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## Fortune's Hostage

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Dedication: To Herman and Barbara, and peacemakers everywhere

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Part One

The Bargain

## Chapter 1 War's End

The pass hung silent and silver under the fitful moon. Somewhere in the distance a wolf howled. Hefting her heavy rifle to her other shoulder, Sybilla glanced at her communicator's luminescent dial. Only two more hours until her relief.

She sensed rather than heard the intruder and the hairs rose on the back of her neck. "Halt! Who goes there? Identify yourself or I'll shoot."

"Tonight's password is White Wolf 707, and hello to you too, little sister."

Sybilla had all she could do not to drop her weapon in the snow and hug her older brother. Instead, she came to attention and dutifully presented arms. "Commander? Isn't it a little early for inspection?"

Carlo chuckled. "I got done earlier than I'd expected. Call up your relief. We've got some talking to do."

"Talking? As in social visit?"

"Not exactly, but I'd just as soon get out of this wind if you don't mind."

Entering the wooden guard hut, Carlo shucked his battle helmet, gloves and heavy greatcoat. He stamped his booted feet, then stood warming his hands at the black iron stove. Fine strands of dark hair were plastered to his pale forehead and his blue eyes looked tired beyond belief.

After placing her rifle in the rack, Sybilla shook the snow from her brother's dark green coat and hung it up. When he smiled, she was struck anew by how handsome he was.

"Quite the little mother, aren't you, love?"

"There's not much space in here and that's our only chair." She unsnapped her chin strap, then removed her bulky headgear. After neatly placing the night vision glasses and helmet on the shelf above her bunk, she thankfully took off her bandolier and heavy jacket. "Phew! I need a shower."

Carlo eyed her sweat-stained wool shirt and heavy fatigue pants with some sympathy. With all the extra bulk, Sybilla still looked no bigger than a mouse and, much as he loved his baby sister, even he had to admit she would never be a beauty. Her heavy glasses perched on the end of her reddened nose, her pale blond hair had been flattened by the heavy helmet to the point of virtual non-existence and her tiny ferret-like features were even paler than usual.

"Momma sent me to bring you home. The war's over."

"The war's .... What? Oh, come on, Carlo, this is no time for jokes."

"No joke, little sister. The war is well and truly over."

"What about Port Moriah?"

"Momma's made a treaty with the Illyrians. In return for the Synod's protection, she's given up all claims to the port. From now on, it's to be neutral territory."

Sybilla's mouth dropped open.

The exquisite white-walled city of Moriah was their country's only outlet to the sea. A bone of contention between Illyria and Lodebar for over a thousand years, the bustling seaport had changed ownership every hundred years or so as regularly as clockwork.

In this latest go-around, Illyria's King Daniel had kicked the Lodebarians out in a daring midnight raid and denied them access to their fishing fleet. Queen Sidonia of Lodebar fled to the safety of Aretz, or Old Earth, where she appealed to the Interplanetary Synod Assembly for help. She'd returned a month ago and ordered her youngest daughter, Sybilla, up to Great Bear Pass for her regular tour of duty.

"The Synod? As in troops? You mean they actually came through?"

"Yup. As of now, Lodebar's under official Synod protection. An Allied detail should be coming up the pass any time to take over this guard station."

"What about Daniel? Don't tell me the Mountain King is gonna to give up a thousand years of tradition with one stroke of the pen? Oh, I don't believe it. This has to be some dirty Illyrian trick."

"No trick. Illyria's Crown Prince Darius was captured by Synod troops four days ago. They caught him on our territory and it seems he's the one behind the Masked Death raids. That's how the Synod Assembly forced Daniel to the treaty table."

"That little bastard was behind the Masked Death raids? And they didn't execute him on the spot?"

Sybilla shuddered. Men, women or children, the Masked Death hadn't cared. They came and went like shadows in the night, leaving their calling card at the scene of every slaughter: a razor sharp silver dagger bearing a snarling mountain lion's head on its handle.

"Actually, our people had him first, along with his little squad of terrorists."

"Alive? Why didn't they ...?"

"First of all, they didn't realize who he was. Secondly, they hadn't gotten around to him yet. He was behind the wall of some farmhouse where his squad had taken cover. When one of our half-tracks came over the wall, he was underneath it. Our men had just finished cutting the other prisoners' throats and were pulling him out of the rubble when the Synod troops arrived. He was fighting like a wildcat. Even with the extra troops' help, they had one hell of a time subduing him."

"And they let the Synod take him, just like that?"

Sybilla handed her brother a steaming mug of broth and he sipped it gratefully. "Ah. That's good."

"It's what's left of a hare I trapped the other night. But go on. What happened next?"

"The Synod commander said he needed a prisoner for interrogation. Our captain saw no reason why not. The Illyrian was badly hurt and probably wouldn't live long anyway. If he'd had any idea ...." Carlo cursed softly under his breath.

"Do you think the Synod commander knew?"

"Sure he did and it was almost as if he'd been tipped off. I found out later they whisked him straight off the planet. Where he is now is anyone's guess."

"That's how they got Daniel to the treaty table?"

"His queen was killed in battle a couple of years ago and that murdering brat's his only son. If it were up to me, I'd string him up right now. The Synod has other ideas. Right now, they're holding him hostage to Daniel's good behavior."

Sybilla sank into the chair. "I can't believe it. What does Momma say about all this?"

"She demanded Prince Darius's surrender to her custody so she could put him on trial. At the moment, she's probably madder at the Synod Assembly than Daniel is."

"But you said she's signed the treaty. She's given up Port Moriah as well?"

"Apparently. She's made some sort of a deal with the Synod Assembly in return for economic assistance."

"She sold us out for money?"

Carlo shrugged. "It seems that way, but what choice does she have, Syb? Our people are starving. With their housing and crops destroyed, half are living in cotton tents with hardly enough blankets and food to keep body and soul together, and winter's just getting started. I mean, look at you. Except for what you've been able to trap or forage, you'd be starving too."

"That's true. We haven't seen a supply shipment for weeks. As for pay, forget it. We aren't even getting that worthless paper scrip any more. Not that it was good for anything anyway, outside a fire starter."

He sighed. "Yeah, I know. I don't even care to ask what's in the Commissary stew. Rat, probably."

The hut door opened to admit a blue-helmeted Synod captain and five warmly clad men. Carlo and Sybilla returned his salute.

The captain's accent was that of a Seiran. "Your Highness. We've a supply truck and a couple of half-tracks outside. Will you be requiring an escort down the mountain?"

"Supply truck? As in real food?" Sybilla couldn't help herself.

White teeth flashed in the visitor's dark face. "We could have dinner first. It seems to me I even saw a bottle of brandy in one of the packs." He signaled to one of his men. "Mischa here is a fair cook, even with the dehydrated stuff our quartermaster has the nerve to call a meal. I would be honored to have you as my guests."

Sybilla looked down at herself in dismay. "If you gentlemen will excuse me ...." She grabbed a change of clothes from the locker at the foot of her bunk and disappeared into the hut's tiny bathroom.

"Well, at least the heater still works," remarked Carlo. "I'd offer you something, Captain, but all we have is some hare broth and not much of that."

"We got here none too soon, then. The situation's been the same with every guard post we've visited. How you folks have held out this long is beyond me."

When the prince smiled, his weariness wasn't lost on the captain. "We were closer to the end of our rope than Daniel knew. Another week or two ...."

"Just as well we're here, then. Ah, Mischa, bring that brandy over here with a couple of mugs. Your Highness, to your very good health."

Carlo raised his mug. "And that of Lodebar. Speaking of Daniel, what's the status with his son?"

The Seiran's eyes hooded. "The kid's where Daniel won't find him."

"He's alive?"

"As of my last report."

"Will you turn him over to my mother for trial?"

"The Assembly's Executive Committee has voted no."

"Who's got him?"

"That's a fair question. He was shipped to Nublis for medical treatment but their Emperor Janus says he wants no part of this hot potato. Nobody else wants him either: not with Daniel rampaging around. They've got far too much respect for Illyria's commando forces and know his father will stop at nothing to get the kid back."

"Umm. Maybe Momma's better off the way she is."

"That's the way the Assembly sees it. They're trying to stop the carnage, not renew the hostilities."

Sybilla emerged from the bathroom amid a cloud of steam and the fresh scent of soap.

The captain gallantly kissed her hand and she blushed. "Princess. Mischa is preparing a fine dinner. In the meantime, would you care for a drink?"

"How is Momma better off? The Synod's not surrendering that monster for trial?"

"It seems not."

"Where is he, then?"

"On Nublis, apparently. For how long is anyone's guess."

"They're not returning him to Illyria? Carlo, tell me they're not."

The captain shook his head. "The Synod won't execute him. But they'll do the next best thing and it's unlikely Illyria's Crown Prince will ever see his homeland or his father again."

The Synod Assembly President's tone was pleading. "Your Majesty, you would be doing us a tremendous favor. Seira's security is better than anyone else's and if anyone can handle this hot potato, it's you."

The Emperor of Seira grimaced slightly. "You've got no place else to put this problem child?"

"The decision to keep young Darius hostage to his father's good behavior has generated enormous controversy in the Assembly. The majority agrees that Daniel of Illyria is not to be trusted but no one wants his son within their borders."

"Knowing Daniel, I can hardly blame them. I've always kept him and Illyria at arms length and I'm not thrilled at the idea of being his son's keeper. By all accounts, young Darius is every bit as belligerent as his father."

"I agree. But there are a couple of things you should know, Your Majesty. Darius was seriously

wounded when he was captured and there's a possibility he'll be permanently incapacitated. Darius is his father's only weakness. Daniel will go to almost any lengths to preserve his son's life and we'll take steps to ensure that his father doesn't know where he's being held. As long as he knows his son's still alive, we can keep Illyria in line and observing the terms of the treaty."

"Why don't you give Darius to Sidonia? Lodebar has more of a stake in this and she'd love to have him as a hostage."

"The Committee considered that. But Lodebar's a small impoverished country and Darius's presence there would give Daniel an incentive to invade them again. Also, the Lodebarians would be just as likely to say 'screw the peace treaty' and cut the kid's throat as soon as he arrived."

"After Daniel's last two invasions, I can't blame them. And Darius himself isn't exactly an innocent"

"Unfortunately, that's true. As young as he is, the prince has done his share and he's as bloodthirsty as his old man. Right now, we've got a peacekeeping force in Moriah and the Synod Assembly has pledged to help the port assert its independence. It's the only way to keep peace between them."

Timothy winced. "Don't remind me. Half the force in Moriah is Seiran and my oldest son happens to be its commander."

"That's why Daniel and Sidonia have been keeping their hands off. They have a healthy respect for Seira. Especially Sidonia."

"Ah, the lovely Sidonia. How is the dear lady, by the way?"

"She looked marvelous the last time I saw her. For someone as tough as she is she certainly looks very feminine."

"Don't let her appearance fool you. Sidonia's a real ball-breaker and her mother taught her well. Lodebar is a matriarchal society and the women have ruled there for centuries. Rumor has it Daniel came on to her at some interplanetary conference and she kneed him in the groin. Supposedly, that's why he hates her so much."

"I can believe it. Sidonia's every bit as stiff-necked as the Mountain King, but she was the one who sued for peace."

"If it's not too stupid a question," asked the Emperor, "what in the hell was Daniel's precious son doing in harm's way in the first place?"

"That's a good question. He wasn't supposed to be anywhere near the action. The Lodebarians captured his best friend in a previous raid and Darius sneaked across the border to rescue him. His unit was trapped on the way back and wiped out. The Lodebarians were cutting the captured Illyrians' throats and stripping them of their gear when one of our commanders arrived. He's a native of Betelgeuse and recognized Darius immediately. Without telling them who the kid was, he persuaded the Lodebarians to give him up for interrogation. Then he signaled for a MedEvac unit and flew him to the Synod's main base. We took him off-planet that same day."

"Where is he now?"

"On Nublis in their Temple clinic. But the Nublians would just as soon be rid of him. The Illyrians have

an excellent intelligence service and they don't want any trouble. They've told us in no uncertain terms to find Darius another home. We have a deadline of one week from today."

"You can't find any government willing to take him?"

"Something like that."

"Well, I'm pretty sick of the hostilities between Illyria and Lodebar and Seira does have a vested interest in maintaining the peace in this part of the Synod. All right, I'll take him. I'll send my flagship to Nublis and leave it there in orbit. The Nublians can send him up in a shuttle from the Temple roof. Tell Janus he'll owe me a big one for this and his security had better be damn tight."

"Thanks, Timothy. The Synod will owe you too."

"Keep that in mind the next time a trade question comes up to do with Seira," growled the Emperor. "Just because our manufacturing is more cost-effective than anyone else's shouldn't make us a target for sanctions. I'm sick and tired of all these little crackpot nations squawking that we're taking the bread out of their mouths. If they'd do something about their internal corruption, they wouldn't have to worry about jobs for their people. But they won't because it's easier to throw rocks at Seira."

"I can't comment on that but I will keep it in mind. All right, I'll notify the Nublians and get back to you on the final arrangements."

"I hope I don't live to regret it. Incidentally, is the Assembly footing the bill for the transfer and expenses or am I expected to pay for those too?"

Only a Seiran, thought the President resignedly. "The Executive Committee has tabulated the prince's expenses as a budget item, and I would appreciate your sending the invoice to my personal attention. Part of the agreement is that Darius be permitted to bring an old family retainer with him. The man's name is Rufus Harkanian, he's known the kid since birth."

"No problem. I'll alert the flagship's crew to expect them. Incidentally, the ship has full medical facilities."

"Fine. I'll call you as soon as things are finalized."

"Good enough. I'll be waiting to hear from you."

Timothy deactivated the scrambler and snapped off the viewscreen. Then he leaned back in his big chair and put his feet up on the desk.

He should have known this peaceful situation wouldn't last. Things had been so quiet lately, he'd been almost worried. Even his strong-minded Empress and the palace's temperamental Major Domo had been getting along. The weather was beautiful and there had been no disputes in or outside the family. Now he was going to have to tell his wife about the imminent arrival of an unwilling houseguest. Once he had done that, he had an uneasy feeling this rare interlude of tranquility would come to an abrupt end.

The Emperor had no idea how right he was. If he'd had the slightest inkling of the upheaval Darius was going to cause, he'd have thought twice. But he didn't know, any more than he realized that the peace and quiet on that particular day was only the calm before the coming storm.



## Chapter 2 Eagle in a Cage

The Nublian medical attendant eyed his patient with disgust. His glare was returned in full measure.

"He refuses to eat and won't cooperate in any way. The last time I brought a meal tray, he threw it clear across the room. As for giving him a bath or a bedpan, forget it. When one of the technicians tried to draw blood, he punched her. He pulled out both his intravenous lines, ripped off every dressing he could reach, then tried to tear out his stitches."

"Well, I see you've got him in restraints now," remarked the doctor. "As far as his not eating, immobilize his head and tape his mouth so he can't bite you. Once you've done that, shove a gastric tube down his nose. That type of feeding is unpleasant enough to make him think twice about giving you a hard time, then maybe he'll be more cooperative the next time he sees a meal tray. As long as you've got him tied down, put a diaper on him and take all the samples you need. You won't have to put up with this one much longer anyway. We'll be rid of him in a couple of days."

"And good riddance. I've never felt like smacking a patient before but this brat's making me lose all my religion."

The doctor spoke with real feeling. "'I know. I took care of the little bastard when he first came in and had all I could do not to punch him out myself. A couple of agents were questioning him in his native tongue and said they never heard such language. Especially from someone so young. Furious wasn't the word. He was biting and scratching and struggling so much I had to give him a knockout shot just so I could put him through the scanner. Whoof."

Darius could hear every word. They weren't keeping their voices down because they thought he couldn't understand. *Well, more fools they.*

He actually spoke Nublian very well and a dozen languages besides, but wasn't about to let them know that or anything else if he could help it. Since they were speaking Nublian, he assumed that was where he was. If there was any way he could get word to his father, Daniel's agents would come get him. But that was impossible when he was trussed to this stupid bed like a damn festival goose. These Nublians were tough, he had to admit, and he was well aware how close that particular doctor had come to punching his lights out.

The naso-gastric feeding tube sounded really nasty. Judging by his tone, the attendant was looking forward to shoving it into him.

In truth, Darius wanted nothing more than to die. This whole disaster was his fault. But for his crazy notion of a rescue mission, Lucius and the others would still be alive and he wouldn't be in this miserable predicament. His father had been right in forbidding him to go anywhere near the action. Unfortunately, the realization had come too late to do him any good. Now, here he was with broken bones, a concussion and a half dozen bullet wounds, stuck in this miserable hospital bed while the damn Synod Assembly tried to make up its mind what to do with him.

"Dad, I'm sorry," he murmured, "I'm so sorry."

When the attendant entered the room, his patient's eyes were closed and a tear trickled down one cheek.

He's only sixteen, he thought. *He's just a kid and he sure as hell didn't belong on any battlefield. What kind of people are those friggin' Illyrians anyway? When they're not fighting each other, all they ever do is make war on other people. Well, wherever he goes, I wish them joy of him. They're going to have their hands full with this one and then some. If he's this bad when he's all shot up and in traction, I can't imagine what he'll be like when he's on his feet again.*

Opening his eyes, Darius took one look at what the attendant was holding, then snarled in his native tongue, "You try sticking that in me, you've got another think coming. Get away from me you miserable bastard and take that silly apparatus with you."

As he coughed and began struggling for breath, the attendant dropped the tubing and pressed a nearby button. The room filled with people and Darius heard the doctor's voice. "Something's ruptured. Get him to surgery stat."

Hours later, they brought him back. Groggy from whatever they'd pumped into him, he was too tired to resist when the attendants replaced him in the bed.

Someone took his hand and he heard a familiar voice. "Darius. I'm so glad to see you. Now you hang in there whatever you do. That's an order."

"Rufus? Are you really here or am I dreaming?"

The old Illyrian soldier stroked the prince's dark hair. "I'm here. Now, close your eyes and sleep." Then he said almost to himself, "I know one thing for sure. Those bullet wounds are in the front because you never ran from a fight in your life. Nor did your old man or your mother, bless her heart. But who knows when you're going to see Daniel again or he you? Little prince, the Synod's just given you a life sentence. From now on, you aren't even going to know where you are. Well, I promised your father I'd keep you safe and I'll do my best. If I know you, that's going to be no easy task."

"He's asleep," said the attendant, "and will probably stay that way until morning. They're bringing in a cot and a meal's on its way up."

Rufus looked up somewhat distractedly, then replied in flawless Nublian. "Thank you. I appreciate that."

The attendant was surprised. "You speak our language well. Unlike that youngster there."

Rufus smiled. "Prince Darius speaks fluent Nublian and a dozen other tongues besides. He's a little devil, I'll admit, and he ran a number on you."

"Little devil is putting it mildly. Now you're here, maybe he'll settle down."

"Don't count on it. He always was a handful and what's to become of him now, I don't know. I can only hope his new keeper will treat him with kindness and understanding because he's like a wild eagle that's been caged. Just keeping him alive and sane is going to be no easy task."

"What of you, sir? Aren't you going to be caged too?"

"That's true. But I've lived a full life and his hasn't even begun. All Darius has ever known is the freedom of the mountains. Just being in the lowlands will make him feel stifled and hemmed in. He fought you like the wild thing he is because that's all he knows. Now I have to teach him to be a docile prisoner and will be betraying him with every word I speak."

"I hadn't thought of it quite like that. Are you saying Prince Darius may never see his father or his home again?"

"That's very possible. The day he realizes it, he'll despair and want to end his life. He's already tried it hasn't he?"

"Well, he has been refusing to eat. Then he tore off his dressings and pulled out the stitches. That was right after he tried to destroy the transfusion apparatus and pull the tubes out of his arms. Yes, I suppose he was trying to kill himself. Finally, we tied him down. We were about to start artificial feeding when something let go. He started choking and I called an emergency code."

"That doesn't surprise me. He did a stupid thing and it cost his friends their lives. He has to live with that for the rest of his days, and the knowledge that he let his father down."

"Poor little soul. That's going to be a tough row for him to hoe."

"Don't let Darius hear you call him that. He's liable to kill you on general principles to prove you wrong or at least give it the old college try. As for pitying him, don't even think it. Defiance is his middle name and war his natural heritage. At the age of five, he rode his pony at the head of his father's troops. He was a crack shot by the time he was eight. He knows more about killing than men three times his age and is as good a strategist as his father's most experienced generals. What happened in Lodebar was pure bad luck. Darius and his friends had mounted raids like that a dozen times before and returned without a scratch."

"But something went wrong."

"Now his days of freedom are over and I pity his new keeper."

"Judging by what I've seen of the prince, I have to agree with you, sir. Wherever he's going, it's certain to be lively."

Daniel paced back and forth, chewing furiously on his blond mustache. Then he rounded on his chief of security, Vasek Zivon, who was taking his ease in a chair by the open window. "What do you mean, you can't find him? There are only so many places to look and people talk. There must be some trace of where they took him."

Vasek calmly took another sip from his drink. "That's the problem, don't you see? There are too damn many traces. Three other shuttles took off that same afternoon along with a couple of their big MedEvac air units. A couple of ground ambulances left through the main gate with an unidentifiable patient in every

last one. In fact, there were so many vehicles and transports leaving we wondered if the Nublians weren't evacuating the whole damn place. Believe me, Daniel, Emperor Janus is no fool. He knew we'd find Darius sooner or later. That's why he got him out of there. By the time my people realized where he was and got into the clinic to retrieve him, he was gone. Who has him now is anybody's guess. He might still be on Nublis or they could have sent him to Aretz. Or Sidonia might have him in her clutches, heaven forbid."

"Was there any bloodshed?" The King's tone was a trifle anxious.

"A couple of banged heads, that's all. We tied up a few of the staff and herded the doctors and guards into closets. But we didn't do anything drastic."

"Good. Then, maybe, the Synod and Lodebar won't take it as a violation of the treaty. As to their holding Darius hostage to my good behavior, I told that damn pip-squeak of a Synod President he was a dirty, backstabbing, double-crossing son of a bitch. That bleeding Sidonia sat through the whole meeting and smirked. Then she actually had the nerve to offer me a cup of tea. I told her what she could do."

Vasek bit back a smile. He could well imagine what the irascible Daniel had told Sidonia. Privately, he considered the prince an overbearing, arrogant, spoiled little prick who badly needed to be taken down a notch or two. The stunt he'd pulled was typical of his irresponsible attitude and it was high time the kid was forced to live with the consequences of his actions.

In his father's eyes, Darius could do no wrong. But this time, even Daniel was having trouble swallowing the kid's reckless defiance of his authority. The King had given his son a direct order to stay away from the action and the little smart mouth deliberately disobeyed him. His recklessness cost him the lives of all of his friends and Darius himself had damn near bought the farm. Had that Synod commander not arrived when he did, the prince's body would now be lying in an unmarked grave on Lodebarian soil and no one would ever know what had become of him.

His King ought to be grateful to the Synod Assembly, reflected Vasek, instead of rampaging all over the place and calling its President names. Not only had their forces saved Darius's life, they'd put an end to the age-old conflict between Illyria and Lodebar. Using his son as a lever, the Synod Assembly had forced the previously intractable Mountain King to the treaty table and into personal negotiations with Queen Sidonia herself. The peoples of both nations heaved a huge sigh of relief when the cease-fire held and the treaty became a reality. But Vasek's sense of self-preservation was far too well-developed to allow him to even suggest such a thing to the raging Daniel.

"Do you have any clues as to where they might have taken him?" stormed the King.

"Just a hunch."

"Spit it out, dammit."

Long used to the King's ways, Vasek merely shrugged. "Our monitors picked up a late night transmission from the Synod Assembly President to the Emperor of Seira's private number. The call was scrambled and the President used Seira's top encryption code."

"What's so odd about that? They talk all the time don't they?"

"Not outside regular office hours they don't, and never with that particular code. The Synod seldom uses it because it not only increases transmission time but there's an incredibly elaborate protocol before you

can even get online. That's why we tagged it."

"The call was pre-arranged?"

"It had to be. Timothy's never in his office at that hour, especially on a weekend."

"Mmmm. I'm beginning to see what you mean. Is there any chance of decoding the damn thing?"

"Not a chance. And for pity's sake, Daniel, don't order me to get the code key. I've lost too many operatives already trying to do just that. Compared to Seira's security, Nublis's Archon Intelligence is a piece of cake, and the Nublians are just about the toughest cookies in the universe. But Seira has never pretended to be anything other than a police state. Hell, Timothy even locks up innocent tabloid reporters and throws away the key. You don't even want to know what he does to a foreign intelligence agent on his turf."

"Any agent?"

"Yeah, any agent, up to and including those belonging to his Nublian friends. As to Darius's whereabouts, my guess is the Nublians whipped him straight up to a Seiran battlecruiser. I know damn well they were expecting us. They allowed to us walk in with such ease because the prince was already gone. They could have killed at least half of my force any time they felt like it. Their Temple Complex is absolutely ancient, has more booby traps than a dog has fleas, yet we got in and out without a scratch."

"Are you saying we were had?"

"Knowing the Nublians, they were probably laughing their asses off the whole damn time. I would also guess that Darius and Rufus haven't the slightest idea where they are. The Synod Assembly aims to keep it that way."

"Well, you know Janus has lodged an official protest with the Synod. He's also broken off diplomatic relations."

"Since you don't do business with Nublis anyway, that's an exercise in futility isn't it?"

"Somewhat. I bank there like everyone else but have always done so through intermediaries. The only bitching is from those of my beloved people who'd been planning to vacation on Nublis. When I strongly suggested they show some loyalty by spending their money at home, they shut up." Daniel moved over to the well-stocked bar and poured himself a drink. He settled in an easy chair near Vasek and put his feet up with a sigh. "So you think the Synod has talked Timothy into taking Darius."

"That would be my guess. He's either on his way to Seira, or else he's already there. And frankly, Your Majesty, we don't have a snowball's chance of getting him out of there."

Daniel moodily contemplated his drink. "Sadly, I have to agree with you. If we'd pulled that stunt on his territory, Timothy wouldn't have hesitated to squash us a like a bug. That's why his oldest son was put in command of the troops in Moriah. The only good thing about that is Sidonia's as stymied as I am. She doesn't dare make a move on me or Moriah and I suppose I can be thankful for one small mercy. Thanks to Timothy, Darius is beyond Lodebar's reach as well."

"Well, I must say, we certainly have some luxurious accommodations here," remarked Rufus after the masked guard freed his hands and uncovered his eyes.

He removed his charge's blindfold.

The guard unlocked the cuffs securing the prince's wrists and the infuriated Darius ripped the tape from his mouth. When he saw two cocked rifles aimed at him, he thought better of what he'd been about to say.

The old soldier gestured to the guards to lower their weapons. "His Highness isn't in a position to give you any trouble. Since I would guess we're on a ship, would you happen to have a physician on board? Otherwise, would you please get me a medpack. The prince is only a few hours out of surgery and he's in pain."

As one of them moved to the intercom, Darius muttered "Thanks Rufus." He was hurting, badly. The attendants hadn't been particularly gentle when they've shoved him onto the stretcher and the tape over his mouth had been one final indignity in a day filled with humiliations. Even blindfolded, he could tell they'd been moving fast. He'd wondered at first what was going on, then realized his father must have located him. But the canny Nublians had moved him out before Daniel's commandos could get there.

Within minutes of the guard's call, a doctor and two medical attendants arrived. They wore surgical caps and masks and all Darius could see of them were their eyes.

The doctor greeted him in his native tongue, "Sorry about the dramatics, young feller. Your father's commandos were inside the complex and the Nublians had to get you out in a hurry. You're on a ship but, for security reasons, it's better you don't know where we're headed. Now, let's see what we've got." He gestured to the two attendants.

One connected Darius to a set of monitors on the wall while the other loaded a needlegun. The doctor adjusted the apparatus holding the prince's shattered legs, then checked the dressings on his chest and abdomen. As he inspected the feeding tube inserted through Darius's nose, he asked gently, "Do we really need this? The food here is excellent and you'd rather eat normally wouldn't you?"

The prince nodded resignedly.

Dark eyes smiled down into his. "Just hold still while I remove this thing and let's get rid of this diaper while we're at it. Then we'll give you a bath and you can start functioning normally again. What do you say, Your Highness? Do we have a deal?"

He stuck out a gloved hand and Darius took it. "All right. I'll behave."

"Good," said the doctor. He began removing the feeding tube. "I have a son just about your age and I can imagine how miserable these last few days have been. Incidentally, may I call you Darius? You don't stand much on ceremony in Illyria do you?"

Seeing the prince's blue eyes fill with tears, the doctor handed him a wad of tissues without comment. Then he nodded to Rufus. "If you need anything, Captain, just push the intercom button over there. We have a fully equipped clinic next door and another physician. I'm sorry we can't give you the customary tour but I'm sure you understand. We'll be in transit for approximately two days and nights."

Rufus's tone was dry. "Which will take us just about anywhere in the Synod. Especially in hyperdrive and at warp speed. I see you know who I am."

"We were expecting you. The arrangements for the transfer had been finalized before the raid and we were already in orbit. We just had to speed things up a little, that's all."

"Hmm. Then the Nublians were expecting us."

"Certainly. But they were remarkably careless when they overlooked the fact that you and he speak their language. I suppose it was you who signaled the Illyrians. I spent time at your royal court when I was growing up because my father was attached to one of the diplomatic legations. Darius was giving a remarkable imitation of an uncouth back-country lout but I happen to know he's nothing of the sort."

Rufus's lips twitched. "Thanks to a certain popular video, most people believe us to be untamed tribesmen in animal skins who spend most of their waking hours feasting on wild boar and ravishing female captives in public. The damn thing stars a Nublian in the role of the prince's grandfather, for pity's sake. According to the story, King Daniel's father was a handsome beardless illiterate who spent most of his time waving a sword and riding into battle on a white charger. Until he wound up in the boudoir of Queen Sidonia's mother. For almost the entire last hour, the King of Illyria is shown with most of his clothes off as he and the equally naked Queen of Lodebar frolic and make passionate love in a succession of picturesque locales. It ends with the handsome young Lysias riding stoically off into the sunset while Queen Maeve of Lodebar remains behind in her elegant castle crying her eyes out."

"It's not accurate?"

Rufus snorted. "You of all people know better than that. The late King Lysias was red-bearded and over six feet in his socks. He weighed over three hundred pounds and loathed horses. He and the Queen never so much as met and she *was not* a buxom black-haired wench. Actually, Queen Maeve was tall and slim like Sidonia. She had the same blonde hair, blue eyes and Grecian nose and, according to everything I've heard, was remarkably straitlaced. For his part, King Lysias was a devoted family man who never looked at any woman other than his wife. When the video came out, King Daniel took instant offense and banned it from Illyria. Sidonia did the same thing in Lodebar and that's one of the few times the two of them ever agreed on anything."

"You've seen this epic?"

"Everyone has, including King Daniel. 'The Mountain King' is my country's top selling video of all time and Prince Darius thought it was hilarious. His father was less amused and they say Sidonia's still spitting tacks."

Darius smiled up at the doctor. "That's true. I really liked it and contacted the star on the SynoNet to tell him so. He sent me an autographed picture of himself as King Lysias and even wrote a personal message on it. His stage name's Elf and he's married to one of the Emperor of Seira's nieces. I'm a big fan of his and I have--er--had all his videos." Remembering where he was, the prince fell silent and turned his head away. Rufus squeezed his hand sympathetically.

The doctor said gently, "Maybe we can arrange to get you another set. Your new guardian's not really a bad person. All you need do is ask."

"I'm not going to be shut up in a dungeon?"

"Heavens no. You're a hostage, not a criminal. Your host is fixing up a very nice apartment for you and the captain. It includes a private garden, a therapy room with a pool and every luxury you can possibly imagine."

"He must be very rich."

"Oh, he is. He also owns several ships of which this is only one."

"But you're not going to tell me who he is or where I'm going?"

"Sorry. As time goes on, that might change."

"Will I ever get to meet him?"

"Perhaps. This shot's going to make you somewhat sleepy. You've been through a lot in the last few days and you need your rest. Before I go, I'm going to have a word with the captain and now I'll bid you good day."

The doctor extended his hand and Darius shook it solemnly. Then he beckoned Rufus to one side. "How much does the prince realize about his condition?"

"He hasn't had much of a chance to think about it."

"He's got more than a pair of smashed legs, you know. According to the report, he was crouching behind a stone wall when it was blown up, then a Lodebarian vehicle drove right over him. I'm surprised he wasn't killed outright."

"That's why they got to him last. It wasn't as though those bastards wanted to save his life. They were only waiting to cut his throat until they'd stripped him of his uniform and badges. The reason they didn't do so beforehand was because they didn't want to get blood all over his gear. And they call us savages?"

"You didn't kill the Lodebarian wounded in exactly the same manner?"

"Not unless we had no means of getting them to an aid station. Darius's group was well behind enemy lines and there was no excuse for butchering them. There were no Illyrians within range and there was a big MedEvac base within a mile of the site. It was a typical Lodebarian atrocity. Good grief, they were only kids."

Lethal kids with a slew of sophisticated weaponry and a bad attitude, thought the doctor. He wisely said nothing.

Darius and his merry little gang had committed more than their fair share of atrocities during their dozen forays into enemy territory. When they executed his companions, the outraged Lodebarians had considered themselves justified. In that particular instance, they had the sympathy of most of the Synod. Well be that as it may, Darius was here now and paying one hell of a price for his transgressions. He'd never walk again, and for someone as physically active as the prince life in a wheelchair was likely to be traumatic at best.

"How bad is it?" asked Rufus.



"We'll do a full workup as soon as we arrive, the prognosis isn't good."

"What should I tell him?"

"Nothing. It'll be a few weeks before he heals and there's plenty of time. He's already traumatized and there's no sense in adding to his burden. Right now, it's important to get him eating. Otherwise his body won't be able to fight off infection or heal properly."

"What can I do?"

"Keep him calmed down and get him to eat. I'll leave orders with the dietitian. The galley's open twenty four hours a day and you can order anything you like. Does he have any particular favorites?"

"The usual kid fare. He's no great fan of vegetables, but likes a traditional stew the Illyrian shepherders make. He's also fond of our giant mountain trout, and desserts of course. The prince has a powerful sweet tooth, he'll eat ice cream by the bowlful."

"I'll get him some food supplements and ice-cream to start. Do you have a recipe for that stew?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. It's traditional soldier fare and there's been many a time I've made it over a campfire during our campaigns."

"Good. If you'd be kind enough to write out the recipe, I'll make sure it gets to the cook. In the meantime, the galley can see if they have any mountain trout. How does he like it? Grilled?"

"In what language shall I write out the recipe? Seiran perhaps? We are on our way to Seira, aren't we? And Emperor Timothy is Darius' new keeper?"

"Illyrian will do just fine, thank you."

"As far as the trout are concerned, Darius prefers them stuffed and baked. But there's little I could teach a Seiran cook about that, is there?"

The doctor glanced at the two attendants. "I'd appreciate your not sharing your speculations with the prince. He'll find out soon enough. Until then, the less he thinks about it the better. My colleague speaks Illyrian as do all of the attendants and he'll be on duty in a half hour. Barring emergencies, I'll see you in the morning."

As the door closed behind the doctor, Rufus heard a giggle from one of the attendants and wondered what Darius had just said. Knowing the prince, he'd told her one of his infamous Illyrian jokes. Probably the one about the mountain goat and the two shepherders. The story was truly gross but also very funny. Rufus himself still laughed whenever he heard it.

If Darius was cracking jokes maybe there was hope for him yet. And it actually made little difference where they were going. Their chances of ever getting out of there would be virtually nil.

## **Chapter 3 Royal Reflections**

Sidonia chewed on the end of her pen but it didn't matter how she arranged and rearranged the figures. Lodebar was drowning in an ocean of red ink and the situation was growing worse. She had appealed to the Synod Assembly again and again on the subject of getting Illyria to pay Lodebar its war reparations but their Human Rights Tribunal did nothing but demur and drag its feet. It really wasn't fair. Thanks to that damnable video, Illyria's economy was booming. Daniel had his income from the King's jewel mines and there was all that sheep farming besides.

Poor little Lodebar couldn't even raise two cents to rub together. Were it not for Seira's foreign aid, Sidonia's struggling people would have long since starved to death. She dreaded the upcoming meeting with Timothy's money wizards because her only news was bad.

Seira was equally unwilling to prod that miserable scofflaw Daniel and the King's response to every one of her demands had been the same. "Give me back my son. Until you do, there's nothing to talk about."

In her last appearance before the Human Rights Tribunal, Sidonia had pleaded "Why don't you reimpose sanctions until Daniel pays off his obligation? He was the aggressor, after all. My poor people are having to double up and manage as best they can. Most are living in tents and winter's coming."

Her pleas had fallen on deaf ears. Although the Synod Assembly was debating a modest aid package for Lodebar, vociferous opposition from the smaller members was keeping the matter bottled up in committee. Right now it was split fifty fifty and the committee chairman was a known Illyrian sympathizer.

Sidonia fared no better with Betelgeuse's Federation Parliament. Daniel's spin doctors and lobbyists had been murderously effective and the answer was the same. "Until Daniel's son is returned, he won't pay a cent. We don't have the votes to impose sanctions on Illyria or force the issue. Sorry."

She'd argued, "I couldn't give Daniel's son back if I wanted to. The Synod made the prince's detention a condition of the treaty. I had no more say in the matter than Daniel."

The Parliament's representative countered, "You didn't oppose the decision, did you, Your Majesty?"

"No, I didn't. If there'd been any justice, Prince Darius would have tried for his crimes and hanged by the neck until he was dead." She'd even brought out a picture album. "Why don't you look at what that murdering little bastard did? Then you tell me there's no reason to detain him."

"Well," said the Federation representative. "I won't argue that Darius committed those atrocities, but they weren't at Daniel's orders. Aside from that, Your Majesty, his entire unit had been executed by the time the Synod forces arrived. Your troops would have killed him too had the Synod commander not prevented them. Isn't that true?"

"Er, yes. But that was not at my orders. The officer responsible has been severely disciplined."

"I'm sure he has. What kind of a slap on the wrist did you impose on your erring captain, Your Majesty? Twenty lashes with a wet noodle?"

"Suspension without pay for sixty days and a dishonorable discharge."

"After which he wrote a best-selling book and is now a high-paid hit on the Synod lecture circuit. Some punishment. The soldiers who cut those kids' throats weren't penalized at all, were they?"

Sidonia had simply shaken her head and put the album away.

She sighed and threw down her pen. She would just have to do the best she could with Timothy's money men and somehow goose the Synod Assembly into granting the aid package. While Daniel was a hopeless cause, she couldn't altogether blame him for his recalcitrance. He considered himself double-crossed, and rightly so, because he'd honestly expected to get Darius back once the hostilities were over.

Almost a year had passed since Illyria's Crown Prince had been shipped to an unknown destination. She wondered how the kid was faring. While the tabloids had speculated about the identity of Darius's keeper, most informed bets were on Timothy of Seira and she suspected the Emperor knew more than he was telling. But no one knew for sure and the public's interest had long since turned to other things.

When she heard a gentle knock on her office door, Sidonia leaned back with a sigh. "Who is it?"

"Sybilla. I brought you some lunch."

The Queen looked up with a smile.

While Sybilla was a slender blonde like herself, that was where the resemblance ended. At seventeen, her youngest daughter had to be the ugliest of all ugly ducklings. Her beige flour sack dress did nothing to help her unfortunate appearance. While the garment was bad enough, her thick black stockings and ugly military boots made matters infinitely worse. A pair of heavy glasses perched on the tip of her beak-shaped nose and her wispy hair had been pulled back into some semblance of a pony tail.

The princess set down the heavy silver tray and removed one of the dish covers with a flourish. "It's baked chicken and I saved you a piece of peach pie."

Sidonia looked dubiously at the cold lumps and pale congealed gravy. A couple of forlorn peas and a carrot or two accompanied the meat and the whole thing looked depressing to say the least. To avoid hurting Sybilla's feelings she took a bite, only to realize that the food in front of her tasted every bit as bad as it looked.

"Whose turn was it this time?"

"Anna Lisa's. It's not very good, is it? Why don't you just have the pie? I made that."

Unlike the chicken, the pie tasted delicious. Sybilla's cooking always was, but try telling that to her older sisters.

When Sidonia had been unable to catch up her back wages, the palace cook finally left. Her second daughter, Anna Lisa, immediately took charge of the kitchen and one culinary disaster followed upon another. It wasn't that Anna Lisa didn't try. She did mightily. Unfortunately, cooking was not her forte and Sidonia didn't have time to teach her. When the Queen mildly suggested that Sybilla might be better at running the stove, Anna Lisa burst into torrents of weeping. When her oldest sister Solaria joined the hysterics, Sybilla simply shrugged and began clearing the table.

Throwing up her hands in despair, Sidonia fled to the relative peace and quiet of her private office. After Anna Lisa and Solaria retired to their rooms, Sybilla sneaked her grateful mother an omelet.

At the Queen's urging, the princesses finally agreed to take turns. It had now been a month and with the exception of Anna Lisa's inedible cuisine, things were running on a fairly even keel.

Anna Lisa was now eighteen, reflected Sidonia, and her extraordinary beauty should go a long way toward her landing a suitable and wealthy husband. Under normal circumstances, she would be making her debut during the upcoming Synod Assembly's social season.

Unfortunately, Sidonia's current finances wouldn't allow for the purchase of so much as one modest ballgown and throwing the customary coming out party was out of the question. On the bright side, Solaria was handy with a needle and the Queen had a few bolts of Nublis's legendary silk put by.

A certain notion had been percolating in Sidonia's head. Her idea might furnish a solution to Lodebar's economic woes and could put paid to hostilities between the two countries forever. But she knew better than to broach it prematurely, especially when it involved anyone with as uncertain a disposition as Daniel of Illyria.

Yes, thought the Queen, if she played her cards right, it might just work. All she had to do was stay on the right side of Timothy and keep things hung together for the next couple of years or so.

The physical therapist had just left. This latest session had been as miserable as it always was, and Darius was in the apartment's garden pretending to read a book. After almost a year, he had resigned himself to the fact that he would never walk again and this boring existence was going to be permanent. While Rufus did his best to keep him entertained, it was heavy going and the prince had been so docile lately, the old soldier had begun to worry about his state of mind.

Something pushed against Darius's foot, startling him.

His visitor was a fluffy black cat. It had huge yellow eyes, and seemed anxious to make friends. "Merow," said the cat and it continued to rub its glossy head against Darius's foot.

"Hello to you too," replied the prince, "and where may I ask, did you spring from?" He dropped his book and reached down to pick up his visitor. In typical feline fashion, the cat instantly made itself at home in his lap. While Darius scratched its head and kneaded its soft furry body, it purred contentedly like a small engine.

A light tenor voice came from behind them. "So that's where you got to."

A pleasant looking middle-aged man stood by the entrance to the garden. Elegantly dressed, he had light brown hair and sharply penetrating blue eyes. He approached the wheelchair and held out his hand. Darius looked up at him with a slightly puzzled expression.

The man smiled. "My name's Timothy. I'm your host and this rascal's name is Balthasar. He's my wife's favorite cat and she's turned the whole palace upside down looking for him. No one could figure out where he'd run off to and I thought I'd check here. It's about time we met anyway, Your Highness. You've been here for almost a year and I'm sure you've long since figured out where you are."

Darius inclined his head slightly. "Your Majesty. I overheard one of the servants speaking Seiran my third day here so it wasn't too hard to figure out. Rufus guessed when we were on the ship but your security's tight and there wasn't anyone we could tell."

The Emperor smiled. "It had better be tight, and let's drop the formalities, shall we? You may address me as Timothy and I'll call you Darius. Like the Illyrians, we don't stand much on ceremony. Or try not to anyway." He picked up the book Darius had dropped. "Ah, you have an interest in ancient mythology. Or is this part of your assigned course?"

"The latter. Professor Damien says it would benefit me to study Illyria's cultural roots and these ancient gods are an important part of my heritage. To me it's just a bunch of fairy tales and magic rituals no one believes in any more."

"Balthasar might give you an argument there. He comes from a long line of witches' familiars and there's little about magic he doesn't know. Cats are creatures of mystery. They have a wild streak and have never been fully domesticated in the sense a dog or a horse is."

Darius glanced at the sleeping cat. "I don't know about the magic but the rest is probably true."

Timothy smiled. "Oh, I never joke about magic. Here on Seira, we take it very seriously indeed. My grandmother was a Medean witch and my father Ephraim has some awesome powers."

"But you're the Emperor. How can your father still be living if you're on the throne?"

"He retired a few years ago and is in his eighties. He travels around the Synod with my mother and functions as an unofficial ambassador. Right now, he's here on a visit. Why don't you and your man Rufus come to dinner tonight and meet him?"

"Do you really mean that? If you do, I'd like that very much." The prince frowned. "But I don't have anything to wear. Especially if dinner is formal."

"Unfortunately, dinner here is always formal. My Major Domo insists on it. Don't worry about what to wear because one of my sons is just about your size. I'll send something over and an escort will pick you up around seven. How does that sound?"

Timothy picked up the still sleeping Balthasar. The cat yawned and stretched, then resettled itself in his arms. "Come on you ungrateful wandering rascal. Don't you know Giuliana's been about out of her mind with worry about you? You can come see Darius tomorrow. That's if it's all right with him."

It was the prince's turn to smile. "That's just fine with me. I like cats and enjoyed his company. I enjoyed meeting you too, Your M--er--Timothy, and I look forward to tonight."

"Until tonight then."

Darius retrieved his book from the table where Timothy had left it, then began reading once more about the roots of his ancient people.

Genevra stood at the top of a hill above her father's palace and looked down at the teeming cityscape. Over to the east reared the twin towers of Giulliam's teeming spaceport from which gigantic starships arose day and night. As fast as the laden freighters left, empty ones would come in to the docks they'd just vacated, then stand with their bays open like hungry mouths waiting to be filled.

The princess wasn't supposed to be out without one of her father's ever present security guards, but she found palace life stifling and the endless protocols and rituals a complete and utter bore. If she could spend more time with her father, things might be different. But Timothy was always busy and Genevra and her mother didn't see eye to eye on anything.

Her older brothers were all away and their lives were a whole lot more interesting than hers. The oldest, Micah, was commanding the Synod troops in that seaport on Betelgeuse. The second one, Zachary, was attending law school on Aretz and her closest sibling, Jonathan, was away visiting their cousins on Nublis.

Actually, Jonathan had been shipped off to his Uncle Janus in disgrace after being caught in a compromising position with one of the kitchen maids. It wasn't that their father minded so much, but the Empress flipped out at the thought of her precious son dallying with a mere servant.

For the sake of peace, Timothy had gone along with her wishes.

Although she didn't know it, Genevra was the image of her grandmother Thamar at the same age. She had the same winsome heart shaped face, delicate turned up nose and soft curly brown hair. Like Thamar, Genevra was tall and as slender as a reed and her delicate skin had a tendency to turn golden brown when exposed to the sun. Her enormous violet eyes were the princess's most striking feature and had been doing considerable damage to the sensibilities of the younger lords around her father's court.

Those same courtiers knew Genevra was the apple of her formidable father's eye and not one had the temerity to approach her. Instead, they contented themselves with yearning after her from afar and pursuing ladies with less dangerous antecedents.

Except for the servants or her mother, there were no other females in the Imperial Palace and now Jonathan was gone, she was lonely. Looking down into the palace grounds, she saw a walled garden she'd never noticed before and a young man seated there. He was reading a book and as far as she could tell, was a stranger.

*That's funny. I didn't know we had a houseguest. I wonder who he is.*

She made a note of the garden's location and decided to head back and satisfy her curiosity.

Just as she entered the palace gate, Genevra ran into the Major Domo.

Oh hell. Now I'm for it.

"I saw you up there, young lady, and just what were you doing outside without an escort? Oh, you wait until your father hears about this. In the old days, they would have locked you up for a year with only bread and water for company. Oh, I just can't believe what this world is coming to. Incidentally, your grandparents just arrived and they're looking for you. I put them in the solarium. You'd best go greet them. After you've done that, you'll barely have time to make yourself presentable for dinner. Oh, my, my, my ...."

As the man went off muttering, Genevra patted her hair in place. Then she made for the solarium. With any luck she'd be with her grandparents by the time Timothy found out and maybe they'd talk him out of punishing her. Good-natured though her father was, he was buggy on the subject of security and would come down on her hard. The inevitable tongue-lashing would be bad enough and she dreaded to think what else he might come up with. She didn't look forward to taking her meals alone in her room for a week and that was liable to be the lightest of her possible punishments.

Well, maybe Grandfather can talk him out of it. Otherwise, I'm going to miss their whole visit.

When they reached the moonlit courtyard next to the palace's magnificent banqueting hall, Timothy was waiting. He took the handles of Darius's wheelchair from Rufus. "I'll take care of the prince. Go on in and get yourself a drink."

Hmm, thought Ephraim. *So this is who all the fuss has been about.*

At seventeen, the grave-faced prince had the classic features, dark hair and burning blue eyes of his original Illyrian forebears. Physically, he couldn't have been more different from his blond mountain chief of a father, yet something about Darius's steady gaze put Ephraim in mind of King Daniel. This one would willingly bow his head to no man and pride was definitely his middle name.

The wheelchair stopped and Timothy said, "Father, I'd like to present Crown Prince Darius of Illyria. His Highness has been our guest for the past year and he's honoring us with his presence tonight. Darius, this is His Majesty the former Emperor Josea and over here are my mother, Thamar, my wife, Giuliana, and my daughter, Genevra."

Genevra saw her father's frown.

Uh oh. The Major Domo ratted on me but it's too late for Dad to do anything about it.

She bent to take Darius's hand and their eyes met. Time stopped and it was if he and she were completely alone. Looking up at her, Darius knew instantly the two of them had been made for each other. He would never care for another woman for as long he lived.

"I feel as if I've known you forever, Princess," he said softly as he kissed her hand.

Genevra continued to look into his eyes. "Will you sit with me at dinner?"

When he smiled his assent, she felt as if the sun had just come out and all the birds in the heavens were singing at once.

How sweet, thought Thamar as she watched them. *They actually seem to have taken to each other.*

Timothy hadn't noticed because he was preoccupied with something the Major Domo was saying and Giuliana was talking to Rufus.

Ephraim had and he raised an inquiring eyebrow at his wife. This was a complication Timothy hadn't counted on and who knew where it might lead? Like his son, Ephraim wasn't entirely mortal and possessed some strange powers. He could read minds and as he scanned Darius', he became disturbed. A flame had been lit in the prince that would never go out until the day of his death. He was one of those rare people who would love only once in his life. When he did, it would be passionately and with his heart, body and soul.

Only once before had Ephraim seen a love like that. That had been the unwavering passion between his friend Julian of Nublis and his beloved Empress Corey. From the moment he laid eyes on his bewitching designated bride until the day of his death sixty-four years later, the late Emperor never so much as

glanced at another woman, and he'd loved her as passionately at one hundred as he had at thirty-six.

Corey had been eighteen years younger than Julian and theirs had been an arranged marriage in which neither expected to care for the other. Fortunately for Julian, Corey returned his ardor in equal measure. When he died, she had been like a lost soul and Ephraim's heart had ached every time he'd seen her. It was as if she'd lost her center and entire reason for living and her own death a few years later had been a merciful release.

"It doesn't seem like sixty-four years," she'd said once. "It's as if we were together for only a day. I looked away for just a moment and in that brief span of time, Julian was gone."

Is this the price one pays for such a love? wondered Ephraim. *If that's the case, my young friend, your newfound passion will bring you much heartache and very little joy. You've already traveled a rocky road, little prince, and now the way ahead will be twice as hard.*

For the moment, Darius and Genevra seemed happy in each other's company and he would be the last person in the world to deny them that.

In honor of his father's homecoming, Timothy had decided to serve a traditional Seiran banquet complete with pillowed couches, belly dancers and chunks of honeyed lamb on flaming swords.

"This is not unlike an Illyrian feast," remarked Darius as Rufus settled him on his couch, "but our belly dancers aren't quite as spectacular as these and I've never seen a meal on a flaming sword before."

"You have belly dancers in Illyria?" wondered Genevra. "I never realized that."

The prince smiled. "Obviously, you've never seen Elf's notorious video 'The Mountain King.' It's all about my grandfather and the first hour is full of them."

Genevra made a mental note to borrow *The Mountain King* from her mother as soon as possible. Up until now, she'd never paid much attention to Elf's videos. Their plots were trite and repetitive and the romantic interludes bored her to tears. When it came to theatrical entertainment, she was into much sterner stuff. She preferred grim tragedies where everybody died and never could understand what her mother and grandmother found so fascinating about Elf's flossy productions with their syrupy happy endings.

Genevra had met Elf several times during his visits with his beautiful wife Cornelia and he'd struck her as being rather quiet and withdrawn. In fact, he wasn't in the least like his on-screen personality. Besides, he was married with two kids, for pity's sake. Sure, he was handsome and all that but how much more boring could a person be? Even if he'd been single, Elf was too old for her anyway. He had to be at least twenty-five if he was a day. Good grief, he might even be thirty, and that was definitely over the hill. Since Darius seemed to be a fan, she said, "Elf is married to one of my cousins and they visit the palace quite often. Maybe you'll get to meet him the next time he's in town. How long are you going to be staying with us? Or is that a rude question?"

Darius smiled, a trifle sadly. "It's not a rude question and it's obvious that your father hasn't explained who I am. I'm a hostage to my father's good behavior, Genevra, and the Emperor of Seira is my keeper. He's detaining me indefinitely on behalf of the Synod. I've been here almost a year but this is the first time I've been allowed out of my apartment. My quarters are very nice and everyone's been most kind, but I find them confining nonetheless."



"They took you away from your father and won't let even you go home or see him or anything? That's terrible. How can Daddy go along with such a monstrous thing?"

"It's what they call politics and, right now, you sound just like my father. It's all very complicated and has to do with a peace treaty between Illyria and its closest neighbor, Lodebar. I was captured during the war and the Synod Assembly decided not to give me back."

"Was that when you got hurt?"

"Yup. A Lodebarian truck drove over a collapsed wall. I happened to be underneath it and was lucky to survive at all."

"You were actually in *abattle*?"

"Several. In the last one I ran out of luck."

"How could your father allow you to do such a thing?"

"He didn't. He'd forbidden me to go anywhere near the action. I should have listened to him." Darius looked deep into her eyes. "But then, I wouldn't have met you, would I?"

"That's true. Do you think it was worth it?"

"Definitely. Meeting you has made it all worthwhile. For as long as I live there'll be no one else for me but you."

"Oh Darius, that's so beautiful. Do you really mean that or are you just saying it?"

"Well, those two certainly seem to be getting along," Timothy remarked to Giuliana. "They're just about the same age and they'll be company for each other. Being around Darius should keep Genevra out of mischief."

"It is rather sweet isn't it?" observed Giuliana. "He seems like such a nice young man. How come you never let him out before this?"

"Nice young man, nothing. Before his injury, young Darius was nothing but a gangster and a terrorist. By all accounts, he was an extremely unpleasant individual and you wouldn't have wanted him within a hundred miles of our precious daughter."

"He's changed that much? But he seems so cultured, dear, and I must say he has beautiful manners."

"Oh, Darius is very well educated and the Illyrians are among the most courtly people in the world. That's when they're not fighting, of course. Contrary to Elf's popular presentation, they don't go around in animal skins, and in sexual matters, they're extremely straitlaced. So are the Lodebarians for that matter. I have a hunch you'd find Queen Sidonia and her daughters very dull indeed."

"Well, did you ever manage to get them that economic development package? I understand they've been having a very hard time of it."

"They have. And yes, I did finally shame the Synod Assembly into giving Lodebar some limited financial aid. I've been casting around for something they could set up and use for a financial base. So far I haven't been able to come up with anything. Do you have any ideas, Gee?"

"As a matter of fact I do. Back in my reporting days, my publisher was having endless trouble with his art and printing services. Why doesn't Queen Sidonia look into getting into that? From what I've seen, there's no lack of talent in Lodebar and that type of equipment can be set up anywhere."

"They'd need a decent airport but you may have something there. I could probably sell the Synod Assembly on giving them some more funding to set it up. Then Lodebar could do for printing and publishing what Seira does for manufacturing. Except I wouldn't couch it in quite those terms."

The Empress smiled. "No, indeed. Seira and manufacturing in the same sentence has the same effect on the Assembly a red rag does on a bull."

Timothy glanced at Darius who was still deeply engrossed with Geneva. "Thanks Gee. I'll give Sidonia a call tomorrow and run it by her. I'll let you know what she says. Maybe we can even set up a visit. I'd have to keep her and Darius at opposite ends of the room but it could be interesting. Everyone knows he's here anyway, so there's no sense in keeping him cooped up any longer. According to his latest medical reports, there's no chance he'll ever walk again and his legs were so badly smashed it's unlikely he'll even be able to use a brace. Incidentally, the Assembly is talking about allowing him to meet his father at a neutral location some time next year. They've just given permission for a viewscreen call. I haven't told the prince yet."

"It sounds as if they're easing up on him."

"His father has finally agreed to pay part of the reparations he owes Lodebar. Incidentally, the Assembly is setting up another meeting between Daniel and Sidonia. Guess who gets to referee."

"Oh no, Timothy. Not again. Where is it this time?"

"On Eos, so why don't you come with me? We can have a wild weekend of fun and frolic and the trip won't be a total waste. Since you've never met Sidonia, you can look her over and decide for yourself if her daughters are as hopeless as I think they are."

Sidonia was closeted with her three daughters in her bedroom.

"We're going to Eos?" squealed Anna Lisa. "But Momma, what am I going to wear? Oooh, isn't this exciting?"

"We'll be guests of the Synod Assembly," remarked Sidonia. "which means that we won't have to watch every last cent for a change. Anna Lisa, Solaria just finished that pretty green dress for you and there's a nice piece of velvet we can use for a jacket. Actually, I'm more concerned about Sybilla. Let's have a look at you, dear."

Sybilla sighed deeply and obediently moved into the light.

Sidonia inspected her youngest daughter critically. With some makeup, new glasses and a curled hairpiece to fill out her skimpy locks, Sybilla might actually be passable. And she had just seen a couple

of designs that would help conceal her youngest daughter's remarkably flat-chested figure.

The door opened and Sidonia's younger son Baron came in. A year older than Sybilla, the two siblings were quite close. Since the peace treaty, he'd been home on furlough from his unit and Sidonia had been teaching him accounting.

His older brother Carlo was a senior officer and away on border duty. Last month, there'd been a minor fracas when some over-eager Illyrian guards strayed over the line into Lodebar. Sidonia immediately dispatched Carlo to investigate and he was inspecting all the checkpoints and making sure her troops were on their toes.

"What is it Baron?"

He saluted and the Queen gestured for him to stand at ease. "Emperor Timothy is setting up a viewscreen call and the operator's asking if eleven would be convenient."

Sidonia glanced at the clock. "That's ten minutes from now. Tell the operator that's fine. I'll take it in here."

Baron turned on the viewscreen in the corner of the big bedroom. After fiddling with a couple of dials, he set up the scrambler and handed her the remote control.

Sidonia eyed him fondly. If the truth be known, Baron was her favorite child. Red-haired like his father, he had the same stocky build but possessed Sidonia's trademark blue eyes and the family Grecian nose. His father was the only one of her lovers for whom she'd had any feelings and she'd let him go with real regret.

Carlo was the oldest of her four children and Sidonia had detested *his* father, a supercilious count with a fixation on his aristocratic lineage. Her councilors had been anxious for them to make a match and she had been mightily relieved when the issue of their union had only been a boy and not the royal heir.

Now that there was income again, the Queen had changed her mind about Anna Lisa's debut. The gala coming out party was in the works and she thought it might be a good time to put Carlo on display too. Tall and slim, he'd inherited his father's aristocratic good looks as well as his smooth black hair and dark eyes. As sweet-natured as his father was ugly, he'd never given Sidonia a moment's grief. The Synod Assembly's social season would provide him an excellent opportunity to snag some wealthy heiress or perhaps even an alliance with one of the major royal houses. Nublis had an oversupply of unmarried princesses while Seira was overstocked with fledgling princes. Both families were wealthier than snot and her children's' lineage was respectable enough for either.

For now, she was keeping her plans for Sybilla to herself and much would depend on how things went with Daniel at the upcoming conference. Sidonia had seen his eyes straying in her direction more than once. Daniel had been widowed for several years and she knew very well what effect she had on him. The Illyrian King had become increasingly intrigued with her and she found him not unattractive.

For this particular trip, she was giving careful thought to her personal wardrobe and for the first time in many years had ordered some sexy lingerie and perfume. Then she'd announced to the girls that she was going to take a private suite of her own. That way, if they wanted to have some company or a party after hours, they wouldn't disturb her.

Solaria had given her mother a sharp look but said nothing. As the heir to the throne she was immune to

Sidonia's marital machinations and planned to pick her own lovers when the time came. Having inherited her mother's beauty and her somewhat waspish disposition, Solaria didn't take crap from anyone. Without consulting Sidonia, she had taken her pick of the carefully saved Nublian silk and created several attractive outfits for herself.

She planned to have her own kind of fun on Eos. To that end, she'd obtained several brochures for Eos's famed male escort services and was squirreling away the necessary cash. It might be the only chance she'd ever have and she planned to make the most of it.

Sybilla knew all about Solaria's plans and didn't altogether blame her. If anything, she envied her beautiful older sister and wasn't about to report her to their mother.

As the heir to the throne, the Crown Princess would be required to pick her lovers from a carefully culled list of eligible suitors and the rules for her sexual relationships were extremely rigid.

While Baron and Carlo could do as they pleased and each had at least one mistress somewhere in the city, Sidonia watched Sybilla and Anna Lisa like the proverbial hawk and neither would ever have the freedom their male siblings enjoyed. To the Queen, Anna Lisa's beauty was money in the bank and she was going to be put through her paces during the upcoming social season. At its end, Sidonia would auction her daughter off to the highest bidder like a prize racehorse.

While Sybilla had never thought of physical beauty as a curse, in Anna Lisa's case it certainly was. She was thankful her own miserable looks had spared her the same fate. What Sidonia planned for her she had no idea and was surprised her mother was even bothering with her. She'd not only been included on the trip, Momma was fussing over her appearance almost as much as Anna Lisa's.

Baron put down the phone and Timothy's face appeared on the viewscreen. "My dear Sidonia. How are you and your beautiful family?"

"We're just fine," replied Sidonia melodiously. "And how are you, Timothy? Your lovely wife is well, I hope."

Timothy kept a straight face. "Giuliana is as marvelous as ever and looking forward to meeting you and your lovely daughters. I called you today because I've come up with an idea that could furnish a solution to Lodebar's economic problems. We need to work up a proposal for the Synod Assembly because it'll require a certain amount of investment. I've been doing some number crunching and the whole thing appears feasible. It could make Lodebar financially independent in as little as five years."

Financially independent. *Now, that has a nice ring to it.*

"You have me intrigued, Timothy. Tell me more."

After Timothy was done outlining his proposal, Sidonia frowned. "I don't know much about publishing but I suppose I could learn and the unions are not a problem here. The tabloid action alone would be quite a chunk and you say there's quite a bit of glossy magazine business as well. Not to mention books, art prints, religion and pornography. I agree with you that we need a decent airport. I no longer control the Port Moriah, but that's more than offset by the fact that Illyria and Lodebar are finally at peace. We can shuttle our product and raw materials back and forth through the Federation's spaceport. It's a free port and there's no tax on any of Betelgeuse's Federated Nations, of which we're one."

"Remind me to talk you about that some time," said Timothy dryly. "We're getting socked to a fare thee

well every time we ship through there. Maybe I can make one of your companies a limited partner and we can get around it that way. I'd pay you of course."

"It's a thought and I owe you a favor anyway. Let me think on it and we can talk some more on Eos."

After Timothy snapped off the viewscreen, he frowned.

Sidonia was up to something and he didn't trust her any further than he did Daniel. Well, at least last night's dinner had gone well and if he'd known that young Prince Darius was that charming and well-behaved, he would have let him out of his apartment long ago.

The doctor on the ship that carried Darius to Seira was one of Timothy's nephews. His claim of a father in the diplomatic corps had been a polite fiction. In addition to being a physician, Prince Alexander was one of Timothy's most skilled intelligence operatives. His assignment had been to break their rebellious young prisoner's spirit and bring him to heel.

Alexander's task had been pathetically easy. The poor kid was so sick and traumatized he couldn't see straight. The real problem had been how to avoid breaking him to the point that he would go into a severe depression and never recover. From what he'd observed, Darius was suicidal and would bear watching for as long as he was in Timothy's hands. His guilt and grief over his friends' deaths weren't going to go away any time soon. As long as they were present, he was at risk. Alexander had also warned Timothy that the prince was very, very smart. He'd be constantly testing his limits and looking for some way to escape.

The Emperor had therefore been agreeably surprised by how smoothly the dinner party had gone. There was no question Geneva was having a beneficial effect. All the women in his family seemed taken with the Illyrian Prince and Timothy himself found the young man most appealing.

Only Ephraim demurred from the general consensus and refused to explain why. Well, maybe Dad was finally getting crotchety in his old age. For all his youthful appearance, Ephraim was well into his eighties and had been traveling for most of the day. He'd probably been tired and the dinner party had gone on until it was quite late.

When Rufus came in with Darius' breakfast, the prince was wide-awake and actually smiling.

"Well that's a nice change. You're usually as grouchy as an old bear. What happened? Did the Emperor slip you some happy pills or something?"

Darius yawned and stretched. "If you'll bring the traction bar down to where I can reach it, I'll even do my exercises without your telling me to."

Rufus looked at the monitors on the wall. They were all within normal ranges.

"Are you sure you're well?"

"I've never felt better in my life. Now how about bringing down that traction bar?"

When he was done with his exercises, the prince surveyed the covered dishes on the tray. "What's for breakfast?"

"Eggs, some of that sausage you like, fruit, bread, and that rice vegetable mushroom thing the cook insists on making."

"Good. I'm so hungry right now I could eat the pattern right off the plates." He proved it by devouring everything in sight.

"Now I know you're sick and I'm calling the doctor right now. You hate that rice vegetable mushroom thing and never touched it before."

"Isn't she beautiful?" remarked Darius as if he hadn't heard. "She's coming to see me today. How about the red silk shirt and matching sweater? They're pretty snazzy, don't you think?"

"*Who's* beautiful? Oh, no. Don't tell me. You've gone and fallen in love with the Emperor's daughter."

"What's wrong with that? I'm going to be a king some day. We're exactly the same age and it would be a perfectly suitable match."

"Her father might not see it that way. Besides, you're much too young."

"No, I'm not. Last night I met the only woman in the universe for me. If I live to be a hundred, I'll love her with every fiber of my being until the day I die."

"You really mean that, don't you?"

"That's what I just told you. There'll never be another woman for me and now I know what true happiness is. It's knowing that Genevra's alive and nearby and coming to see me today. Now, how about that red shirt?"

"All right."

Digging around in the closet, Rufus thought, *I'm afraid you're going to be like Daniel and give your heart away only once. I don't want to see it broken the way his was, and I hope and pray that Genevra realizes what a precious gift you've given her.*

"Where are they?"

Rufus looked up from the clothes he was folding. Recognizing the Emperor, he quickly got to his feet. "Out on the patio, Your Majesty. Would you like me tell His Highness you're here?"

"Not necessary. Please continue with what you were doing."

As the Emperor went through the French doors, he heard a soft giggle. Darius's dark head and Genevra's fair one were bent over a gaming board and Balthasar the cat lay stretched in the sun nearby. He watched them for a moment.

"Darius, that's not fair," exclaimed Genevra. "You're cheating, I swear."

"No, I'm not. I'm just a whole lot better at this game than you are. Let's see. You now owe me fifteen million credits .... And a kiss. A second kiss will wipe out your obligation and a gambler should always pay her debts promptly. How about it?"

Genevra giggled again. "Oh, all right. If you really think one of my kisses is worth fifteen million credits."

"My lady," Darius started to say. Then he looked up and saw Timothy.

He flushed and dropped the game piece he was holding.

Genevra looked up too and gasped, "Daddy. You should have let us know you were there. It's not nice to eavesdrop on people. You never know what you're going to hear."

Timothy raised an eyebrow. "Apparently not. Is there something you two want to tell me? Or is this just a harmless flirtation?"

Darius looked the Emperor straight in the eye. "I love your daughter, sir. May I have her hand in marriage?"

"Oh, Darius," breathed Genevra. "Do you really mean that? If you want me to marry you, the answer is yes."

"Now hold on just a minute," exclaimed the startled Timothy. "Aren't you a bit young to be making these kinds of decisions? You only met yesterday, you can't possibly be serious."

"Oh, I am, sir. What's more, I've never been more serious in my life. I'm not in the best physical shape but I can assure Your Majesty I have plenty to offer your daughter. She'll never want for anything."

Oh no, thought Timothy. *This can't be happening.*

"Your father might have something to say about this. I came to tell you a viewscreen call is being set up this afternoon. You're going to be able to talk to him."

"Really? That's wonderful, and the timing couldn't be better. Actually, my father has nothing to say about who I marry. According to our custom, I can wed whom I please. Unlike the Seirans or Nublians, my people marry strictly for love. My mother was a barmaid in a tavern on Aretz and my father was a student at the university when they met. He wasn't much older than I. They loved each other dearly until the day she was killed in battle at his side. He's never looked at another woman since that day."

That's all you know, thought Timothy but decided to keep his opinions to himself.

"Your Majesty," Darius continued earnestly, "this is surely not an unsuitable match. Genevra and I are the same age. She's an imperial princess and I will be a king. What's wrong with that?"

"Part of the problem is the difference in your cultures. In Illyria, the women fight in battle alongside their menfolk. Genevra was raised to a gentler way of life."

Darius smiled a trifle bitterly. "What you're saying may be all too true, Your Majesty. But let's face it, my

days of going into battle are over for good. My role henceforth will be to remain far behind the lines with the old women and children. Quite apart from that, sir, Lodebar and Illyria are at peace now and likely to remain so because the seaport of Moriah is gone."

"Does it not bother you that you're a ...."

"Cripple? If it doesn't bother Genevra, why should it be a problem for me? The doctors tell me I can lead a perfectly normal life. Outside not being able to walk, of course. One advantage of being shut up in here for the past year is I've had plenty of time to think. For a long time, I was like a bird beating its wings futilely against the walls of a cage. Then I realized, when the bird's wings are broken a cage is probably the best place for it to be. One of your ancient philosophers talks about our interior universe and the rich world of the soul. During the past few months, I've found his thoughts very helpful. With Genevra at my side, I'll be content."

"For your age, you're amazingly mature. The philosopher to whom you refer was Seira's first Emperor and I agree with you about his writings. I too have found his thoughts helpful during certain dark hours of my life. At one time he was a heedless young man, living only for pleasure and the gratification of the moment. He married a gracious young princess who loved him deeply. She gave him a son and for a short time they were happy together. Then he turned back to his old ways and even brought other women to their marriage bed. When he was still in his thirties, he was blinded in an accident. After that, he changed. During that dark hour, he learned about the interior life of the soul. The greatest of all of our Emperors, his writings survive to this day."

"Did he ever recover his sight?"

"No, he never did. There's a legend that a witch offered him his sight back. He refused the gift because he'd never seen clearly until he was blinded. If he could see again, he feared he would lose that inner vision and everything worthwhile in his life."

"I don't know if I'd go that far. If a witch were to offer me my legs back, I'd take her up on it in a heartbeat."

"Then, you might not be quite so resigned to your cage."

"True. It would require another whole adjustment in attitude. But you haven't given me your answer. May I have your daughter's hand in marriage? Yes or no."

Timothy looked down at the two hopeful young faces, then threw up his hands. "I'll have to talk with Genevra's mother. You're both so young and you've got your whole lives ahead of you. Let's just say I won't necessarily oppose your relationship. No matter what your Illyrian customs, you need to consult with your father on this. Something tells me there are other forces at work and this whole situation may not be as simple as it appears."

"We can go on seeing each other?" asked Genevra.

"I don't see why not." Timothy gave Darius a stern look. "I'm assuming you're an honorable man, Your Highness, and will do nothing with Genevra you wouldn't if her mother and I were present. Do we understand each other?"

"Of course, Your Majesty. I wouldn't have it any other way."



"Very well, then. I'll let Rufus know the time of the viewscreen call. In the meantime, go on with your game."

Vasek looked up at Daniel as the King paced back and forth. "By all reports, Darius has changed. But the extent of his injuries has been kept secret until now."

"What do you mean, the extent of his injuries? Are you saying there's something wrong with him? Why would they keep such a thing from me?"

"I've obtained a copy of Darius' medical report along with an account of exactly what happened the day he was hurt. Getting hold of it was suspiciously easy, I suspect the Seirans intended for you to have it. Also, I'm beginning to think my agent in the Imperial Palace is a double."

He handed the file to Daniel, and the King began to read. When he saw the scans of Darius's legs, he gasped.

"I know. Between the wall that crushed him and the truck that drove over him, it's a miracle there was anything left at all. As you can see, his first six months were pure hell. Since then, he's seemed to adjust."

"How can you adjust to something like that? If he'd been here, it would have been bad enough. But to deliberately leave him among strangers, away from everything he's ever known--that's barbaric. Call in my generals. This treaty is a meaningless farce and the peace is at an end. Darius would be better off dead than the way he is now. If those bastards want to kill him in return for my violation of their precious treaty, they'll be doing us both a favor."

"Now you know why they kept it from you. And think for a minute before you go off half-cocked in ten different directions. Darius got into this situation because he defied your orders. He and his little gang of thugs committed atrocities you would never have sanctioned in a million years. When he and his friends got caught it was their twelfth such raid. The way he was going, it was bound to happen sooner or later. All things considered, the Synod Assembly was pretty merciful. Sidonia wanted him tried for his war crimes and condemned to death. Had he been anybody else, he would have been."

"Well, Sidonia isn't exactly as pure as the driven snow. She's got plenty of blood on her hands too."

"That's true, and it's exactly why she didn't pursue it with the Human Rights Tribunal. She doesn't have a leg to stand on and knows it. She let off the captain who was responsible for the butchery of Darius's friends with little more than a slap on the wrist. The soldiers who did the actual killings weren't penalized at all."

"So you're saying it's six of one and a half dozen of the other. But that still doesn't resolve the situation with Darius, does it?"

"Your son's received a life sentence for what he did and watched his friends die. If he's going to stay sane, it's bound to change him. At some point there has to be an end to all the hate. Maybe this is it."

"What are you saying? Have you become a wuss too, like those pantywaists who run the Assembly?"

"Anything but. But take a look at the facts, Daniel. Your people have never been happier and Illyria is prospering as never before. Hell, you're doing so well you could pay Sidonia's reparations twice over

and never miss 'em. She's had to give up control of Port Moriah and will never get it back. Lodebar's such a miserable country, you wouldn't want it if it was handed to you on a platter. So, what's left to fight about?"

"When you put it that way, not much. But I was raised in an atmosphere of war. I've never known anything else."

"You raised Darius the same way and look what he turned into. A pure and simple killing machine. He may have been a great terrorist but he was a terrible human being. As far back as he can remember, he's eaten, slept and breathed nothing but war. His own mother was killed in battle at your side and he was literally weaned on gunfire. Is that really your vision of the future?"

"You're saying I turned Darius into a monster? Which means I'm responsible for what's happened to him, I suppose. In any other society, I'd have your head for saying that."

"Not in Illyria. You depend on the truth, Daniel, because it's the only thing that will keep you safe when we're this close to the bone. This is the one thing that worries me about a peaceful prosperous society. That's when the lies and treachery begin."

"So, what's the answer?"

"I wish I knew. Wiser men than I have spent a lifetime trying to figure it out and they never have either."

Darius was visibly nervous as he waited for the viewscreen to come on line and kept fussing with the remote control to the point that Timothy felt like smacking him. Finally Genevra leaned over and said softly, "He's your father, after all, and he loves you Darius. Now relax before you break that thing."

"Maybe I should change my shirt again," muttered the prince. "This isn't a particularly good color. He might think I'm sick or something."

"Oh, Darius. You've changed your shirt three times already and look fine. Besides, Daddy says your father's just seen your medical report. He knows what to expect."

"What do you mean, he's just seen it? He didn't know?"

Timothy frowned. "We thought it better not to divulge that particular information until now."

"Why?"

Darius answered his own question. "If he'd seen it before this, my father would have concluded I was better off dead, then you'd have lost your precious political lever." He swung his wheelchair around to face the Emperor. "What makes you think he won't react that way now?"

"Two things. First of all, we have Illyria encircled in a ring of steel and its skies overhead are filled with battlecruisers. Secondly, you're going to talk him out of it."

At that moment, King Daniel's face appeared on the viewscreen. "Darius? Are you there?"

Grabbing the wheelchair, Timothy shoved it within range of the viewscreen's camera. "Talk."

Darius swallowed hard. "Dad? I'm here."

"Son. They told me what happened to you. I'm still trying to get used to the idea."

Darius bowed his head to hide the sudden tears. "I know, Dad. I--I'm sorry. I disobeyed your orders and let you down."

Timothy was finding the whole thing almost too painful to watch.

"Darius. It's all right. What's done is done. You've paid dearly for what you did. You don't need to beat on yourself anymore. What's important is where we go from here."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes, I do. Much as I hate to admit it, the Synod Assembly's right. There has to be an end to this pointless killing. The war between Illyria and Lodebar is over for good, son, and it's time to hang up our shields. When I meet with Queen Sidonia two days from now, I'll be extending her the hand of friendship. After that, I'm going to find a way to bring you home."

"Home? Yes Dad, of course. I c--can't wait."

"They're telling me it's time to go. Darius? I--er--take care of yourself."

"You too, Dad."

After Daniel's image faded, Darius sat looking at the viewscreen for a long time. He clutched the arms of the wheelchair so hard his knuckles were white. "You can call your dogs off, Your Majesty. My father's beaten and he knows it. Now, I'd like to be alone."

When Genevra made a move toward him, Timothy shook his head. "Leave him be. Come on, sweetheart. Let's go and find your mother."

He put his arm around his daughter's shoulders and led her from the room. Just as they reached the hallway, he looked back. Darius was still in the center of the room where they'd left him. His head was bowed and he was weeping bitterly.

Timothy closed the door softly and left the prince alone.

Sybilla looked at her mother in horror. "You can't be serious."

Sidonia returned her daughter's gaze calmly. "I've never been more serious in my life. After we return from Eos, you and Prince Darius will be officially betrothed. The wedding will take place when he reaches the age of twenty-one. Then you'll go live with him in Illyria. Think of it, Sybilla. You'll be a queen."

"But he's a terrorist. You said yourself he should have been tried for his crimes and hanged by the neck

until he was dead. Now you want me to marry him? Oh, this is really sick. No, Momma, I won't do it."

Sidonia took her daughter by the shoulders and looked deep into her eyes, "Oh yes, you will. You'll do it for Lodebar."

"What makes you think Darius will even consent to such a thing?"

"He won't have anything to say. This is strictly between Daniel and myself and Darius will do as he's told. Now, don't look so stricken. The Crown Prince is a well-mannered handsome lad and he'll treat you well. You'll have clothes and jewels and be the mistress of one of the loveliest palaces in the Synod."

"Now I understand why you were taking all that interest in me. Here I actually thought you cared but all I am to you is a piece of meat like Anna Lisa."

Sidonia slapped her daughter so hard, Sybilla's ears rang.

When the Queen spoke, her voice was thick with rage. "Don't you ever say anything like that again. Everything I've ever done is for you and your sisters. Your marriage to Darius will bring Illyria and Lodebar together. For the first time in history, our people will go to bed at night with no fear of the morrow. We'll raise a generation of children who know nothing of war and at long last will be able to plant something in our fields besides rows of gravestones."

"We're going to do that anyway, Momma. The Synod Assembly will see to that."

"You really don't understand, do you? We're politically fashionable right now and our conflict with Illyria is the flavor of the month. But the Assembly will eventually tire of its peacekeeping role. There'll be increasing pressure from its membership to pull out the troops. After they're gone, it will all begin again. Daniel will never give up until his boot's firmly on Lodebar's neck and Port Moriah's under his control. Unless ...."

"Unless what?"

"Unless we can find a way to change his mind. Now, do you understand?"

"Why me? Anna Lisa's so beautiful, Darius will probably fall in love with her. But me? Come on, Momma. I see myself in the mirror every day. I know how I look."

"For one thing, Anna Lisa's two years older than Darius. But that's not the reason I chose you over her. This is a difficult assignment, Sybilla, and your sister's not very bright. She'd be easy prey for the first sweet-talking gallant who came on to her and have both our families enmeshed in scandal in no time. I have no such fear where you're concerned."

"You've got that right. No sweet-talking gallant is ever going to come on to me unless he's *blind*! As long as we're on the subject, Darius isn't going to come on to me either. You can marry me off to him all you want, I'll probably die a virgin."

"Not necessarily true. There's an old saying that all cats are gray in the dark. Darius is a man like any other and I'll teach you a thing or two before you go to your marriage bed."

"Assuming we overcome all that, how are you going to persuade Daniel to go along with such a thing?"

"You leave Daniel to me. By the time we come back from Eos, he'll be eating out of my hand. Besides, it may be the only way he can persuade the Synod Assembly to give his son back."

"The Synod Assembly? What do they know about this?"

Sidonia gave her daughter a beatific smile. "Your union with Darius has the blessing of some very highly placed people. In fact, the Assembly's movers and shakers absolutely love the idea. They love it so much, in fact, they're going to substantially increase our next economic development package. Don't you see, dear? Your betrothal will put a time limit on their peacekeeping role and that will make the Assembly's rank and file very happy indeed."

"What's to prevent Daniel from using me as a hostage after Darius and I are married?"

"*You* will. My dear Sybilla, you're going to make Daniel love you like a daughter. You may be no raving beauty but you're one of the sweetest people I've ever known. Daniel's no monster and all you have to do is be yourself. You'll give Darius an heir and your position within the Illyrian Royal Family will be secure."

"You've really thought this out, haven't you?"

"Yes, dear, I have. As Queen of Lodebar, that's part of my job. My first duty is towards my people and so is yours. Just keep that in mind, Sybilla, and it'll all be worthwhile."

Timothy's magnificent black and silver imperial flagship was nosing its way to the dock at Eos's spaceport when Queen Sidonia's infinitely more modest craft came into view over the horizon. Bearing the distinctive insignia of the Synod, a blue and gold Trade League merchant cruiser was already parked in the next space over from Timothy's. Soon after the Lodebarian Queen's ship docked, it was followed in by a rakish, heavily armed vessel belonging to Illyria's King Daniel.

As the main bay doors of Timothy's ship slid open, the Emperor observed to Giuliana, "Everyone's here, I see, and there's an official reception committee complete with press and photographers. Dammit Gee, this was supposed to be an unofficial visit."

"What else did you expect, dear? This is Eos, not Seira. Here, my love, you have to be nice to the press. You can't chuck them in a cell, then throw them off the planet the way you do back home."

"More's the pity."

The Empress adjusted her hat and inspected Timothy's immaculate jacket.

A small girl waited at the end of their ship's dock to greet the Imperial Couple. She held an enormous bouquet of flowers and just behind her stood a flock of dignitaries and their wives. As Timothy offered Giuliana his arm, he said through clenched teeth, "So much for our plans for fun and frolic."

They advanced in stately fashion toward the concourse and Giuliana could see out of the tail of her eye that the Illyrian and Lodebarian royalty were being similarly greeted. "Smile," she hissed at Timothy as they reached the small girl.

After she'd been presented with the flowers, Giuliana bent and gave the child a hug. Then she turned to

the leader of the delegation and extended her hand. Vaguely she remembered he was the Governor of Eos and that the young woman next to him was his daughter. "Your Excellency," she trilled. "It was so kind of you to meet us. Eos is so pleasant at this time of year, is it not?"

The Governor bowed and kissed her hand. "Your Majesties. While we realize that this not an official visit, we couldn't allow the arrival of so much illustrious royalty to go unnoticed. I would be honored to have you as my personal guests at the Mansion."

There goes our weekend for sure, thought Timothy.

Sidonia and her daughters had come up behind them with Daniel and his entourage were close on their heels. Giuliana firmly nudged her husband and he gave the waiting press a wave and a gracious smile.

After greeting the rest of the visiting royalty, Eos' Governor offered the Empress his arm while Timothy did the same for his host's daughter. Flanked by their ever vigilant security guards, the entire party walked in procession across the crowded spaceport concourse towards the waiting carriages.

Although Eos was very small and had little in the way of natural resources, the planet had long been the Synod's premier convention and resort center. Home to every imaginable vice, it was said anything was available there for a price. Prostitution was legal and strictly regulated. The planet's fabulous courtesans were widely renowned as were Eos's incredible resort hotel complexes.

Timothy had thoughtfully reserved the most extravagant penthouse in the entire city for himself and Giuliana. However, the Governor's Mansion was nothing to sneeze at and the Emperor and his wife were agreeably surprised by their accommodations. Since they weren't going to be using their suite, Timothy decided to give it to Queen Sidonia and her daughters instead. According to the brochure and video, the huge penthouse boasted a private elevator, its own swimming pool, two separate floors, a grand staircase, a state of the art kitchen complete with gourmet chef, and a full complement of servants.

Even Queen Sidonia was awed, and her three daughters were struck speechless. "You're sure there hasn't been some mistake?"

"Oh no, Your Majesty. There's no mistake. The Emperor of Seira had originally reserved this penthouse for his own use. After His Imperial Majesty's plans changed, he instructed me to offer these accommodations to you as his guests. If there's anything else you desire, the Emperor has instructed me to charge it to his account."

"Oh, wow!" cried Anna Lisa after the manager left. "This place is incredible. I've never seen anything like it."

"At twenty thousand credits a night, you're not likely to again," her mother told her dryly. "I'll take the suite on this floor and you can pick out your rooms upstairs. We'll all meet in the grand salon in two hours."

As long as everything was on the house, Sidonia ordered up a milk bath and a deep massage. While the masseuse worked, she instructed one of the maids to set up snacks and drinks in the salon, a second to unpack and press the gowns she had brought with her, a third to dress her hair, and the fourth to give her a manicure.

Oh, my, she purred to herself. *A person could get used to this very easily. For once in my life, I'm actually living like royalty. Yum.*

A grand reception was to be held at the Governor's Mansion in honor of the peace conference and she wanted to make a real impression on the King of Illyria. To that end, she arrayed herself in an elegant black lace gown which fit tightly across her bosom and hips and flared gracefully out around her ankles. The luxuriant blonde curls piled atop her small head were topped off with one of her prettiest diadems and a magnificent diamond choker set off her swanlike neck. The entire ensemble was complemented by a magnificent ebony sable cloak inherited by the Queen from her mother. An upstanding fur collar set off Sidonia's exquisite white bosom and shoulders to perfection and the cloak itself swept in great folds to the floor.

The Queen had instructed her three daughters to dress in their very best. Anna Lisa was especially lovely in a full-skirted rose chiffon gown and Solaria was a vision in a tight-fitting green velvet sheath.

Even Sybilla looked presentable. As Sidonia had hoped, her new glasses and hairpiece made all the difference in the world. The faint blush of her youngest daughter's delicate makeup had to be the result of Solaria's skillful hand. The artfully draped bodice of Sybilla's blue silk dress did an excellent job of concealing her woefully flat chest and the gown's finely pleated skirt swirled gracefully around her tiny ankles as she moved.

When the Queen swept into the grand salon, Sybilla's mouth dropped open. "Oh Momma. You look fabulous."

Glimpsing herself in one of the salon's long mirrors, Sidonia had to agree. Tonight's regal trappings were a far cry from the severely tailored military uniforms that were her usual garb. For once in her life, she looked the way a Queen should and the hotel servants' supercilious manner had changed into something considerably more respectful.

We should do this more often, she thought.

The penthouse's bell chimed and one of the maids went to open the door. As she came into the grand salon and curtsied, the Queen asked in an imperious voice, "What is it?"

"Your security is here and the limousine is waiting downstairs, Your Majesty."

After she opened the door of the private elevator, the maid curtsied again, then stood aside to let the Queen and the princesses pass.

Hmm, thought Sybilla as they emerged from the elevator downstairs. *So this is what it's like to be a queen.*

Cameras clicked all over the hotel lobby while women curtsied and men bowed.

While Sidonia acknowledged the crowd's greetings with an inclination of her head and a gracious smile, Solaria kept her nose firmly in the air. She didn't look from one side to the other and poor Anna Lisa merely looked terrified.

Sybilla took it all in as if it were the most natural thing in the world. She gave an impression of utter poise and confidence and appeared completely different from her sisters.

When the limousine drew up to the white marble steps of the Governor's Mansion, Anna Lisa spotted the red carpet and dozens of liveried footmen. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Oh, no, you're not," hissed Sidonia. "Now pay attention, Anna Lisa. Pull yourself together and remember what I've taught you. Then take a deep breath and slowly count to ten."

Solaria closed her eyes with a pained expression. "Oh, Momma. This is so embarrassing. Anna Lisa, for pity's sake. Anyone would think you'd never been to a grand reception before."

"Well, I haven't. What's more, Solaria, neither have you."

Sybilla bit back a smile. Whatever else her sisters might be, sophisticated they were not.

The Governor waited to greet them at the bottom of the steps. "Welcome to my humble home, Your Majesty. King Daniel is already here as is His Excellency the President of the Synod Assembly. We only needed your august presence to make this evening complete."

When the Governor offered the Queen his arm, Sybilla saw a handsome young officer in a Synod battlefleet dress uniform looking at her expectantly. Quickly, she placed her white gloved hand on his arm.

Followed by her sisters and their escorts, she started up the steps after her mother.

Inside the Mansion, they entered a glittering white marble ballroom with what seemed like acres of glittering chandeliers overhead. The orchestra struck up the strains of the Lodebarian national anthem. The crowd parted and their party proceeded slowly to the other end of the floor. As they reached the far wall, King Daniel rose to his feet and came forward to greet the Queen. Their eyes met and Sidonia caught her breath.

The golden bearded Illyrian king was a magnificent figure of a man. Six foot four and in his prime, he was clad in the traditional native dress of his mountain forebears: a dazzling white tunic, gleaming leather bandolier and snug-fitting riding pants. His black knee-high boots were so highly polished, they glittered, and a fur-lined green velvet half-cloak swung from one shoulder. An ornate jeweled belt encircled his slim waist. From it hung a golden sword whose handle and scabbard were set with enormous flashing gems. But even though he possessed more battlefield medals than he could count, Daniel wore none of them.

Wow, thought Giuliana. *What a pair.*

On his throne beside her, Timothy raised an eyebrow. Sidonia and Daniel looked dazzling and each had obviously gone to a great deal of trouble to impress the other. Even in her severe military uniforms, with her long blonde hair pulled back into a bun, Sidonia was an extraordinarily beautiful woman. Tonight, she was breathtaking. Judging by the stunned expression on his handsome face, the king was completely bowled over.

As Daniel kissed Sidonia's hand, she spoke in a soft, melodious voice. "Now, I'd like to present my real crown jewels to Your Majesty. These are my daughters Solaria, Anna Lisa and Sybilla."

After each of the three Princesses swept him a graceful curtsy, Daniel conducted Sidonia toward the imperial thrones.

Mmm, thought Giuliana. *Her daughters don't look so hopeless to me. The red-haired one in the middle is a raving beauty. Even the little one in the glasses isn't too bad. What did she say her*



*name was? Celia? No, that's not right. All right, I've got it now. Their names are Solaria, Anna Lisa, and Sybilla.*

Sybilla blinked as she beheld the imperial couple.

The Emperor and Empress were arrayed in their magnificent coronation regalia and looked as if they had stepped out of a fairy tale. Timothy's dazzling white armor was topped with a brilliant blue cloak emblazoned with the black and gold eagles of the imperial house of Seira and he wore a glittering gold coronet set with deep blue sapphires. Giuliana's formfitting dress was made entirely from cloth of gold and covered with diamonds that flashed with a million points of fire every time she moved. A blue cloak similar to Timothy's streamed from her graceful shoulders and the myriad of gems in her glittering diadem sparkled as if each had an individual light of its own.

"Now that," muttered Solaria, "is real money."

Sybilla saw the Emperor's face was kind and the Empress was smiling at her reassuringly.

They're just people like us, she thought, *and I'll bet that dress weighs a ton .*

As a matter of fact it did and Giuliana had complained that moving around in it was like lifting weights. "If I wear this tonight, I'm not dancing. Tell them I've got a sprained ankle or something. Once I've reached that throne, I'm staying there until we leave. Whoever designed the damn thing was no friend to the Empress. How your mother stood it for as long as she did, I'll never know."

Timothy laughed. "If you think your dress is bad, you should try this armor. Dad used to complain about it all the time. During the Revolution, he'd have to actually climb on a horse and parade in it at the head of his troops. Holding the great banner of Seira, yet. The Plutarchs' gunners found him an absolutely wonderful target and used him for a reference point whenever they were sighting in their heavy artillery. He said if he ever caught the idiot who dreamed it up, he'd have killed him on the spot. No one would ever take the credit."

"I know. But I've seen all the videos and you have to admit your father looked fantastic. The one where he stood beside that funeral pyre on Mount Phasga and raised the great standard of Seira for the first time still gives me goose bumps. But that all happened before you were born, didn't it?"

"Yeah. Momma was pregnant with Nathan. Corey told me she almost died from shock when she saw Dad on the viewscreen. Up until then, she had been afraid he was dead. She was still on Nublis and he'd been kidnapped and imprisoned on Seira. It's quite a story."

"Your father was quite a man. But then, of course, he still is."

"That's because he was smart enough to abdicate and leave the damn throne and armor to me."

"Well, at least it's bullet-proof."

"So's that dress. In fact, I suspect it was deliberately designed to be."

Giuliana looked down at herself thoughtfully. Timothy might have a point because assassination was the one nightmare every royal family had to live with. Especially these days when one never knew what kind

of insane flake was going to come out of the woodwork.

For some reason, that put her in mind of Darius.

The King of Illyria still didn't know where his son was being held and his agents were said to be hunting for the prince all over the Synod. Since Daniel was considered to have his suspicions of Timothy, Seiran Intelligence had increased their whole family's security tenfold. She worried constantly that one of their children would be kidnapped or worse. Queen Sidonia lived with the same anxiety and it made for a common bond between them. Well, maybe this meeting would do something to allay those fears. She hoped so anyway.

As Daniel and Sidonia came before him, Timothy scanned both their minds. Daniel was reacting to Sidonia but the Queen was something else again.

She's deliberately going to seduce him, but that isn't all she has in mind.

He scanned Sidonia again.

Oh no. She's plotting to marry one of her daughters off to Darius and is going to persuade Daniel to help her. Actually, it's not a bad idea. Now, which does she have in mind? Not the oldest. She's the heir to the throne and a nasty little piece of work she is too. The beautiful redhead is so naive Sidonia would never trust her in a situation like that. Nope. It's got to be the ugly duckling, Sybilla. Knowing Sidonia, she's already gotten herself some heavy backing for the match from Betelgeuse's Parliament and the Synod Assembly. Now she's going to try for Daniel himself, and me too I shouldn't doubt. At least she would have if I hadn't brought Gee. Well, it should make for an interesting weekend if nothing else.

Sidonia's clear blue eyes met his and Timothy realized she knew exactly what he was thinking. Of course, she didn't know about Darius and Genevra and the heartbreak her machinations were liable to cause. Even if she did, it would make no difference to her. However, it did to him. Genevra was not only the apple of his eye, she was the child closest to his heart and honestly seemed to care for Darius. Besides that, the prince deserved better than what Sidonia had in mind for him and Timothy wondered how much unhappiness this was all going to cause little Sybilla.

Once the presentations were over, the orchestra struck up a waltz. Sidonia shed her magnificent sable cloak and the king of Illyria offered his hand. As she smiled at him, Daniel led her onto the floor. They circled gracefully around the room and the assembled crowd broke into spontaneous applause.

Timothy beckoned to a page and whispered in his ear. The page approached one of the young battlefleet officers standing nearby and the young man approached Solaria and bowed to her. As he led her out to the floor, two others did the same with Anna Lisa and Sybilla.

While a waiter offered Giuliana a glass of champagne, Timothy turned to the Assembly President. "The Empress bruised her ankle earlier. Since she isn't up to dancing tonight, I'll stay here and keep her company. Then we're going to make it an early night. Please tell the assembled company to go ahead and enjoy themselves as if we weren't here."

As the President asked his wife to dance, Timothy grinned. "Now all you have to do is put a bandage around your ankle and limp a little. We may be even able to use it to get out of some other functions."

"Thanks, dear. Sidonia and Daniel make a handsome couple, don't they? It's too bad we can't marry them off to each other and unite the two kingdoms once and for all."

"That shows how little you know about Lodebar and Illyria. From time immemorial, they've been at each other's throats and have about as much chance of getting together as oil and water. When word of this conference got out, Sidonia and Daniel received death threats and we're under the tightest security Eos has ever seen. The Synod forces in Moriah and Lodebar are on full alert and I'm considering calling all three of our boys home."

Circling the dance floor, Sidonia saw the admiration in Daniel's eyes. "This is very nice. It isn't all that often that I get a dancing partner who's taller than I am."

"How tall are you, Your Majesty? Six feet?"

"Over. Actually I'm six two. My mother Queen Maeve was even taller than that. Oh, and you might as well call me Sidonia. I agree with Timothy that the Majesty business wears a bit thin after a while. We are equals after all."

Daniel said suddenly, "You don't know where he is either. Do you?"

"Who? Oh, silly me. I'm sorry, Daniel, I wasn't thinking. I don't know where your son is but I'll bet you anything you want to name Timothy does."

"I talked with him a couple of days ago. They must have bounced the signal off a half dozen satellites because we couldn't trace its origin. Well, at least I got to see his face for a few minutes. Did you know he's in a wheelchair?"

That startled Sidonia and she stopped dancing for a moment. "No, I didn't. I'm sorry, Daniel. How bad is it?"

The king put his arm around her and they began to move once more. "Very bad. It's unlikely that Darius will ever walk again or do much of anything else. His legs were virtually pulverized when that truck drove over him and the doctors seriously debated amputating them altogether."

"But they didn't."

"No. Partly because he was so shot up, but also because they had to move him very quickly. My agents had located him on Nublis and I sent a commando force to retrieve him. But they knew I was coming and they'd already gotten him out. He might have been better off if I hadn't done that. When it comes to treating that type of injury, the Nublians are second to none and they might have been able to help him. I think Timothy has him now but there's no way to confirm that."

"I have an idea how you might be able to get Darius back and keep the Synod Assembly happy at the same time."

It was Daniel's turn to stop dancing. "You do? Surely you, of all people, would oppose his return to me. They're holding him over my head to keep me from invading Lodebar. Isn't that what you want?"

"Let's go someplace we can talk. There are too damn many big ears on this dance floor and Timothy can

read minds, you know."

"I saw a balcony just through that archway."

"That sounds good to me. Let's tell our security and get out there."

There she goes, thought Timothy. *Daniel, my friend, you don't have a prayer.*

"Oh my," remarked Giuliana. "Sidonia and Daniel are getting along famously. Look at them. They're even going out to the balcony to look at the moon."

"Daniel is. I think our fair Sidonia has something else in mind."

Giuliana frowned at him. "Timothy. There's something going on isn't there? It's Sidonia and she's up to no good."

"Right now, she's pursuing Daniel and he's not really resisting. Actually, a roll in the hay might be good for both of them and would give them something to think about besides war. They're still in their physical prime and it's kind of a shame to see all that beauty going to waste."

"Timothy. What a thing to say."

"It reminds me of the first time I met you. As I recall, I propositioned you within the first ten seconds and you became very huffy indeed. Then I made you an offer you couldn't refuse and you had a beer with me. One thing led to another and here we are."

"As I recall, you blackmailed me into going on that date with you. Your father would have tossed me in jail and thrown away the key if he'd known I was a reporter. As I recall, you threatened to tell him unless I went out with you. Remember?"

"Sure. I'd do it again in a heartbeat even though I never got to first base with you until months later. Incidentally, how about getting out of here and recreating that delicious night?"

"Sounds good to me. We've done our duty here and I can't wait to get out of this gem-encrusted torture device and into something more comfortable. And let's face it, Timothy, you're not exactly embraceable in that damn armor."

The Emperor rose to his feet and offered his arm.

Seeing the Imperial Couple gracefully descend from their thrones, a couple of pages hastened to pick up the end of Giuliana's long cloak. The orchestra stopped playing and Timothy said "Ladies and gentlemen, we will now bid you a very good night. Thank you for gracing this reception with your presence and please enjoy the rest of the evening."

As the orchestra struck up the Seiran national anthem, they proceeded slowly across the crowded floor and out of the ballroom.

Out on the balcony, Sidonia turned her head. "They're leaving."

"So they are," replied Daniel. "The moon is full and the night is young. Can you find escorts for your daughters to get them home? Right now, I'd just as soon have you all to myself, and why did I never realize before how beautiful you are?"

"Well, you're not exactly ugly yourself. As you said, Your Majesty, the night is young. Of course you did get a bit basic a couple years ago. As I recall, I wasn't particularly interested."

He winced at the memory, "Er, yeah, I did. That was when I found out the true meaning of the term ball-breaker and limped for days. You certainly do pack a mean wallop." He asked a little anxiously, "You're not going to do that again are you?"

"A lot has changed since then and no one more than I. But you didn't try it because you loved or wanted me. You didn't even like me and you certainly didn't think I was beautiful. It was a power play on your part, wasn't it? In fact, weren't you the one who said women only had value when they were horizontal?"

"I'll admit it. I wanted to put you down so badly, I could taste it. That was before they took my son and I've done a lot of thinking since then. This damn war isn't worth the lives of our children, Sidonia. It took the loss of Darius to finally teach me that. Especially after I found out what it cost *him*. Maybe that damnable video was making a point and neither of us realized it. Have you seen it, incidentally?"

"As a matter of fact I have. In some ways, I found it charming even though the hero didn't look a bit like your father. As for the Queen .... All I can say is it's a good thing my mother isn't around to see it. Queen Maeve had absolutely no sense of humor. The very idea would have sent her into a complete tailspin."

"Not to mention what it would have done to Father's sensibilities. But I think the public ravishing of the female captives in the banquet scene would have upset him even more."

"Actually, I rather liked that part. In fact, I was giving some thought to showing that particular clip in our schools as an authentic depiction of Illyrian social customs."

Daniel's eyes twinkled in return. "Would you like to continue this conversation in a more hospitable environment?"

"I thought you'd never ask. Incidentally, I've already told my daughters to make their own arrangements. We have a magnificent penthouse overlooking the city and I feel a hankering for a midnight supper. Would you care to join me, Your Majesty?"

"That sounds good to me and I happen to have a change of clothes in my limousine. May I give you a ride back to your hotel?"

"That would be very nice. We can certainly talk better there."

Daniel bent to kiss her hand. "That we can."

As Sybilla watched them leave, she thought, *When you said you'd have him eating out of your hand, Momma, you meant that literally, didn't you?*

"No, Darius. You can't have another shot. It's been barely three hours and you know what the doctor said."

"So help me, Rufus, if I was on my feet I'd pound the living shit out of you. I'm hurting, dammit, and I need the friggin' shot. So where in the hell is it? If you don't want to do it, give me the damn gun and I'll administer myself." The prince spun his wheelchair around. Then he went over to a cabinet in the corner and began rummaging.

As stuff flew out of the cabinet in all directions, Rufus said quietly, "There's no point in looking in there, Your Highness. I moved it and I'm not about to tell you where it is. You can have a shot tonight when you go to bed. During the day you can take these pills. They may be milder but at least they're not addictive."

"I told you. I'm in pain and I need that damn shot." Darius was almost in tears. He was shaking and his forehead was slick with sweat. "Don't you understand? The pain in my legs never friggin' goes away. It's a non-stop ache that goes right through to the bone. At night it gets so bad it actually wakes me up. These shots are the only thing that keeps me going. Dammit, Rufus, do you think I don't *know* I'm addicted? But what in the hell am I going to do? Right now, I'd just as soon die rather than have this never-ending crap continue. Now, please, for pity's sake, give me that shot."

Timothy could hear their voices through the door and recognized a note of anguish in Darius's. Rufus's back was to the door and when the Emperor spoke, he jumped.

"Give him that shot right now. Then call the doctor and tell him from me to get his ass over here. This situation cannot continue and there has to be something else they can do."

As Rufus complied, Timothy went into the bathroom and got a damp washcloth. He handed it to Darius and the prince took it gratefully. He wiped his face with a visibly trembling hand and Timothy gave him a clean towel.

"I've seen the latest scans," the Emperor said gently, "and there's no way you could not be hurting. Had I realized how bad it was, I would have taken action before this. My only excuse is I've been busy and only got back from Eos this morning. Where's Geneva? Isn't she usually here at this hour?"

"I told her not to come. I didn't want her to see me like this and I had Rufus call Professor Damien and tell him I was sick. Actually, it wasn't too bad at first. The drugs aren't killing the pain but I can't get along without them. Rufus doesn't understand and he refuses give me what I need."

Timothy held out his hand. "May I see that? I want to know what they've been giving him." When he saw the cartridge's color, he raised his eyebrows. Then he read the name of the drug and its potency. "This is enough to put a horse out for a week, let alone a man. Who's been prescribing this stuff?"

"That's why I didn't want to give it to him, Your Majesty. Doctor Lazarus prescribed it. He's the head of surgery at the clinic."

Timothy turned the cartridge over in his fingers. "On second thought, don't call Doctor Lazarus. Get hold of Prince Alexander at this number instead and tell him I need him here, stat. Besides being my nephew, he happens to be a doctor. You and Darius met him on the ship."

"Yes, I remember. He was very kind."

"He is."

Timothy remembered what Alexander had said at the time of Darius's arrival. "What the Nublians have done to this kid borders on abuse. Medicine and politics are a deadly combination and that's what we have here I'm afraid."

Medicine and politics. Doctor Lazarus comes from Lodebar and I sure as hell don't like what I'm thinking.

After Prince Alexander completed his examination, he beckoned to his uncle. "Let's go outside."

"Well?"

"I don't know who's been treating the prince and hesitate to slam a colleague, but ...."

"But what?"

"It's almost as if the doctor went out of his way to make him as miserable as possible. Any number of things could have been done to make the prince's life easier but I see nothing in this course of treatment that could possibly have helped him. As for prescribing him this particular drug ...." He sighed. "It's one of the most addictive substances known. If Darius continues to take it, it's going to shorten his life span. Lazarus might as well have been feeding him poison, it's having exactly the same effect."

"I wondered about that. According to Genevra, Darius has been complaining about his therapist for quite a while. He says the man hurts him and that he always feels worse after the sessions than before."

"Then there's something wrong. The prince's therapy sessions shouldn't be causing him pain or discomfort. In fact, they're supposed to do the exact opposite. What about this man, Rufus? Do you have any doubts about him?"

"He's genuinely concerned. But he's not well educated, he's had to trust the doctor and the therapist."

"Who've been torturing the kid to death by inches for the past year. Do you have any of the therapy sessions on video?"

"Everything that goes on in there is on video."

"I'll take a look at the sessions as soon as I leave. Something's been going on since the peace conference and several factions in Lodebar and Illyria bitterly oppose the negotiations between Daniel and Sidonia. We're watching an especially vicious group in Lodebar called Partners in Death but they're difficult to infiltrate and their leader's unknown. Supposedly they have ties to one of the old terrorist groups on Aretz and they're being generously financed by a consortium of arms dealers."

"Hmm. The arms dealers have a vested interest in continuing the hostilities. If what you say is true, they're probably financing both sides."

"I have it on good authority that Daniel and Sidonia got it on with a vengeance while they were on Eos. Would you happen to know anything about that, Uncle Timothy?"

"It was Sidonia's idea. Daniel was far from unwilling and they both left the conference with big smiles on their faces. She wants to marry her youngest daughter off to my young guest in there and put an end to the hostilities for good and all."

"More power to her if she can pull it off. It's actually one hell of a good idea."

"There's a slight snag. Darius and Genevra have an idea they're in love and they've told me they want to get married. But they're barely seventeen and, hopefully, things will change."

"Kids can get pretty intense at seventeen and Darius strikes me as the steadfast type. Does he know anything about this?"

"Hardly. I just got back from Eos this morning and this is the first time I've seen him. I walked in on a shouting match and the prince's medical condition suddenly became more pressing."

The doctor frowned. "In my personal opinion, his legs should have been amputated right after it happened. If they had been, he'd be walking with a prosthesis and wouldn't be in all this pain. Unfortunately the Nublian doctors became upset with Darius's behavior. They were so preoccupied with putting him in his place they lost sight of his medical needs. Of course it didn't help that his last atrocity was all over the news at the time."

"Yeah, I know. The press definitely took sides on that one. If it had been up to them, he wouldn't have lived to reach Nublis. They're still howling because he was never tried for his war crimes by the Synod Assembly. Unfortunately, for every atrocity committed by Illyria there's been at least one by Lodebar. One side's as savage as the other and both countries have thousands of bodies in unmarked graves. It's unlikely our teams will find them all and identification is an unbelievably tedious process. Daniel and Sidonia have committed to a lasting peace and now their lives are on the line for it."

"So's yours, Uncle. Or didn't you know?"

Timothy ignored the comment. "There's a doctor on Aretz named Hugo de Blanc. He's been doing fantastic things with amputees and paraplegics for the InterPlanetary Foundation for the Disabled. I'd like him to look at Darius."

"I know who he is and it seems to me he's been the subject of some controversy himself. Something to do with cloning and human tissue experimentation. He was also involved with terrorists a few years back. His wife Leda actually was a terrorist. She tried to hijack the Nublian Imperial flagship."

"I know, but a good friend of mine did some successful string-pulling in high places. He got the books closed on her and she was declared dead by Nublian Intelligence. She married Hugo de Blanc and has been in retirement ever since."

"Your friend must be quite a string-puller. Are you certain de Blanc isn't involved in this?"

"That's for you to find out. You're supposed to be an intelligence agent, aren't you? Or did we spend all that money on your education for nothing?"

"Don't say that in the hearing of my superiors. They were suspicious enough of my credentials as it was because I was related to you. It never occurred to them there was a huge family fight before I was allowed to apply to the Service. Mother isn't over it yet."



Timothy well remembered the earful he'd gotten from his sister-in-law for backing Alexander. "In the meantime, would you consider taking Darius's case? There has to be something you can do."

"There's plenty I can do. Pain control's come a long way since the dark ages of medicine. No patient should suffer as he has. But we have to cure his addiction as soon as possible because that's exacerbating the pain."

"All right, then. Let's get in there and see what we can do to make him more comfortable. Did I take you off some other assignment?"

"Not really. I've been jockeying a desk for the past six months and bored to tears. I suspect my beloved Mama of whispering in the Director's ear because he's flatly refusing to send me out in the field."

"Considered yourself assigned and I'll have a word with the Director myself. Darius is an extremely hot political potato. As of now, he's your baby."

"What are you going to do about Doctor Lazarus?"

"I want a confidential report from you on his maltreatment of Darius, then I'll deal with him. I think I'll send the good doctor to Illyria to work with the Body Identification Commission. Then he can get a good close look at his Lodebarian friends' handiwork. From now on, he'll be closely watched. If he gets up to any more shenanigans like this, he's liable to wind up in an unmarked grave himself."

Alexander shivered slightly. "You don't fool around do you, Uncle?"

"Not on stuff like this, I don't. That poor kid in there has been in needless agony for over a year and someone's going to pay."

When the apartment door opened, Darius looked up. Then he smiled. "Am I going to have a different doctor now?"

The shot must have kicked in, thought Timothy.

"As a matter of fact, you are. Doctor Lazarus is going off-planet and Alexander here is going to be taking care of you. While we're at it, we may as well find you a different therapist."

"You mean, someone besides Jenny believes me?"

Alexander said mildly, "Your therapy should have been giving you some relief. Since it obviously isn't we're going to try something different. There are some other things we can do to control your pain, including a small electrical device called a reverse andrynergic stimulator. It temporarily deadens the nerve impulses and you can use it as much as you need to. I'll get you one this afternoon. In the meantime, Rufus, I'm ordering a special medication pump. It'll be hooked up intravenously and Darius can use it whenever he needs a shot."

Rufus looked anxious. "Is that wise? What if he overdoses himself?"

"There's no way he can. The doses are measured and there's a limit on how many he can have. Once he has the stim, he'll be using that when he's awake. He'll only need the pain medication at night. Eventually, he won't need it at all."

It was Darius's turn to look anxious. "What about the stuff I'm on now? I need it."

"I know, but not for long. You're addicted and I'm going to start weaning you right now. Now, don't look so worried. I'll give you something to help you over the bumps and you won't be going it alone. Rufus will be here and so will I." He glanced at Timothy. "It might help if Genevra were to come and see him tomorrow and I want him to get back to his studies as soon as possible. After I've looked over those videos, I'll move in here. There is an extra bedroom, isn't there?"

"Sure." Timothy picked up the phone and punched in a number. "I'm ordering up the videos right now."

"But I thought you were married and had a son my age."

Alexander thought quickly. "Actually, I'm divorced. My ex-wife lives in the southern isles. I see my son a couple of times a year and he's about to go into the army as a cadet."

Timothy spoke telepathically. "*Good thinking. I told you he was sharp.*"

Darius spoke up. "What videos are you talking about? Are they something I should see?"

Oops, thought Timothy and Alexander gave him a half-smile. "They have to do with your therapy and they're very dull indeed. The doctor wants to consider some other courses of treatment, that's all."

"Well, if they have to do with my therapy, I'd find them very interesting. I hate to be disrespectful, sir, but why are you lying to me? I know perfectly well that you have cameras all over the place in here and watch every move I make. Are these videos of what the therapist did?"

"You are sharp," observed Timothy. "And just when, pray tell, did you figure out I had cameras in here?"

"Ever since the first week I was here. I know where most of them are and their ranges. I was trained as a commando and know a great deal about surveillance equipment."

"I suppose you could disable them if you felt like it."

"Oh, I have. Or rather Rufus did. I simply told him what to do."

"Why are you telling me this now?"

"You're moving one of your agents in here and he'll spot what I've been doing anyway. That's if he hasn't already."

"What do you mean, one of my ...? Why, you little devil. You've got the hallway wired. What else did you hear?"

"Everything. Including what you said about Queen Sidonia and my father and the fact that she has ideas about marrying me off to one of her daughters. But I already told you, sir. Jenny is the only woman I'll ever care for. I love her with every fiber of my being and she's the one I want to marry. So you can tell the Queen of Lodebar to take her bright idea and stuff it."

Timothy winced at the very thought. Alexander looked at him sympathetically, then held out his hand. "All right, let's have it."

Resignedly, Darius took the tiny receiver from his ear and handed it over.

"As long as I'm here, young man, I'm going to search this place and confiscate any other unauthorized toys you may have. Then I'm moving you out while a crew redoes the camera system."

"Sheesh," muttered Darius. "It was only one wire."

"For your information," Alexander continued in a gentler tone, "I really am a doctor and I'm genuinely concerned about you. My uncle called me over here in that capacity. My intelligence role is incidental."

"Did you really mean that about amputating my legs? I'm not sure I care for that idea at all."

"I'll agree it's not a pleasant prospect," interjected Timothy. "But you might be better off in the long run. You'd be amazed what they're doing with prosthetics these days. Elf had the same problem and look at him now."

"The video star?"

"Right. Elf has serious birth defects. Until he was twenty, he was deaf and blind and in a wheelchair. The Doctor de Blanc you heard me mention is the man who helped him. Elf's legs were as bad as yours or worse."

"But he rides horses and gets in swordfights and everything. Besides that, he's married with two kids."

"He's married to one of my nieces and coming for a visit fairly soon. Would you care to meet him?"

"What kind of a dumb question is that? Would I care to meet him? Haw. Is Queen Sidonia a feminist? Of course I'd like to meet him. Especially after what you just told me."

Timothy's lips twitched and it was his turn to look at Alexander sympathetically. "Well, Doctor, it looks as if you're going to have your hands full. I'll tell the Major Domo to prepare the blue suite. You can park Darius in there while they redo the cameras. Darius, if you promise to behave, I'll let Genevra come and see you tomorrow. Then, hopefully, she'll stop bugging me. And now if you don't mind, I'm going to have lunch with my wife."

As he was going out the door, Timothy said over his shoulder, "Oh, and Alexander. Don't forget to get the wire out of the hall. Knowing Darius, he's probably got another receiver or two stashed away. There's no guarantee you'll find them all."

Alexander caught Darius's guilty look. "Obviously, you and I are going to have to come to an understanding and don't think I won't sweep every room you've been in. You've got bugs planted all over the place, haven't you? Yeah, I thought so. No wonder security's been complaining about the cameras in here. After the way you've been cannibalizing them, I shouldn't doubt it."

"Well, I got bored and I certainly wasn't hurting anybody." The prince continued with a mischievous grin, "The Major Domo's been getting it on with the same kitchen maid who was fooling around with Jonathan. She's pregnant and not sure who the father is."

"Oh, man. You probably know more about what's going on in this place than my Aunt Gee. The Major Domo huh? Jonathan will kill him if Aunt Gee doesn't get to him first. Are you sure you're not working for one of the tabloids? You'd have a great career as a reporter."

The phone chimed and Alexander picked it up. Then he said to Rufus, "The Major Domo just called to say the blue suite is ready. A guard detail will be here shortly to take you over there and I'll be along as soon as I've got the crew started on the camera system. The pain pump will be here in a couple of hours and I'll pick up the reverse andrynergic stimulator on my way. Rufus, why don't you order lunch for three while you're at it?"

Darius smiled at the doctor and held out his hand. "I liked you the first time I saw you and I appreciate what you're doing now. They say politics make strange bedfellows and I have to take my friends wherever I can find them. Will you be my friend?"

"Yes, Darius, I will. In my business it's not often possible to do that but in this case, I don't think there'll be any divided loyalties. You have to realize something, though. I've sworn allegiance to my Emperor. If there's ever a conflict between that and our friendship, the Emperor wins."

"I can live with that. It's the same way with me and Illyria."

"You mean, if there was a conflict between your love for Genevra and your duty to Illyria, Illyria would win?"

"Unfortunately, yes. But I hope it never comes to that."

There was a knock on the door and Alexander opened it. "The guard detail is here. The blue suite is just down the hall and I'll see you both in a little while."

Solaria stood in front of her mother's desk with her hands on her hips. "You can't be serious. There's no way that we can ever have a permanent peace with Illyria. Marrying Sybilla to that--that--monster will only make matters worse. Now the cash is flowing again, we need to be beefing up our armaments and preparing for a serious incursion into Illyria. You said yourself you had Daniel eating out of your hand. If you do, Mother, you've got him lulled into a sense of false security. We should strike while the iron is hot."

"Daniel has no more of a sense of false security than I. When I said I'd have him eating out of my hand, I only meant that in regard to Sybilla's marriage to his son. You don't seem to understand that I want peace between Lodebar and Illyria more than anything else. A union between our two royal houses could accomplish that."

"But you and he ...." At the look on her mother's face, Solaria's voice faltered.

"He and I what?" Sidonia arched her brows.

"He came to your suite the night of the reception and stayed there until morning. When he left he was wearing different clothes. I saw him."

"We were discussing affairs of state over dinner. A glass of wine got spilled and that's why he changed his clothes. Those riding pants were white buckskin and had to be treated immediately. You can ask the maid if you don't believe me."

"Oh sure. And he just happened to have a change of clothes with him. How convenient. Momma, just

how dumb do you think I am?"

"Very. Do you have any idea what the Great Council would do if they found out about your escapade with a male prostitute on Eos?"

Solaria went dead white. "How do you know about that?"

"In case you're wondering," Sidonia said dryly, "neither of your sisters told me. I have my own sources and watch you more closely than you know. As things stand now, I'm seriously considering taking you out of the Succession. The only thing giving me pause is the fact that Anna Lisa would then become my heir. She's not as bright as you and we need brains on the throne. My other choice would be to switch you and Sybilla and marry you off to Crown Prince Darius instead. That would be an excellent punishment for him and you would torment the hell out of each other for the rest of your natural lives." She chewed on her pen thoughtfully. "The more I think about it, the more I like the idea."

"Momma. You wouldn't."

The Queen smiled sweetly at her oldest daughter. "Oh yes, I would. The only problem is you and Daniel would be at each other's throats from day one and he'd be tempted to use you as a hostage. Especially if his precious son couldn't stand you either." She sighed regretfully. "No. It'll have to be Sybilla, more's the pity. She's worth ten of you and I'd much rather see her on the throne. Timothy has a daughter and three sons. Between Anna Lisa and Carlo, I'm going to see if I can't snag one of them during the coming Synod Assembly season. No, your status as Crown Princess is safe my dear, despite what you've done. But if the Grand Council ever finds out, I'll have to execute you for high treason. You do know that, don't you?"

Solaria looked as if she was about to faint. "No, Momma. I didn't know. What if they find out about you and the king?"

"That was an affair of state in every sense of the word and everybody knows about it. Incidentally, I'm planning to do it again at the first possible opportunity. Daniel's a wonderful lover and he's got a body that just doesn't quit."

"What about the glass of wine?"

Sidonia smiled at the memory, "How do you think I got him out of his clothes, you ninny? His beautiful pants and tunic were ruined but he said the loss was well worth it."

"What did you do with that wine? Throw it at him?"

"Let's just say the carafe slipped. Daniel was so busy staring into my bosom he never even noticed until it started soaking in. Then I managed to spill some on my dress and had to change too."

"What if he hadn't had extra clothes along?"

"Oh, but he'd already told me he did. Even if he hadn't, we'd have improvised something. It was a full service hotel after all."

"You'd planned it all along, hadn't you? You did it to get his support for the marriage between Sybilla and that--that--"

"He's the Crown Prince and has a name. It's Darius. You'd better get used to saying it because he's going to be your brother-in-law."

"Momma. How can you? This is against everything we believe in. The only good Illyrian is a dead one and you know it. They're absolute monsters. Lodebar will never be truly free until the last Illyrian's been wiped off the face of the planet."

The Queen shook her head sadly, "You were weaned on hate, Solaria, and now you have to learn to set it aside. The Illyrians are people like us and Daniel and I are sick to death of war. His son will never walk again and his companions were murdered in cold blood by our own soldiers. They'd already been captured and there was no reason to butcher them. Timothy's right. For every atrocity of Illyria's, we're guilty of one too. There has to be an end to it and the time is now. I can only pray that I stay in this life long enough to teach you another way to go."

"I'm sorry, Momma, but I just can't see it. I don't understand how you could let any Illyrian touch you, let alone their king. Ugh. It makes my skin crawl just to think of it. As for-- Just the thought makes me sick to my stomach."

"Yet you had sex with a male prostitute. A piece of diseased human garbage who'd been heaven knows where. That didn't disgust you?"

"He wasn't Illyrian and he most certainly was not diseased. Eos is very strict about their escort services. I'm not pregnant either. We were extremely careful about that."

"Well, I certainly would have expected you to have that much sense. Actually I called you in here to tell you it's time for you to take your first lover. I've already selected him and he's waiting in your new apartment on the third floor. You'll be checked every week and as soon as you're positive, out he goes. Now go do your duty for me and Lodebar."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"Is he anyone I know?"

"No, but you'll like him well enough. Thanks to your escapade on Eos, you'll know what to expect. If he asks why you're not intact, tell him you ride horses a lot. It's an old excuse but still works. Now I have work to do. Close the door quietly on your way out."

## **Chapter 4 Portrait of a Terrorist**

Giuliana was impatient. "It's been six months since Hugo de Blanc examined Darius. So what did he say?"

"He thinks he might be able to help him," said Timothy, "but only if we move him to his clinic on Aretz. When I talked it over with the muckety-mucks at the Synod, they objected for two reasons. Number one

is the expense of transferring him to Hugo's clinic and keeping him there. The second is security. The expense is a smoke screen but the security concern is very real. Radical pro-war groups in Illyria and Lodebar have been gaining political strength and sympathizers in high places. The arms dealers have been spreading their money around and it's starting to show."

The Emperor sighed, "Security-wise, Aretz's system is full of holes and Nublis' isn't a whole lot better. But that's a built-in problem with democracies. The Synod Assembly wants me to keep Darius here but Hugo de Blanc says we don't have the facilities. I talked to the President about that and the expense objection came up again."

"What about the Foundation? Can't they help?"

"The problem is how Darius got injured in the first place. The damage to his legs was a direct result of his terrorist activities and the Board is balking. Don't think I haven't tried and I still haven't given up. I've threatened to withhold next year's contribution and use it for Darius instead but they still won't budge."

"Why don't you do just that?"

"I'm giving it some serious thought. But that doesn't solve the problem of how we're going to get him and Hugo together. Hugo says he will only perform the surgery if Darius comes to Aretz and the Synod Assembly says no."

"Can Elf help?"

"Elf has an image to protect. He offered to do some lobbying but I told him to rethink that idea. He's more effective where he is and there's no sense in getting him embroiled. The human tissue scandal has never really died down and he came close enough on that one."

The door to their suite opened and Giuliana smiled. "Speaking of angels. Elf, It's good to see you."

The handsome young man in the doorway smiled back. Tall and slender with a mop of copper colored curls, his golden skin and fine bones were typical of his Nublian race. He looked a question at Timothy. "Something tells me you're discussing young Darius. Is there any news?"

"Just the usual waffling and excuses. The Synod Assembly's setting up a meeting between him and his father at the end of the year and the betrothal idea is gaining more support all the time."

Timothy indicated a chair. Elf took it, then accepted a cup of coffee. "Thanks. I skipped breakfast because Neelie's still sleeping. The twins had her up half the night and she won't leave them to the nursemaid. If one of them so much as breathes funny, she freaks. That must be the doctor in her, I suppose."

"I suppose. She was the best ship's doctor I ever had and I still haven't forgiven you for running off with her."

"Well, that's what you get for having such a beautiful niece. She's also one hell of a fine actress and we're contemplating a sequel to 'Julian and Cassius.'"

"You're not."

"That's why I'm here. I'd like your permission to do the filming on the actual sites where it all happened."

Hell, Ephraim looks so good, he could play himself."

"Knowing him, he probably would. It is one hell of a yarn, isn't it? What does Nublis say?"

"They're all for it. 'Julian and Cassius' gave their tourist trade a shot in the arm and they're hoping the sequel will do the same."

"They're trusting you not to rewrite history, I gather. The way you did with 'The Mountain King.'"

"I only did that because we couldn't get any cooperation from Illyria or Lodebar and were forced to shoot on Nublis and Seira. We were getting threats from both sides. From what I hear, the current King and the Queen have been emulating the second half of 'The Mountain King' to a fare thee well. Or are the tabloids lying again?"

"For once, they're telling the truth. Daniel and Sidonia have been attending the same seminars all over the Synod and wind up in the same hotel room each and every time. They've gotten to be such regulars on Eos, one of the resorts has actually named a penthouse after them."

"What do their children think about that?"

"Sidonia's daughters haven't been heard from and Darius seems a bit mystified. For his entire life, he's believed Sidonia to be a demon with horns and a tail. Now she and his father are lovers. Not only that, this demon wants to marry him off to one of her daughters. He says they can announce his betrothal to Sybilla of Lodebar all they want but he's going to marry Genevra. Fortunately, the wedding is several years away and I'm hoping something will change."

Elf cleared his throat. "Speaking of Genevra, she's a dead ringer for Thamar at the same age. Would you have any objection to a screen test?"

"I'll have to think about it. For security reasons, I try to keep my children out of the limelight as much as possible. Apart from that, can she act?"

"Very well. Judging by the pictures I've seen, the camera likes her too and she seems to be a natural like Cornelia."

"Cornelia did an outstanding job in 'Julian and Cassius' and she's cleaned up every acting award in the Synod."

"Yeah. She's in such high demand now, I have trouble getting her myself. At least it's had the effect of making her parents more accepting of me than they were. Her father especially."

Timothy chuckled. "Well, he's not looking for a horsewhip any more. When he found out his precious daughter was pregnant--you don't even want to know what he said. He stormed around here until hell wouldn't have it. Sending a death squad after you was his mildest threat."

"Honestly Timothy." exclaimed Giuliana. "The things you say. In polite society, people look the other way at such times, then talk about premature birth."

"Right," chortled her husband. "Like they did with us."

When Giuliana blushed to the roots of her hair, Elf stifled a grin. "Well, at least this next one's going to



come at the proper time."

"Oh, Elf. Don't tell me."

"Yup. Neelie's pregnant again. If we don't get this new show on the road pretty soon, we're going to have to shoot around her. This particular story takes place fifteen years after the first one and Julian and Corey had long since completed their family."

"It's too bad you never knew Julian," reflected Timothy. "You and he would have gotten along really well. His first love was the concert stage but he maintained close ties to the theater. When it came to flying, he and Cassius were born daredevils and it'd be hard to equal some of their stunts. Especially Julian's. Fortunately you won't have to. There's plenty of news footage you can splice in."

Elf looked wistful. "I should have liked to have known him. In a sense, I feel as if I do. I've studied so much footage of Julian and Cassius, I can almost believe I've walked and talked with them. They were so multi-faceted they could have lived several lifetimes instead of just one. But I've never been able to discover what became of Cassius during those eleven lost years and the Nublians won't say. There was some talk of drugs and an incarceration and I finally left it an open question. From what I can determine, Julian knew where his brother was but wasn't telling."

"Don't look at me because I have no idea. Julian and Cassius took that secret to the grave and I doubt that anyone around today could tell you."

"Yes, there is. Emperor Janus knows but he's not about to tell me. So did his brother Cass, I suspect. But I can't ask him, unfortunately, because he died last year."

"Cass had been ailing for so long it was a merciful release. That was why he abdicated from the Nublian Succession in favor of his younger brother. He never got over what happened to his twin. He and Deborah were extraordinarily close. When she lost her mind, it hit Cass hard. She's never recovered, has she?"

Elf thought about the mystery surrounding Emperor Julian's favorite child, the gifted and difficult Princess Deborah. At one time, the Synod's premiere clothing designer, she'd given him his start in the business as the official model for her menswear line. Her son Aaron had signed him as a contract player for his video company and the rest was history.

Everything had been fine until Elf began taking an interest in Deborah's niece, Princess Cornelia. He'd found out the hard way that the Nublian Imperial Family might be willing to accept him as an employee or even a friend, marriage into their exalted ranks was something else again.

One night, he had been brutally abducted and one of his kidnappers calmly announced with a chuckle, "Let's just say the Synod's biggest sex symbol is going to be singing soprano from now on, shall we? Oh don't worry, orphan, we have a doctor waiting and an anesthetic. Our instructions are to damage you as little as possible otherwise because your employers say you're still a valuable commodity. They just don't want you for an in-law."

Elf managed to escape before they could carry out their threat, then went into hiding. Later, he had found out Deborah had been behind the kidnapping and the projected surgery.

All that was known about the night she went insane, was that she received a visit from a mysterious dark-haired young man. He'd told the guards in the lobby he had a message for the Princess. After destroying their communications equipment and rendering them unconscious, he'd taken the private elevator up to Deborah's office and never been seen again.

Deborah was found huddled in a corner of her office the following morning. Her formerly auburn hair had turned snow white and she'd never spoken a coherent word since. But there wasn't a mark on her. The only signs of her mysterious visitor were two half-filled glasses of brandy and an enormous black scale from some sort of reptile in the middle of her immaculate desktop.

Elf had been as mystified as everyone else. The Nublian Imperial family had been horrified at what Deborah tried to do and any opposition to his and Cornelia's marriage disappeared. When he severed his connection with Prince Aaron's studio, Deborah's son didn't argue. Soon after, Ephraim found him the backing he needed to start his own operation on Seira. The studio was doing very well and Elf's productions were noted for their consistent excellence.

Aaron cannily waited to release 'The Mountain King' until after 'Julian and Cassius' premiered. His patience paid off handsomely. The last in a series of swashbuckling potboilers Elf had made under contract for him, 'The Mountain King' was Aaron's biggest moneymaker ever and far outstripped 'Julian and Cassius' at the box office.

Fortunately for him, Elf had a good-sized piece of the action and his extraordinary profits from the video's skyrocketing sales went a long way toward soothing his wounded feelings.

"Well, it only goes to show," said Aaron as he cheerfully counted the latest receipts, "you can never underestimate the taste of the public. Are you sure you won't reconsider going into partnership with me?"

Elf realized Timothy was saying something and abruptly stopped his woolgathering.

"I was talking about Deborah but it looked as if you were off in a world of your own."

"I'm sorry, Timothy. I wasn't paying attention. What were you saying about Deborah?"

"It wasn't important. They say she's failing and probably won't live out the year. Deborah's one of the major talents of our era and she's had an awesome effect on arts and entertainment. It's sad to see such a brilliant intellect go into decline. It was so sudden too."

"Yes," said Elf thoughtfully, "It was."

He wondered for the umpteenth time how much his mysterious partner, Michael Silver, had to do with what had happened to the Princess. The description of the young man who had visited her on that fateful night had exactly matched Michael's. When Elf asked him, his friend just smiled. "Let's just say she won't be troubling you any more. Things are better this way. There'll be no scandal and you can get on with your life in peace."

"On another subject," said Timothy, "would you be willing to visit young Darius while you're here? He's been a bit depressed and could use some cheering up."

"Certainly. I'll take him a video of 'Julian and Cassius' and a copy of the new 'Mountain King' game. It isn't officially out yet and I'll be interested in his reaction. We used to communicate on the SynoNet and he's extremely bright."

"I've been casting around for something he can do to occupy his time," remarked Timothy, "and think I've come up with something. He's an expert in all kinds of weaponry and clever with his fingers. I had him restore an antique pistol for me and he did a wonderful job. Of course, he should. He's been building explosive devices and timers forever and has an encyclopedic knowledge of electronics and surveillance equipment. He managed to cannibalize the cameras in his apartment without us knowing and used the parts to bug every room he was in. Hell, he knew more about what was going on in this place than Gee and I did."

Elf laughed. "I should probably use him as a consultant. He sounds better than most of the so-called experts I have now."

"I put paid to his activities by moving one of my agents into his apartment and he's been somewhat bored ever since. Even Jenny has trouble entertaining him these days and his tutor is literally at his wits' end. Well, at least he's out of that terrible pain he was in even if we still haven't been able to do anything about his legs."

"You won't until you can get Darius and Hugo together," observed Elf, "and Hugo won't come here. Do you want me to talk to him?"

"You could try but I doubt it'll do any good. I can see Hugo's point. He's got other patients, not to mention his responsibilities to his research institute and Darius is not exactly a standard hardship case. He did some horrific things during his dozen or so raids into Lodebar. Sidonia's got an album of his atrocities that would make your hair stand on end. Daniel choked when he saw it. If Darius been anyone else, he'd have been tried for his crimes by the Synod Assembly and condemned to death. Fortunately for him, he had more value as a hostage to his father's good behavior. I saw no point in putting him in a prison cell because he was already suffering the tortures of the damned. But I still left him in virtual isolation until Gee's cat got away one day and wound up in his private garden."

Elf looked at the Emperor thoughtfully. "Would you say his attitude's changed?"

"When he first came here, Darius knew almost nothing outside war and the art of killing. He hated Lodebarians with a passion and had never considered them in the context of real people at all. Up until then, his whole objective in life was to exterminate every last Lodebarian from the face of the planet."

"And now?"

"Now, he knows better. He's had a lot of time to think and I haven't exactly spared him. If he could go back and redo it, he would."

"You've given me an idea for a project. I could call the production 'Portrait of a Terrorist' and build it around a series of conversations with Darius. Terrorism is the bane of our age. It seems to me the subject would bear close examination if only to give us a better understanding as to how such people come about. This is a priceless opportunity to get inside a genuine terrorist's mind and find out what makes him tick."

"That's true, but I doubt that Darius would allow himself to be exposed like that to the public gaze."

"He might if he remained anonymous. We could change his appearance or have him wear a mask and use a voice changer. No one would recognize him, especially if they didn't know which side he was on. To drive our point home, we could intersperse the conversations with excerpts from sources like that

album of Sidonia's."

"You know, if you put it to him right, he might even be willing to help you with such a project. It would make for a fascinating documentary and might help him to come to terms with the way things are now. Why don't you ask him and see what he says?"

Elf put down his coffee cup. "If Your Majesties will excuse me, I'll go see if my lovely wife is awake. Then I'll visit Darius. The more I think about it, the more I like this idea. It probably won't make much money but I've a slew of income to lay off and am looking for a tax loss. Giuliana, my love, if I weren't such a happily married man and your husband weren't scowling at me so fiercely from across the table, I'd be making a play for your gorgeous self right now."

The Empress giggled. "Oh, Elf, you silver-tongued devil. You do say the nicest things."

"Hmmf," snorted Timothy as the door closed behind their visitor. "Now I see why women are so besotted with his videos. Honestly, Gee. Talk about feeding you a line."

"I know and I just love it. Elf has a real gift when it comes to talking to a woman, he makes every one of them feel like a queen. You know, you could learn something from him, Timothy."

The Emperor shook his head. "Elf's one of the most charming individuals I've ever known. If anyone can help Darius, he will."

When Elf came out to the patio, the prince was playing a game with Balthasar the cat. Darius had a realistic toy mouse attached to the end of an almost invisible thread and was driving Balthasar crazy as he tried to catch it. The cat's claw caught one of his legs.

"Dammit, you miserable beast. Is that any way to repay me for entertaining you? If you're so smart, go find yourself a real mouse, you lazy, overfed, flea-bitten mangy feline."

By way of answer, Balthasar proceeded to rub his chin against Darius's ankle until the prince picked him up. "All right, you win. A full body massage it is."

"Am I interrupting something?" asked Elf casually. "If you two would rather be alone just say so."

Darius looked up from his ministrations to the wriggling Balthasar. "Rufus told me you arrived last night and I was kind of hoping you'd come see me. No, you're not interrupting a thing. If this was Jenny I might give you an argument but Balthasar enjoys company."

The cat left Darius's lap and sauntered over to Elf. "You see, he's totally fickle. You might as well pull up a chair and make a lap for him. He won't quit bugging you until you do."

He's so damn young, thought Elf. *It seems unbelievable that he could have done even half the things they're accusing him of. What kind of a society is Illyria anyway that it would put weapons into the hands of such children and send them out to kill?*

Then he realized Darius was looking at him. "You're awfully quiet today," remarked the prince. "Is there something on your mind?"

"I just came from Timothy. We had a talk about you."

Darius shrugged his thin shoulders. "I can't imagine what's so interesting about me. It's just the same old, same old. Nothing ever changes and I'll probably be stuck here until the day I die."

"You need something to do, don't you?"

"I suppose, but my options are a bit limited. There are only so many antique pistols to be fixed and Timothy isn't going to give me anything more lethal than that to play with."

"I'm considering a new project and you might be able to help me. I'd like to hire you as a consultant because you're an expert on the subject."

That caught Darius's interest. "What subject?"

"Terrorism. I'd like to do a documentary about it."

"What makes you think I'd know anything about that?"

Elf was a little taken aback. Then he thought quickly. "Darius, listen to me. At the age of five, you were riding at the head of your father's troops. At the age of ten you were in commando school. You've been going on clandestine raids into enemy territory since you were thirteen and there's nothing about weapons or explosives you don't know. You were literally weaned on gunfire and until you came here war was the only thing you knew. Isn't that true?"

"I suppose so. But what makes you think I'd want to help you with such a project? I've had enough of war and killing to last me the rest of my life. I don't want to think about it any more."

"Unfortunately, not everyone feels as you do. I'd like to expose the face of terrorism for what it really is and strip away the romance once and for all. That might force people to stop and think about what they're really supporting when they take sides in a war such as yours. Then, just maybe, society will change."

"This sure doesn't sound like your usual stuff."

"You really don't know me at all, do you? I lived in a world of darkness and silence for over twenty years and learned about human suffering all too soon. There are different kinds of terrorism, you know. Some are more subtle than others. I have my own reasons for wanting to do this."

"Timothy said something about you being in a wheelchair and that you'd once had trouble with your legs. Before he told me that, I thought of you as some sort of golden boy who'd never known a day's worth of affliction or pain."

"Hardly. No, Darius. I've been there and know exactly what it's like. Along the way, I've paid a heavy price for becoming what I am now. Life has been good to me lately and it's time to give something back. If this documentary were to turn even one person toward peace, it will have been worth it. Will you help me?"

"When you put it like that, how can I refuse? What do you want me to do?"

"I want to get inside your head and find out what makes you tick. I want you to take me with you on

those clandestine raids. I want you to tell me what you did and why. I want to know how you felt each time, the highs as well as the lows. Lastly, I want you to describe those terrible moments when it all went wrong and your companions were butchered in front of your eyes. Can you do that for me?"

"You aren't asking much, are you?"

"I know exactly what I'm asking and think it's the only way you're ever going to exorcise your personal demons. My documentary will be called 'Portrait of a Terrorist' and it will be your story. It'll be the tale of your personal odyssey from there to here and how you turned from the ways of war to those of peace. Anyone who knows you can see you're not the killer you once were. I'd like to explore how that metamorphosis came about."

"You want me to turn myself inside out and expose my most intimate feelings to the entire world? How can you ask such a thing?"

"I'm not. We'll use a mask and a voice changer and I promise no one will ever know who you are. That includes the production crew. Those who see this film won't be able to tell if you're male or female or even which side you were on. The whole point is terrorism knows no gender or national origin. It's a universal problem and no society is immune. I told you. I want to expose the face of terrorism for what it really is and strip away the romance once and for all. That's what this documentary will really be about, not you."

"And you want me because I understand it better than anybody else. Is that it?"

"Basically. I think the way to do it is with just me and a camera. Our conversations will be strictly one on one. No one will even know when or where they took place."

"If you will absolutely guarantee my anonymity, I'll do it. I can see what you're driving at. Come to think of it, I can give you a lot of background as well. You'll need to spice up this documentary with film clips and such. I can tell you what to look for and where. You might want to consider doing one conversation on the arts of assassination and killing and show the methods and weapons that terrorists use. It could be very chilling. Another could be on arms smuggling and the art of the deal. The Synod's arms manufacturers and sellers are unhappy with the peace and their faces could use some exposure. Not to mention certain politicians who've grown fat on their profits from our never-ending conflict while publicly wringing their hands and calling for an end to the war. If you want their names, I'll give them to you. I know them all and every dirty deal they've ever pulled. I've been sitting in on my father's war councils since the age of seven and have a flypaper memory for such things."

Elf grinned. "You're a man after my own heart. Do me a favor and rough out an outline because you have some excellent ideas. I'm going to be around for a while anyway because I'm scouting locations for my next project." He reached in the pocket of his jacket. "In the meantime, here's a copy of 'Julian and Cassius' and 'The Mountain King' computer game. It's not out on the market yet and I'd like to get your reaction. I might as well put you on my company's payroll as a consultant because I can see a lot of ways in which you help me. Are you interested?"

The prince's mouth dropped open. "Are you serious? You actually want to hire me?"

"Of course. And there's one thing I can count on, at least for the next year or so."

"What's that?"

"I'll always know where you are. That's something I can't say about most of my employees. Do we have a deal?"

"That depends on how much you're offering. I have my pride and I'm not going to work for nothing."

Elf raised an eyebrow, then intoned, "How soon they forget. I'll have Timothy draw up a standard employment contract and pay you the going rate. How's that?"

"Fine." Darius extended his hand. "When do I start?"

"Right now. I want you to play that game a few times and give me some feedback by tomorrow morning. You can start roughing out that outline any time."

Princess Solaria pulled up her horse next to the mountain hut and motioned her two security guards to stay back. It was early in the morning and she had sneaked out of the palace before anyone in the family was awake. Throwing back the hood of her cloak, she swung her leg over the saddle and slid to the ground. With the horse's reins in her hand, she went to the door of the hut and knocked. When it opened, she beckoned to her guards. One dismounted and joined her while the other led the horses out of sight. He returned on foot and took up his station outside the door.

As the princess and her first guard entered the tiny hut, a handsome dark-haired man rose from his seat at the rough-hewn table. "Welcome to my humble abode, Your Highness. Perhaps you'd care for a hot drink on this chilly morning. I have some excellent spiced wine warming over the fire."

"Thank you, no," replied Solaria, mindful of her pregnancy. "Linus here may have some if he wishes. Well, Commander. What do you have for me?"

"Good news. The Consortium has come through with the money and weapons they promised and we're arming our brothers and sisters along the border. Better yet, we may have located that criminal son of Daniel's at long last."

"That is good news. Where is he?"

"For the past year and a half, the Illyrian Prince has been living in the lap of luxury in the Emperor of Seira's palace. Unfortunately, security there is so tight we have no way of getting at him. However, there's talk of moving him to some clinic on Aretz for a surgical procedure. As you well know, Aretz is a whole different story. Failing that, a meeting's being set up between Darius and his father a neutral site early next year. It might be possible to get a shot at both of them at once."

"Sounds interesting. Do we have no one we can trust on Seira?"

"Seiran Intelligence has a nasty habit of turning our agents into doubles and the fewer risks we take with them, the better. Timothy of Seira has a long arm and an extremely short fuse. Believe me, Your Highness, he's no one to mess with."

"My mother is bound and determined to go through with this marriage and I'm just as determined it will never take place. She has some idea of a lasting peace between Lodebar and Illyria but you and I know

that's impossible. I've told her, over and over, we need to use this breather to build up our strength and prepare for an incursion into Illyria. But she won't listen. She's too besotted with Daniel to see straight and is becoming a political liability."

"You're surely not suggesting we assassinate Queen Sidonia?"

"Of course not. But we need to curb my mother's powers for her own and Lodebar's good."

"And put you in her place, I suppose."

"Only in the capacity of Temporary Regent. Since the child I'm carrying is a girl, her birth will secure the Succession and ensure that the Queen won't suddenly decide to pass me over in favor of Anna Lisa or Sybilla. Sybilla's sympathies lie increasingly with Illyria and Anna Lisa doesn't have a brain in her head. My mother's already threatened to do it, you know."

"Now, I see why you're worried. Where Illyria's concerned, we daren't let our guard down for so much as a second. This business of coddling a criminal like Darius is an outrage to honest, decent men. Did you know the Synod Assembly membership is being taxed to support him?"

"Why, that's outrageous. While the spilled blood of our people is crying out for justice, their murderer lives off the fat of the land at our expense. As if that's not enough, my own mother, the hereditary Queen of this proud country, is preparing to give her youngest daughter to that monster like some sacrificial lamb. Oh, it doesn't even bear thinking about."

"I couldn't agree more and it's unbelievable what this world is coming to. No wonder the morals of the young are in such decay. Look at the example they're seeing. While the Illyrian king and our own Queen openly sport all over the Synod like a pair of wantons, our people struggle desperately to make ends meet. What was she thinking to give away Moriah in so careless a fashion? Does the Great Council no longer have any control over her?"

"Sadly no. They're fat old men who want to be done with war, then drowse away the rest of their lives by a warm fire. Honor and pride mean nothing to them and they'll go along with dragging Lodebar's flag in the dirt for just as long as it increases their personal comfort."

"It sounds as if we could use some new blood on the Grand Council."

"I agree with you," replied the princess, "and there's a place where an assassination or two might help. The Grand Chancellor is long overdue for retirement but just won't go. Sidonia refuses to ask for his resignation, she says, because she depends on his wisdom and clear-sightedness. The man's got to be eighty if he's a day. I don't care how healthy he claims to be or whether he rides a horse to the daily sessions or not. He's old. There's no longer any fire in his loins or anywhere else for that matter."

"Let me think on it and I'll get back to you. In the meantime, I'll find out more about this projected meeting between Daniel and his son. That'll be the time to strike. We can get the wolf and his whelp at the same time and deprive Illyria of its head."

Solaria laughed. "And just about the only brains in that entire benighted country. I like your idea, Commander. Work on it and get back to me. In the meantime, I'll review possible candidates for the Grand Council and the Chancellor's chair. You have my private number and know the code."

The Commander frowned, "Have you sounded out your brother, Carlo, Your Highness? He is my son



and well-liked by the people. He'd be a valuable asset to the P.I.D. if we could persuade him to see things our way."

"I've tried talking to him but he's loyal to Momma and says peace is the only way to go. Baron's the same way and that stupid Anna Lisa doesn't even know her own mind."

"More's the pity. Carlo could have been destined for great things if he hadn't thrown in with the wrong side. He might even have been a king."

"What are you talking about? Carlo will never be a king."

"Of Illyria, not Lodebar. With Daniel and Darius gone, the country will need a ruler. Carlo's blood is as royal as anyone's. On both sides, I might add."

Solaria looked at the terrorist leader with a sudden sense she might have gotten in over her head, then quickly reassured herself. Carlo's father was no enemy of hers or even the Queen's. As passionately committed to the honor and glory of Lodebar as she, he'd never done or said anything to cause her to doubt him. She was only sorry he wasn't her father instead of Carlo's. She had far more in common with him than she did with her own sire, an amiable, soft-spoken Duke with a small estate on Lodebar's southernmost border.

It had never occurred to her the Commander might actually be ambitious for his son or even himself. The male nobility in Lodebar were supposed to know their place and keep it. Their only purpose in life was to service the Queen and function as her advisors on the Grand Council. For a male noble to aspire to the throne was unthinkable and she was shocked at the very idea. By their nature and physical makeup, males were unsuited for political power and it was against everything she'd ever believed in. If you doubt that, she thought, all you have to do is look at the animal kingdom. Especially the lion, the so-called King of Beasts. The lionesses do everything and call the shots. The lion's job is to guard the pride against intruders, service the lionesses and watch over the cubs while their mothers go hunting. Other animal societies go even further, like the hyenas with their Queen of the pack and dynastic royalty. While the male's job is to strut magnificently and secure the survival of the race, ruling the roost is strictly a female prerogative. Its male dominated society, after all, is the main reason for all our problems with Illyria.

The princess rose from her chair. "I had best be going before I'm missed. When you have the information on the meeting between Daniel and his son, get back to me. Think on what I've said about the Great Council and curbing Sidonia's power. In a couple of months, I'll no longer be able to ride and we'll have to find some other meeting place. Check with the P.I.D. and find a safe house in the city." Solaria beckoned to her guard and swept regally out of the hut.

The Commander looked after her with a thoughtful expression on his handsome face. There has to be a way to bring young Carlo around to my way of thinking, he's surely destined to be Lodebar's first king. As soon as the P.I.D. assumes control, these mewling women will be put in their place once and for all. Then I'll have the arrogant Sidonia where I want her, at my feet and in my bed.

As for Solaria herself, the Commander smiled at the thought. Once her usefulness is over, I have plans for her too. She'll find out what they are in due course. In the meantime there's work to do.

On a crag above the hut, an Illyrian spy named Gideon Zivon put down his field glasses and made a note in the miniature computer at his belt. The bug he'd planted in the hut had worked perfectly and Solaria's second security guard had signaled to him when the coast was clear. So Darius is on Seira. Daniel will be glad of that information even though his chances of getting his son out of Timothy's clutches are about the

same as the proverbial snowball's.

He pressed a button and a scrambled message flashed to his headquarters over a hundred miles away. He didn't need to follow the Commander because he already knew where he was going. After heading back to his ancestral home, the terrorist would issue orders to various minions on his staff, then take it easy for the rest of the day.

It was ironic, thought Gideon, to find himself on the same side as Lodebar's ruler. After listening to the chilling conversation between her oldest daughter and the terrorist Commander, his sympathies lay entirely with Sidonia and he could see what his King saw in Lodebar's Queen.

Like his chief, Gideon had not been entirely sorry when Darius had been retained as a hostage by the Synod. The prince and his little gang of commandos had been a royal pain in the neck in every sense of the word and their unauthorized incursions into Lodebar had screwed up more than one of his operations. But he didn't deserve to be assassinated any more than Daniel did and it was part of Gideon's job to keep him alive.

He could have easily killed the Commander by pressing a button because he'd wired the hut with high explosives at the same time that he'd placed the bug. But Illyria needed to know who else in Lodebar was involved with the P.I.D. and the true sources of the organization's funding.

So far, Solaria and the Commander were their only leads.

It would be up to Daniel to warn Sidonia. While Gideon didn't envy him his task, the recording of this morning's conversation in the hut would go a long way toward convincing the Queen. After that, Solaria's days would be numbered.

As the Commander emerged from the hut, Gideon put a small device to his eye. He sighted it in and pressed a button. A tiny dart shot out of its end and toward the back of the Commander's padded jacket. As the dart imbedded itself in the thick fabric, he pressed a second button and a miniature beacon began transmitting to the receiver in his ear and the computer on his belt. Wherever the Commander took the jacket from then on, Illyrian Intelligence would have a listening post and, with any luck, the names of the rest of the conspirators.

True to his word, Prince Alexander became a good friend to Darius during the months after he moved into the apartment. The two whiled away many an hour discussing women, sex, the true meaning of life and other weighty things. The agent told the young Prince many tales of life in Seira's western desert where he'd been raised and what it was like to hunt its great black leopards and tiny succulent gazelles who moved like lightning and were incredibly difficult to shoot.

"Some day, I'll take you there and we'll camp in the open under the midnight sky. The stars are so thick they look like a field of flowers. They hang so low you can almost reach out and pluck one with your hand. There's no place in the universe as magical as the great desert of the Cariath and I go there every so often to cleanse my soul and reestablish contact with my roots. Timothy keeps a rustic cabin in the Western Desert. It's where he goes when he needs to think."

"That's one of the Four Kingdoms of Seira, isn't it? And your father's its ruler?"

"He is and my mother was a Nublian Princess. I'm the youngest of their four sons. My older brothers are

all disgustingly healthy so there's little prospect of my ever inheriting the throne."

"So you're a prince like me. It must have been neat growing up in a family like yours. I should like to have had brothers and sisters."

And not to have been raised as a terrorist. *You never had a childhood at all, did you?*

"Having siblings is a mixed blessing, especially if you're the youngest. I got picked on a lot and never had a stitch of new clothing until I grew up and was able to buy my own."

"Surely your family was wealthy. Couldn't they afford to buy you clothes?"

Alexander laughed. "My family is very wealthy, but my mother has got to be the cheapest person in the universe outside my grandmother. My grandmother is Princess Deborah. She's a clothing designer and they say she has the first credit she ever made."

"Isn't she the lady Elf used to work for? I've got quite a bit of her stuff. This silk knit tunic is one of her designs. I really like her clothes."

"Elf did work for her at one time but something happened a few years ago. She had a stroke or something and has been ill ever since. She's not expected to live out the year."

"That's very sad, she has an incredible talent."

"Mother says that Deborah never did get over the death of my grandfather. They'd been in love since their teens but my Great-Grandfather Julian was opposed to the match. It took years and years to bring him around because Deborah was his favorite daughter. Ephraim told me her father had spoiled her rotten and that's why she was the way she was. My grandfather was totally different and she was much nicer when he was still alive. He adored her and spoiled her as much as Julian did."

"You know the Nublian Imperial Family, then."

"Oh sure. The cousins and aunts and uncles all know each other well and visit each other regularly. When we all get together it's an absolute madhouse. This palace is pretty big but when the family comes to visit it's literally bursting at the seams."

Darius looked wistful. "My grandparents are all dead and I don't have any aunts, uncles or cousins. My father had two younger brothers but they were killed in the war. So were my mother and grandmother."

"Well, if you marry Jenny, that'll no longer be the case. Elf was an orphan and when he married Cornelia he found that out in spades. There are times when he thinks that much family is a very mixed blessing and I know for a fact Neelie does."

"Did Elf tell you about his new project?"

"As a matter of fact he did. In fact, he asked me if I'd run the camera for him. Oh, don't worry, my lips are sealed. It sounds as if it could be fascinating."

"Well, as long as you know maybe you can help me with this outline. I have some ideas but it's going kind of slow."

Alexander had just left on an errand and Darius was finishing up a couple of his suggested edits when Genevra came in.

"What are you doing?"

"Just a minute. Let me finish this sentence and I'll be right with you."

She looked curiously over his shoulder. "What language is that?"

"Nublian. It's something Elf asked me to do and I need to finish by tomorrow."

"You know Nublian?"

"Sure." Darius saved his work and shut down the program. "And a dozen languages besides."

"Well, you certainly speak Seiran like a native. I hardly know a word of any other language. If we're to be married, I suppose I'd better start learning Illyrian hadn't I?"

"There's no time like the present. Incidentally, love, where's my good morning kiss?"

As he held Genevra close and breathed in the fragrance of her hair, Darius tried not to think about the future. It had been almost two years since he arrived on Seira and the time was rolling away much too fast. When she'd looked over his shoulder, he'd been concerned. He'd never told her about the things he'd done, didn't think anyone else had either, and had been mightily relieved she didn't understand Nublian.

Some day he was going to have to tell her and wasn't entirely sure how she would take it. As Timothy pointed out, she had been raised to a far gentler way of life and knew little of the horrors he had experienced on a daily basis since his earliest childhood. He wished he could erase the past and come to her as fresh and clean and whole as she. Unfortunately, he couldn't. The things he'd done in Lodebar were an indelible part of his psyche and those blood-filled memories would be with him for as long as he lived.

Darius told no one about the faces haunting his dreams or the dead hands that reached out to him nightly.

"You should have died with us," his companions would whisper, *"then we could all be together again. You're our leader, Darius. We need you and our band of ghosts is still seeking our lost Captain. There's no greater glory than to have died for Illyria. You've been cheated of your rightful due."*

"I still have work to do and you deserve your rest, my friends. Stop seeking me on that battlefield. I'll join you soon enough. I'm still your Captain and that's an order."

*"We swore in blood to live and die as one but we're missing our Captain. Come to us, Darius, and complete your vow. Then our unit will be complete again."*

He always awoke at that point and would lie there wondering if his companions weren't right. He was aware of the ever-present eye of the camera and that there was no way he could do anything even if he wanted to. Alexander was a telepath who could read his every thought. The unseen watchers monitoring the camera probably were too. At times, he felt like a specimen being studied under a microscope and would wish there was some dark corner in which he could hide and never come out into the daylight again.

It didn't matter how kind Timothy was or how luxurious his accommodations. He was a hapless prisoner as surely as if he'd been in chains in some isolated dungeon far below the earth's surface and there seemed to be no end to his sentence.

In his heart of hearts, the prince knew his dream of marriage to Genevra was just that and did his level best not to think about it. When Doctor de Blanc had come to examine him six months ago, he'd allowed himself to hope that this time things might be different. But nothing more had been said and he'd had been afraid to ask.

He was unaware Alexander had returned and was quietly scanning his thoughts.

Genevra looked up. "Hi, Alex. I wondered where you'd gotten to. Darius was telling me he's doing some sort of project for Elf."

"Did he now? And what did he tell you?"

"Just that he needed to finish it by tomorrow. Why? Is it something I should know?"

"No," said Darius quickly. "Er, yes. There's a new computer game based on 'The Mountain King;' Elf wanted my thoughts on it."

"Really. Can I see it? I love computer games and this might be a good one."

"He brought me the video of 'Julian and Cassius' too. We can watch it after lunch if you like."

"Now that I'd like to see," remarked Alexander. "I missed it when it came to the theater."

"Well, I've already seen it once," said Genevra, "but wouldn't mind seeing it again. Especially now that Elf's planning to make a sequel. He's even talked to me about playing my grandmother Thamar because I look just like her. He's scouting locations right now and says he's going to be doing a lot of filming in the Western Desert and around Mount Phasga. That's where they had the big battle, you know. The one where Grandfather raised the standard and held it up all day."

"Even I know about that," responded Darius. "They say, while Ephraim held the standard, the image of Thamar came and protected him from the Plutarchs' shells."

"There were countless veterans of that battle who swore up and down they saw her that day," said Alexander. "Some claimed she wasn't Grandmother Thamar at all but the sacred goddess of the mountain. I asked Grandfather about it once but he smiled and wouldn't say."

"That was when Elf's father-in-law volunteered to be a decoy. He wore Grandfather's white armor and drew the Plutarchs' fire," said Genevra. "He almost died and a blood transfusion from Julian saved him. They were mortal enemies and Julian didn't know who he was. When he found out, he tried to stop the transfusion. Grandfather's men wouldn't let him."

"Then, years later, he married Julian's daughter Beryl," mused Alexander, "and they became friends. It can happen you know. It certainly did in their case."

Is he trying to tell me something? wondered Darius.

"Well," said Alexander. "Here comes Rufus with lunch. I don't know about you people but I'm starved."

Prince Carlo was just turning to leave the sentry post he'd just been inspecting, a young man tapped him on the shoulder. Instantly Carlo whirled around. As he brought up his gun and made ready to fire, the young man stepped back and raised his hands in the air. "Take it easy. I only want to talk."

Carlo's tone was skeptical and he kept the gun cocked and pointed at the visitor's head. "Do you indeed? And what do we have to talk about, stranger? You have exactly twenty seconds in which to state your business. If I'm not satisfied with your story, you die. As of now, I'm counting."

"I'm an Illyrian spy, Your Highness, and I have information for you about your father and your oldest sister, Solaria. Are you familiar with an organization called Partners in Death, otherwise known as the P.I.D.?"

Carlo's finger tightened on the trigger. "Go on."

"My king has ordered me to apprise you of the current situation. He says you can be of considerable help to us and your mother as well. Have your sentry there search me, Your Highness. He'll find I'm totally unarmed, and I swear to you on my mother's head that I come in peace."

Carlo motioned to the sentry. "Do a strip search. And use your scope."

Several minutes later, the young man smiled ruefully at Carlo. "Are you satisfied? If you are, is there some other place where we can talk? It's freezing out here."

After gesturing to the sentry to leave, Carlo lowered the gun. "Sure. You can put your clothes on again because I'm satisfied. If you've got anything concealed on you, it's got to be invisible. Incidentally, spy, do you have a name?"

"They call me Gideon." The young man dressed again. Then he blew on his hands to warm them in the bitter cold.

Carlo holstered his weapon and pointed to his waiting transport. "There's a tavern in the village just below. We can go there. A few moments by a roaring fire and a glass of spiced wine will warm you up in no time."

"It sounds good to me." The young man tried to stop his teeth from chattering. "Another couple of minutes and you wouldn't have had to kill me. Mother Nature would have done the job for you."

"You're an Illyrian and a spy at that. So, what else did you expect? Had our situations been reversed, you'd have done the same."

"I'd probably have treated you even worse. In my business, life has a regrettable tendency to be nasty, brutish and short, nowhere more so than on this border."

Carlo started the vehicle and they moved away from the sentry post. "How did you manage to get up to this checkpoint, anyway? There are at least three before this one and they're surely not that lax."

"Oh, they're not. I had tonight's password and my papers were all in order."

"Hmm. I don't suppose you're going to tell me how you got them."

"Hardly. However, if it makes you feel any better, I can assure you that it wasn't easy."

"You said something about my mother. Would you mind explaining what you meant?"

"It would seem, Your Highness, that your mother and my king now have a common enemy. The P.I.D. has adherents on both sides of the border and they seek nothing less than the overthrow of both our monarchies and the resumption of the war. A consortium of arms dealers and manufacturers is financing both factions and they won't rest until we're at each others' throats again."

"Under the circumstances, you may as well call me Carlo. You mentioned my sister Solaria and my father in the same breath. Tell me about that."

"Your father is the leader of the P.I.D. on this side of the border. He has ideas of putting you on the throne in your mother's place."

Carlo hit the brakes and the vehicle lurched to a sudden stop. "WHAT? You're going to have to give me some proof because I think you're out of your mind."

"I have proof. May I?"

As Carlo listened to the recording of his father's conversation with Solaria, his handsome face grew somber. He put the vehicle in gear and started down the mountain again.

"Who else knows about this?"

"Illyrian Intelligence, my king, your mother. And now, you."

"Oh, Solaria. You damn fool." Carlo muttered almost to himself. "Why couldn't you have just let well enough alone? You'd have had the throne soon enough anyway."

Gideon looked sharply at the prince. "What do you mean?"

Carlo laughed bitterly, "I may as well tell you because it'll soon be public anyway. My mother's dying. She was diagnosed a year ago with a rare blood disease that takes its victims all too quickly and has no more than six months to live. That's why she was so anxious to marry Sybilla off to your Crown Prince and for Solaria to make an heir. When she told me, she swore me to secrecy. Outside her doctor, I'm the only person who knows. This news about Solaria will kill her for sure."

"You have no ambition to sit on the throne yourself?"

"Absolutely not. I think the world of my mother and our system works very well. I like my life the way it is and don't want to assume the burden Sidonia has to carry. Neither does my younger brother, Baron. The women have always ruled in Lodebar because it's the logical way. That doesn't mean that they don't respect their menfolk, because they do. We have our place in the natural order of things and I'm perfectly happy with mine. If I ever stop to wonder what it would be like if the men were in control here, all I have to do is look at Illyria and the rest of the Synod. Yecch."

"That seems so strange to me. But I have to admit there's a harmony in your relationships that seems to

be lacking elsewhere. Except for your sister Solaria, of course."

Carlo pulled up to a cozy looking tavern by the side of the road. Its lighted windows shone with welcome and illuminated the snow covered ground.

As he opened the door and jumped out, the spy shivered slightly in the darkness and thought about the strange path he'd followed to this moment. He was about to have a friendly drink with his mortal enemy and help him save the very government Gideon had spent his entire adult life trying to overthrow.

Solaria was beating Sybilla for the third time at their favorite card game when a knock sounded on her apartment door. "Who is it?"

"The Captain of the Guard, ma'am. May I enter?"

"You can come in but I can't imagine what business you would have with me at this late hour." She turned to her sister. "Sybilla, you may just as well hang it up because you're absolutely hopeless. I just wish Carlo would get back. He's the only person in this whole place who can give me a decent game."

Sybilla flushed slightly, then began gathering the scattered cards and putting them back in their box. "I think I'll go find Anna Lisa and see how she's coming with her computer lessons."

In the meantime, the Guard Captain had entered the living room where the two princesses sat. She bowed respectfully to Solaria. "Your Royal Highness, Her Majesty begs the pleasure of your company as soon as possible." Then she turned to Sybilla, "You too, ma'am. Prince Baron is already with the Queen and Prince Carlo is about to come on the viewscreen."

Solaria clapped her hands, "Oh, how nice. Maybe he'll actually be home for the holidays. Well, I'd better get out of this robe and into something respectable. That's if I can find anything that fits."

Sybilla said suddenly, "I'll come and help you. Captain, we'll only be a moment."

As the two princesses went into Solaria's bedroom, Sybilla saw the Captain pick up the phone. Then she heard her say, "I'm with her right now. She's getting dressed and they'll be down in a few minutes."

That's odd, thought Sybilla. *Why do we need a guard detail to escort us down to Momma's apartments? All she needed to do was call. I wonder if this has anything to do with Illyria and Prince Darius.*

It felt so strange to her to be betrothed to a man she'd never met. It wouldn't have been so bad if Solaria would have just had the decency to keep her mocking comments to herself. But she never shut up. It went on morning, noon and night until Sybilla honestly felt like strangling her. Then she'd think about Solaria's situation and pity her instead. The closer Solaria came to term, the stranger her behavior became and things were now to a point where she wondered whether her sister wasn't losing her mind.

As she entered the bedroom, Solaria was rummaging through her well-stocked closet. "There's got to be something I can wear. I just hope I haven't lost my figure because of this damn baby. Oh, I can't wait until this dreary pregnancy is over so I can get back to my regular life."

Sybilla spotted a soft knit silk tunic and pants. "How about this? It's such a pretty shade of blue and all



stretchy."

Solaria looked. "I just got that from a catalog and haven't even had a chance to try it on yet. Give it here. Yes, I think it might work. There's a blue and green chiffon scarf over there on the dresser. Grab that pin, will you? The big emerald one shaped like a rose."

Sybilla looked closely at the pin. "That's Momma's. How did you get hold of it?"

"Let's just say I borrowed it when she wasn't looking. She never wears any of her jewels anyway so she might as well give them to me."

"Oh Solaria, do you think that's wise? You know how Momma is about her personal things. What's she going to say?"

"In a couple of weeks, she isn't going to have anything to say about anything. And for your information little sister, you aren't going to have to marry that Illyrian monster after all."

Sybilla stood stock still, "What do you mean, Momma isn't going to have anything to say? Solaria, what's going on?"

Her sister laughed. Sybilla didn't like the sound of it at all.

"Let's just say that's for me to know and for you to find out. And Sybilla, if you know what's good for you, you'll keep your mouth shut about this."

"Are you *threatening* me?"

"If you want to put it like that, yes."

There was a knock on the bedroom door and the Captain's voice asked, "Your Highnesses, are you ready? The transmission is about to start and Her Majesty made a point of telling me she wants you both there."

Solaria checked herself in the full-length mirror, then patted her hair. "This'll have to do. Even like this, I still look ten times better than you do, little sister. Just wait until your intended gets a really good look at you. He'll go down on his poor little non-existent knees and beg for mercy. Or hadn't you heard? Your beautiful Prince Darius is nothing but a helpless cripple in a wheelchair. One of our big trucks ran over him and turned the bones in his legs into powder. Good for him, I say, because it's just what he deserved. But I forgot, dear sister. You're not going to marry Darius after all. With any luck he'll be dead very soon, along with his old man."

"Now I know for sure you've lost your mind. Come on, Solaria. We don't want to keep Momma waiting."

As the two princesses followed the guard down the marble staircase, Sybilla thought to herself, *He's a cripple in a wheelchair? How come no one told me? And what does Solaria know about his being dead? The last I heard, the King of Illyria was very much alive. So was his son. I should know because Momma says I'm supposed to be at this meeting on Nublis next month. That's when she and King Daniel are going to make Darius' and my betrothal official, then take all kinds of pictures.*

When they reached Sidonia's apartment, the Queen greeted her daughters with hands outstretched. "Come on in, my dears. Find a chair and make yourselves comfortable. Solaria, here's a footstool so you can put your feet up. Baron and Anna Lisa are already here. Darling Carlo should be on the viewscreen any time."

She was so effusive, Sybilla almost asked, "Mother? Are you well?"

When she glanced at Baron, he frowned. He put a finger to his lips and shook his head.

Ah so, she thought, *something's up and whatever it is, Momma knows all about it.*

"Ah, there he is," trilled Sidonia as Carlo's image materialized on the viewscreen. "Oh, my dear son, you're as handsome as ever."

"Momma," said Carlo. "It's good to see your face. You're well, I trust. How goes it with the family?"

"They're all here. I'm switching the camera to a wide angle so you can see them. Wave at Carlo, children."

Obediently his four younger siblings waved. Sybilla heard Solaria mutter under her breath, "How corny can you get?"

After several minutes of meaningless chitchat, Carlo suddenly frowned at the camera. "Is Solaria there?"

Sidonia fiddled with the control. "Solaria, the camera's on you. Answer him."

"Oh," said Solaria, evidently a little flustered. "Yes, Carlo, I'm still here. Was there something you wanted to ask me?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. How's my father the Count? I gather you saw him not long ago."

Solaria looked around her like a hunted animal. "What makes you think that?"

"Someone recorded one of your conversations and you talked of various things. Would you like me to play it back to refresh your memory?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," shrilled Solaria, "What things?"

"Ah, that's what makes it so interesting. You said the Grand Chancellor was too old and the Council could stand an assassination or two. Don't you remember? And something about me being a king. No, wait. It was my father who said that. You merely asked of which country and he told you Illyria. Then you discussed setting our mother's powers aside and making yourself Regent. Temporarily, of course. Momma has the recording in case you feel the need to brush up on what you said."

When Solaria started up from her chair, Baron quickly rose to his feet. He took his sister by the arms and held her down. "Oh no, Solaria, you're not going anywhere. You're going to stay and listen to the rest."

Carlo's voice continued from the viewscreen, "Partners in Death you call yourselves and that's exactly what you are. The problem is, you never were on a battlefield and neither was my esteemed father. You plan to send others out to die while you sit safely behind the doors of your palaces. The freezing snows

and sleet of the mountain border checkpoints are not for the likes of you. I live with them daily, little sister. Our troops would much rather be home with their families than peering into the icy darkness night after night, hoping the next bullet that flies doesn't have their name on it. Just a few miles down the road, the Illyrian guards are thinking exactly the same thing. Your problem, Madam Princess, is that you've never had to go on a bivouac in your life. You've never heard the moans of the dying on a battlefield or experienced the mud and the blood of a real campaign. You call yourself a revolutionary but don't begin to know the meaning of the word. It's Momma who's the revolutionary, Solaria, not you. She's the one who had the guts to take the initiative and turn her back on centuries of war. And she's right. It's time for something besides gravestones to be planted in our fields and I too would like to see a generation of our people who've never known anything but peace. Queen Sidonia, as your subject, I humbly salute you and all you stand for. Above all, I want you to know I'm proud to be your son."

To Sybilla's amazement, tears were streaming down Sidonia's pale cheeks.

Baron stood. "I agree with Carlo. I salute you, my Queen, and I'm proud to be your son." He looked meaningfully at Sybilla.

Taking Anna Lisa's hand in hers, she rose and pulled her sister to her feet. "Anna Lisa and I salute you, Mother. Like Carlo and Baron, we're proud to be your children. Aren't we, Anna Lisa?"

"Oh, yes, and you don't need to pinch me like that. I think the world of Momma and I'd never do anything to hurt her."

As her sisters and her brother glared at her, Solaria shrank back in her chair. "What do you want from me? Of course I'm proud of Momma and all that. But what of the honor of Lodebar?"

Sidonia rose in her turn. "You let me worry about the honor of Lodebar. You know nothing of it, you foolish child, and should have stayed away from that which you did not understand. That is what now constitutes your downfall. I told you months ago you were more closely watched than you knew but it still took an Illyrian spy to catch you. That's where I heard about this plot of yours, my daughter, to my everlasting shame. Had you possessed your soul in patience for six more months, my little Crown Princess, it would all have been yours anyway. I'm dying, Solaria, and that's how long the doctors have given me. Your fellow conspirator and his friends are incarcerated where they belong and go to trial tomorrow. As for you," the Queen continued, "you'll be held close until your child has been born. Then, regretfully, you'll go on trial also. By then, your fate will be out of my hands. Your final disposition will be up to the Grand Council."

"No!" screamed Solaria, "Momma, you can't do this. I'm sorry. I'll change my ways. I'll swear loyalty to you just like they did. Please, Momma."

Sidonia gave a bitter sob and turned away. Then she went into her bedroom and closed the door.

Baron opened the suite's outside door, then beckoned to the waiting guards. "You can take her now," he said quietly. "Solaria, I'll be up to see you once you're settled."

As Anna Lisa began to sob, Sybilla took her in her arms and remembered all the good times the three of them had had together when they'd been growing up.

Carlo's voice came from the viewscreen. "If there'd been any way I could have prevented this, I would. For what it's worth, Sybilla, I'll be home in the morning. Until then, take care of Momma. She's not nearly as strong as you think. Doing this to Solaria has been like sinking a knife into herself."

Sybilla spoke. "Momma didn't do anything to Solaria and tried to stop her every way she knew. The one who did this is Solaria and we're all suffering for it. I'm glad you're coming home because we need you desperately. Especially Momma. It's only your loyalty that's keeping her going right now."

She gently disengaged herself from the sobbing Anna Lisa. "I'm going to see Momma. You go on up to bed. I'll be in after a while."

As Sybilla entered the bedroom, the Queen was by the open window, gazing silently out at the moonlit sky. She heard the door open and close but didn't turn. "For over a thousand years," she said sadly, "the royal daughters of Lodebar have guarded our country and kept faith with our people. Never has any one of them ever betrayed her sacred trust. Tell me, Sybilla, where did I go wrong?"

"You didn't, Momma. Solaria's responsible for her actions, not you. It just goes that way sometimes. Is there nothing that can be done? Medicine is so advanced these days it seems as if they have a cure for just about anything."

The Queen sighed. "I know, and don't think I haven't looked into it. I have for the whole of the past year. This is one of those rare disorders for which they haven't found a cure and I've already tried everything there is. You're the strong one in the family and it's going to be up to you to keep things on an even keel after I'm gone. But I want you to promise you'll go through with this marriage and cement the royal houses of Illyria and Lodebar together in peace for all time. They say I'm a witch, but it isn't so. I'm an ordinary woman doing the best I can. I failed with both Solaria and Carlo's father. I wish I knew where I went wrong."

"You're no ordinary woman and you haven't failed anybody. Solaria failed you, not the other way around. If it means that much to you, I'll go through with the marriage to Darius and make the best of it I possibly can."

Sidonia turned and looked at her directly. "You're the brightest and best of all of my children and I'm only sorry it took something like this to make me see it. I wish I could put you on the throne but Solaria's unborn daughter is now the heir. You'll have to watch over her and show her the right way to go. Carlo and Baron will help, bless their hearts. Unfortunately they're only men. You'll have to do things as I would and it is to you that the Grand Council will have to turn to guidance after I'm gone."

"What of Solaria? What disposition will you make of her?"

"She's safe until the child is born. After that, she'll be executed the way all such traitors have been in Lodebar since time began."

"Oh no, Momma. You can't."

"I have no choice in the matter. If I did, don't you know I'd sooner put my own hand into the fire rather than hurt one hair on my own child's head? The five of you are all the world to me and everything I've ever done has been for you. This will be the hardest thing I've ever had to do and I'll go to my grave agonizing over Solaria's loss. We pay a heavy price for being who we are, Sybilla, and don't you ever forget it. Now you'd better go. Anna Lisa's alone and afraid and she's waiting for you."

"But Momma," wailed Sybilla. "What about you?"

The Queen smiled at her youngest daughter. Then she took her in her arms and stroked her hair. "We're

born alone and we die alone. If at some point along the way, we find someone to walk beside for us for even a short time, we should count ourselves blest. I loved Baron's father and I was fond of yours. They're both still good friends to me. Between that and the rest of my children I can't ask for much more. Go and comfort Anna Lisa, little one. I'll be all right."

"Jenny, I just don't know." Darius sighed and buried his face in Genevra's hair.

She tightened her arms around his neck. "I'm going to miss you too, but think of it, Darius. After all this time, you're finally going to see your father and you said it yourself. Your father and Sidonia can announce this betrothal all they want but that still doesn't make it so. Do whatever you need to, then hurry back to me. Daddy says they're all coming here in a couple of months for the big Spring Solstice Festival. We can talk about it then."

"Father's coming here?"

"Your father, Queen Sidonia, the daughters, everybody. I overheard him telling Momma about it yesterday. The Queen's bringing her oldest son Carlo too. Then she's taking her daughter Anna Lisa and Carlo on to Aretz for the opening of the Synod Assembly's social season. Incidentally, Daddy says Anna Lisa's very pretty."

"Not as pretty as you, I'll bet." Darius lightly traced the outline of her cheek with his forefinger.

Rufus came out to the patio and coughed politely.

"What is it Rufus? If it's anything that can wait, please come back later. You can clearly see I'm busy right now."

The old soldier said firmly, "It's three o'clock, Your Highness. Professor Damien's on his way and Her Majesty has asked me to remind the princess that she has a fitting with the dressmaker in ten minutes."

Darius suddenly looked at Genevra as if seeing her for the last time. "Jenny," he started to say, then stopped.

"What is it love?"

"It's just I have a feeling-- Oh, Jenny. I just don't know. Something's ending and I'm not sure what lies ahead. But I want you to know that, no matter what happens, I love you with all my heart and always will. As long as I live, there'll never be anyone else for me but you."

"Darius. What is it? You sound as if you're saying goodbye forever. But I already told you, love. Do whatever you need to and hurry back. Then we can pick up where we left off."

The prince's dark blue eyes were filled with distress. "If I could only be sure of that. But I have a feeling it's not going to be that simple. Our time's run out and I feel so helpless. I must go wherever they take me and there's not a damn thing I can do."

"You're afraid you aren't coming back. That's it, isn't it?"

As Rufus cleared his throat, Darius told her solemnly, "Somehow, some way, I'll find my way back to you, even if it takes the rest of my life." He tugged the golden signet ring off his little finger and placed it in her hand. "Keep this safe for me until I return to claim it."

Genevra looked up at Rufus. "Please give me your knife." The princess cut off a lock of her hair, wrapped it in her handkerchief and gave it to the prince. "Keep this next to your heart to remind you we'll soon be together again. In the meantime, you'll have a part of me with you wherever you go."

As he took his knife back, Rufus said, "Professor Damien's here. Your Highness, if you don't leave now, you're going to be late for your appointment."

Genevra gave Darius a quick kiss on the lips. Then she ran swiftly across the patio. Darius looked down at the handkerchief in his hand, sighed and put it in his pocket.

"Yes, Professor. I know you're there. My assignment's finished and saved in the computer. All I have to do is print it out."

"Let's get to it then," said his teacher. "As long as we're on the subject, here's a list of what I want you to do while you're away."

When Darius saw the list, he groaned. "You can't be serious."

"Oh yes, I am, Your Highness. If you're to understand the trade and political relationships in the Synod, you need to know the history of how they came about. Since it's my understanding that you're being confined to your cabin, you won't have much else to do. Your books and other materials are already on board. Now, let's take a look at that homework assignment."

"It's time," said the Queen. "Come Sybilla. You're going to help me."

The doctor met them at the door to Solaria's apartment and Sybilla could hear her sister's moans from the dimly lit bedroom.

When Solaria saw her mother, she shrank back. Sidonia took her oldest daughter's hands in hers. "I'll stay here with you until it's over and so will your sister. Everything's on schedule and you're doing just fine. Now you need to start breathing the way we practiced. That's a good girl. Ah, there went another one. Now, just relax and focus. Good."

The Queen nodded to Sybilla to take her sister's hand, then drew the doctor aside.

"She's desperately afraid," said the doctor, "and I can't imagine why. Solaria's a healthy young woman and the baby's fine. But she's got a fixation she's going to die and I can't talk her out of it. Maybe there's something you can do."

"Solaria will do what she has to do which is to push that baby out. As to this fixation of hers, we'll deal with that later. Do you have a place where I can sit? I'm feeling a little faint."

"Oh, come over here, Your Majesty, and put your feet up. Would you like a cup of tea?"

Sidonia settled on the couch and closed her eyes.

It's too early for this to be happening and Solaria would just as soon I wasn't there, poor child. This is the day she's been dreading and with good reason. I have so much left to do and now my time has all but run out. Oh Daniel, how I wish that you and I could have had a child together. Unfortunately that's no longer possible. If my illness is progressing this fast, we're going to have to do the next best thing and expedite the marriage between your son and my daughter. We'll be having a wedding next week instead of a betrothal and young Darius will be going home to Illyria sooner than he'd expected. Well, at least someone will be happy. The prince's exile will be over and Daniel will have his son back at last.

Oh Solaria, thought Sybilla as she sat by the bed and held her sister's hand. *You were so beautiful and had so much going for you. This should have been one of the most joyful days of your life, the completion of the circle that began with your own birth, and the crowning jewel of your existence. How could you have let that man seduce you into such a disaster? How could it have come to this?*

One of the monitors above the bed beeped urgently. The doctor came swiftly over to Solaria and examined her. Then she frowned at Sybilla. "You'd best go get your mother. There's something wrong and we're probably going to have to take the baby. Now go, child. Fetch your mother quickly."

She murmured to herself, *"If I didn't know better, I'd swear this girl is deliberately willing herself to death and the baby with her. There's a dark shadow over her and I felt it the moment I came in here. Perhaps she loved the baby's father too much and is breaking her heart over him. Whatever it is, she's resisting the birth with all her might and doesn't seem to want this child to come into the world."*

The doctor took a small communicator from her belt and spoke urgently into it. A few minutes later, the bedroom door opened and two attendants wheeled in a stretcher.

The Queen hastened to Solaria's side. The Crown Princess opened her eyes wide and looked up into her mother's face. "You'll win, Momma, because you always do. I admired you more than anyone else and wanted above all to be just like you. You were the supreme goddess and there was nothing you couldn't do. Together we could have conquered Illyria and merged it with Lodebar once and for all. All you had to do, Momma, was put out your hand and take it."

She began coughing and an attendant put a mask over her face.

The doctor's voice was urgent. "We've got to take her now, Your Majesty. According to the monitors, the baby's becoming compromised and there isn't a minute to lose. A MedEvac unit is standing by."

"Go!" The Queen's voice was sharp. "As soon as I've notified my sons and Solaria's other sister, Sybilla and I will follow in one of the regular air transports."

"I'll have someone meet you as soon as you arrive." The doctor gestured to the attendants. "Let's go. Stat."

Goodbye, Solaria, thought Sybilla and choked back a sob.

The little princess knew she would never see her sister alive again. Her mother would see to that. Even though her death would be an act of mercy, Sybilla still found it hard to take. And to think she'd actually envied the glamorous headstrong Crown Princess.

They'd had such good times together when they were growing up and she couldn't believe she'd never again see Solaria's wicked smile or hear her melodious voice. She would never own another dress as beautiful as the one her sister had so lovingly made for her for the trip to Eos and felt a sudden wrench at her heart when she remembered Solaria saying to her that night, "*Come on little one. I'm going to make you drop dead gorgeous if it's the last thing I ever do. For once in your life, sweetie, you're actually going to be the belle of the ball.*"

Thanks to Solaria's magic touch, she had felt beautiful that night and wondered sadly if she ever would again.

Then she realized, whatever she was feeling her mother must be experiencing tenfold. She remembered what Sidonia said to her that terrible night. "*I'd sooner put my own hand into the fire rather than hurt one hair on my own child's head? The five of you have been all the world to me and everything I've ever done has been for you. This will be the hardest thing I've ever had to do and I'll go to my grave agonizing over Solaria's loss.*"

As Sidonia put down the phone, her daughter saw the tears running down her cheeks. "Oh Momma. I can't bear it." She burst into a storm of weeping.

Her mother's arms went around her and her voice whispered soft words of comfort. "It's better this way. Solaria will never know the public trial and execution that would have been her fate otherwise. Instead of being cursed by her people as a traitor, she'll be spoken of with reverence and affection. She'll be remembered as the beauty she once was and be blessed for having secured the royal succession. And I promise you, Sybilla, she'll feel no pain." Sidonia pressed a handkerchief into her daughter's hand. "Dry your eyes, my love, because we have to present a brave face to the world. Come, our transport is waiting and we need to welcome the new heiress to the throne. Think on it, Sybilla. There's a new life beginning to replace the one that's been lost and it's going to be up to you to guide her after I'm gone."

"Sidonia," exclaimed Daniel. "What a nice surprise. But surely we could have waited to talk. We'll be together in just a couple of days."

Watching his face on the screen, Sidonia took a deep breath, "I know, Daniel. But something here just changed drastically and we need to modify our plans. I--er--I called to tell you myself before you picked it up from a newscast or out of a tabloid. Solaria--my oldest daughter--she--um ...." Her voice caught in her throat and she was unable to go on.

Sybilla took over. "Your Majesty. Late last night, my sister Solaria went into premature labor. There were difficulties and she--er--she didn't make it."

"You mean she's dead?"

"Y--yes. The reason Momma called you is because this changes everything. Solaria's baby daughter is now the heiress to the throne. In the event something happens to Momma, the Grand Council will have to appoint a Regent. Momma has nominated my brother Carlo and the Grand Council has accepted him."

"Sidonia." Daniel's voice was sincere. "I am truly sorry. Solaria was a beautiful young woman and you had such high hopes for her."



Sybilla drew in a deep breath, "Momma also wanted to tell you that she wishes to change the betrothal to a formal wedding. It's time for an end to the animosity between our peoples. The sooner your son and I give you an heir, the better off we'll all be. Once Darius and I are married, the Synod Assembly will be amenable to his return to Illyria."

Daniel thought for a moment. "If that's the case, I wholeheartedly agree. I'll notify our host immediately and ask if he'll make the preparations. Under the circumstances, we should make it a simple ceremony with little or no festivities. Don't you agree, my dear?"

"Er, yes, Your Majesty. Will you take care of notifying Prince Darius?"

"Of course. In fact, I'll call Timothy right away. Since it's an open secret that he has custody of Darius, I'm sure he'll be delighted to get him off his hands. Darius should be boarding his ship in a few hours and I'll give him the news when he arrives. Sidonia, I'm truly sorry about Solaria and I trust your new granddaughter will give you the consolation you seek. As for you, little princess, I look forward to welcoming you into my family. If you have even half your mother's grace and wisdom, my son will be a fortunate man to have you for a bride."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," replied Sybilla with a blush.

Her mother spoke. "Daniel, that was a lovely thing to say. My only regret is we never got together sooner."

"True," replied the Illyrian King. "But the future is still ours, is it not?"

"What there is of it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just that life can be so unexpected sometimes. You just never know what will happen. Daniel, will you give me your word about something?"

"You need to tell me what I'm supposed to be promising."

The Queen's voice was weary, "I want you to promise to watch over Sybilla as if she were your own."

"That's a given. But if it'll make you feel any better, I promise."

Sidonia's voice was almost a whisper, "Thank you, Daniel. That means a great deal to me. We'll be boarding our ship very soon and so will you. I look forward to seeing you on the day after tomorrow."

"I'll be counting the hours," said the king

"Let me see." Rufus counted the bags. "I want to make sure we've got everything. This will be the last chance I'll have to check if we have to go through the handcuff blindfold routine again."

"You've got everything packed but the kitchen sink. Honestly, Rufus, it's only for a couple of days. Why do we need to take all this stuff?"

"There are going to be several receptions and at least one grand banquet. As the Crown Prince, you have to put on a good appearance. Also, between the crutches, the wheelchair and all the rest, you have quite a bit of paraphernalia, you know."

"Don't remind me. Just so you remembered to pack the spare stim in case mine gets mislaid. If I lose that thing and don't have a spare, I'm really going to be up a creek."

Rufus clapped his hand to his forehead, "I'm glad you thought of it. It's hard telling what kind of benighted backwater they're going to be running us off to for this meeting. It would be just our luck there wouldn't be a decent medical supply facility within a thousand miles."

Darius looked anxiously at his old friend. "I don't know how Father's going to react to me being in a wheelchair. My physical prowess has always been so important to him and now I can't ...."

"Daniel will be so glad to see you, he won't care. Remember, Your Highness, he's seen your medical reports and knows full well what your condition is. He doesn't know you've been practicing on those special crutches, though, or how good you are at getting around on them."

"Thanks to Jenny. But I keep getting this awful feeling I'm never going to see her again."

"That's nonsense. You'll be back before you know it and she'll be waiting. You've never been away from this palace since you arrived. That's why the trip seems like a lot more than it really is."

They heard a knock and a voice said, "This is the guard. Is His Highness ready?"

"Come on in," called Rufus. "We're as ready as we'll ever be."

The door opened to admit a full guard detail.

Timothy was with them. As one of the guards took out a set of handcuffs and a blindfold, the Emperor said sharply, "That's not necessary." Then he turned to Darius. "Do I have your word and Rufus's that you'll make no attempt to escape or signal anyone if I leave you free?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," replied the prince. "You have my word. Rufus?"

Rufus nodded resignedly. "Agreed."

"Good," said the Emperor. Then he told the guard, "You can put those away."

Timothy held a small box which handed it to Darius with a smile. "This is for you. Your royal crest is the cat. Wear it in good health."

When Darius opened the box and saw the ring inside, he gasped. An intricately carved cat's head, it was made from a jewel he could not identify and set into what looked like a solid red-gold nugget. The huge gem was a shade of purple so deep as to be almost black. It flashed and glimmered as it caught the light and he saw shifting fires deep within its heart.

As he slipped the ring on his left forefinger, Timothy remarked, "This belonged to Seira's first Emperor. The gem was once a shooting star and is the only one of its kind. It's said to have magical properties and the power to bring peace where all else has failed. Under the circumstances, it seemed an appropriate gift."

Darius turned the gem this way and that, admiring the way it caught the light. "This is truly magnificent, Your Majesty." Then he said sadly, "I have nothing to give you in return."

Timothy signaled for the guards and Rufus to leave.

When they were alone, he said gently, "You already have, my son. The project you did for Elf is a gift to all mankind. Everywhere it's been shown, people from all walks of life have seriously questioned and rethought their attitudes towards terrorism. Unlike Elf, you'll never receive the accolades you so richly deserve for this magnificent piece of work. Out of necessity, you must remain in the shadows. This is a small token of my appreciation for giving so generously of yourself. I can only guess what it must have cost you."

"How did you know? Did Elf or Alexander tell you? They promised they'd never breathe a word."

"No one told me, they didn't need to. There was only one source from whom this story could have come and it wasn't hard to put two and two together. Believe me, Darius, I know of no one else who would have had the courage or the wisdom to do as you did."

"What about Jenny? Does she know?"

"No. And you have my solemn word that she'll never hear it from me."

"This is goodbye, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so. Here is where we must part and I don't know when or if we'll ever meet again. You have a destiny you must fulfill and countless lives depend on your decisions."

Tears pricked at the back of Darius's eyelids. "Tell Jenny ...." He choked, unable to continue.

"The two of you will meet again but when and where is anybody's guess. What's happening now is out of my hands and I would it had been some other way."

"I know and no one could have been kinder than you. Now, it's time for me to go."

When they left the apartment in which he'd been confined for so long, Darius never looked back. As Rufus wheeled him into the elevator, he thought about the father he hadn't seen for over two years. Then he squared his thin shoulders and set his face toward the future.

Sybilla looked curiously out of the window as their craft edged its way into their assigned dock at Nublis's spaceport. The magnificent blue and gold flagship belonging to the Emperor of Seira was next to theirs and just beyond it King Daniel's sleek black vessel.

She wondered if Prince Darius had disembarked yet and if he was as nervous as she. Suddenly, Sybilla was in no hurry to leave her seat and she wished that they could turn right around and go back to Lodebar. Home had never seemed so dear to her and her stomach clenched into a tight knot at the thought of what lay ahead.

Anna Lisa rose to her feet as the cabin steward approached.

She saluted. "Her Majesty is already in the main bay and asks that you join her as soon as possible."

Baron was seated across the gray carpeted aisle.

"You too, Your Highness. There's a reception committee at the end of the dock and the Queen would like the whole family to disembark together."

Sybilla unsnapped her seat harness. She smoothed out the wrinkles on the full skirt of her deep crimson Nublian silk dress and straightened the back of Anna Lisa's green velvet suit. Baron reached into an overhead bin and brought out two matching wide brimmed lace hats, one with a red ribbon for Sybilla, the second with an ornate green trim for Anna Lisa.

He was neatly turned out in a Lodebarian infantry dress uniform of black and gold. The scarlet flashes on its sleeves and high collar indicated his captaincy. But even though he had already earned more than his share, Baron wore no combat medals out of deference to their peace mission.

Carlo would already be with their mother. As the Commander of Lodebar's elite mountain ski troops, his dress uniform would be white and gold and, like Baron's, bare of medals.

Instead of her usual military garb, Queen Sidonia had opted for an elegant gray silk dress and a small velvet hat. Her long blonde hair was piled on top of her small head and her magnificent set of rose colored pearls had once adorned her legendary mother, Queen Maeve.

The royal jewel collection was a major portion of Lodebar's national treasure and the Queen was not at liberty to sell or borrow against any part of it no matter how dire her circumstances. More than once in recent years, she had contemplated the millions of credits tied up in those jewels with real frustration. Now she was glad of them. Her magnificent gems were a match for anything the Nublians and Seirans owned and they enabled her and her two daughters to put on a more than respectable appearance. Anna Lisa wore the huge emerald pin once appropriated by Solaria and the Queen had found a delicate strand of diamonds and rubies for Sybilla.

As their party made its way up the red-carpeted dock, a band near the entrance to the concourse struck up the Lodebarian national anthem. Lodebar's and Illyria's security guards were surveying the area and talking into their personal communicators.

Sidonia walked on ahead while Carlo offered Sybilla his arm. Baron did the same for Anna Lisa. As they neared the end of the dock, King Daniel came forward to greet the Queen.

The king, Sybilla noticed, wasn't in military uniform either. As he had on a previous occasion, Daniel wore the white buckskin tunic of an Illyrian mountain chief. Magnificent as ever, he topped Sidonia's considerable height by almost a full head. As he bent to kiss her hand, he told the Queen, "The Emperor and the Empress are waiting inside the concourse. Darius isn't here. The Nublians sent a shuttle up to the flagship while it was still in orbit and they took my son and his man Rufus to the Temple Clinic."

"You haven't had a chance to see him?"

"No. Which means that I haven't been able to tell him about the change in plans. We're supposed to fly from the Imperial Palace to the Emperor's hunting lodge in the mountains this afternoon. Darius will arrive tomorrow morning and the wedding is scheduled for two days from now. According to Nublian intelligence, the P.I.D. was planning something here at the spaceport. Since Darius is their main target, the

Nublians felt that it would be safer this way."

As she laid her white-gloved hand on his arm, Carlo smiled down at his little sister. "Sybilla, you're looking quite elegant and that hat is very becoming. From what Momma says, King Daniel likes you already. All you have to do is be yourself, sweetheart, and you'll do fine with Darius too. Just smile at the cameras and do what you did on Eos at that reception. Oops, there's the receiving line. Now, watch Momma and do exactly what she does."

Feeling as if she was in a complete haze, Sybilla got through the Imperial receiving line and found herself in an open horse-drawn carriage. She was next to Carlo and opposite Baron and Anna Lisa without the slightest recollection of how she had gotten there.

She looked around. "Where's Prince Darius?"

Carlo beckoned to one of the hovering security guards and whispered in his ear. The man spoke into his communicator, listened for a moment, then whispered something in reply.

"They took him off while they were still in orbit. He's at the Temple Clinic. We won't see him until tomorrow afternoon after he's had a chance to spend some time alone with his father."

"Does he know about the change in plans and the wedding?"

Carlo's dark eyes were sympathetic. "I doubt it. The king was supposed to tell his son when he arrived but hasn't had a chance. There was some security flap to do with the P.I.D. and the Nublians changed the plan at the last minute. The P.I.D. think Darius is on the flagship and are waiting for him to disembark. The Nublians have a decoy and they'll spring their trap as soon as we're clear of the concourse. It should be all right. Nublis Intelligence is pretty good and they're working with Daniel's and our forces."

Sybilla frowned. "Is this the way it's always going to be? That's a horrible way to have to live."

"For all of our sakes, I hope not. Unfortunately, every time we clean out a nest of those P.I.D. terrorists, a new one springs up to take its place. Illyria's having the same problem. Both sides are being financed by the same consortium of arms dealers and have links to some of the old militant groups on Aretz."

"What do they want?"

Baron answered "Who knows? Every gang that appears has a different set of slogans. The only thing they have in common is they want the war to resume. For instance, Lodebar's P.I.D. is laying claim to Port Moriah. They want to kidnap Darius, try him for his war crimes, then string him up in our main square. Illyria's equivalent calls itself the Sons of Blood Honor or the S.B.H. Naturally, they also want Moriah. Their stated goal is to try Momma for the murders of Darius's unit, then string her up publicly in Illyria's capital square."

"But Momma didn't even know about those executions until afterwards. And she certainly didn't order them."

"That makes no difference to the S.B.H.," replied Carlo quietly. "Both groups are violently opposed to your marriage to Darius and will go to almost any lengths to stop it. However, they're under the impression it's supposed to take place on Seira two months from now. They're not nearly as concerned about the betrothal as the wedding, and they think the present shindig is to be at the Imperial Palace and the Temple Sanctuary."

"You mean it isn't?" piped up Anna Lisa. "Shoot. I was looking forward to seeing the Palace and I've heard so much about the Temple. The Inner Sanctuary is supposed to be gorgeous and it's got a pair of gold doors studded with jewels the size of a man's fist."

Carlo cocked an eyebrow at her, "Sorry to disappoint you, Sis, but after we've had lunch with the Emperor we're flying to his hunting lodge in the mountains. We'll be having dinner with King Daniel tonight and Prince Darius is due to join us tomorrow morning."

Another day, thought Sybilla. *I don't know if I can stand it.* And she wondered how her intended bridegroom was faring in his new surroundings.

Considering his circumstances, Darius was actually faring quite well. On their arrival on the imperial flagship, he and Rufus had been personally greeted by the captain. They'd been given the customary VIP tour and invited to stay on the bridge as the Jerusa left Seira's orbit and headed out into deep space. Later that same evening, Darius and Rufus dined with the captain and his senior officers, then joined them for after-dinner drinks and a friendly game of cards on the ship's magnificent observation deck.

Somewhat to his surprise, Darius had been assigned the Imperial Suite which came with its own staff, personal chef and private therapist. After Rufus settled him in the Emperor's enormous bed, the prince commented dryly, "Nublis is going to be a bit of a comedown after all this luxury."

"You might as well make the most of it. Even our accommodations at the palace are going to seem a mite plain in comparison and they're nothing to sneeze at."

When Rufus opened the door and saw Prince Alexander, his mouth dropped open in surprise.

"Well, look at what the cat dragged in." Darius remarked sleepily. "What in the hell are you doing here? Did Timothy give you a new assignment? You surely weren't missing me that much."

"Not exactly. There's been a change in plan. We've had an urgent signal from Nublian Intelligence that the P.I.D.'s up to something at the spaceport. Your security's been beefed up and Timothy sent me to oversee things. The Cornelia is Emperor Janus's personal flagship and it's meeting us in a few hours. You're being transferred to Nublian custody. After your arrival, you'll spend the night in the Temple Clinic. You'll be flown out on the following morning to Uncle Janus's hunting lodge in the northern mountains and your father will be waiting for you there. We have a decoy on board who looks exactly like you. When the Jerusa docks at Nublis, we're going to run a number on the P.I.D. and hope they fall into the trap. We want at least some of them alive for interrogation purposes."

"Hmm. Now that I'd like to see. I'm pretty good in a firefight, you know. Are you sure you wouldn't like me to stick around and help?"

Alexander laughed, "Not on your tintage, little buddy. You're going to be as far away from the action as we can possibly put you. I don't doubt for one moment that you can shoot the eye out of a squirrel at a thousand yards but now is not the time to prove it. However, I meant what I said about taking you hunting in Seira's Western Desert. I fully expect to keep that promise. Now, try to get some sleep while I talk to Rufus about the transfer arrangements."

"Oh all right. Just as long as they don't make me go through that blindfold handcuffs routine again. It's

really humiliating, you know."

"I'll see to it they don't. That's why Timothy sent me along. The Nublians remember your behavior vividly from your last visit and are none too anxious to have you back. I've assured them you'll be on your best behavior. You will, won't you?"

"I already gave Timothy my word on that, so did Rufus. Besides, Dad isn't about to send in a squad of commandos. We're all on the same side this time or we're supposed to be anyway."

After pressing the button on the pain pump to give himself a shot, Darius settled back into the pillows. He closed his eyes and within a few moments was fast asleep.

As Rufus shut off the light and closed the bedroom door, Alexander said softly, "There's been an additional change in plan and it's pretty drastic. I see no reason to tell Darius and I don't want you to either. Uncle Timothy found out about it just before he said goodbye. To say he wasn't pleased is putting it mildly."

Rufus was already dreading the answer. "What is it?"

"There's no easy way to say this and I think Darius's father should be the one to tell him. For whatever reason, they've decided to change the betrothal into a full-blown wedding. Then the newlyweds are to proceed straight to Illyria. Since this marriage is the Synod's price for Darius's return home, it wasn't hard to convince Daniel. He wants his son back so badly he would have agreed to just about anything."

Rufus swore under his breath. "What of Princess Genevra? Does she know?"

"By now, Timothy must have told her. I don't even care to contemplate what effect this is going to have on Darius."

"I can see why you wanted to keep it from him for as long as possible. When he finds out, a truckload of spitting wildcats will have nothing on him. He's in a whole lot better shape now than when they first brought him into that clinic, and he drew blood then."

"I believe it. He gave one of the Nublian lab technicians a black eye when she tried to do a procedure and the Emergency Room doctor required stitches and a shot after Darius bit her in the hand. He'd given the battlefield medics a few bruises before they finally got him tied down. Before that, he was fighting off a whole squad of Lodebarians with a knife. The Synod troops had one hell of a time getting it away from him even though he was flat on the ground and the odds against him were twenty to one."

Rufus smiled. "That sounds like Darius all right. The prince comes by his temper honestly. His mother, may heaven rest her soul, was every bit as fierce as he. She may not have been Illyrian by birth, but by disposition she certainly was. Even though she and King Daniel adored each other, they fought like cat and dog and she bruised and scratched him plenty. Darius looks just like her. The King saw his dead wife's eyes gazing back at him every time he looked at his son. That's why he could deny him nothing. Daniel didn't want his wife to go into combat with him that day but she insisted. The sniper's bullet that killed the queen was meant for him and neither he nor Darius has ever gotten over it. Darius himself was only eleven when it happened. He was still in Commando School and vowed vengeance for his mother's death against every last Lodebarian on the face of the planet. He and his fellow-students formed a death squad behind Daniel's back and swore a blood oath to live and die as one. When the Lodebarians captured Darius's lieutenant, they knew the death squad would come after him and set a trap. Illyrian Intelligence found out about the ambush too late. It was only due to pure dumb luck that Darius survived

at all."

"And now they want to marry him off to a Lodebarian princess and an ugly one at that. Ooof. I definitely don't envy you or Daniel when he finds out. As for that poor princess, to say her life with Darius will be no picnic is putting it mildly. But I don't suppose she's had any more to say about it than he. Queen Sidonia's a formidable woman. When that lady sets her mind to something there's not much that's going to withstand her. Her daughter least of all. According to Timothy, Princess Sybilla is just a little slip of a thing and as mild-mannered as they come. She won't be any match for Darius, that's for sure. He, poor soul, will be thinking of Genevra and resenting his new bride every time he sees her."

Since Darius was still in blissful ignorance of his eventual fate, the transfers went off without a hitch and he was soon comfortably ensconced in a VIP suite in Nublis's famed Temple Clinic.

The clinic staff was eyeing the Illyrian prince warily and Alexander agreed with Timothy that it was just as well he was there to referee. Even though he was behaving beautifully, Darius's considerable charm was totally lost on the Nublian doctors and medical attendants. They had long memories and a low tolerance for intractable patients and Alexander guessed the horror stories about Darius's previous visit hadn't been diminished one whit by either the passage of time or the changes in the political atmosphere. Had he not been there, the Clinic's medical staff would have probably put Darius in restraints and on artificial feeding as soon as he arrived and Nublian Security would have blindfolded and handcuffed the prince each and every time he was transferred.

That, in Alexander's opinion, was nothing but an invitation to trouble. As Timothy's nephew, he carried a certain amount of clout. All it took was the threat of a midnight call to his other uncle, Emperor Janus of Nublis. Since the Nublians had known full well what their Emperor's reaction was likely to be if he were to be awakened out of a sound sleep for such a reason, they instantly backed off. There was no more talk of restraints or artificial feedings and their manner toward Alexander became almost pathetically ingratiating.

Under any other circumstances, Alexander would have found the situation hilarious but not this time. He had become genuinely fond of the young prince and what was happening was a real tragedy. Anyone with half an eye could see the love between Darius and Genevra was the real thing. Even Timothy had recognized its inevitability and despite their tender ages, he and Giuliana had given the young couple their blessing.

Unfortunately, they had all been under the impression there was plenty of time. Until this damn betrothal idea came up without warning and right out of left field. While Darius had accepted his enforced betrothal to Sybilla with remarkable equanimity, his reaction to an actual wedding would be something else. While Alexander was no coward, he was grateful that he wasn't going to be the one to break the news and he planned to be well out of range when Darius finally found out.

The P.I.D. commander fidgeted impatiently as the last of the royal party cleared the concourse. The procession of carriages began to move towards the causeway and the great square where the Imperial Palace stood. Finally, the gleaming main bay doors of the Seiran Imperial flagship slid open to reveal a slender black-clad figure seated in a wheelchair. Several officers in Seiran and Nublian dress uniforms clustered around him.

"Well, it's certainly taking them long enough," growled the commander and fingered the control in his pocket. "Now start coming ahead, you miserable rat. That's it. There you go. Only a few feet more and



you'll be on the dock. Then, boom, no more prince. As long as you manage to take a few Nublians and Seirans with you into the next world, there'll be no more talk of peace and fellowship and they'll be looking to take their noses out of our affairs."

He jumped as a voice with a Seiran accent said pleasantly from behind him, "Please take your hands out of your pockets, sir, and put them where I can see them. I'm sorry to disappoint you but that's not the prince and we've already clipped the wiring to those charges. No, don't turn round. The pressure against your back is a poison dart and you'll drop like a stone if you try it."

The commander pressed the button on the control but nothing happened. He let off a string of colorful curses and raised his hands in the air.

The man behind him laughed softly. "If the Nublians weren't so anxious to take you alive, I'd have let you have it just for that. Now do you believe me? If you look more closely, you'll see I'm telling the truth about the prince as well. Darius arrived last night and is safely tucked in bed in the Temple Clinic." He gave his prisoner an ungentle shove. "Now, start walking toward the ship. Your sharpshooter in the tower is already in custody, so's the charming young lady who was placing a nerve gas bomb in the gift shop. Oh, and while you're at it, you might want to explain to Archon Intelligence where you got the security guard's uniform and papers. The spaceport's personnel office is quite upset about it."

"Who are you?" growled the commander. "And how in the hell did you find out, anyway?"

There was no answer.

In front of him, he saw a dozen weapons aimed squarely at his head. Deciding to chance the dart gun, he abruptly turned around to look at his mysterious captor. There was no one there, and all he could see was the back of a tall man with dark hair disappearing rapidly into the crowded concourse.

The young man in the wheelchair on the dock smiled up at him. Then he rose to his feet. "That was my opposite number in Seiran Intelligence. A really charming fellow but quite shy when it comes to social introductions. He's on his way to give your best regards to the prince and finalize the wedding arrangements. Unfortunately, you and your colleagues won't be there because you have a previous engagement over at the Temple. But I'll be sure to give them your regrets. Now, open your mouth."

As the commander belatedly thought of the hollow molar filled with poison in his lower jaw, his mouth was forced open and something was shoved between his teeth. His hands were cuffed behind his back and he was roughly pushed toward the ship.

"You'll join your ancestors soon enough," remarked the young man casually, "In the meantime, we're going to shuttle you over to the Temple and squeeze you dry. However I'm going to give you a couple of hours to think about things. The conclusion of this whole affair will be strictly up to you. The young lady's your daughter, is she not? A pretty little thing she is too. Her young life has barely begun and she deserves better than the fate you've wished on her. If you can persuade her to double for us, she might have a chance to survive. You do that for me and I'll give you an easy death. If you refuse, you'll get to watch her die painfully and slowly. Then you yourself will go into hell by inches screaming for mercy with your last agonized breath. You have a couple of hours to think about it and the clock is about to start ticking right now."

The young man heard Alexander's voice in his earpiece. "Oof. You don't fool around do you, Gideon? Will you really do that if he refuses?"

Gideon watched the commander disappear into the flagship's shuttle bay. "He's not going to refuse so you'll never really know. Incidentally, thanks for the help. Since when did you carry a poison dart gun?"

"Never. But he believed it and my pen was a reasonable facsimile. Now I have to go back and face some real danger. These terrorists are going to have nothing on Darius when he finds out about the wedding."

Gideon winced at the very thought. "Better you than me." Then he followed his prisoner into the waiting shuttle.

"There he is," cried Sybilla. She was watching from their suite as the red and black Nublian flyer circled and came in for its landing.

Sidonia pulled her daughter back from the window. "We need to leave Daniel greet his son alone. You'll have plenty of time to get acquainted with Darius during the next couple of days and will have to possess your soul in patience until you're formally introduced this afternoon."

"Oh, Momma, this is so romantic." breathed Anna Lisa from her station by the bed. "I just love weddings, don't you? Sybilla, your dress is gorgeous."

"Hmmf. The dress may be gorgeous but I'm not and all the flowers and furbelows in the world aren't going to help. I told you, Momma, he'll take one look and consider this marriage a fate worse than death. Isn't there any way you can call it off?"

"Oh, honey," argued Sidonia, "don't sell yourself short. You may not be as beautiful as Anna Lisa but you still look very charming. You have a lovely voice and Daniel certainly likes you. Remember, sweetheart, Darius has his own set of physical problems to contend with. He's going to be nearly as judgmental as you think. Now, it's time to get ready for lunch and I want to see a big smile on your face when you greet our Imperial host and his wife. They've gone to a great deal of trouble on our behalf and Nublis is an important source of business for Lodebar. Daniel and Darius are going to be eating alone in the king's private suite and I'm sure everyone is just as nervous about your initial meeting with the prince as you are."

Sybilla gulped. "Yes, Momma. I'm sure they are. But I'm telling you right now, I won't be able to eat a thing."

Darius watched curiously from the co-pilot's seat as his craft came in for its landing next to the immense stone structure. "Why this place is absolutely huge. You may call it a hunting lodge but it's every bit as big as my father's palace in Illyria."

The young pilot grinned. "My family never does anything by halves. My great-great-great grandfather built this place. This is where he used to entertain his lady friends of which he had more than a few. There've been some wild parties up here over the years and my Great-Grandfather Julian and his brother Cassius entertained their fair share of girls on these premises in their younger years. Grandfather picked it for this meeting because it's so secluded. Believe me, this lodge is very well guarded by the Mountain Scouts. Do you see up there? Three of their craft will be circling around overhead at any given time and they'll be patrolling every inch of the surrounding forests for the entire time you're here."

"I'd expected something more primitive than this." remarked Darius as the pilot reached for the lever next to his seat and pulled it to open the door. He unsnapped his harness and waited for Rufus to help him out of his seat.

The pilot looked at him with concern. "Are you sure you're going to be able to manage on those crutches all right? The steps have an electric lift but the terrain between here and the main door is more than a mite rough."

"Thanks, but I've been practicing. If you and Rufus can give me a hand getting over to the steps, I should be able to manage all right."

Darius checked the hinged brace enclosing each of his legs, then did a final run through on the controls. After Rufus handed him a pair of unusual looking crutches, he pulled himself up and turned on the power to the braces. He made his way smoothly across the transport's cabin and toward the waiting steps. When the pilot pressed a button on the console, the top step rose with a hum until it was level with the cabin floor.

"Here goes nothing," muttered Darius and swung himself out of the cabin. To his relief, his feet connected solidly with the waiting step, then he waited as it lowered him steadily to the ground. "Nothin' to it." he said cheerfully and grinned at the pilot, who gave him a thumbs up sign.

The tip of his crutch caught on something and he swayed and almost fell. A firm hand caught his elbow. "I should have known you'd be on your feet. Now let's go have lunch. You and I have a lot of catching up to do."

"Dad. I--er ...."

Daniel's arms went around him and he held him close without saying a word. He cleared his throat, then stood back and looked at his son for a moment. "You've grown. You're almost as tall as I and you're shaving now. You could stand to gain a little weight, not to mention some color in those cheeks. But that's nothing a good Illyrian cook and our healthy mountain air can't fix."

"What do you mean, Illyrian?."

Daniel smiled. "Come on. I told you we have a lot of catching up to do. There's an excellent lunch waiting in my private suite and Rufus can follow at his leisure." He shook his head. "I can't believe how much you've grown."

Together, they made their way slowly toward the house. Despite the rough terrain, Darius managed his crutches and leg braces with ease and even a certain amount of grace.

Daniel watched him closely from the corner of his eye. He was circumspect about offering any help and matched his son's pace as inconspicuously as possible. "When did all this come about?"

"Several months ago. The braces have sensors that are tied in to my nervous system. Eventually, I may even be able to manage in certain situations without the crutches."

"What about horseback riding? Are the braces up to that?"

"Er, yes. I think so. Once I'm on the horse's back, that is."

"Let's see what we can arrange." Daniel spoke with a heartiness he didn't feel. He beckoned to Rufus and whispered something in his ear. Rufus looked at the prince with a question in his eyes.

Darius nodded. "Why not? The worst that can happen is I'll fall off. On some gentle old plug going at a slow walk, how bad can that be?"

"There are some fine animals in the stables," Daniel remarked. "Rufus, why don't you see what you can come up with while we're having lunch? I ride every morning before breakfast and would enjoy Darius's company. Ah, here we are at the house. The stairs will be no problem because they've got an elevator."

Rufus took the hint. Muttering something under his breath, he dropped the bags he was carrying near the doorway and headed toward the nearby stables. A hovering manservant retrieved the bags and followed the king and his son across the magnificently paneled hall toward the waiting elevator. The prince noticed a second servant on his way out to collect the rest of his things. The young pilot waved cheerfully as he passed, then disappeared into another part of the house.

"His name is Jesse and he's the Emperor's grandson," remarked Darius as they entered the elevator. "He's also the Crown Prince. He told me on the way up here he was born with flying in his blood. After that he let me take the yoke and fly on my own for a while." Then he laughed, "Rufus and the security guards damn near threw a fit but I did fine."

Daniel grinned, "I imagine you did, you always were an excellent pilot. You refrained from doing any stunts, I trust."

"Of course, but it felt good anyway. That's an absolutely beautiful transport and it has some wrinkles I haven't seen before. Thanks to these braces, I'm not limited to hand controls. At least now I know I can do it."

"That's good to know. I'll keep it in mind when we get back to Illyria."

Darius looked at his father sharply, "That's the second time you've said something like that, Dad. Knowing Synod politics as I do, there's got to be more to this than meets the eye. So, what's up?"

Daniel glanced at the servant, then frowned. "I'll tell you once we're alone. Until then, you'll have to possess your soul in patience. Ah, here we are. My suite's right here and yours is down the hall. Now come on in and freshen up. Lunch is already on the table I see and we have the place to ourselves." The king nodded to the servant and gave him a silver coin. "I'll call you when I need you. Now, please leave us alone."

The servant bowed and withdrew, closing the suite's double doors behind him.

"My household staff could certainly take some lessons from him," remarked the king. "I suppose you've gotten used to the same kind of service."

"Hardly. Rufus is pretty rough and ready and he's always kept my feet on the ground, so to speak. The only servants I saw were the ones who came to clean the apartment or bring our meals. Rufus gave them their orders and they never spoke to me. Aside from that, I would see the tutor, the doctor and the therapist. But they were giving me the orders not the other way around."

"Were you never allowed out?"

"I'd be invited to dine with Timothy and his family once in a while. Other than that, no. I never even saw Timothy until I'd been there for almost a year. However, it isn't as bad as it sounds. The apartment's quite large and has its own therapy room, patio and private garden. I have pictures somewhere if you want to see it."

"At least, it wasn't a prison cell."

"Oh, it was a long way from that. But it was a prison nonetheless and I was never allowed to forget it. There were security cameras everywhere, armed guards outside, and a Seiran intelligence agent who lived with us. He's a doctor and we've gotten to be pretty good friends. His name's Alexander and he's one of Timothy's nephews. Incidentally, he speaks Illyrian like a native."

"Hmm. It seems to me Vasek has mentioned him a time or two. He spent some time in Illyria a few years ago and got out just before we caught him. Alexander's a slippery one from what I hear and a real devil with the ladies. So, you're friends, huh?"

"Yes, we are. What's more, I owe him. Nublian security was going to handcuff and blindfold Rufus and me each time we were transferred and even tried to put me in restraints in the Clinic. Alex told them he'd call his Uncle Janus if they so much as laid a hand on me and they backed right off." Darius's tone grew wistful, "Alex comes from a big family and he's promised to take me hunting with him in Seira's Western Desert. That's if they ever free me, of course."

"The Synod's about to free you but there's a condition. Why don't you sit at the table and I'll get us both a drink? Then I'll tell you all about it."

"After you're done, I've got something to tell you. But you go first."

"Um." Daniel hesitated, then went over to the bar in the corner. "What's your pleasure? How about a glass of champagne to celebrate our reunion?"

The prince thought for a moment. "That sounds fine to me. Hey, this lunch looks good. Baked trout, no less."

Daniel filled both their glasses. "A toast," he said and Darius joined him.

"A toast. To you, Dad, and peace from now on."

Daniel filled a plate and handed it to his son. "Now, to business. As I told you, the Synod is willing to free you and allow you to return home to Illyria. But there's a condition and I'm not sure you're going to like it."

Darius set down his fork. "It has to do with this betrothal, doesn't it? That's why we've been left so carefully alone. Oh, don't tell me. Let me guess." He pushed himself back from the table. "I should have known when Alexander got so evasive and Rufus stopped looking me in the eye. Talk about pussyfooting around. The fact is, Dad, I've already met another girl and I'm in love with her. We were hoping to marry someday and Timothy had even given us his blessing. He must have known all about it when he said goodbye. In fact, he said as much. Oh, talk about the cosmic joke of all time. Why me, dammit? Why me?"

Daniel's mouth dropped open. "What do you mean, another girl? You were a prisoner in that place.

How could you meet a girl?"

Darius laughed bitterly, "Haven't you guessed by now? She's Timothy's daughter. Her name's Geneva and we met when Timothy invited me to dine with his family. The moment I laid eyes on Jenny, she was the only woman in the universe for me. You of all people should understand because it was exactly the same way with you and Mother, wasn't it? Come to think of it, how did you ever sell my grandfather on the idea of an Aretzan barmaid for a daughter-in-law?"

Daniel shoved his chair back from the table. "That's quite enough out of you. Now, you listen to me, you insolent little shit. If you'd followed orders and kept your nose to home, none of this would have happened. What you're living with is a direct consequence of your own irresponsible behavior and don't you ever forget it."

Darius had gone dead white and his mouth was a rigid line. His eyes fixed unwaveringly on his father, he sat absolutely still.

"You have a destiny you must fulfill," Timothy had said, *"and countless lives depend on your decisions."* Was this what he meant?

The whole thing had an inevitability about it and he felt as if he was living out a dream. Then he realized his father was asking him a question.

Daniel's face was concerned. "Son? Are you all right?"

"Y--yes." Darius reached for his glass of champagne. His hand slipped and the glass went over, spilling its contents across to the tablecloth. "Damn."

"Not to worry." Daniel blotted at the spill with a napkin. "Here. I'll get you some more."

When they were settled at the table again, Darius aimlessly moved his food around on the plate.

Daniel watched him for a while. Then he said, "You're not any hungrier than I, so what do you say to a drive instead? I think we could both use some fresh air, don't you?"

"All right, then you can tell me the rest of the bad news."

Daniel went into his bedroom and rummaged around in the closet. He came out with a warm jacket and settled it around Darius's shoulders. "It's a bit big but it'll do. The mountain air gets pretty chilly and I have a feeling you're going to need it after the warm climate on Seira."

"Thanks Dad. I have become a bit of a hothouse flower at that and what you said is absolutely right. What happened is my own damn fault and it's about time I took the responsibility for my own actions. My friends died because of my recklessness. As for what I did to you ...."

He stopped and looked down at his hands. "Timothy gave me this ring when he said goodbye. I think he knew that Jenny and I ...." He swallowed hard, "Timothy knew I wasn't coming back, but he said Jenny and I will meet again someday. I gave her my gold signet ring and she promised to keep it for me until I came back and claimed it. Then she cut off a lock of her hair and wrapped it in her handkerchief and gave it to me. That way, I'd always have a part of her with me wherever I went. When we said goodbye, it was as if we knew we wouldn't see each other again. I suppose I've always known our dream was never going to become a reality. What I did has a heavy price and I'm going to have to pay it. I'll marry

your princess and do my best to treat her well. That's what this is about, isn't it? A wedding rather than a betrothal?"

Daniel sighed, "Yes, it is. After what you've told me, I would it had been some other way."

"That's exactly what Timothy said. It's funny, isn't it? Emperors, kings and princes are supposed to have so much power, yet in matters like this, we have none at all." Then he grinned. "No wonder the Nublians were so damn nervous. After the way I went berserk the last time I was in their clinic, I shouldn't wonder. I'm in ten times better shape now. This time, I would have done some real damage."

Daniel ruffled his son's dark hair affectionately. "I imagine you would have because I heard all about your shenanigans at the time. There wasn't a government in the entire Synod willing to take you and the Assembly President was literally at his wits' end when he called Timothy. The Nublians wanted you out of there so badly they could taste it and Sidonia was like a cat on hot bricks."

"Speaking of Sidonia," Darius's tone was deceptively mild. "I hear you and she aren't nearly the enemies you used to be."

Daniel quickly changed the subject, "Now, how about that drive? We've just got time before you have to meet your intended."

The prince put his hands on the arms of the chair and pushed himself up. Then he reached for his crutches and started for the door. "There's no time like the present. While we're on the subject, Dad, you can also tell me how many days of freedom I have left. After that, I want to hear all about you and Sidonia."

Sybilla thought their luncheon with the Emperor would never end. First she dropped her napkin under the table, then her fork. When her water glass went over, Sidonia said gently, "I'm sure Their Majesties will excuse you, dear, if you wish to go upstairs and lie down for a while."

The Empress nodded understandingly and the Emperor smiled. He said in a kindly tone, "You go ahead, Sybilla. We'll see you later."

As the little princess reached the elevator door, it opened and she abruptly stepped back. "Oh. You must be Darius. But aren't you supposed to be in a wheelchair?" She blushed crimson and clapped her hand over her mouth.

As the young man looked down at her curiously, Sybilla noticed his crutches and the complicated metal braces encircling each leg. He was very handsome, she thought, with his dark blue eyes and black curly hair.

When the prince spoke, it was in her language and without an accent. "You must be Princess Sybilla. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, ma'am. My father and I are about to go for a drive. Would you care to join us?"

Sybilla looked up at Daniel and he smiled encouragement.

"Er, that would be very nice. Could you wait for a moment while I get my wrap?"

"Certainly. It's going to take me a while to get across this hall so you'll have plenty of time."

The elevator door closed behind Sybilla and Daniel raised an eyebrow at his son. "I think I'm going to have to wait to tell you about Sidonia and me. She is her mother, you know. Well, what do you think?"

"I told you I'd marry her but never said I'd like it. When they handed out the looks, Sybilla must have been behind the door. Honestly, Dad, if you wanted to punish me did you have to try quite so hard?"

"Well, she does have a sister who's much prettier. But Anna Lisa would drive us both out of our minds within a week. Sybilla's actually very sweet and has a lot more going for her than you realize. She's having a hard time of it right now. Her oldest sister just died in childbirth so I want you to take it easy on her. She didn't seek this marriage any more than you and she's probably scared to death."

A picture of Geneva as he'd last seen her came into Darius's mind and he sighed. "I suppose she is. She is from Lodebar, after all. She must have been hearing about Illyrian monsters for most of her life and now she's supposed to marry one. All right, Dad, I'll go easy on her. But you'd better plan on making the conversation. If you don't, I swear I'll ask you about your relationship with Sidonia right in front of her."

"I'll keep that in mind," said his father dryly. "I can already see you're a chip off the old block and you've certainly inherited your mother's instinct for the jugular. Aretzan barmaid indeed. Hah, I suppose Rufus told you that. But it wasn't strictly true. Your maternal grandfather was a very wealthy man who owned a successful nightclub in one of the best parts of town. Your mother managed it for him and helped out in the bar from time to time. My father wasn't any problem because he adored her right from the start. Her father was another story entirely. Not only had he never heard of Illyria, he was a staunch republican besides. To him, royalty was a dirty word. When your mother insisted on marrying me, her father instantly disinherited her. He never spoke to either of us again for as long as he lived."

"Rufus never told me that and neither did Momma. As for you, you were always so damn busy planning your next campaign you never had time to talk to me about anything else."

"Well, I have the time now. Speaking of angels, here's Sybilla. Darius, since you require more room, why don't you take the back seat? The princess can sit up front with me and we'll make polite conversation while you look at the scenery."

Daniel's sarcasm wasn't lost on Sybilla and she wondered what they'd been saying while she'd been upstairs. Darius had probably said something uncomplimentary about her looks and she wondered if she'd been wise to accept his invitation.

*Oh, Momma, she thought desperately. Do you begin to know what you're asking? Darius might marry me but I'm still going to die a virgin, I just know it. He's not going to want to sleep with me in a million years.*

The pity of it was that she'd fallen for Darius like a ton of bricks the moment his eyes met hers. Just looking at him made her shiver to the very core of her being and she wanted him so much she could hardly stand it. The Illyrian Prince was easily the handsomest man she'd ever seen and she'd follow him to the ends of the universe if she had to.

*Well, Momma, she thought, you promised to teach me a trick or two before I went to my marriage bed and you'd better come up with something good. I'll do anything, I swear, to make him love me. But I can't imagine right now what that could possibly be.*



Reaching into her closet, Sybilla had glimpsed herself in the mirror and almost gave up in despair. Even with the new glasses and makeup, she still looked like a scrawny little plucked chicken, and there were no two ways about it. She didn't need to be a fly on the wall to know what Darius must have said to his father. His expression told her all she needed to know about her future husband's opinion of her, but one part of her didn't care. She loved Darius so much she was willing to take him on any terms at all, even if he hated her.

What was it her mother had said? *"The Crown Prince is a well-mannered handsome lad and he'll treat you well. Just think of it Sybilla. You'll have clothes and jewels, and you'll be the mistress of one of the loveliest palaces in the Synod."*

Well, maybe it won't be so bad after all, thought Sybilla as Daniel handed her into the front seat of the transport. She glanced timidly toward Darius and he gave her a half-smile in return.

Daniel said quickly, "I thought I'd run us up to the lake and back. It's quite beautiful and there's some spectacular scenery on the way. By the way, Sybilla, do you ride?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. I have a mare of my own at home called Daybreak. I raised her from the time she was foaled. She's dapple gray with a cream-colored mane and tail. Momma says I can bring her with me to Illyria if that's all right with you."

"Of course you may. Darius has a favorite horse too. His name is Seafoam and his coat is the color of moonlight. I've kept him exercised and I know he'll be glad to see his master come home."

Darius said nothing and looked studiously out of the window at the passing landscape. If it would keep Sybilla happy to have her damn horse with her, so be it. He wished them joy of each other. Seafoam was a strong and spirited stallion. Even if he could get on to his back, he'd never be able to ride him again. He'd count himself lucky if he was able to stay on a slow-moving mare or gelding for longer than five minutes and mentally cursed his father for even bringing up the subject.

In the meantime, the king was chatting conscientiously to Sybilla. He knew full well Darius would make good on his threat if he didn't. He noticed in the rearview mirror that his son's eyes were closed and he looked as if he was taking a nap.

Darius wasn't sleeping. He'd closed his eyes because a problem had just come up that was known only to Rufus and himself. They'd managed to keep it from Alexander and the ever-vigilant cameras and never told any of the doctors. Whatever was causing it had never showed up on any scanner and it probably stemmed from that concussion he'd received when he was captured.

Damn. On top of everything else, I don't need this. Well, maybe it'll have passed by the time we get back to the lodge.

The first time it happened, he was in the Clinic on Nublis. At first, he thought his room had gone dark until one of the attendants had said something. Then he realized it was full daylight and it was he who couldn't see.

It happened again after his arrival on Seira. He called out for Rufus, then whispered in his ear what was happening. From then on, he and Rufus were careful to always keep the furniture in the same spots and between them they managed to fool everyone. Since he was in a wheelchair, it had been easy to do because Rufus had always been there to guide him.

Now, unless his sight returned before the trip ended, he was well and truly stuck. The hell of it was, he hadn't even thought about it until it happened and there hadn't been the slightest warning. One moment he was seeing just fine, then everything went pitch black. To date, the episodes had never lasted for more than a couple of hours and his sight returned each time as suddenly as it left. Because he couldn't think of anything else to do, Darius promptly closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep.

The transport stopped and his father's voice said cheerfully, "Well, we're here. This is a really spectacular view, don't you think? There are supposed to be some monster trout in this lake. Maybe we'll get a chance to throw a fly at them before we leave."

Darius obediently opened his eyes and turned his head in what he hoped was the direction of the lake. "Yes, it certainly is beautiful but I haven't been fishing since ...."

Sybilla was watching. *There's something wrong here. It's as if he isn't even seeing it at all or else he doesn't care.*

"What is it, son? Fishing used to be one of your favorite occupations and this is a really spectacular lake."

Darius closed his eyes again, "I'm a bit tired, that's all. Go ahead and enjoy the scenery and don't worry about me. I'll be all right."

Daniel looked questioningly at Sybilla and she shook her head.

"He's not all right," she said firmly. "There's something very wrong. Darius, what's the matter? Open your eyes and look at me. Please."

Dammit. Why don't you just leave me alone?

"I already told you. I'm tired and want to take a nap. That's what I usually do at this time of day."

Daniel picked up a small flashlight from the transport's toolbox and went around to the vehicle's back door. Then he opened it and got in. "All right. Just hold still for a moment because I want to check something."

After shining the light into each of his son's eyes, he asked quietly, "How long has this been going on?"

"How long has what been going on?"

"All right then, I'll spell it out. How long have you been having these episodes of blindness? Right now, you can't see a thing, can you? I've been in enough of these situations to know what I'm looking at. This type of condition is not all that unusual after a concussion or a head wound."

"It's not?"

"No, and I'd like to know why in the hell you never told anybody. I'm also curious how you managed to fool the Seirans for almost two years, especially if they watched you as closely as I think. Not to mention all those doctors in the Temple Clinic."

"Rufus knows and my sight always comes back eventually. I never saw any reason to tell anyone because I doubt there's much they can do anyway."

Sybilla spoke, "I think I understand. I don't like people feeling sorry for me either. This, on top of the crutches and the wheelchair, would really be a double whammy. Your Majesty, do we need to tell anyone? Personally, I think Darius has been managing his condition very well. If he wants to keep it to himself, I can respect that. I don't think the whole world needs to know, do you?"

"I don't know. There's that reception to get through this afternoon, not to mention the banquet tonight. There'll be some dignitaries there from the Synod Assembly and they've flown in especially to meet you."

"I'll be in my wheelchair and Rufus knows the drill. I went through an entire evening like this with Timothy's family and they never knew the difference."

"Not even ...." Daniel looked at Sybilla and stopped.

"No one noticed. Incidentally, Sybilla, thanks for understanding. I really appreciate it."

She flushed at the unexpected compliment and her eyes grew moist. "Oh, er, you're welcome."

Daniel looked at the time. "We'd better get back before they get the entire security force out looking for us. All right, Darius, I'll go along with your wishes and we'll keep this between the three of us. But the moment we're back in Illyria, I'm going to have the doctors check you out and see if we can't get to the bottom of this. Understood?"

"Yes, Dad. Understood. Can we go now?"

"Kids," snorted Daniel as he backed the transport away from the lake.

Sybilla caught a glimpse of Darius's face in the rearview mirror. His eyes were closed. He looked for all the world as if he was taking a nap and she smiled.

Sidonia reached for the silver-backed hairbrush on the dressing table. "Genevra, huh?"

Daniel took it from her and rhythmically began to brush her long blond hair.

The Queen made a purring noise deep in her throat. After a few minutes she turned around and reached for the belt of his robe. The king asked in a semi-frustrated tone, "How can you expect me to concentrate when you're doing that? You want a hundred strokes don't you? Now I've lost count, dammit. At this rate, we'll never get done until morning."

Sidonia looked up at him mischievously before returning to what she'd been doing. "That's the general idea. Speaking of strokes, let's continue this over there."

A while later, she turned her face towards him as he rested beside her. "What more can you tell me about this girl Genevra? Darius has a lock of her hair? Do you know where he keeps it?"

"Rufus would know," replied Daniel sleepily. "But I don't think you should steal it, my love. It's one of my son's most treasured possessions. I probably shouldn't have told you about it or Genevra."

"Oh, I'm not going to steal it. I just want to borrow it for a little while, then I'll put it right back. You want this marriage to succeed don't you? I just want to take out a little insurance, that's all."

"Insurance?" Daniel sat up in the bed. Then he leaned on his elbow and looked down at her. "What do you mean by insurance? I'll tell you right now, I won't condone anything that will harm Genevra or hurt Darius's feelings any worse than they are already."

Winding her arms around his neck, Sidonia pulled his face close to hers. "It won't do either, silly. You have my word on that. All I want to do is give Sybilla a fighting chance. Believe me, Daniel, she needs all the help she can get. Far from hurting Darius's feelings, it'll probably make him very happy and Genevra will know nothing whatsoever about it."

Daniel pushed her away from him. Then he sat on the edge of the bed and reached for his robe. "I'm not sure I like the sound of this. It smacks of witchcraft. That's something I don't tolerate in Illyria."

Sidonia got up and went over to a well-stocked bar in the corner of the room. She poured a couple of brandies, brought one to Daniel and took the other herself. "I'm no witch and I have no more love for the occult than you do. But something has to be done to get Darius to accept Sybilla into his bed. Otherwise, my poor little daughter's fears are liable to come true and she'll remain a frustrated virgin for the rest of her days. Is that what you want, Daniel?"

"Of course not. But there'd better be no magic involved or that'll be the end of you and me."

"There was no magic involved when I seduced you. All it took was an application of the womanly arts and an understanding of your masculine nature. That's all that will be involved here. Sybilla already adores your son and will do anything to please him. But when it comes to physical attributes, she's been cruelly shortchanged by Mother Nature. All I want to do is balance the scales a bit."

The king looked at her sharply. "Did you care for me at all? Or was I just a means to an end?"

Sidonia put her finger under his chin and turned his face toward hers. "At first you were but now ...." Her voice caught. "Now I care for you as I've never have for any other man. Now, I find myself wishing I wasn't the Queen of Lodebar and could cleave to one mate as the women in your country do. If I could marry you, Daniel, and stay by your side forever, I would. I wish I could give you a quiverful of beautiful children. I wish ...."

She set down her brandy and buried her face in her hands.

The king took her in his arms. "Why are you crying like that? What is it, my love? You can tell me. Surely it can't be that bad."

Sidonia gave a long shuddering sigh. "Yes, it is. Daniel, it's as bad as it gets. Oh why couldn't we have gotten together twenty years ago? What was wrong with us that we spent so many years making pointless war on one another? Now my time has run out and it's too late. All those wasted years--the children we never had--why, oh, why did it have to be this way?"

She burst into a storm of weeping, but when he went put his arms around her again she pushed him away. "No, Daniel. Our time is over. After we say goodbye, you'll never see me again. I already knew my fate that first night on Eos. After that, I greedily took whatever happiness was left without even thinking about you. Once I thought I could face it but now I don't want to die. Oh Daniel, my love, I

don't want to leave you. The darkness is closing in on me and I'm afraid."

"How long did they give you?" His voice was very soft.

"I've already lived longer than expected but the weakness and other symptoms are starting. I want you to remember me as I am now, dear heart, not as I will be. Sybilla knows. That's why she consented to this marriage. So do my other children. In a couple of months, my newborn granddaughter will be on the throne and her Uncle Carlo will be the Lord Regent of Lodebar. Before I die, I want to see Sybilla carrying your son's heir and our two royal houses welded together as one. Now, do you understand why it is so essential that she and Darius ...."

"I understand. Now, what is it you want me to do?"

"Well, at least you can see again," grumbled Rufus, "and I'm just as glad you did finally tell your father. That reception was a close thing and I thought we'd never get through the banquet. Some of them probably thought you were drunk or on dope or something. Emperor Janus is no fool and he was giving you some very sharp looks. If it hadn't been for that little Sybilla, we couldn't have pulled it off at all."

"Yeah. She was a big help. Why don't you leave the light on? I want to read for a while. Frankly, between my non-existent lunch and the problems with the banquet, I got so little to eat today, I'm absolutely starving. Are there any snacks around here? I'm so hungry, I could eat the pattern right off that wallpaper."

"I'll go down to the kitchen and see what I can scare up. I'm as hungry as you. Remember, I was sent off to the stable to check on a suitable mount for you and got no lunch at all. As for that damn banquet, I was so friggin' busy trying to keep you out of trouble I got nothing to eat myself. That growling sound you hear is my belly trying to eat up my backbone. If I don't do something about it pretty soon, it'll probably waken the entire household."

Darius grinned, "A roast beef sandwich would be nice. With a glass of milk and apple pie for dessert."

"That's it. You just said the magic words and I'm out of here."

As he closed the suite's outer door, Rufus met the king in the hallway. "Ah, Rufus." said Daniel, with an extremely ingratiating smile. "I was just coming to find you. There's something I want you to do for me."

"Er, yes, Your Majesty. Can it wait until I get back from this errand for Darius?"

"He's not asleep?"

Rufus shook his head, "Far from it. He's wide awake and reading a book. He got little or nothing to eat today and is as hungry as a bear. So am I for that matter. I was on my way to find us something to eat."

"Fine. I could use a snack myself so why I don't come with you? Then I can tell you what I want on the way."

As the two of them disappeared down the staircase, the door to Daniel's suite quietly opened. Sidonia put her head out and looked around. Seeing no one in the hall, she slipped out of the suite and closed the door silently behind her. Then she made her way swiftly down the long passageway toward the palatial

quarters she was sharing with Anna Lisa and Sybilla.

As the Queen entered, Sybilla was brushing out Anna Lisa's long red curls while Carlo sat with his feet up in one of the living room's easy chairs. Baron was sprawled on the floor and they were engrossed in a documentary on the viewscreen. "Doesn't anyone sleep around here?" Sidonia started to say when Carlo shushed her.

He indicated the chair next to his. "This is a really interesting video. I've been taping it for you so you can see the first half. It's called 'Portrait of a Terrorist' and has already been nominated for every award there is. No one knows the identity of the star but he or she is supposedly the real thing. Whoever it is certainly knows their business. They've even got stuff from that notorious album of yours about Darius's atrocities. You've shown the damn thing to enough people and someone could have made a copy. There, you see. Those are some of the shots."

Sidonia sank in the chair next to Carlo's and watched for a few minutes. "Why, so they are. Oh, my. This thing isn't sparing anybody, is it? Now they're interviewing someone from the Body Identification Commission in Illyria and talking about our atrocities. Why are they showing this thing anyway? Who made it?"

"It's being sponsored by some interplanetary peace organization called the Children of the Dove and it was made by Roman de Blanc. He's otherwise known as Elf and is a big star. His foster father is the famous Doctor Hugo de Blanc who does all that work with amputees, paraplegics and burn victims and he's married to the Emperor Janus's niece. According to the viewing guide, he's the narrator."

"That's a very well-connected individual and it seems to me I've heard of him before. Oh yes. Now I remember. Isn't he the star of that awful video, 'The Mountain King?'"

Sybilla finished brushing Anna Lisa's hair. "Momma? Can I get you a cup of tea or something?"

"A cup of tea would be very nice, dear. That new herbal concoction you just got is really delicious. Especially when you put honey in it." She followed her daughter into the suite's small kitchen. "As long as Carlo's taping it, I can always watch the film later. I wonder if Darius has seen it yet. Of course, with his history, he might not care for it."

"You two seem to have gotten awfully chummy all of a sudden," commented Baron to Sybilla's retreating back, "I saw him whispering in your ear all during the banquet. I suppose that's good being you're supposed to marry that miserable little cripple the day after tomorrow."

Sybilla turned around. "Don't you call him that, and he's not so little either. Actually, he's almost as tall as his father."

Carlo raised an eyebrow. "How would you know that, little sister? Darius was in a wheelchair the whole time and I certainly couldn't tell his height. What have you been doing? Spying on him in his bath or something?"

Sybilla blushed to the roots of her hair. "N--no. Of course not. It's just that he's got very long legs and big hands and looked tall to me. That's all."

"He's clumsier than hell too," remarked Baron, "or else he was drunk or on dope or something. Momma, are you sure you want Sybilla to marry this idiot? He probably can't even read, let alone do anything else."

"That's enough, children," said Sidonia mildly, "and you two can stop picking on your little sister right now. Actually, I have no more idea than you what was wrong with Darius at the banquet but you have to remember his physical condition. He's been doing a lot of traveling during the past few days and may have been on some pain medication that put him off balance. As far as his being able to read, he is extremely well educated. He speaks even more languages than you and if he and Sybilla are getting along, so much the better."

Baron flushed, "I'm sorry, Momma. I wasn't thinking. It's just the whole idea of Darius becoming a member of this family .... It doesn't seem right, that's all."

"Well," Carlo snapped off the viewscreen. "I can see we're not going to get the rest of this watched tonight. Oh, don't worry, it'll keep recording until it's over and we can look at it some other time. As long as we're on the subject, I have to agree. I wasn't particularly impressed with Darius and I'm as repelled as Baron at the idea of his marrying Sybilla. Are you sure this is what you really want for her? It would seem to me she deserves better."

His sister returned from the kitchen. "Why don't you let me be the judge of that? I like what I've seen of Darius and his father and don't find this marriage repellent at all. Once you've had a chance to know him better, you won't find it so either."

Sidonia looked up at her daughter in some surprise. "Well, you've certainly done an about face since this morning. Is there something you're not telling us?"

Sybilla bit her lip. "Momma. Can we talk in private?"

Carlo promptly stood up and stretched. "I can take a hint and can see we're not wanted around here. Incidentally, does anyone want to go riding with me in the morning? Besides Baron, that is. If you do, I'll be at the stables around seven."

"Yes, I would," replied Sybilla and Sidonia looked at her sharply.

"Are you sure you're well, dear? An early morning ride has never been one of your favorite activities before."

"A person can always change. You never know who you might meet on those forest trails."

"This is all getting entirely too complicated for me," remarked Anna Lisa, "so I'm going to bed. Good night, Momma. Sybilla. You too Carlo. And Baron." After dutifully kissing each of them on the cheek, she disappeared into her room.

Carlo looked after her for a moment. "Sometimes I think Anna Lisa's the only sane person in this family. Good night Momma. Sybilla, we'll see you in the morning. Come on Baron. It's time we got some sleep."

When they were finally alone, Sidonia took her daughter's hands and drew her down into the chair beside her. "And now, would you mind telling me what's been going on?"

After Sybilla had finished giving her mother a full account of the day, Sidonia grew thoughtful. "Of course, you do realize that going off with the king and his son without a chaperone was not the thing to do. But I don't see where there was any harm none. It might even have been a good thing and now I understand why Darius was having so much trouble during the banquet and the reception. Did he give

any indication how often these episodes occur?"

"Not really. But I gathered from something he said it happens quite often. Do you think anything can be done?"

"Daniel was right about one thing. It's not an unusual condition and I've seen it before. The more I hear about young Darius, the sorrier I feel for him."

"He wouldn't care to hear you say that. It's why he didn't want anyone to know about the blindness. I can understand that."

"You're in love with him, aren't you?"

Sybilla flushed. "Yes, Momma. I am. Right now, I can think of nothing else but Darius. I'm so crazy about him I don't know what to do with myself. I want to go up to the rooftop and shout my love for him to the whole world. I want to hug and kiss everyone I meet and just the mention of his name makes me shiver all over."

"You've got it bad. I'll be honest with you, that's the way I feel about his father."

"You do? Oh Momma. I'm so glad you understand. The problem is, Darius doesn't love me in return."

"I know that, sweetheart, and that's what I want to talk to you about. Darius met someone else on Seira and he's told his father he's in love with her."

"I suppose she's absolutely beautiful."

"I'm afraid she is. She's the Emperor of Seira's daughter Genevra and she's actually quite dazzling. But honey, you have to know one thing. The Synod Assembly would never countenance a match between Darius and a member of Timothy's family. Such an alliance would give far too much political strength to Illyria's royal house. Quite apart from that, as long Darius is the Synod Assembly's prisoner, he can't marry anyone. If this attachment between him and Genevra becomes known, he'll never be permitted to return to Seira. Don't you see, sweetheart? The only way Darius is ever going to be free is if he marries you."

"But he'll hate me." Sybilla burst into tears.

"No, he won't."

Sidonia took her sobbing daughter in her arms and comforted her. "Hush now. Just because Darius doesn't care for you that way doesn't mean that the two of you won't get along. There are all kinds of relationships, my darling, and love can be very different from one person to another. The fact that you're crazy about him means you're already halfway there."

Sybilla stopped crying and looked up at her mother. "What do you mean by that?"

"Ah. I'm glad you asked. You and I have work to do, my dear, and I promise you this. By the time we're through with him, Darius will be all yours."



Oh, I don't know if this is a good idea, thought Darius as a couple of grooms boosted him on to the back of the patiently waiting mare. One handed him his riding crop and the prince said "Come on, you lazy thing. Let's see if you can move at all."

Daniel took his son's leading rein from the groom and the two horses began moving side by side out of the stableyard at a sedate walk.

"Sidonia's two sons and Sybilla left shortly before you arrived. She was looking all around as if she was expecting someone."

Darius smiled wryly. "Yeah, well. I told her during the banquet I might be joining you this morning but I don't think her brothers are any great fans of mine. Especially the younger one. Frankly, I'm just as glad that they're not around to see this. It's as bad as being back in the nursery. Good grief, Dad, I haven't used a leading rein since I was three and I've not been on a horse at all for over two years."

"I could tell yesterday you weren't exactly enthused about the idea. But you need to start leading a normal life and the sooner the better. Incidentally, congratulations on getting your sight back."

"Well, let's hope it stays put for the rest of the visit. According to Rufus, half the people at the banquet thought I was drunk or on dope and the Emperor was looking at me very dubiously indeed. On the other hand, if I was bad enough it might persuade Sidonia to put off the wedding or even change her mind altogether."

"Don't count on it. Actually, Sidonia thinks you're fine. She's looking forward to having you for a son-in-law and at this stage of the game, I don't think there's anything you can do to put her off."

"That's right. I'd forgotten that the two of you have been bed and breakfast mates for the past year. Or have the tabloids been lying again?"

"Bed and breakfast mates? Now there's an expression I haven't heard before. Where, in heaven's name, did you get that?"

"I have a good friend on the SynoNet who keeps me up to date on the latest social gossip and he told me about your wine episode. You ruined a beautiful set of white buckskins, didn't you? Or rather, Sidonia did. What were you doing, Dad? Gazing at her snowy bosom while she was filling your glass? According to my friend, the maid who was told to clean them was in the pay of one of the gossip columnists and tried to swipe your buckskins as a souvenir. Sidonia caught her with them as she was leaving the penthouse. What she said to her was unprintable."

Daniel laughed. "She shipped them back to me from Lodebar and you're right about one thing. They were absolutely ruined."

"You and she are lovers, aren't you? Tell me, Dad, is this just a passing thing or are you serious about her?"

"We're very serious. Unfortunately, Sidonia's not going to be around much longer."

"What do you mean? Is she leaving the throne or something?"

"In a manner of speaking. The Queen's dying, my son, and her time has just about run out. She wants our royal houses to be united before she goes in order to ensure a permanent peace between our two

countries. This is the reason for the change in plan and why we're having a wedding ceremony tomorrow instead of a betrothal."

"But she's so young. Dad, how can that be?"

"It happens. The irony is that Sidonia's survived as many battles as I have and has had more than her share of close calls. I swore I'd never love any other woman after your mother and, believe me, this was totally unexpected. She told me about her illness last night. She said ...." Daniel's voice caught in his throat at the memory of Sidonia's anguished declaration.

"It's all right, Dad. I know what it's like to lose someone you love."

"Yes, you do and I'm truly sorry about that." The king looked up. "It would seem we've caught up with Sybilla and her disapproving brothers are nowhere to be seen. I'll tell you what. I'm going to hand your leading rein over to her, then take a brisk canter up that path."

Before Darius could utter a word of protest, the king waved Sybilla over. Then he nudged his horse's sides and took off. Within a few moments, he was out of sight and the prince and Sybilla were alone in the silent forest. Darius smiled apologetically at his future bride and she said hesitantly, "Well, you can see again at least. Last night was an ordeal, wasn't it?"

"You've got that right. It would have been even worse if you hadn't been there. Between dumping over the wineglasses and not being able to find the correct silverware, I must have made a real spectacle of myself."

"You were doing your best and it wasn't fair of your father to insist on putting you on display like that. Especially when he knew you couldn't see."

"I got my sight back at the end of the evening but by then it was too late. Most of the guests put it down to the fact that I'm an uncouth Illyrian. Since it was more or less what they'd expected they probably weren't too shocked. Thanks to you, I was at least able to recognize some of the people to whom I'd been introduced, like the Synod Assembly President, for instance. Otherwise the whole damn thing would have been a total fiasco."

"Well, well, well," came a drawling voice from behind them, "if it isn't our new brother-in-law. And on a leading rein at that. Come here Baron and take a good look at Illyria's hope for the future."

Darius grabbed the leading rein from Sybilla, then turned his horse around. "I presume, sir, you're Sybilla's oldest brother, Carlo. Are you suffering from last night's hangover, Your Highness, or are you always in this foul a mood?"

"Tsk. He actually bites. Tell me, Illyrian, what makes you think you're even faintly worthy of my sister?"

"I'm not. But I've had no more to say about this wedding than she, and if I had my druthers I'd just as soon not be related to you."

"That goes double for me." Baron had come up beside his brother. "Especially after your sterling performance last night. What my mother sees in your father, I can't imagine. To me, one Illyrian pig looks just like another."

Darius eyes blazed.

Just as he was about to bring his riding crop down on Baron's head, his father's voice spoke from behind them. "What in the hell is going on here? Gentlemen, I just met a couple of your security guards and they're expecting you and the princess back at the house for breakfast. Please be good enough to inform His Majesty that my son and I will be along shortly. Now, I'll bid you both a very good day. Come Darius. There's something up here that I want you to see."

Taking the prince's leading rein, Daniel turned their horses away.

As soon as they were out of sight, Sybilla rounded on her brothers. "Just what do you think you accomplished by that? Right now, I feel ashamed to even be seen with you. When it comes to boorish behavior, you two wrote the book and if I had any way of disowning you, I would. Honestly, I've never been so mortified in my entire life. If you don't immediately apologize to Darius *AND* his father, I'll never speak to either of you again."

Carlo looked sheepish. "I'll admit we did lay it on a little thick. However, your intended gave every bit as good as he got. He's got quite a temper, hasn't he? Maybe it's just as well his father came along when he did, little brother. Darius was about to whack you on the head with his crop and I can't say I blame him."

"Has it occurred to either of you lamebrains there might have been a valid reason for Darius's behavior last night? You've been around enough injured veterans to know better and you had no business treating him that way."

"Why? Is there something else wrong with him?" asked Carlo. "He seemed all right a few minutes ago."

"This morning he's just fine. Last night was a whole different story. Oh, what's the use? The two of you are as dense as a piece of granite. There's nothing between your ears but mush and you have the nerve to call Anna Lisa dumb. Men!"

As she kicked her horse and disappeared down the path at a full gallop, Carlo grinned. "Whoof. Talk about an ass-chewing. Baron, old buddy, I think our little sister's in love, and do you know something? She's getting more and more like Momma every day."

Genevra unlocked the door of Darius's apartment. She pushed it open and slipped inside. Closing the door softly behind her, she relocked it. Then she turned on all the lights and stood in the center of the living room.

For the first time since she could remember, the double doors leading out to the patio were closed. The apartment had an unused almost abandoned look but what struck her most was the unaccustomed silence. When she opened the therapy room door and looked inside, she realized what was missing. It was the gentle, never-ending bubbling of the big whirlpool. Now silent, the pool was completely drained and dust covers had been put on all the equipment.

She missed other sounds. Rufus's constant muttering under his breath, the hum of Darius's computer, even the whir of his wheelchair motor as he moved from one room to another.

She ran across the living room to the patio doors and pressed the control panel on the wall. They slid

open to reveal the sunlit garden outside. But the figure she looked for wasn't there and all she heard was the breeze ruffling the flowering trees. Even the fountain was shut off and the sense of desolation outside was even worse than the apartment's.

A small sound startled her almost out of her wits and she whirled to see Balthasar batting a crumpled piece of paper across the living room floor. Gathering the fluffy black cat in her arms, she held him close. "You miss Darius too, don't you, baby? And all those snacks he used to feed you, not to mention that damn mechanical mouse. I wonder if he took it with him or if it's still around here. I'll tell you what. Let's see if we can find it."

Holding Balthasar to her for courage, Genevra tiptoed across the living room and opened Darius's bedroom door. This room was forbidden territory and she had never seen it before. Then she asked herself out loud, "Why am I being so quiet? This place is soundproof and there's no one here but you and me. You're not going to tell anyone, are you?"

Timidly, she approached the big bed and put her hand out tentatively to touch its dark green coverlet. It was velvet and very soft. Feeling a little bolder, she sat on its edge and bounced up and down a few times. The mattress was made of some mysterious material that adjusted instantly to her body contours. Intrigued, she climbed on the bed and lay down. "Mmm. Why don't I have something like this?"

The surface was almost like a living thing underneath her and as she wriggled around, the mattress would move and readjust itself to each new position. Not like water exactly, it was more like floating on an airy cloud.

She noticed a small control on the bedside table. Curiously, she picked it up and pushed one of the buttons. The head of the bed began to rise and the pillows adjusted to her body contours just as the mattress had. Another button caused some sort of body massager to appear and in response to a third a wave of soothing music came out of nowhere and completely filled the room. She found she could open and close the window drapes, switch the viewscreen and lamps on and off, even start the bathtub running.

There were a couple of buttons she couldn't identify and when she pressed them, nothing happened. Unbeknownst to Genevra, one of the security cameras in the apartment had inadvertently been left on and the last control button was an emergency call to the palace's central guard station.

"Damn," exclaimed the lieutenant on duty. "There's an intruder in the prisoner's apartment."

He looked at the one screen that was still active but all it showed was the empty living room. The lights were on and the patio doors stood wide open. Mindful of the constant threats against Prince Darius, he ordered a full guard detail over to the apartment with their weapons cocked.

They left at a dead run.

When they arrived, the outside door was locked and everything was quiet. "Open it," snapped the lieutenant, "then stand back."

Genevra heard the guards unlock the door and froze. She looked at the control in her hand, then dropped it as if it was a live snake. *Oh no. One of those buttons must have been an alarm. Now what do I do?*

Quickly, she jumped off the bed and looked around. An ornate carved antique clothes press stood in

one corner and, without even thinking, she climbed inside. The heavy door swung to behind her. Then it snapped firmly shut and locked itself, enclosing her in warm, scented darkness.

When the guards came in, they saw Balthasar in the middle of the bed. The lieutenant noticed the cat's paw on the control and laughed. "There's our culprit. Come on, Balthasar. Let's close this place up and get you back where you belong. The cleaners must have left those doors open and you snuck in here as usual. But you might as well not bother any more. Your old buddy isn't coming back and more's the pity. They're about to marry the poor soul off to some barbarian princess he's never seen, then they're sending him home for good. He may have been a terrorist and all that but I'll tell you something, cat. Prince Darius was as nice a young fellow as you'd ever want to meet and I'm only sorry he and our Genevra couldn't make a match of it."

That evening at dinner, Timothy asked, "Where's Jenny? She didn't make her usual afternoon visit to my office and I haven't seen her all day."

Giuliana frowned, "Neither have I. Her tutor was looking for her after lunch and couldn't find her either. You don't think she went out again without an escort do you?"

"Merciful heavens, I should hope not. After the rocket I gave her last time, she must know better than that." He beckoned to the Major Domo. "You know everything that goes on around here. Do you have any idea where the princess could have gotten to?"

"The only thing that happened today, Your Majesty, was a false alarm in Prince Darius's apartment. The guards went over there immediately but all they found was Her Majesty's cat, Balthasar. He'd gotten in somehow and set off the alarm button on the bedside control with his paw."

"Darius's apartment, huh? And they found no one there but the cat? Well, it's a place to start. Jenny has the same kind of powers that I do. She's missing Darius sorely and might have gotten in there and done some shapechanging, just out of mischief."

"Oh, no," cried Giuliana in frustration, "I thought once the children were grown, we were done with all that. Honestly, Timothy, I sometimes wonder why I couldn't have stuck to an ordinary mortal. Instead, I had to go and marry into a family with all kinds of weird powers. By the time the boys were in their teens, I'd had enough of their shapechanging ways to last me for the rest of my natural life. But Jenny has always refrained from that kind of magic."

"Until now. She's got to be around here somewhere and since no one seems able to find her by conventional means, it's time to try something else."

Timothy beckoned to the Major Domo and whispered in his ear.

The man hurried off and came back almost immediately with a silver bowl and a matching ewer filled with water. Carefully, he cleared the table in front of Timothy, then he set the bowl and ewer within easy reach of the Emperor's hands.

"Leave us," Timothy ordered him, "and take the rest of the servants with you. Gee, you can stay as long as you don't say anything because I need to concentrate."

When they were finally alone, Timothy poured the water from the silver ewer into the bowl until it was

almost brimming over. He made a motion with his hands and the lights in the banqueting hall dimmed. Then they suddenly winked out, leaving the two of them in total darkness.

Giuliana caught her breath and gave an involuntary exclamation as the water within the bowl began to glow. She heard an eerie hum, chanting in a language she didn't understand, then realized that they were coming from Timothy.

The iridescence from the water gradually increased until Timothy's form was completely outlined in blue light. The Emperor stood up and his outline grew taller and taller until his head was almost touching the carved cherubs on banqueting hall's gilded ceiling. Then he suddenly disappeared leaving her alone in the darkness with only the glowing water in the bowl for company. She sat still, hardly daring to breathe. Timothy had gone to find their daughter and she sensed he needed the shining water's guidance to bring them safely back.

Her husband abruptly reappeared again with Genevra's limp form in his arms. As the lights in the banqueting hall sprang back to life, he said sharply, "Call the Major Domo and tell him to get the doctor on the double."

While they waited, he cradled his unconscious daughter. "It's all right, baby, you're safe now. Come on, sweetheart, keep breathing. You can do it."

After the doctor finally left and Genevra was safely tucked into bed, Giuliana asked, "What happened?"

"There's an antique clothes press with an automatic lock in Darius's apartment. Jenny was in the bedroom when the guards came and she hid. The lock snapped shut on her and she couldn't get out. It never occurred to her to use her powers or that she could have opened that door any time she wanted."

"That's my fault. I've always made such an issue of her doing everything the normal way, she thinks using her powers is wrong. Timothy, it almost killed her. If it had, I would never have forgiven myself."

As she burst into tears, Timothy took his wife in his arms. "But it didn't because I was able to find her in time. After I established a homing link with Jenny through the water spell, it was just a matter of taking her out of there. Had I known she was still in the palace, I would have done something much less dramatic. But I was afraid she'd been kidnapped and had no idea how far afield I was going to have to go."

"You mean if any of our children were to be kidnapped, you could find them by using that spell?"

"Of course. I could bring them back too. I check on each of our children each night before I go to bed no matter how far away they are. Ephraim used to do the same thing when we were growing up. If we happened to be with a girl it could be damn embarrassing."

Giuliana laughed in spite of herself. "How come you never told me about this before?"

"Because you're their mother and would never have left them in peace if you'd known. Tamar didn't know either. If Dad found any of us in bed with some girl, he never told her, but you can be sure we heard about it the next day."

"Well, have you?"

Timothy arched an eyebrow. "Have I what?"

"Have you ever found any of our sons in bed with a girl?"

He grinned and chucked her under the chin. "Now you know why I've never told you. As far as I'm concerned, that's the boys' private business. At this stage of the game, I don't have the right to pry into their personal affairs. Neither, my love, do you."

"What about Jenny? What if you found her in bed with some boy?"

"I'd kill him. Then I'd lock her up in a magic proof forcefield for the rest of her natural life."

"That's not fair. Talk about a double standard. Shame on you."

"It's not the same thing at all. Jenny's my daughter."

"Every one of those girls was somebody's daughter, including me. At one point, my father and brothers wanted to horsewhip you, remember?"

"Er, yes. But that was only until they found out you the one were balking at the idea of getting married, not me. After I told them that, they were perfectly fine."

"Don't remind me. Then you all went out for beers and left me alone in the apartment with the cat. After that, you and my brothers became the best of friends and they started nagging me incessantly to accept your proposal."

"Speaking of proposals, I've been trying to think of a humane way to break it to Jenny that Darius isn't coming back. I'd have done it tonight if she'd been conscious. Gee, it's going to break her heart and I don't even care to think about what it's doing to him."

"I know. The pity of it is it all seemed so harmless. Now the poor lamb is being married off to some girl he's never even seen. It's as bad as what they used to do to the Emperor of Nublis when the Parliament would pick out his bride and he had to marry her. Corey told me all about it. She was barely eighteen when she was designated as the Imperial Bride and Julian was thirty-six. He was old enough to be her father and she received no warning at all. One day she was happily running around her father's farm. A few weeks later, she was forcibly married to a man she hardly knew."

"That's exactly what's happening to Darius. Come to think of it, the wedding's scheduled for tomorrow. We'd better figure out a way to tell Jenny before she finds it out from the viewscreen, or worse yet from the servants' gossip."

"That's if she hasn't found out already. She's really lonely Timothy. Don't you think it's time we called Jonathan home?"

"I'm way ahead of you. Johnny boarded his ship yesterday and will be home for dinner tomorrow night. As for that errant kitchen maid who was the cause of all the trouble, she was pregnant by one of the guards. I've sent them off to my brother's household in Phasga to rusticate with the wolves and the bears. From what Janus tells me, our Johnny didn't pine all that long. He's been cutting such a swath through Nublis's female population my brother Emperor's happy to get rid of him."

"It'll cheer Jenny up to have him back. And I suppose we'd better bite the bullet and go tell her the bad news as soon as she wakes up."

"Well, at least we got through the wedding rehearsal with no problems. All things being equal, tonight's dinner party should be a cinch. Is it my imagination or are these braces getting easier to manage?"

"I think it's more a matter of your getting used to them. Have you got anything to drink, son? I'm absolutely parched."

"Sure, Dad. Help yourself. Now, if you'll excuse us for a moment. Rufus, one of these damn things needs an adjustment. It's digging in and starting to hurt."

While Rufus and Darius were in the bedroom, Daniel poured himself a drink. Then he wandered over to look at the outfit he'd given his son for the ceremony. He'd commissioned it months before and like his own formal wear, it was the traditional garb of an Illyrian mountain chief. The tunic was fashioned from a rich dark green suede of incredible softness and lavishly embroidered with golden oak leaves. The oak leaf was the badge of Illyria's famed Mountain Corps and that particular shade of green was the color of their uniforms.

An elite unit composed of the cream of Illyria's army, the Mountain Corps served as the Crown Prince's personal guards. In the normal course of events, Darius would have been their commander.

When they emerged from the bedroom, the King raised a questioning eyebrow at Rufus, who nodded. All was in readiness, thought Daniel, and he hoped for the umpteenth time that he was doing the right thing. After watching Darius struggle through the banquet on the previous night, his heart had ached for him and he'd had all he could do to restrain himself from banging Sybilla's brothers' heads together. The murderous expression in Darius's eyes hadn't been lost on the king and Baron obviously had no idea how close he'd come to serious injury or even death had he not intervened.

During the wedding rehearsal, he watched the two young men closely. Their conduct toward Darius was impeccable and he suspected little Sybilla might have had something to do with that. There was a definite gleam in her eye whenever she looked at Carlo and Baron and their manner around her had become a trifle sheepish. Well, maybe she wasn't quite as meek as he first thought. If that was the case, Darius was liable to find life with his new bride somewhat livelier than he expected.

Daniel hoped so. He'd developed a fondness for the quirky little princess and had no wish to see her run over by his difficult headstrong son. He could plainly see that Sybilla was head over heels in love with him and that the prince, for his part, barely tolerated her. The little princess had a dignity and grace about her which did much to offset her woefully inadequate looks and, in Daniel's opinion, was one of those rare people whose appearance would improve with age. Her small face shone with intelligence and the glow in her eyes whenever she looked at Darius made her almost beautiful.

"I'm really going to miss her," Sidonia had told him and Daniel could see why. Next to Baron, Sybilla was the favorite of all of the Queen's children and she had agonized long and hard over the decision to marry her off. Daniel assured the Queen that Sybilla could visit her family as often as she liked and stay for as long as she wanted. The distance between their capital cities was only a few hundred miles and the trip by air was less than a half hour.

For the first time in their history, free communication existed between Illyria and Lodebar. Commercial trade was brisk and the graceful seaport of Moriah had become a favorite recreation spot for both.



The extraordinary beauty and independent ways of the legendary female soldiers of Lodebar wasn't lost on the young Illyrian guards stationed along the border and quite a few marriage applications were crossing Daniel's and Sidonia's desks. It was a problem neither had anticipated and both were still wrestling with the protocols.

Even so, there was a definite culture clash between the women of Lodebar and the men of Illyria and the domestic fur was already flying.

When it came to the men of Lodebar, the opposite was true. Because of their extraordinary sensitivity and courteous attitude, the Lodebarian male aristocracy had become catnip to the upper-crust females of Illyria. While Daniel was hearing serious grumbling from the more traditionally minded nobles at his court, Sidonia found the situation hilarious and the king suspected she might be actively encouraging the liaisons.

Darius noticed his father examining the green suede tunic. "It's really beautiful, Dad. Despite the fact that I've had to take early retirement, I really appreciate the color and the oak leaves. Thanks."

"The Mountain Corps still considers you their commander. They've sent an honor guard to escort you tomorrow."

Rufus smiled. "That's true, and I'll be joining them."

"Incidentally, Rufus," said the King. "Your captain's bars are no longer valid. You've been promoted to major. Your new uniform should be ready in the morning."

The old soldier's eyes misted and for a moment he was speechless. "Your Majesty. I don't know what to say."

"You've earned it. For the past two years, you've served your country and me above and beyond the call of duty. This recognition is long overdue." Daniel saluted and Darius followed suit.

Obviously overcome with emotion, Rufus abruptly disappeared into his room.

Darius grinned. "That's the first time I've ever seen Rufus speechless and I agree with you, Dad. It was long overdue. Of course, now he's a major he's going to be far too important to look after the likes of me."

"Of course. But you won't need him after tomorrow. You're going to be a married man and you'll have your wife to help you."

The prince's face clouded and he turned away. "Don't remind me. That's the price I'm paying for all this and I'm going to have to live with it for the rest of my life. I'm simply swapping one form of imprisonment for another and will be as much of a hostage as I ever was. Except I'll be in Sybilla's custody instead of Timothy's."

Daniel went to put a reassuring hand on his shoulder, then lowered it again. What his son had just said was true. Between politics and his physical condition, Darius was still a hostage and, as such, at everyone else's mercy.

Rufus's bedroom door opened. He looked from the king to Darius and back again. "Is something

wrong?"

The prince shook his head, "No more than usual. We were talking about what's going to happen after tomorrow. Dad was reminding me I'll be a married man and that my wife will be taking care of me from now on."

"I suppose she will, and I'll be getting a new assignment. I'm certainly going to miss you."

"And I you."

"Well, don't be too anxious to say goodbye to each other," remarked the king. "Rufus, I was planning to assign you to the royal household and make you Darius's military attaché." Then he smiled. "That's unless you're tired of my son and would rather go someplace else."

"Oh no, Your Majesty. Being Darius's military attaché would suit me just fine."

"Good enough. Now, if we're all ready, we should start wending our way downstairs for tonight's dinner party. Queen Sidonia is hosting it and I'm curious to see what Lodebarian delicacies she's serving."

"She won't have belly dancers that's for sure and if I know anything about Lodebarians the entertainment's liable to be extremely dull. It's already been a very long day and I'm pretty tired. So if it's all right with you, Dad, I'm going to make it an early night."

"That's fine with me."

Daniel and Rufus exchanged a meaningful glance, "In fact, that's a very good idea. You're going to need all your strength for tomorrow. A sleeping draft might not be a bad idea either."

Darius shook his head as he went through the door, "The Queen's entertainment's going to be soporific enough. Outside you and Rufus, there isn't anything particularly scintillating about tonight's company either. That includes my bride-to-be."

Again the king glanced at Rufus, who nodded. Then they followed Darius across the passageway to the waiting elevator.

True to his word, the prince made it an early night. Strictly to please Rufus, he obediently drank the hot milk laced with brandy the old soldier prepared for him. He vaguely noticed the king when he said goodnight and by the time Rufus had turned off the light, he was fast asleep.

There was a soft knock on the outside door of the suite and Daniel opened it. "Everything's ready," he whispered, "and now I'll wish you good night."

With a wave at Rufus, he went outside and down the hall to his own quarters. Sidonia would be waiting and they planned to make the most of what would probably be their last night together.

Rufus thoughtfully left the prince's door ajar. After making sure all was in order, he discreetly disappeared into his own room. What happened from then on was up to fate and it would be out of his hands.

Darius found himself on the patio of his apartment in Timothy's palace with Geneva in his arms. He buried his face in her hair, then breathed in its fragrance. "Where have you been my love?" she asked. "I've missed you so much."

"Let's not waste time talking," he groaned. His mouth found hers and they clung together for what seemed like an eternity. Suddenly, without his knowing how they had gotten there, they were in his bed naked with their arms and legs entwined.

"Oh no," he muttered, "I promised your father we wouldn't do this. What if he comes in and catches us. He'll kill me on the spot."

"Hush, my darling," came Geneva's whisper in his ear. "Daddy's sleeping and no one's going to disturb us. This is your last night of freedom and we need to make the most of it. Besides, this is just a dream, we're perfectly safe."

"In that case, come here, you beautiful thing. I'll show you what love is all about." He thrust himself into her again and again and she returned his ardor in full measure.

With her snuggled against him spoon-fashion, he finally fell asleep. A couple of hours later, he awoke and she was still there. Sleepily, she turned around to face him and giggled softly. "Come on. You're well-rested, my love, and the night's not over."

"Oh Jenny," he breathed, reaching for her again. "How can I possibly live without you?"

"I'll always be here with you in your dreams," she replied as they came together again. "This will be our time, my sweet. Now and always."

Her mouth fastened on his and they clung together in silence. He and Geneva were welded together into one being, suspended in space and weightlessly floating in some mysterious fourth dimension where time and the ordinary concerns of life no longer had any meaning.

How long they stayed like that, Darius never knew because he fell asleep again. When he finally awoke, Geneva was gone as if she had never been.

He lay unmoving for the rest of the night while his body and soul ached. Where his heart had been was an empty void and all he could see ahead was a endless series of gray tomorrows. Watching the sky's darkness finally turn to rose, he realized Rufus would be in soon with his breakfast. Then he'd draw back the curtains and cheerfully announce, "Wake up, Darius. It's your wedding day."

My wedding day.

He felt beneath the pillow for the handkerchief and lock of hair that were all that remained to him of Geneva and their vow. *Someday, my love, somehow, I'll find my way back to you even if it takes the rest of my life.*

Darius turned his face toward the wall and wept.

As Sidonia shook her shoulder, Sybilla stirred sleepily.

She turned over and buried her face in the pillows. "Leave me alone, Momma. It's surely not time to get up yet."

"Come on, sweetheart. The sun is already up, the birds are singing, and it's your wedding day. Here, I have a lovely breakfast for you and Anna Lisa's waiting to help you get ready."

Sybilla thought about the events of the night before and her eyes flew wide open. "I wasn't dreaming, was I?"

"No, honey, you most certainly weren't. You did wonderfully, my darling, no matter what happens from now on you'll be giving Darius an heir."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, you're positive all right. The doctor checked you just as soon as you came back and there's no question. Darius is young and healthy and so are you. He's certainly vigorous, isn't he?"

Sybilla blushed. Then she remembered what Darius had said and the tears came. "He truly loves her, Momma. If he ever finds out, he'll be so angry."

"With any luck, he never will. Now you'll just have to get him to do his duty as your bridegroom, if not tonight then sometime within the next month. You know what to do and you'll think of a way. At least you know what it's like to have a man make truly passionate love to you in every sense of the word and that you can respond to him in equal measure. I swear, if you'd stayed with him he'd be doing it yet. The majority of women never experience that even once. I was fortunate to have it with Baron's father and that love has sustained me all through the years since."

"And with King Daniel?"

"Ah, yes. And with Daniel."

After Sidonia finally left to get herself ready, Anna Lisa was brushing Sybilla's hair. "What was it like, really? I mean, what did he do exactly? Being he's a cripple and all how could he manage? Well, you know."

The little princess smiled at the memory and felt herself grow warm all over. "Actually, he managed very well and you know what he did. Momma's described it to you often enough and we've both seen the videos. But there's no way to explain how wonderful it is unless you've been there yourself. I understand now what they mean about two people merging into one. We truly did. I should like to have stayed like that forever if there'd only been a way. It wasn't nasty or messy or at all what I'd expected. It was .... Oh, I can't even begin to describe it. If I never have a night like that again for the rest of my life it will still have been worth it, even if he did think I was someone else. Last night, I was the most gorgeous, passionate creature in the universe and the man I love actually worshipped me."

Anna Lisa's eyes glowed. "Oh, Sybilla, you're so lucky. The prince is at least good-looking even if he is in a wheelchair, and now you know that he can actually do it." She continued gloomily, "With my luck, I'll wind up with some doddering old banker with hair growing out of his ears, bad breath, and more millions

than he can shake a stick at."

"Well, if that happens, you'll just have to find yourself some gorgeous young lovers. I mean there are some beautiful guys out there. Unlike me, all you need do is give them half a glance." Sybilla giggled. "You'll want to check out their physical attributes first and make sure you get the pick of the litter. Size is important if you know what I mean."

"Oh, Sybilla," Anna Lisa tried to sound offended. "The things you say."

"Oh come on, Anna Lisa. You assess them as much as I do and don't think I haven't noticed what you're looking at. Those tight riding pants are good for something, you know. You at least have some idea what's there without having to actually sample the merchandise."

"Well, I've heard stories, that some of them--gild the lily, so to speak, and that there's sometimes more there than meets the eye. Or less as the case may be."

Sybilla grinned wickedly. "That certainly isn't true of Darius. He's exactly as represented if not more so. I suspect his father is too."

Sidonia had returned. "Actually, he is and I can see you girls are indulging in your usual indoor sport of massacring the inflated sexual egos of the male population."

"We learned that from you, Momma," replied Sybilla mischievously. "You always say men have no equal as playthings but it takes a woman to get the job done in the real world. Let's face it. There are very few around with any kind of head for business. As for government and politics--forget it."

"That's true," agreed Sidonia. "At the same time, I have to admit Timothy and Carlo are exceptions to that general rule. Once you get to know him, Daniel actually isn't all that bad either. However, in typical male fashion he's managed to make a complete hash of most of his life. It's only during the past couple of years that he's exhibited any common sense at all. Where Darius is concerned, Sybilla, I'm afraid you're going to have your work cut out for you."

"I know, and it doesn't help that he's in love with someone else. At least, he thinks he is."

"Absence doesn't always make the heart grow fonder and it might be possible to give Darius's lady-love an attitude adjustment. In fact, now that I think about it, that's an excellent idea."

"Momma. You've got that gleam in your eye and I'm not sure I like what I'm thinking. She's Timothy's daughter and you really don't want to get on the wrong side of him."

"It seems to me Princess Genevra could use some education in the ways of the real world and is entitled to know all there is to know about the man she's in love with."

"She doesn't know about Darius's terrorist activities? Surely she's not been that sheltered."

"That only goes to show how much you know about Seiran culture. They're only one generation away from the slave markets and the harem and both are still legal under Timothy's regime. His oldest brother Nathan has an old-fashioned harem with a half dozen concubines and a household full of female slaves. Timothy's mother Thamar was once a slave and his grandmother Jerusa was a concubine. When Jerusa died, they didn't even give her a funeral because she was just property. The household servants threw her body into a ravine and left it there for the crows and wild beasts. And she'd been the favorite."

Sybilla shuddered, "Oh, Momma. That's horrible. Surely Illyria's not like that."

"It's not. But the Illyrians have a tendency to look the other way when it comes to rape and incest. For a single woman on her own, things can get pretty tough. Most female entertainers in Illyria are prostitutes because it goes with the territory. Illyrian men may take their women into battle but that's far as it goes. They're control freaks when it comes to money or decision-making. Illyrian fathers take inordinate pride in their sons and regard their daughters as something of a burden. It was only after Daniel came to the throne that the exposure of newborn female infants was outlawed. His queen deserves the credit for that. She was from Aretz and spoke her mind freely. She took one look at the practice and told Daniel she'd leave him if he didn't put an immediate stop to it."

"Darius's mother did that? She can't have been all bad."

"She wasn't bad at all. I'm sorry we were on different sides because I should have liked to have known her. When she married Daniel, she came into the palace like a big wind and turned it upside down. Oddly enough, the Illyrian women hated her and did everything in their power to tear her down. She was the best friend they ever had and they couldn't see it. She was still pregnant with Darius when Daniel's father was killed. Luckily, Daniel thought the world of her and he backed her up after she became queen. He doesn't concern himself too much with other people's opinions and I think her aggressive ways amused him. Unlike most men, he's attracted to strong women and has little respect for doormats. Just remember that, Sybilla. With Daniel on your side, you'll do all right. Without his support your situation will be hopeless. Darius is an unknown quantity at this point and all I really know about him is that he has his mother's temper."

"He has that all right," remarked Carlo as he came into the suite. "He was just about ready to kill Baron yesterday. Wasn't he, Sis?"

"That was Baron's own damn fault. He was way out of line. There wouldn't have been any trouble at all if you'd kept your yaps shut."

"If you talk to Darius like that he's liable to give you a good rap alongside the head," said Carlo. "That's what Illyrian men do when their wives get uppity. Let's face it, Syb, when it comes to speaking your mind, you're not exactly a shrinking violet."

"That's because I raised her right," snapped Sidonia, "and Carlo, I'd appreciate it if you and Baron would please behave in a civilized manner around Darius from now on. Regardless of what's he done in the past, there's no need to provoke him. From what I hear, you were the one who started it. By all accounts, Darius was quietly minding his own business when you suddenly came out of left field and start wading into him."

Carlo's dark eyes flashed and for just a moment Sidonia was reminded of his father. Then he settled down again. "Yes, Mother, of course. Anything you say."

"I've done everything I can with your hair," remarked Anna Lisa. "Now it's time for the wedding gown and the veil."

"Oh the veil's a must." said Sybilla bitterly. "It's too bad I can't keep it on permanently. Carlo, are you and Baron ready?"

"I left Baron in the shower. By now he's probably dressed. Momma, do you want to do inspection?"

Sidonia looked her handsome son up and down and smiled. "You look as wonderful as always, dear. Of course, when it comes to looks, there isn't any Illyrian who's going to outshine you."

"Enough of their women seem to think so. Baron's been having all he can do to fend them off. Three-fourths of our tourist trade from Illyria appears to be female, and somehow I don't think our mountains are the attraction. Someone's brought out a video claiming Lodebarian men are better lovers. It's selling like hotcakes over there."

"I know. And who do you think financed it? Call it my personal response to 'The Mountain King.' "

"Momma, you're nothing but a troublemaker. Supposedly, that damn video is breaking up Illyrian marriages right and left. Their Grand Council's in an uproar and they're trying to get Daniel to ban it. All they need is to find out you had something to do with it and the whole damn war will start up again."

Sybilla and Anna Lisa started to giggle and Sidonia said mildly, "All it means is the Illyrians have swapped their war with us for something closer to home. By all accounts, fighting is their favorite sport. If that's the case, all those domestic disputes should keep them happy for quite a while. Incidentally, my next video is going to be a how-to for Illyrian men. I was kind of hoping you would produce and direct it. After all, you are an expert on the subject."

Carlo rolled his eyes. "You're hopeless. If Syb's anything like you, Darius hasn't the slightest idea what he's up against."

"He hasn't a prayer either." Baron had just come in. "The guests are starting to assemble and one of the servants asked me how long it's going to be before Sybilla's ready? I just saw Darius and his party get into the elevator and the orchestra's tuning up."

"All right. All right," said Sidonia. "Let's go into the bedroom and get Sybilla's gown on. Incidentally, Baron, you look very nice. Come on, Anna Lisa. It's time to get this show on the road."

A shot came up on the viewscreen of Darius's face and Genevra flung herself sobbing into her mother's arms. "Oh Momma, I can't bear it. He looks terribly unhappy and I miss him so much."

"Of course he's unhappy," remarked her brother Jonathan. "Look at the dog he's marrying. Talk about the face that stopped a thousand clocks. That poor bitch is enough to make any man swear off sex for the rest of his days."

"Jonathan," thundered Timothy. "That's quite enough. Princess Sybilla can't help her looks and she's not as bad as all that."

His son was unrepentant. "Her sister is another story entirely. Now, there's a girl I'd really like to get my arms around, and a few other things for that matter."

"She'd probably be just right for you," said Timothy. "Anna Lisa's not what you'd call bright. Five minutes conversation is about all she's good for. If you're trying to talk intelligently, it's thirty seconds max."

"Will you two just shut up," snapped Giuliana. "Honestly, Jonathan, I had hoped your Uncle Janus would

teach you something, but your attitude's as bad as it ever was. A woman is more than a piece of meat, you know, and you need to treat them with respect." She glanced up at the viewscreen. "Oh, my. Now there's a toothsome man if I ever saw one. Jenny. You must look at this handsome creature. Who is he, Timothy?"

"Hmmf. That handsome creature, as you call him, is Sidonia's oldest son, Carlo. When it comes to womanizing, he makes Jon look like a piker and I wouldn't let him within a thousand miles of Genevra. His brother Baron's every bit as bad. They have women chasing them from one end of the Synod to the other."

Genevra sniffled. Then she took a quick peek. To her mother's amusement, she looked again. "You're right, Momma. He is quite nice-looking in a dark video star sort of way. How old is he?"

"Let me see. Sybilla's seventeen, Anna Lisa's going on nineteen and Baron's twenty-one. By that reckoning, Carlo would be twenty-three or twenty-four. There was the older one, Solaria, who just died in childbirth. She was such a beautiful creature too."

"With the disposition of a snake," remarked Timothy. "There's a persistent rumor her oldest daughter was conspiring to take the throne and may not have died from natural causes. After seeing Sidonia in action on Eos, I'd believe it."

Genevra was wide-eyed. "You mean, someone *killed* her?"

"Very possibly. Assassination is an established custom in Illyria and Lodebar and they have less respect for life. If Sidonia caught one of her children doing something like that, she'd execute them without a second thought. The Queens of Lodebar have a healthy sense of self-preservation and they're ruthless. Illyria's conquered every one of its neighbors at one time or another except Lodebar. But they've never quit trying. They might have succeeded this time, were it not for the Synod Assembly. It took the capture of Darius to force Daniel to the peace table. Sidonia did the rest."

"Darius told me he was here because of politics and now I know what he meant. But, Daddy, wasn't it dangerous to have him here?"

"Yes it was, my pet. Now, perhaps, you'll understand why I don't want you running around outside without an escort. Daniel has agents here and he wouldn't have thought twice about kidnapping you and trying to exchange you for Darius."

"Is Alex one of your agents?"

"What makes you ask that?"

"Something Darius said. He talked about Alex as if he was his jailer. Was he?"

"In a sense. Alexander does special jobs for me and this was one of them. That's why he's on Nublis but he'll be home soon."

"Good. Then Uncle Ben and Aunt Elena will stop complaining about your taking him away all the time."

"Believe it or not, sweetheart, I've been doing Alex a favor and he's perfectly happy working for me. He's in his thirties now and it's high time his mother cut the umbilical cord."



"You mean like I did?" Giuliana's voice was dry. "Elena gets to see her boys once in a while which is more than I can say for me."

"You'll be seeing plenty of them in another month. Micah's coming home on leave and Zachary will be on his spring break. We'll all be together when Daniel and Sidonia and their children come for the Spring Solstice."

The Emperor frowned, "The only problem will be security and it'll be thicker than fleas on a dog."

"Is Darius going to be coming?"

"Perhaps."

Timothy glanced up at the viewscreen again.

The bridal couple stood in front of a couple of ornately dressed clerics and the choir was chanting an ancient Illyrian prayer. One cleric held a glittering crown over Darius's head while the other dipped a golden wand into a bowl of water and sprayed it over the congregation. The camera cut over to a close-up of the Queen where she sat beside Daniel. Timothy saw tears in her eyes. Daniel was blinking fiercely and seemed as emotionally overcome as Sidonia.

The cleric holding the crown set it down and took up a cushion containing two rings. He offered it to Darius, who took one and turned to Sybilla. He recited what Timothy knew to be his wedding vows but they were in an obscure language he didn't recognize. Then he placed the ring on the third finger of Sybilla's left hand. Sybilla took the second ring and did the same with Darius. After that the cleric said something, then Darius lifted Sybilla's veil from her upturned face.

As he bent his head to kiss her, Genevra's tears started all over again.

"And there you have it." said the announcer. "A thousand years of brutal war have come to an end with the fairy tale wedding between Darius of Illyria and his ethereal Sybilla of Lodebar in one of the most romantic settings in the entire Synod."

"Ethereal?" sniffed Jonathan. "Well, I suppose they had to call her something. Sizewise, she is little more than a wisp."

Darius turned with his bride to face the people and the music swelled. It stopped for a moment, then the choir began the Illyrian national anthem.

The newlyweds waited patiently.

When they were done with Illyria's anthem, the orchestra and chorus started enthusiastically on Lodebar's patriotic hymn.

Timothy laughed. "They must have tossed a coin to decide who went first. I can't imagine Sidonia conceding to Daniel any other way. Now, what are they doing?"

There was a halt in the proceedings as Rufus came forward with Darius's wheelchair. Accompanied by the bride, he helped the prince down the altar steps.

"Good thought," said Timothy. "It would take them forever to get down the aisle otherwise. Darius is

pretty good on those crutches, but fast he's not."

"Well, I must say he looks very nice," observed Giuliana, "and I'm glad that he was able to stand up for the ceremony. I hadn't realized he was quite so tall."

"Even Sybilla doesn't look all that bad," said Timothy. "Those rose-colored pearls are absolutely magnificent."

"So's the gown. I wonder where Sidonia got it because it's really spectacular. If Deborah were around, she'd be gnashing her teeth. She never forgave me for not ordering my wedding dress from her. But I was in a hurry and bought one off the rack."

Timothy eyed his wife appreciatively. "And very attractive it was too. Especially after I had it off you and draped over the bedpost."

"Timothy." Giuliana looked meaningfully at their avidly listening children.

"Oh Momma," chortled Jonathan. "None of us have thought we were a virgin birth since we were five."

Genevra just giggled.

That's better, thought Timothy. *It sounds as if you're getting back to your old self.*

As the production credits rolled across the screen, a voice-over was announcing an upcoming program. "It's so irritating when they do that," remarked the Emperor and he hit the remote control.

Genevra looked sadly at the blank screen. "He's really gone, isn't he?"

Timothy sighed. "Yes, he is and it's time to move on, Jenny. You and he were never meant to be."

"I suppose not but it seemed so right. I can't imagine myself with anyone else. But his apartment was so empty. It felt as if someone had died."

"That won't be for long," said Jonathan. "Dad's giving it to me."

"Oh, I see. Well, I'm sure you'll enjoy it."

Genevra thought of that long-ago day when she'd first seen Darius reading in the garden. She remembered him in his wheelchair with that stupid mechanical mouse and cursing when the cat's claw caught his leg. *I'll miss you forever*, she thought. Looking at the golden signet ring on her finger, she remembered his promise. "Somehow, some way, I'll find my way back to you. Even if it takes the rest of my life. Keep this safe for me until I return to claim it."

Oh, Darius. I will, I will. You'll be back someday even if it takes the rest of your life. And I'll be waiting.

"Well, this is goodbye." Sidonia stood by the flyer that was to take her family to the spaceport.

The newlyweds and Rufus had gone on ahead. They were to rendezvous with a Seiran shuttle which would take them up to Timothy's orbiting flagship. They would enjoy a two day honeymoon on the

Jerusa, then proceed to Illyria.

Officially, the young couple were honeymooning at Nublis's famed island resort, Nephtali, and terrorist activity had noticeably increased in that quadrant of the planet.

The Illyrian agent, Gideon Zivon, would arrive there soon with a female companion who bore a resemblance to Sybilla and it was hoped that Allied Intelligence would net yet another promising catch. As Gideon had predicted, his captive commander hadn't held out very long and the man had easily persuaded his daughter to become a double agent. Gideon hadn't said what had become of him and Alexander didn't feel like inquiring too closely.

The sharpshooter from the tower had been another story. He hadn't been cooperative and Gideon had been equally closemouthed about the method of his demise.

Prince Alexander had heard about a certain torture apparatus used by the Nublians on recalcitrant prisoners called the Tank. Reportedly, the device created total sensory deprivation and was one hundred percent effective. But it was dangerous and could cause madness and, in some cases, death. Because of the extreme risk to its subjects, use of the Tank as a research tool had been long since discontinued. Only the Nublians were known to employ it. According to Alexander's sources, the question was not whether The Tank would break a subject, but when. He wondered if they'd used it on the captured commander and if it was as efficacious as they claimed. It was difficult to find out because the Nublians weren't saying and no other agency knew anything about it.

Well, he thought, once he'd seen the Lodebarian Royal Family off and bidden Daniel goodbye, his work on the Darius Project was done. The operation at Nephtali was Gideon's baby. Nublian Intelligence would taking the risks from now on as well as the credit.

He picked up his bag and took a last quick look around the small apartment that had been his base of operations. With his credentials and references, there would be plenty of attractive positions in the government's upper echelons and maybe it was time to get into some other line of work. Then he remembered the trapped look in Darius's eyes, and his yearning expression when he'd described camping out under the stars. Right now he seemed to be more of a captive than ever and was likely to remain so for the rest of his days.

Alexander had seen deep into the prince's tortured soul when they'd been making 'Portrait of a Terrorist' and had been struck by Darius's remarkable transformation from a programmed killer to a man of peace. Everywhere the video was shown, it left audiences questioning their own attitudes toward violence and war and several universities built lecture courses around its disturbing conclusions. The production also sparked a major investigation by the Synod's Ethics Committee into the relationship between some of its legislators and the arms dealing lobby and more than one career had gone down in flames. Terrorists across the Synod were said to be anxiously eyeing one another and wondering which had spilled the beans. But, despite endless press speculation, the star's identity remained a closely held secret.

Darius, my friend, reflected Alexander. *Wherever you are, I wish you well. May you have a long and prosperous life and I hope someday, you'll find the freedom you yearn for.*

Return to Illyria

## Chapter 5 A Trip and a Decision

After strapping on his skis, Darius carefully stood up from the bench. Using the specially designed poles to steady himself, he moved smoothly after Sybilla toward the base of the snow-covered slope.

Daniel was waiting. He pushed up his goggles up with a mittened hand, then grinned encouragingly at his son. "Once a skier, always a skier. Sybilla, my dear, Darius has been on these damn things since he was three and he'd won the national downhill twice by the time he was fourteen."

"Actually," Darius admitted, "I'm finding it easier to maneuver around on these than my regular crutches."

"Well, let's see how you do with these anti-gravity propulsion devices."

Daniel fastened a tiny black box on to each of his son's skis, then did the same for Sybilla. After snapping a module around the handles of their right ski poles, the king turned to the fascinated Princess. "We developed these for our Mountain Corps guerrilla forces to give them more mobility and speed in snowy conditions. They enabled our troops to move uphill as easily as down and until now have been one of our most closely guarded military secrets. Now the war's over, these anti-gravity propulsion devices have recreational potential and we're manufacturing them for the upscale sports market. We call them A.G.P's for short"

He indicated a young man in uniform standing nearby. "This is Captain Orpheus Harkanian from our Special Ordnance Department. Orpheus designed the A.G.P. and I've had him add special mechanisms to Darius's leg braces to help him steer and compensate for his lack of knee action. I was trying the A.G.Ps out last night and stayed up there for much longer than normal because I was having so much fun. That's why I wasn't here to greet you when you arrived."

Sybilla and Darius smiled at the young captain who nodded gravely in return.

The princess exclaimed "No wonder Carlo was having so much trouble when he had your Third Infantry pinned down in the Valley of the Owls. He said there was no way in hell to get out of the box you were in, but you did. He could never figure out how you were able to move around in the mountains so fast. I suppose this is why."

Daniel smiled, "Under normal circumstances, Carlo should have wiped us out that day. Your brother's damn good and he had us surrounded. He didn't know about the A.G.Ps, and it never occurred to him we could go up the side of the mountain after darkness fell. When he closed in on the following morning, we plain weren't there."

Sybilla frowned. "Carlo told Momma your force either grew wings or evaporated into thin air. Then to add insult to injury, you came down the other side of the mountain and attacked him from the rear."

"That we did. But let me tell you something, Sybilla. Your big brother's a canny fighter and he's tougher than old boots. He was really dug in and stood his ground. We finally withdrew and limped for home with our tails between our legs, licking our wounds every step of the way. I've got a piece of shrapnel in my

leg from that engagement and it made me think twice about confronting him again."

"He'll be pleased to hear that because he didn't think he'd done you any damage."

Darius glanced at his father. "Well, there's no time like the present. Sybilla. Are you ready?"

She settled her goggles over her eyes, flexed her hands and got into position beside him. "Ready."

Daniel took off and Darius pressed the control button with his thumb. He felt a slight push as his skis' anti-gravity devices activated. Then he followed his father toward the wooden hut at the slope's summit.

As he went, he glanced to his right and noticed Sybilla easily keeping pace. Like her bridegroom, Sybilla had been on skis since she'd been a toddler. She'd thought it wiser not to tell Darius that she was Lodebar's reigning downhill champion, let alone that she'd won a couple of the Synod's most prestigious racing medals while he'd been in captivity on Seira.

Assuming his bride to be a novice, Darius had been instructing her in the basics for most of the morning. She'd been touched by his quiet patience as he asked his father to demonstrate some of the simpler moves. She suspected Daniel knew the truth about her skiing ability but he hadn't given the slightest indication to Darius.

The king had apparently decided to go along with her little charade. He kept a straight face as he listened to his son's admonitions on safety and correct body posture. However, when Darius began instructing her how to get up from a fall, he suddenly put his hand over his mouth and began coughing.

Actually, Sybilla hadn't lied about her ability. When Darius assumed that she'd never been on a pair of skis before, she hadn't corrected him. Mindful of Carlo's warning about the attitude of Illyrian husbands toward uppity wives, she had kept her mouth shut during the three weeks since their wedding and her father-in-law was beginning to wonder if she had any backbone at all.

Daniel had been agreeably surprised when she timidly asked if she might come along on this trip because it was the first time she'd opened her mouth since their arrival in Illyria.

"Of course you may. But what are you going to do about clothes?"

"Oh, I have an outfit. Momma saw to that."

*Yeah, right, thought Darius. And I just imagine the glitzy ensemble she came up with. Right out of some fashion magazine, I'll bet. Color-coordinated to a fare thee well, and the pants alone cost more than my skis.*

But Sybilla appeared at breakfast that morning in a fitted jumpsuit not unlike his own. Far from being the glitzy colors with spangled racing stripes he expected, her suit was dark blue. The only indication of its quality or cost was the discreet emblem embroidered on her breast pocket. The quality of her boots was on a par with her suit and her other accessories were neat and sensible. His bride's only concession to fashion was a spectacular multi-colored quilted silk jacket lined with fake golden sable.

Sybilla noticed his raised eyebrows as she placed it on the chair beside her and explained shyly, "It's a gift from Anna Lisa. Do you like it?"

"Actually, it's quite attractive. Judging by the envious looks you're getting, it'll probably set a whole new

fashion trend."

"I'm glad to hear that. This particular jacket happens to be one of Lodebar's native products and Momma's always looking for new outlets."

As Sybilla suspected, King Daniel knew all about her prowess on the slopes. Amused by her wide-eyed response to Darius's patronizing remarks, he wondered how long she was going to be able to keep it up and he overheard her last remark as he approached their table on the terrace of the exclusive ski resort's restaurant.

Ah, so, he thought. *Maybe you're not such a mouse after all. Let's see how you handle my son once you get out there.*

When they reached the hut, Daniel noticed Sybilla wasn't even winded. Darius was breathing hard and looked tired. The King grabbed an oxygen mask and handed it to him. The prince took it gratefully and put it over his face. He sat heavily on the bench next to the hut and leaned back against the wall with his eyes closed.

Sybilla looked down at him with concern. She opened her mouth to say something but Daniel shook his head. He beckoned to her and once they were out of earshot, said softly, "He needs to do this. Why didn't you tell him you already knew how to ski?"

"Because he's an Illyrian and I'm from Lodebar. He didn't want to marry me in the first place and he's having enough trouble with the fact that I'm from a matriarchal society. If I were to outshine him his first time out, he'd never forgive me."

"I thought it was something like that. That's why I didn't tell him either. You really care about him, don't you?"

"More than life itself. Do you think he's all right?"

"I'll check him out on the hut's monitors before we go down and I can have a MedEvac here within seconds if he isn't. How are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm fine. In fact, I never felt better in my life. I work out every morning, you know. With weights."

"Does Darius know that?"

"Er, no. I exercise in private in my own room. He probably thinks I'm primping or something."

"You don't communicate much, do you?"

"Our wedding night was a bit of an ordeal and after he'd done what was expected, Darius made it clear that was the end of our intimacy. He's always courteous, in private as well as in public, and he's not unkind. But ...."

She lowered her head and Daniel heard a small sob. "But he won't let me help him with anything. He doesn't welcome my company and I know he's thinking of her every time he looks at me."

"Don't sell yourself short. First of all, I doubt Genevra would have been as sensitive with Darius as you've been and she certainly wouldn't have come skiing with us."

"She wouldn't have needed to, would she? All she'd have to do is be in the same room. Darius worships the very ground she walks on."

"More fool him. You're worth ten of her, Sybilla, and you're exactly the wife he needs. Just give it time, I think he'll come around. There are different kinds of love and the romantic kind he feels for Genevra seldom lasts."

Sybilla shook her head. As she started to disagree, she saw Darius had opened his eyes and was looking at them curiously.

"Are you feeling better?" asked the King.

The prince nodded.

"Let's check you both out on the monitors. Then, we can head all back down."

"Are you sure you're up to it, Sybilla?" Darius's tone was patronizing.

She smiled sweetly. "With you as an instructor, how could I not be?"

*Oh Darius, thought the king, you're really asking for it. I'm looking forward to the time when her patience wears thin and she finally lets you have it. One of these days, you're going to get the wake-up call of all time.*

He checked the prince on the monitors and found everything within normal ranges. "Are you two ready to go?"

With a glance at Sybilla, Darius lowered his goggles and put on his mittens. He stood up and rammed his ski poles into the snow. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be." Then he swallowed hard and took off down the slope.

Sybilla looked up at the King and he smiled. "After you."

She gave him a brief smile in return and took off after Darius. Since she was behind the prince, she didn't bother to conceal her expertise and the king admired her graceful style as she wove easily back and forth.

Despite his considerable height, Daniel was an excellent skier and it was one of his favorite sports. Sybilla was taking her time and he soon passed her.

Darius had just reached the bottom when the king caught up with him and he caught his son's astounded expression on his son's face as he watched his bride.

"She's an absolute natural. Or else there's something she's not telling me."

"Hmm. Did she say she'd never been on skis before?"

"Er, no. Not in so many words. I just assumed ...."

"I thought so. Well, let that be a lesson to you to do your homework before you go jumping to

conclusions. Sybilla's from Lodebar and they have as many mountains as we do. She's probably been skiing as long as you and might have a medal or two lying around as well."

"You mean, I owe her an apology?"

"Not necessarily. She was worried about the effect of her expertise on your fragile male ego. That's why she didn't tell you. She's as much at fault as you, but you haven't exactly made her feel welcome, you know. My guess is that she's feeling a bit rejected."

"This marriage wasn't my idea."

"It wasn't hers either, was it? You gave me your word you'd treat her well. It wouldn't hurt your pride any to be a mite friendlier."

"I suppose I have been a bit cold. But you have to admit that the situation is somewhat sticky, what with the wedding night and all."

"Ah. So that's it. You did your duty and you don't want to encourage any more intimacy."

"Since she's tested positive, I don't see what more she can possibly expect."

"Some father to be you are. You're actually acting as if she owes you a stud fee or something. For pity's sake, she's your wife and carrying your child."

Darius opened his mouth just as Sybilla reached them. Then he closed it again. He was turning around to greet her when he dropped one of his ski poles and put his hand up to his eyes.

"Oh hell. Not again."

As he swayed and almost fell, Daniel grabbed him. "Get the medics. Now!"

Sybilla skied over to the medical station, pressed the red emergency button on its outside wall, then pointed to where Daniel stood holding onto his son.

As two medics grabbed a stretcher and started toward them, she came up beside them. "Have you got a scanner? My husband needs a brain scan as soon as possible. Can you do it?"

Another medic went into the station and returned with a large black case. "What happened? Did he fall?"

Kneeling by the stretcher, he noticed the prince's braces. "A war injury, I presume. Well, we certainly see plenty of those."

The king watched the scanner's screen. Then he pointed. "Freeze that."

The medic hit a button. When a sheet emerged from the machine's side, he held it up to the light and grunted. "I think you're right."

A small crowd had begun to gather and he suddenly recognized the king. "Oh, er, Your M ...."

Putting finger to his lips, Daniel saw his guards hovering. "You'd better signal for an air unit. My son needs to be in a full-service clinic as soon as possible."



The medic spoke quietly into his wrist communicator, then listened. "They'll be here in about thirty seconds."

Daniel put his goggles over his eyes, then signaled to Sybilla to do the same. Since Darius' face was obscured by the medic's heads, it was unlikely anyone had recognized him. The press was nowhere in sight but it wouldn't take long for the cameras to appear and he could only hope that they'd be loaded on the MedEvac air unit and gone by then. He motioned to one of his security men and directed him to check them out of their rooms. *Well, so much for this vacation. But at least now we're going to get to the bottom of what's causing his blindness.*

When the MedEvac arrived, Sybilla took one of Darius's hands in hers. She'd removed her skis and was talking to the prince as she walked alongside the stretcher.

One of the guards picked up her skis from where she'd dropped them and the king stopped and removed his. Then he said, "Darius's are over there."

"Not to worry. Go ahead, Your Majesty. We'll see you in a couple of hours."

"Good enough," said Daniel and swung himself aboard. The craft's big door closed and he watched the mountain beneath them recede into the distance.

"It looks like an intermittent nerve block," observed the MedEvac doctor. "There's a theory that these episodes are related to stress and over-exertion. In this case, it was probably a bit of both."

"Can anything be done?"

"There's a man on Aretz who's had a great deal of success with this kind of surgery. It's not anything I'd ever attempt and I don't know any doctor around here who would."

"What's his name?" The king suspected he already knew the answer.

"Hugo de Blanc. He has a research outfit called the Institute for Neuro-Physiological Studies but he only has a dozen patients at any given time. I can make a referral, but I'll warn you, if de Blanc's even willing to accept your son's case, he has a waiting list of at least a year."

Darius had been listening. "Doctor de Blanc examined me on Seira a year ago. He told me he'd take my case and give me immediate priority. All I had to do was go to Aretz, but the Synod wouldn't agree. Doctor de Blanc didn't want to leave his other patients for that long. Even if he had, Seira lacked the proper facilities. The Synod got into a wrangle with Timothy about expense and security problems and nothing came of it."

"In that case, I'll make the referral. The sooner you do something about this the better. The problem's only going to get worse and each time this happens, there's a chance that your sight won't come back."

"Well, it has been getting longer each time," agreed Darius, "and the episodes have been coming on more often."

When Daniel's eyes met Sybilla's, she shook her head as if to say, "I don't know any more about this

than you."

The king would go to any lengths to help his son, including kidnapping and murder and one way or another, this Hugo de Blanc was going to give Darius the treatment he so desperately needed.

Just getting him to Aretz was going to be a problem and Daniel doubted the doctor's willingness to subject his precious institute to a firestorm of controversy if the prince went there under his own name. The very suggestion would cause riots in Parisia's streets and security would be a nightmare of hellish proportions. Secretly, it might be another matter and as soon as he had de Blanc's answer, Daniel made up his mind to call Timothy.

Hugo de Blanc came wearily out of the operating suite and leaned his forehead against the doorframe. Then he pulled off his surgical mask and closed his eyes.

"Well, I should be grateful for one thing, I suppose. At least there aren't any more casualties from Illyria and Lodebar. Why does it take only a second to tear the hell out of some kid's head and days to put it back together? After all this time, you'd think people would have found a more productive way to vent their aggressions. But, no. They've got more ways of killing than a dog has fleas and if our governments would spend a fraction of their arms money on finding a cure for what's killing the Queen of Lodebar, we'd all be further ahead."

When he realized his secretary was looking at him, he stopped muttering and opened one eye. "What is it, Marie?"

"There's an urgent viewscreen call for you in the office. It's all scrambled and the operator says it's from the Emperor of Seira."

*Timothy? What in the hell does Timothy want at this time of day? Last I heard, everyone in his family was disgustingly healthy without so much as a snakebite between the lot of them.*

"Tell her I'll be there as soon as I've washed my hands."

Hugo went into his comfortable office, poured a stiff drink and put his feet up. Then he reached for the remote control. "All right, I'm ready for that call."

The operator's voice was anxious. "I'm glad you're finally there, sir. His Majesty's already online."

Timothy's image appeared on the screen. "You certainly took your sweet time. There isn't anyone else in the Synod for whom I'd do that, Hugo."

The doctor laughed. "Now, that I believe. What can I do for you, old friend? Are you sick?"

"Sorry to disappoint you but it isn't anyone in my family. Do you remember the kid you examined for me a year or so ago? He was an Illyrian prince I was minding for the Synod. He'd committed quite a bit of unauthorized mayhem on the Lodebarians before they put him out of circulation."

"Ah, yes. The young man I was supposed to turn my practice inside out for. How is he?"

"No longer in my custody. Prince Darius was married a month ago and is back in Illyria with his father."

"I remember something about that. Leda was all aquiver about the wedding and the announcer was blathering about a romantic end to a thousand years of war. The bride was a homely little thing and they took him down the aisle in a wheelchair. What does this have to do with me?"

The Emperor hesitated. "His father contacted me a few hours ago. The prince is having some problems and you're the only person who can help him. Darius told him I knew you personally."

"Timothy, I'm absolutely buried. I've got a full house plus a two year waiting list. In addition to that, I'm doing a symposium for the Foundation next month and my agent's bugging me for another lecture series. I've been doing surgeries back to back for the past three months and working eighteen hour days. Leda says she's going to leave me for the grocery boy if I don't start keeping decent hours."

"Can't you get some help? Surely there must be some competent doctors around."

"I have two associates now but the work keeps piling in. Most of the referrals are so heartrending, it's impossible to turn them away. Show me how to be three people at once and I might be able to help. When I examined young Darius, I could have slotted him in right away. Unfortunately, that's no longer the case."

"Hugo, the boy's going to be permanently blind unless you help him. There isn't anyone else. I have a couple of excellent surgeons who would be glad to give you some relief and money's no object. Daniel of Illyria's pretty hard to refuse and this is his only son."

"What do you mean, blind? That wasn't his problem when I examined him. The kid had a pair of badly smashed legs, a nasty disposition, and he was more than a mite controversial. As the university students' least favorite person, he's up there with Attila the Hun and the Monster of Buchenwald. I'm liable to get riots outside my door if I bring him here."

"I know, but I have my own reasons for wanting to help him. I have a soft spot for young Darius and he's not nearly as black as he's been painted. Instead of hanging him in effigy, the Aretzan students should be awarding him their annual Peacemaker Prize. He's done more to end the conflict between Illyria and Lodebar than anyone I know and been doing his bit against terrorism too."

"How?"

"That I am not at liberty to reveal. Just take my word for it. The kid's well worth saving."

Grabbing his electronic calendar, Hugo started punching keys. "Oh, all right. Let me see what I can do. I have an annex two doors from here that no one knows about and I can put him in there. He'll have to check in under another name and you're going to have to help me with the security. If there's the least sign of trouble, out he goes."

"That big floating resort of my father's is going to be in orbit over Aretz for the Northern Hemisphere Bicentennial. I can sneak Darius on board while it's in transit, then shuttle him down amidst the dignitaries and freeloaders. Officially, he'll be a brain-damaged Imperial relative named Gabriel Maximus and you took his case as a favor to me. Incidentally, can you something about his legs?"

"I suppose so. With your propensities and bent for mischief, I'm liable to have an infestation of mutated

Andromedan cockroaches in my labs or something equally unpleasant if I don't help this kid. Plus, I'll never hear the end of it."

"I'd do something like that? How could you even think such a thing?"

The doctor didn't bother to argue. "Tell King Daniel to have the kid ready to go at the beginning of next week. Get him here--let's see--on the 20th at the latest. I'm taking you up on your offer of those two surgeons and I'd appreciate a surgical team as well. Does Darius have any family?"

"Besides his father? Just his brand new wife. I imagine she'll want to be there."

"She can use the annex's apartment but she'd better be prepared to fend for herself. I'm not detailing any of my personnel to cook or clean, and takeout food's out of the question."

"I suspect the princess can take care of herself."

"And there's to be no sightseeing. They're to shuttle down, stay for the treatment, then leave, and no one can know they've been here. If they find out I'm treating young Darius, the local authorities will have my head, not to mention the university, every liberal group on this planet *and* the Foundation."

"I understand. You'll be sticking your neck out on this one and don't think I don't appreciate it."

"I need to have my head examined for even considering such a thing. And it had been anyone but you doing the asking, I'd have given them a flat no."

The P.I.D. operator shut off the recording. "Now we've got him, and that traitorous little wife of his as well. Solaria and the count will be avenged at last and that miserable Darius will finally pay the price."

"Sounds good to me," said his colleague. "What are we going to do about her?"

"Being she's pregnant by the swine and damaged goods, she'd better die too. It's the only sure way to take her out of the Succession and keep the line pure."

"Her big brother won't like that. If we kill his baby sister, he might just stop looking the other way. Then we'd have to find another base of operations."

"What, and give up all that lovely arms dealer money? Get real, buddy. We'll just make the princess's demise look like an accident. In his heart of hearts, he'll know better but he'll at least be able to rationalize it. Especially if she doesn't suffer too much."

"Oh, she won't suffer at all. One snap and her neck'll be broken. She won't even know what hit her."

"As long as Darius does. If he has to watch her die and his kid with her, it'll be a start."

"Unfortunately, he won't care one damn bit. He doesn't like her at all and losing the kid'll mean nothing to him. He's in love with that girl on Seira, Timothy's daughter Grenada or Julia or whatever her name is. Now, if he had to watch *her* die, that'd be a whole different story."

The first terrorist held up his hands. "Whoa! Timothy of Seira's no one to mess with, so don't even think

about doing his daughter. Incidentally, that's why we don't harm one hair on the good doctor's head. His foster-son's married to one of the Emperor's nieces and they would take it very ill if something happened to dear old Dad."

"Oh, him. Didn't he make that goody two shoes documentary that's got the whole Synod atwitter?"

"Yup, he's the one. I'd like to get my hands on whoever his star was and wring their goddamn neck. We're having more PR problems because of that miserable piece of propoganda and it's dried up a lot of contributions."

"Short of a little sabotage on his latest production effort, there isn't much we can do."

The operator pulled his keypad toward him. "That's neither here nor there. We've got an operation to prepare and time's short. Now, who have we got on Aretz?"

Gideon shut down the communication feed, then grinned at Vasek. "You were right. The P.I.D.'s tagging Seira's transmissions and they've got their priority code key. If we nail them, we get the key and that should make Daniel very, very happy. Which brother were they talking about?"

"Baron would be my guess. He hates Darius with a passion and he and the late Princess Solaria were close. Carlo's loyal to his mother and seriously committed to the peace but Baron's a hothead. He's like Darius in a lot of ways and hangs around with a group of rabble-rousers as frustrated as he is. They're hung up on the honor of their flag and the idea the Lodebarian government needs new blood. Sidonia's always been able to restrain Baron and he's devoted to her. Once she's gone ...."

"What about Anna Lisa? You've spent time around that family, Gideon. What's your opinion of her?"

"She's not nearly as dumb as she claims and has a look in her eye that I don't like. That lady could be our biggest problem. If she marries into major money, look out. I'm not sure she isn't the linchpin in this whole thing."

"What makes you say that?"

"The P.I.D.'s got a pipeline into Sidonia's private sessions and whoever's fronting for them in the Palace is very, very smart. Much smarter than Baron, yet they're right in the middle of everything. It's a process of elimination. Everyone talks in front of Anna Lisa and there isn't anyone else it could be."

"That's true. Whenever anyone mentions Anna Lisa, they say, 'She's dumber than a hammer,' almost as if it was one word. Yet her father was one of the most brilliant minds of his generation and Sidonia's no slouch in the brains department. You're probably right about her and she bears watching. Who have we got?"

"The little blonde countess who giggles all the time, Marina Vladislava. She's not only one of our brightest operatives, she put me on to Anna Lisa."

"Tell her to watch her back, then. Does Anna Lisa know who you are?"

"Not as far as I know, unless the P.I.D had another agent when I acted as a decoy for Darius. Carlo's the only one who knows me by sight but I'd best not take any chances."

"You may have to act as a decoy for Darius again. We're obviously going to have to send him someplace other than that annex. Nephtali has top-notch facilities and Hugo might be willing to shuttle up there rather than the other way around. My best bet is to ship you to Seira and have you talk with Timothy face to face. Much as I'd like to have their priority code key, you'd best notify him that the P.I.D.'s tagging Seira's transmissions. With any luck, we can run a number on the P.I.D. again and maybe this time, locate their mysterious chief. Then we can stamp out that nest of scorpions for good and all."

Darius opened his eyes and blinked a few times. For a moment he didn't remember where he was. At first he wondered if his sight was still dim, then realized the room was dark. He'd been watching Sybilla ski down the hill and everything had gone black. She'd held his hand while they were carrying him to the MedEvac and described everything that was going on.

When she put her arms around him, he hadn't resisted. Something about the way she held him reminded him of his dream about Genevra. His legs started to hurt and the doctor gave him something to make him sleep. When he was being transferred from the stretcher to a bed, he'd wakened briefly and fallen into oblivion again. He'd woken once more after that and Sybilla had been beside him. He'd smelled the fragrance of her hair, then she and Jenny merged into one.

"Please don't leave me."

"I won't."

"Who are you?"

"One who loves you more than life itself. Sleep now and I'll come to you in your dreams."

Suddenly Genevra's warm body lay next to his and she was kissing him as lightly as a butterfly's wing. He reached for her and they were back in that fourth dimension where time had no meaning. Merged into one perfect being, they hung suspended in space for an eternity, shining like a crystal star.

When he awakened, she was still been in his arms. He stirred and she snuggled against him. "You see, I told you. This is our time, my love."

"Is it really you?" He scarcely dared to breathe.

"Of course. How could you not know me?"

"How can you be here? This isn't Seira."

She placed her finger across his mouth. "Hush, now. Anything's possible in a dream. That's all this is, remember? Rest now and I promise I'll come again."

Picturing her face in his mind, he traced the contour of her cheek with his finger. "Even blind, I'd know you anywhere. With you beside me, Jenny, I don't care if I never see again."

When he felt the tears on her cheeks, he kissed them away and tasted their salty essence. "Don't cry, Jenny. Please don't cry. It breaks my heart in two to see you unhappy."

She whispered "I can't bear it," and he heard a wrenching sob. "Goodbye, Darius."

He reached for her but she slipped from his grasp and was gone. He lay awake for hours after that, staring blindly into the unforgiving darkness. Finally, he must have fallen asleep again.

The door opened, and a figure stood silhouetted in the light from the hallway.

"Are you awake?" It was Sybilla.

"I'm awake. What's more, I can see you."

She sounded as if she was trying not to cry. "You can see me? Oh, merciful heavens. You can see." Then she turned on a light.

Darius blinked a couple of times. "Were you here last night?"

Sybilla looked at him for a moment as if debating what to say. "No, dear. You needed your rest."

Daniel had come into the room behind her. Still in his ski clothes, he looked rumpled, as if he hadn't slept. He raised an eyebrow at Sybilla as if to say, "*You're going to have to tell him sooner or later,*" then smiled at his son. "Do you feel like some breakfast?"

Darius thought for a moment. "Coffee anyway. And I need ...."

Daniel pressed the button for the attendant, then glanced at Sybilla again. "Let's go to the coffee shop while they get him ready for the day. There's something I need to discuss with you."

Even though the thought of food nauseated her, Sybilla took the hint.

*Damn. I've got morning sickness.*

As she followed the king outside, a couple of attendants hurried in with fresh towels and sheets.

Going toward the elevator, Sybilla saw their ever-present guards checking the hallway and the stairs. Two remained within sight of Darius's door.

The king followed her eyes. "They're a fact of life, little one, and there's no sense in taking chances. Now, to more pleasant subjects. The administrator's given me the use of the VIP lounge. They've set up a couple of cots and a breakfast buffet."

He looked at her more closely. "Are you all right, my dear?"

"There's nothing wrong that nine months won't cure. I'm a bit queasy, that's all."

"There's no sense in taking any chances with you either. Let's have one of the doctors check you as long as we're here. You didn't get much sleep last night, did you?"

She blushed. "Not really. I had things--er--on my mind."

"I'll bet you did. You know, Sybilla, you're going to have to tell him pretty soon. Darius isn't stupid and he's becoming a mite suspicious."

"But he'll be so angry. He'll never forgive me, then I'll really have nothing."

"He has a temper all right. He's not going to take kindly to being had like that so you may be right in hesitating. It seemed like a good idea at the time but now we've got a whole new problem. I'd thought I'd seen everything but never encountered anything like this. But don't worry, little one. One way or another, we'll find a solution. You're carrying his child and that was the whole object of the exercise. Now, all we have to find a way to make him love you."

"Yeah, right, and that's going to be the trick of the week. I see the resentment every time he looks at me and I can't blame him. It was bad enough he was forced to marry someone he didn't love, she had to look like me besides. If I was pretty like Anna Lisa it might not be so bad but I know what they call me."

"What is that?"

"The face that stopped a thousand clocks. One of the tabloids started it and now it's a running joke."

"Not in my hearing. If I catch anyone saying such a thing, I'll break them in half. Who told you that, anyway?"

"No one and I really don't want to cause any trouble. I overheard two of the doctors talking. They didn't know I was there or I'm sure they wouldn't have said it."

"Which ones? Tell me and I'll have their heads."

Sybilla was beginning to wish she hadn't said anything because Daniel meant exactly that. "All I saw was their backs and I doubt I would recognize them again. Please, Your Majesty, I don't want to cause any trouble."

"Call me Daniel, and you're not the one causing the trouble. Sybilla, you are the Crown Princess of this nation. My people will treat you with respect or I'll know the reason why."

"Thank you, Your M-- er--Daniel, but I wish it were that simple. Everyone knows Darius was forced into this marriage and they feel sorry for him. If I were beautiful it would be different but I'm not. They'll be expecting him to take mistresses after he's back on his feet and I can't blame them."

She turned and walked swiftly down the hall, leaving Daniel looking helplessly after her. Because it was only too true.

Oh, Sidonia. *What have we done?*

He remembered the Queen as he'd last seen her. Just before boarding, she'd beckoned to him and they moved out of the guards' earshot. "This time, it really is goodbye. Take care of my little daughter. She's going to have a rough time of it and for once in my life I'm wondering if I did the right thing."

He ached to take her in his arms but there were too many eyes on them. He contented himself instead with kissing her hand, and said with a confidence he didn't feel, "You have done the right thing and I'll watch over Sybilla as if she was my own. Once Darius gets to know her, he'll accept her. My people will too."

"I hope and pray you're right. But I may have let her in for a lifetime of heartache and sorrow, to no



purpose." Sidonia turned impatiently to the beckoning guard. "I'm coming."

They both forced themselves to smile and wave at the watching crowds and suddenly she was gone.

As the Queen's shuttle rose into the sky, he stood alone on the dock, watching it grow smaller and smaller until it disappeared from sight over the horizon.

When Sidonia left him that last time, everything that made life worth living disappeared with her. He'd never felt so desolate. Even the death of Darius's mother hadn't hit him quite so hard and that was when he realized that rather than easing, his grief had intensified.

Because he was a king and people were watching, he gave no outward indication of his pain. Instead, he waved and smiled, then boarded his own ship.

Now, watching Sybilla suffer through the same agony, he had no answers for her.

Dammit, Darius. Can't you at least fake it? Or is there no compassion in your makeup?

Then he followed her to give her the news about Timothy's call.

If the surgery succeeded, Darius would be on his feet within the month and there'd be no more blindness, wheelchair or crutches. All he had to do was get him to Aretz, and keep him safe while he was there.

One way or another, I'll give Sybilla happiness she deserves.

Daniel took the little princess's arm, and smiled down at her. "Good news. Timothy called and he's persuaded Doctor de Blanc to do the surgery."

"That's wonderful. When?"

"As soon as we can get him there. But there's a hitch."

"I should have guessed."

"Oh, it's nothing major. We'll be sending a decoy and a fake surgical team down to the clinic and keeping Darius on the space station. Doctor de Blanc will come to him instead of the other way around but no one is to know that. The P.I.D. got wind of our original plan and we still don't know the identity of their leader. That's why you can't even tell your family. Understood?"

"You mean, someone in my own family ...? Oh, please. Surely not."

"I'm afraid so. Unfortunately, you've become a target as well."

"But Momma ...."

Daniel shook his head. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. Let's go over there and sit. That was the other message. Your mother's gone and your little niece is now Queen of Lodebar. Carlo told me. He was with her at the end and she didn't suffer. The last words she spoke were a message to you. He gave it to me word for word. Maybe you'll understand it. I certainly don't."

Sybilla looked at him dry-eyed and as calm as ice. The tears would come later when she was alone. "What did Momma say?"

"Tell Sybilla the hyenas weren't necessarily right, but it's still up to her to guard the thrones.' Does that make any sense to you?"

"It makes perfect sense. I know what Momma meant and accept the burden she's laid on me. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to lie down for a while. It's been quite a night and we have an even longer day ahead. You go tell Darius the good news and don't worry about me. I'll be all right."

She got up from her chair and went out the door. Daniel watched her go.

Yes, you will be all right. You're your mother's daughter and she was the strongest person I've ever known.

## Chapter 6 Jemma

As Gideon approached the gate leading to his ship, he heard a soft voice behind him. "Please stand still and put your hands where I can see them. What you're feeling is a gun. It's silenced and I won't hesitate to use it. One Illyrian more or less makes no difference to me and dropping you would be a pleasure."

Hell.*How did they know?*

It was as if the speaker read his thoughts. "You're not the only one who uses doubles and one of yours is a triple, my friend. You see that tatty little cargo ship on the last dock? The one with the red dragon insignia? Start walking and if you're thinking about biting down on that hollow molar in your lower jaw, don't. One of my colleagues just planted a nerve gas bomb in the middle of the concourse. He's listening and if you fail to do as you're told, he'll trigger it. Oh, and while we're at it, let's get that beacon off you."

A hand reached around him and twisted a button off Gideon's jacket. As they entered the main bay of the cargo ship, something stung the back of his neck. His world went black, and he fell like a stone.

His captor prodded Gideon's still body with the toe of her boot. ""Excellent. Get him over to sick bay and prepped. I'll be in after I've had dinner and drinks with the captain. We should be out of orbit by then and there'll be plenty of time before that damn space station gets to its rendezvous. Does anyone want to make book on how long it'll take to break him?"

A watching crew member laughed. "He's an Illyrian. My money says you can't do it in any amount of time."

Another one countered, "You're on. I'll give you double to one Jemma will squeeze him dry within eight hours."

As two of the ship's medics placed the unconscious Gideon on a stretcher, the bets came fast and furious.

His captor grinned. After watching the action for a few minutes, she headed for the captain's quarters.

He's only a man and how tough can he be? I'd best remind the doctor to pull that molar before I start. There's no sense in having him bail just as the fun's beginning.

With the feeling of a job well done, she knocked on her commander's door. He was her current lover and she greeted him with a kiss. As he held her in his arms, Jemma thought of her coming encounter with Gideon and purred to herself.

An hour or so later, she heard the sounds of a ship preparing to leave and reluctantly threw back the covers. "You'd best get up on the bridge. I have work to do and the night's still young. If you want to watch, you may. I don't usually care for an audience but this one's special. I might have to pull out my whole bag of tricks."

The captain reached for his shirt. "You're a good operative and I have every faith in you. Yes, I'd very much like to watch. I almost hope he does hold out because I've heard enough about that bag of tricks of yours to make me want to see it. The only subject I'd enjoy seeing you work on more would be Darius himself."

"All things being equal, you may get that chance and in the not too distant future. Now you'd best get going. My subject's ready and waiting and none of us is getting any younger."

Gideon awakened on a table in what looked like a clinic. The light was so brilliant, it hurt his eyes. He went to cover them but couldn't move his hands. They'd been securely fastened by his sides, a strap across his chest held him down against the table and something was wound around his legs and feet. He was as naked as the day he was born and his lower jaw ached.

He explored it with his tongue. Instead of the hollow molar he searched for, he found an open wound.

The door opened and he turned his head to see an astoundingly beautiful woman. Her delicate skin was the color of milk and waves of blue-black hair flowed over her slim shoulders. Her sapphire eyes were the gentlest he'd ever seen and she wore an immaculate white coat with a badge on its right hand breast pocket.

Her melodious voice matched her looks. "My name is Jemma Carlane and yours is Gideon Zivon."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm Simeon Atachi and never heard of any Gideon Zivon. I buy antiquities for my father's business on Eos and I'd like to know just what in the hell is going on. Who do you think you are kidnapping innocent people like me? I demand that you let me go instantly."

The lady smiled. "Very nice and your ID bears out your story. But that doesn't alter the fact that your name is Gideon Zivon."

She picked something up with a pair of tweezers and brought it close to his eyes. "Now, why would an innocent dealer in antiquities need a poison-filled molar in his lower jaw? And you carry an interesting assortment of weaponry, honeypot. Since when are venom-tipped needles and killing stars antiques? They're hardly your usual items of self-defense but they're standard issue for agents like yourself. While we're on the subject, your father doesn't live on Eos. He's Vasek Zivon and Illyria's chief of intelligence, isn't he? Answer me."

Gideon returned her gaze calmly. "You're doing all the talking, lady, and I haven't the slightest idea what you're blathering about. Tell me, Jemma or whatever your name really is, are you the chief nut in this insane asylum or do you report to someone else? I just told you. My name's Simeon Atachi and I'm here to buy antiquities for my father. That's the beginning, middle and end."

Jamie picked up a needle gun. As she was loading it, she looked down into his eyes. "You're a handsome fellow and, under any other circumstances, you and I could have had a whole lot of fun. I hate to see a beautiful body like yours going to waste." Then she sighed. "Well, we may as well get this over with. Since you're programmed to resist chemical interrogation, this is probably a waste of time but we might as well go through the drill and do it by the book."

"I keep telling you. My name's Simeon Atachi and I have no idea what you're talking about."

Something stung his arm. Sinking into oblivion again, he was unconcerned. The implants in his system would be take over as soon as the drugs hit their sensors. No matter how much his tormentor questioned him, his programmed responses would remain the same.

Jemma was hooking a line to the needle she'd just inserted in Gideon's chest when the captain came in. "Any luck?"

"Not yet. In fact, it's pretty much what I expected. Even though he knows his situation's hopeless, he's totally stubborn."

"What are you planning to do?"

"When all else fails, try good old-fashioned torture. He has no programming protection against that and we'll see how much he can take before he breaks. He will break, my love. It's just a matter of when. Dammit, Gideon. Why don't you spare yourself a whole lot of misery and give us the contingency plan for Darius? Then we can pick him up and have done with this mess. Come on, Gideon. Give."

Vasek punched the keypad again. "After he failed to check in, we found his beacon in a spaceport trash can. He didn't board his ship and disappeared into thin air between the concourse and the dock. Six spacecraft and ten shuttles took off in that space of time. He could have been on any one of them."

"There is the second implant," remarked his communication officer, "but it won't activate for at least another hour. A spaceport official saw Gideon talking to a woman by one of the gates. That's the last anyone saw of him."

"A woman? Did he describe her?"

"He said she was a real eye-ful. Black hair, white skin, and absolutely stacked."

"Age?"

"He said she was quite young."

"Give me those manifests and destinations again."

The officer scrolled through his screens. Vasek pointed.

"The Berean Dragon'. She was taking on a cargo of cheap toys and was just done loading when Gideon disappeared. She's a freelance freighter out of one of the moons over Eos and does more than her fair share of smuggling. I'll wager there were arms mixed in with that shipment and she's headed for a rendezvous over Betelgeuse."

"What makes you suspect 'The Berean Dragon'?"

"Her captain's been unusually flush lately and his girlfriend fits the description. Until last week, 'The Berean Dragon' was stuck in port because of an unpaid docking bill. Suddenly, everything was paid up and the ship had a cargo of toys. The 'Dragon' had already filed a destination plan for Betelgeuse and gotten her clearances from the Tower when Gideon disappeared."

"How many hours has it been?" The officer looked worried.

"Six, and that's long enough for them to have given him a real working over. If that woman's who I think she is, he's in big trouble. Her name's Jemma Carlane and she used to be Sidonia's Chief of Security. She has an awesome reputation as an interrogator and all we can hope is that his implant will kick in. Then, maybe, we find him before it's too late."

"Timothy's chief admiral is online now. Seira and Nublis have battlecruisers in that general area doing an electronic sweep, but they need a pretext to board her."

"Tell 'em she's smuggling arms and cash to the P.I.D. and there's a terrorist aboard who's wanted for murder."

"There is?"

"Sure. After the treaty was signed, Jemma dropped out of sight. We have at one unsolved murder we can lay at her door and she may be the P.I.D. chief we're looking for."

Vasek grabbed the phone to call Daniel and give him the bad news.

"Are you going to revive him again?" asked the captain, "Frankly, I think you're wasting your time."

He carefully avoided looking at Jemma's handiwork because his stomach couldn't take it. Fortunately for his sensibilities, Gideon had been remarkably silent and as he didn't look too close, the captain stand it without throwing up or fainting. Never again would he accuse women of being the weaker sex. Not after something like this.

Jemma stripped off her surgical gloves. "If I revive him again, he'll probably die on me. No, I'd better let him rest for a while. Here, give me that sheet. I might as well cover him and lower the light. That's for your sake, dear, not his. He can't see anything and probably never will again, more's the pity. He was such an attractive young man too, now look at him."

"I'd rather not if you don't mind. As talented as you are, Jamie, you may have lost your bet."

"I ought to cut his throat and put him out of his misery on general principles. He's the first man I ever met who's tougher than I and I just can't believe this. There's got to be a way to break him, we still don't know if he warned the Emperor or not."

"Considering he's still insisting his name's Simeon Atachi and that he's just an antiques dealer, I don't see how you're going to accomplish it. Just watching you, I'd have confessed to just about anything and I wasn't even on the receiving end."

Gideon stirred slightly and Jemma moved quickly to the table. She moistened a washcloth with ice-water and carefully dribbled a tiny amount into his open mouth.

He passed his tongue over his swollen cracked lips and moaned slightly.

"Come on, love," she crooned, "Tell Mama what she wants to know then Mama won't have to hurt you any more. When you talked to Timothy, what did he say?"

"Simeon," he muttered, "Name is Simeon. Don't know any Tim -- Timothy. Antiqu -- antiques. Simeon."

Furiously, she drew on a fresh pair of gloves and picked up another instrument. "Don't you do this to me. Your name is Gideon. Do you understand? You can't win, dammit, so why don't you just give it up?"

As Jemma raised her hand to plunge the scalpel into Gideon's throat, it was caught from behind. She was abruptly pulled away from the table, then thrown to the floor. As she shrieked in outrage and shock, she was turned onto her face and her hands were pulled behind her back and cuffed together.

She heard a gasp and a male voice said "Get a medpack, stat. On second thought, bring two. It's all right, Gideon. You're safe now. No one's going to hurt you any more."

"I'm Simeon Atachi. I buy antiques for my father. I never heard of any Gideon."

Something blessedly cool replaced the fire in Gideon's eyes and the straps holding him to the table were loosened. Someone lifted one of his broken hands and he tried not to scream.

It's a trick. It's just another trick to get me to talk. My name is Simeon. Hold the thought. My name is Simeon.

The medic couldn't believe what he was seeing. Just on general principles, he wanted to take the bitch on the floor and pound her face into a pulp because nothing he could possibly imagine would begin to justify something like this.

Controlling himself with difficulty, he turned to his captain. "I've done all I can. He needs to be in a full-service facility and even then I'm not sure what they can do."

The captain shared his fury. "That jerk-off says he never talked and their damn crew actually had a pool going on whether he'd break or not. But it was that ...that ...."

Words failed him. He looked at Jemma's prone figure on the floor and his fists clenched. "Get that miserable bitch out of my sight before I forget myself and kill her on the spot."

The medic finished splinting and bandaging Gideon's hands, then sprayed a sterile analgesic solution over the cuts and abrasions. The gel in his eyes would kill the pain until they got him to a hospital. As for the other mutilations, he'd done the best he could. He'd already gone through two emergency packs and could have used a third. He started an intravenous solution to mitigate shock and dehydration, then hooked him up to a set of monitors.

After he was done, he beckoned to the captain. "He's as ready to move as he'll ever be. You'd better call his father and let him know."

"Is he going to make it?"

"That's anybody's guess. If I were him, I'm not sure I'd want to. We need to get him over to the hospital, then let the doctors decide. What's he saying?"

The captain put his ear to Gideon's mouth. "That his name is Simeon and something about antiquities."

Darius and Sybilla emerged from the shuttle bay into Nephtali's magnificent grand foyer and a young doctor in a teal-blue uniform came to meet them.

Sybilla gazed in awe at the plant-covered terraces soaring above them. "This place is incredible. I've never seen anything like it."

"Be that as it may, Your Highness, we have to hurry. The elevators are this way." Ahead stretched a shining lake with an island in its center and an immense fountain shooting skyward but there was no sign of any elevators.

The doctor grabbed Darius's wheelchair and guided it across a rustic stone bridge. As they approached the fountain, it became a tower. Water cascaded down its mirrored sides in great sheets, then shot skyward again.

As they approached a cunningly concealed entrance, their escort took a control from his pocket. A hidden door slid to one side, and they entered a luxuriously carpeted reception area that was all silver and gold. The doctor unlocked a control to one of the elevators. "We're taking you straight up to our clinic. It has an apartment next door where your security people can stay. There are accommodations on the other side for the surgical team and you should be quite comfortable. Would you prefer one bed or two? Or would you rather have separate bedrooms?"

Sybilla spoke without giving Darius a chance to reply. "One room with two beds. I'm--er--expecting."

The prince gave his bride a curious glance. "Thank you, that will be fine."

"We have our own dietary department and the clinic floor is entirely self-contained. We have an excellent security system as you can see, and outside access is severely restricted."

Rufus went ahead, opening doors and looking into the different rooms. Finally, he pronounced himself satisfied and beckoned to Darius and Sybilla.

Their guards stayed on either side of them, weapons at the ready, and the doctor looked slightly amused. "This is a favorite medical facility for heads of state and we like to think our security is second to none. His Majesty has directed us to accord you every courtesy. If there's anything you require, all you need do is ask."

"Illyrian goat cheese?" Darius's tone was mischievous.

The doctor never batted an eye. "I'm sure the kitchen has some in stock. How would you like it? Chilled or at room temperature?"

"His Highness detests Illyrian goat cheese." Rufus said sternly and Sybilla stifled a giggle. "However, I'm rather fond of it myself and wouldn't mind a slice or two after dinner. Chilled."

"I'll have the dietitian send a selection of menus as soon as you're settled and relay the major's request to the kitchen. We have an excellent selection of wines and liquors and a complete range of non-alcoholic beverages and juices."

The doctor beckoned to a middle-aged official in the same distinctive teal-blue uniform. "This is Paulus. As the complex's executive director, he'll be seeing to your daily needs. If you have any concerns or questions, please convey them to him. You'll find a map of the entire floor in your suite along with a guide to the communications system and a directory for Nephtali's services and amenities."

When Paulus and the doctor bowed, Darius inclined his head in return. "Thank you, Doctor. Paulus, I'm delighted to make your acquaintance. Please convey our thanks to His Majesty and tell him I hope to be able to repay it in kind someday."

Paulus went to a pair of ornately paneled double doors at the end of the corridor, opened them with a flourish and led the way inside. "This is your personal suite, Your Highness. I trust you and Her Highness will be comfortable here. You can take your meals here if you wish but there is a formal dining room down the hall."

Sybilla looked around curiously.

The suite's living room was paneled in rare inlaid woods and she felt as if she was about to disappear into the rose-colored carpet up to her ankles. Several groupings of comfortable looking furniture occupied three corners. The fourth wall was glass and covered by filmy draperies.

Paulus smiled. "When the curtains are open, you have a sensation of floating around out there among the stars. It's quite spectacular and our guests seem to really enjoy it. According to the forecast, there'll be a circular rainbow tomorrow afternoon and it'll be well worth seeing. The wall is one way glass which means that no one can see in."

"That's good to know," growled Rufus, "except I can't imagine who would be out there."

"We see our share of passing ships. Nephtali's a popular attraction and many luxury cruisers go out of their way to view it. We frequently have maintenance personnel out there and our guests are encouraged to don suits and take a tour around its outer parameters."

"I think I'd enjoy that," said Darius.

Rufus shook his head. "You're staying put right here until it's over and one way glass or no, those



curtains are staying closed. You can look at tomorrow's rainbow on that screen and there's to be no wandering around the complex. The fewer people who see you the better and that goes for you too, Sybilla. Any communications will be through Paulus or me and you're to stay away from the SynoNet and the phones. Understood?"

"You might know it," muttered Darius. "I might as well still be a prisoner on Seira for all the freedom I have now. Here I am in the most legendary resort in the universe and I'm not even going to get to see it."

"It's for your own safety. That reminds me. I'd best check in with your father and let him know we've arrived."

Sybilla looked sympathetically at her husband. Then she opened the bedroom door.

Like the living room, it was huge. Gilded walls were festooned with rosy silken draperies and the two enormous canopied beds looked like a pair of clouds.

When she explored the alcove containing the bathroom, she found two. Each contained a large selection of fluffy color-coordinated towels and Sybilla noticed a soft green velvet robe in hers.

Paneled in rich black marble and gold, the first bathroom boasted an elaborate shower and whirlpool tub, and male toiletries lined the counter around the gold-plated sink.

The second was a symphony of soft ocean colors with silver trim and delicate fittings carved from solid crystal. It contained an enormous shower and whirlpool and a selection of perfumes, oils and lotions that boggled her imagination. The fountain bubbling in one corner was surrounded by delicate flowering plants and minute colored fish flickered back and forth in the crystal pool at its base.

This is so beautiful, I could spend the whole time here. *I wonder who feeds the fish.*

When Paulus's voice spoke behind her, Sybilla almost jumped out of her skin. "Should you desire privacy, there's a provision for draperies around each bed. There's a personal maid on call for you and a valet for your husband. You'll find two dressing rooms through the other archway and a study just off the living room. I've taken the liberty of ordering refreshments and they should be arriving any moment."

If this is a prison, it's certainly a luxurious one, thought Sybilla. *If I were you, Darius, I wouldn't complain too much. The Seirans could just as easily have just stuck you in a hospital bed and left you there. In fact, that's what I'd expected them to do.*

Paulus continued "There's a connecting door into the clinic and His Highness will be able to spend most of his time here. Each bed has a set of monitors as well as a complete medical observation system and there's an oxygen and emergency setup behind the headboard."

"Are you saying this is really a hospital room?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. But we've tried to make it as comfortable and non-clinical as possible."

"Well, you've certainly achieved that. I would never have guessed."

"His Majesty's father spent a great deal of time in clinical settings when he was younger and had some strong feelings when it came to this one. He owns Nephtali, you know, and he and his late partner, Lord Zachary Fortier, designed most of it themselves."

"Lord Zachary? Wasn't he married to Princess Deborah?"

"The very same and a finer gentleman you'd never want to meet. He was an architect and engineer and designed that magnificent fountain around the elevators. His father-in-law, the late Emperor Julian, was a famous horticulturist and they commissioned him to do the gardens. When Lord Zachary died, he left his share of Nephtali to Ephraim. We were concerned at the time because the station was getting older and in need of renovation. But Ephraim's fond of this place and made the necessary investment. There are several of these resorts now but Nephtali was the first. As far as I'm concerned, it's still the best."

"Oh, I'm sure it is. That little fountain is unique and these rooms are quite lovely."

"They are, aren't they? The Dowager Empress Thamar personally designed the bathrooms and she's particularly fond of that fountain. The fish are a rare species from Seira's southern ocean and I take care of them myself. I'm glad you like it."

Sybilla decided she liked Paulus too. She smiled shyly at him and his eyes twinkled in return. Deciding this wouldn't be as much of an ordeal as she'd feared and she followed him out to the living room again.

While Hugo was attending Darius on Nephtali, a decoy and dummy surgical team landed on the annex roof by shuttle.

As expected, there was a lightning raid by the P.I.D's terrorists. Alexander and his men were waiting and there were no survivors.

Shortly after the P.I.D. attack, an unruly group of protesters showed up with the press in tow. When they demanded to see Dr. de Blanc's new patient, Hugo invited their delegates inside, along with one pool reporter. Then he personally conducted them upstairs to meet a bewildered old lady who spoke only Illyrian.

The reporter gave the protesters a dirty look, and left.

After talking urgently amongst themselves, the delegates then demanded to see the shuttle.

Hugo conducted them to the rooftop landing site where he encouraged them to inspect the craft. "What you expect to find, I really don't know." he'd said mildly as he ushered them inside the cabin. "The lady is an elderly aunt of King Daniel's on his mother's side. Devoted family man that he is, His Majesty has left this shuttle at the princess's disposal until she's ready to return to Illyria. Since crowds make Her Highness nervous, he had her brought directly here instead of subjecting her to the rigors of a public arrival. The Illyrians are quite protective of their women, you know."

"Oh sure," sneered one of the protesters. "So much so, they take them into battle. Use them for human shields, I hear."

That was it for Hugo. "My patience is at an end and this interview is terminated. Since you obviously haven't found what you're looking for, you will please leave. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

Gesturing to the waiting Alexander to show the protest group out, he left the roof, banging the door

behind him. Once the chastened group had gone on its way, he returned, and Alexander flew him up to Nephtali.

A slight brown-haired woman quietly left the annex a short time later. A character actress hired by Alexander for the occasion, she'd never been to Illyria in her life and recited from a prepared script of which she hadn't understood one word. Minus her wig, makeup and cane, the pickets failed to recognize her and she was too busy counting the proceeds from one of the most lucrative gigs of her career to worry about what it all meant.

"Call me any time," she told the amused Alexander, "because, darlin', you are just about the cutest man I've ever seen. All you have to do is whistle and I'll come runnin'. You aren't married are yer?"

He looked at her sadly. "Alas, ma'am, I am. Unfortunately, she's one of the richest and most jealous women in the universe. Not to mention the ugliest. Otherwise I'd take you in my arms right now, sweep you off your feet, and carry you straight to paradise. I can tell you're a creature of great passion and sensual appetites. Under any other circumstances, we could have made beautiful music together."

The actress's lips twitched. "I suppose I deserved that. Tell me, Doctor, do you say that to all the girls?"

"Only the ones who come on to me. To tell the truth, I'm unmarried and likely to remain so. Hugo and I have been an item for years. His wife and children are just a cover but let's keep that between us, okay?"

She gave him a sharp look. "And I'm the Empress of Seira. As I said, Doctor, you can call me any time. Incidentally, you'd do great in the fertilizer business. You certainly do know how to spread it around."

When Hugo told Leda about the exchange, she wasn't as amused as he'd expected. "Alexander's something of a mystery, isn't he? There could have been some truth to what he said. He's never been married and he shows very little interest in women."

Hugo was annoyed. "You should know better than that. First of all, it's none of our business. I happen to know Alexander adores women and for your information, he has been married. His wife was killed in a bombing right after he completed medical school. He told me about it after we'd been working on a kid for hours and lost him on the table. He didn't want to stop the resuscitation and I had to damn near cold-cock him to get him out of there. After we went to my office, he got drunk and it came pouring out. The kid was a bombing victim."

"I'm sorry, Hugo, I just didn't think. I never thought of Alexander in connection with anything like that. He grew up in one of the most powerful and wealthy families in the universe and had everything handed him on a platter. Who was she?"

"His wife? She was the daughter of one of his father's ministers and her upbringing was as privileged as Alexander's. They were childhood sweethearts."

"Did they ever catch who did it?"

"No. To this day, they don't know who it was. It was a random bombing for which no one ever took credit. Alexander's wife wasn't even a target. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time, waiting for him to pick her up after a shopping expedition. He was late because he'd gotten caught in traffic. Someone left a package under a nearby table and that was all she wrote."

"Is that why he went into intelligence?"

"Probably. And you and I know all about that, don't we?"

Leda thought of her murdered parents and Hugo's slaughtered mother and brothers. "A person never really gets over something like that, do they? Poor Alexander. I had no idea he was a member of the same club."

"He and I talked for a long time that night and he got very drunk. That was when I asked him if he'd take over the Institute. He said yes."

"You're quitting?"

"Perhaps."

Hugo crossed his fingers behind his back. The surgery on Darius was still a secret and even Leda didn't know about his visits to Nephtali.

Darius barely needed anyone's attention after his highly successful surgery. He was on his feet in an astonishingly brief time and his physical independence even gave Rufus pause.

From the moment he was permitted out of bed, Darius set himself a strenuous exercise regimen over and above his prescribed course of therapy and physically began to come back to where he'd been before his ignominious capture two years before.

As Hugo explained, he first reconstructed the damaged bones in Darius's legs, strengthening the original tissue with a delicate combination of rods and pins fashioned from a special material compatible with his own systems. With the help of DNA treatments and special injections, the prince's system accepted the artificial material which was now contributing to his bone growth.

"In a year or so," said Hugo, "it will be as if you never had a problem. With the exception of the scars of course."

The doctor was less sanguine about Darius's episodes of blindness. After studying the prince's scans for days, he was still dubious. "This is the most difficult type to cure precisely because it is intermittent. If they hadn't gotten these scans during an episode it would be impossible to pinpoint it. There's a new implant I can try, but it's experimental and there's no guarantee it'll work."

Darius didn't hesitate. "Go ahead. It certainly beats the alternative."

To Hugo's surprise, the implant did work and the prince's episodes of blindness never recurred. He couldn't have asked for a more cooperative patient and Nephtali's facilities proved to be as good as his Institute's, or maybe even better.

From Sybilla's point of view, the success was a mixed blessing. Darius had at least some need of her before. Now he had none.

While her husband was scrupulously courteous in private as well as in public, his attitude remained cool and he made it clear he cared little for her company. When she heard a rumor around the royal court that Darius was seeing a certain young countess after hours, the king advised her to discount the story. Then

he banished the offending lady to her country home on Illyria's southernmost border.

After that, Daniel kept Darius firmly under his eye.

The remaining ladies got the message. There was no more talk about the prince's roving glance and the couple settled into a boring marital routine.

The only excitement occurred on the memorable day when Sybilla confronted the cook and the entire household staff in the palace kitchen. It happened a few days after their return from Nephtali. Darius was upstairs resting and Sybilla sat at the lunch table with Daniel.

The princess looked at the unappetizing food on her plate for several minutes. "Is this what they normally serve you, or is it something they dreamed up in my honor?"

Daniel was somewhat puzzled. "This is what I usually have. Why? Is something wrong with it?"

Sybilla frowned down at her plate as if seeking inspiration. "You bet there is. I've been looking at the household accounts. For what you're paying, you should be getting a whole lot better than this slop. This entire meal is cheap and preprocessed. It doesn't even taste good and has no nutritional value whatsoever. The damn stuff is so easy to prepare, you might as well put a heating unit in the dining room and fix it yourself. Then you can save the cost of a lazy cook and kitchen staff who do nothing but sit around on their fat behinds. They're probably stealing from you as well and I have absolutely no doubt your staff and their families are eating very well indeed."

Daniel hadn't had this much fun in years. "Shall we go take a look?"

When he heard a gasp from the parlormaid who was handing around the dishes, the king snapped, "If you know what's good for you, you'll stay put and keep your mitts off the intercom."

He pushed back his chair and held out his hand to his daughter-in-law. "After you."

They found the staff comfortably seated around a massive, well-stocked table in the sunny kitchen.

Sybilla took one look at the heaping plates and serving dishes. "What did I tell you? There's no preprocessed food here. This is the real thing, and very good it looks too."

Dead silence had fallen and the staff sat frozen into a tableau. Their mouths were open and their collective expression was that of a rabbit trapped in an oncoming vehicle's headlights.

While Daniel bit his lips to keep from laughing, Sybilla walked slowly around the loaded table, enumerating its culinary delights as she went.

"Fresh strawberry pie. How very nice. Those are some good-looking cheese muffins aren't they, Your Majesty? Ah, what have we here? Stuffed roast pork unless I miss my guess. Done with a side of oven roasted potatoes and fresh baby peas, yet. Yum."

She touched the roast's glaze and tasted her finger. "Just as I suspected. Honey and ginger, no less. Oh, and here's a healthy fruit salad. For the diet conscious among you, no doubt. Your Majesty, as you can plainly see, we've been eating in the wrong section of the palace. Henceforth, we should take our meals down here, unless your oh so talented staff would care to share their largesse."

The cook rose to his feet blustering. "Your Majesty. I can assure you these are only ...."

"Only what?" Daniel's rumble cut into a silence so thick he could have heard the proverbial pin drop.

"Leftovers?" offered the cook.

"Leftovers? From what?"

"We need to keep the staff happy, don't we?"

At the sight of Daniel's face, Sybilla decided she'd better intervene. "You and I," she told the cook, "will meet here first thing tomorrow morning. We'll go over the menus, and all food purchases will henceforth be approved by me. His Majesty has no objection to the staff eating well and neither do I. But from now on, whatever's served at this table had better be leftovers or the same fare that's coming upstairs. Do I make myself clear?"

She turned to the housekeeper. "While I'm on the subject, the supplies in our bathrooms are woefully substandard. My bedsheets have holes in them and this morning I saw mouse droppings in my husband's room. After I'm finished with the cook, we're going over your inventory and purchasing records. Then you and I will inspect this place from top to bottom."

The fuming housekeeper drew herself up to her full height, easily topping Sybilla by a full head. Then she glared down at the little princess. "That's for the King to say not you, and His Majesty hasn't complained. I've worked here nigh on twenty years and my mother and my grandmother before me. Never in my entire life have I been treated this way. You're in Illyria now, little missy, not Lodebar. We do things differently here."

"I can see that. Cleanliness is obviously not your forte and it would seem to me, Madam Housekeeper, you've been here twenty years too long. There's the door and good day to you."

The housekeeper looked indignantly at Daniel. "Your Majesty, she can't fire me. Only you can do that. As I just told Her Loftiness here, you certainly haven't complained."

"Princess Sybilla is now the mistress of this house," said the King, "and can hire and fire whomever she pleases. But I'll admit I'm at fault for not having paid more attention. Had I done so, I would have complained long before this. But you're right about one thing. Her Highness is not going to fire you."

The housekeeper turned back to Sybilla with a triumphant smile.

"I'm not finished. Her Highness is not terminating your services because I'm doing it for her. I'm not firing you because of your slovenly housekeeping, although that is a good reason. You addressed Her Highness in a disrespectful manner and I will not tolerate such rudeness in this house. You'll receive one month's salary in lieu of notice and I expect you to be out of here first thing in the morning."

Sybilla raised an eyebrow at that. Then she said quietly. "The steward will assist you with your packing and nothing will leave these premises that is not yours by right."

"Are you calling me a thief?"

"Not necessarily. But long experience has taught me it's a wise procedure to follow in cases like yours. As long as you leave quietly and keep your mouth shut, I'll give you the customary references and have

no doubt you'll soon find another position."

"If I leave, the rest of the staff will leave with me. Then where will you be?"

Daniel looked at each of the faces around the table. "Is that true?"

Several servants cleared their throats and a couple began playing with their forks. Finally, the steward spoke. "No, Your Majesty. I wish to remain in your service and anticipate no difficulties with Her Highness as the new mistress."

When a murmur of assent echoed around the table, the housekeeper burst into tears. "Is this how we support each other in our time of need? How can you behave with such treachery?"

The steward put an arm around her shoulders. "Come. You're distraught and you need to lie down for a while. I'll have Maria bring you a cup of tea and I'll be up later to see how you are. And now, Your Majesty, I'd better come upstairs and clear the table. Then I'll see about some food that would be more to Her Highness's liking."

"Fine," said the King. "You can notify us as soon as it's ready. Now, we'll bid you all a very good day. Enjoy the rest of your meal."

On the following morning, Sybilla began interviewing the would-be replacements for the housekeeper's position and the maids' vituperative comments about their former supervisor were a real eye-opener.

She finally selected a quiet country girl named Lucia who'd said little. However, she had plenty of ideas as to how the job should be done.

Sybilla hoped Lucia would develop into an ally but the girl kept her distance.

The steward was more forthcoming and it was from him the princess learned how unpopular the former housekeeper had been. It didn't take her long to uncover the long-standing system of kickbacks between purveyors of goods to the palace and certain members of the staff.

The chief cook was a major offender. He'd been buying food for the royal table at outrageously marked up prices to reflect the substantial kickbacks he was being paid. After selling the food to local restaurants and pocketing the proceeds, he proceeded to serve Daniel pre-prepared meals obtained at a substantial discount from a relative in the business.

The staff would never have stood for that kind of treatment and the cook depended on their silence. They continued to receive the high quality meals they'd always had and the situation might have continued indefinitely had Sybilla not come to live in the palace.

The day she and the king came downstairs, the cook saw the handwriting on the wall. He'd socked away his considerable earnings in gilt-edged Nublian stocks and choosing the better part of valor, beat a voluntary retreat before the princess fired him.

He moved to the legendary resort planet, Eos, where he opened a successful ethnic restaurant and married a retired courtesan. Everything went well until the day he got into a dispute with an irate customer who stabbed him to death with a steak knife. But that's another story.

Three months later, Sybilla sat with Gideon on a sunlit terrace just off the main drawing room of Daniel's palace.

It had been Daniel's idea to bring Gideon to the palace after his release from the hospital. Looking after him would give Sybilla something to do and he would provide her with some much-needed company.

Sybilla had done more than her share of nursing during the war. Gideon's terrible injuries didn't phase her a bit and, as Daniel hoped, it proved to be a happy decision for both of them.

They were playing cards and Gideon was winning. The deck they were using looked like any other but each card was marked with a configuration of raised dots so that he could tell their denominations with his fingers.

When he first brought them out, he explained to Sybilla, "This is called Braille. It's a reading and writing system for the blind that's been in common use on Aretz for as far back as anyone can remember. I prefer it to all of this electronic gadgetry. For one thing, it's faster. Besides that, Braille's simpler to use and I don't have that never-ending worry about batteries and solar power."

He was referring to his sonar imager and miniature text-speech computer. The computer sat at his elbow within easy reach and the sonar imager was clipped to his lapel.

Even though he would have been the first to admit that he would have found impossible to get along without them, Gideon had an ongoing love/hate relationship with both devices. However, his mild sniping at his electronic companions was the closest he ever came to complaining about his condition.

When he won his fourth hand in a row, Sybilla threw down her cards in disgust. "You're cheating."

Gideon looked hurt. "How could I possibly be cheating? I'm as blind as a bat and clumsy besides. Come on, Sybilla. Cough up. You owe me fifteen credits on that last hand alone."

She grudgingly counted out the coins. "Skinflint! I should have known better than get myself suckered by a hustler like you. You've already got my next month's allowance and I'm going to have to ask Daniel for an advance again. What do you do with all your money anyway?"

"What money? Unlike you well-to-do royals, I've always had to work for a living and my pension doesn't go that far. That's why I have to supplement my income as best I can by playing cards with a fish like you. And Daniel, of course. Where is he, by the way?"

"He and Darius left on a hunting trip early this morning. Daniel wasn't that keen to go but you know Darius. Three days at home, he gets cabin fever, then starts climbing the walls. He's brought back so much fish and game, the cook doesn't know what to do with it. The freezers are full, my pet charities have said, 'No more,' and I'm starting to run out of recipes."

"Oh, he'll simmer down eventually. I remember how I was at his age and I hadn't been cooped up for two years. Now he can ride and walk again, he can't get enough of being outside where the action is."

"The doctor says he can start flying again soon but I regard that as a mixed blessing. He's already applied to the Interplanetary Pilots' Association for his license and they're reactivating it. He can go anywhere he wants inside Illyria without it but needs it everywhere else. Daniel's ordered a customized five-seater for his next birthday as a surprise. Once he's got that and his license, I suppose I'll never see



him at all."

Gideon caught the despair in her voice and frowned. In his opinion, she was worth ten times more than Timothy's daughter and he considered Darius a complete idiot for not appreciating what he had. So it had been an arranged marriage and neither had been in love with the other. By all accounts, Sybilla was no raving beauty but Darius hadn't been any prize.

Compared to Nublis's or Seira's, Daniel's royal house was not particularly wealthy and decades of war had made a considerable dent in its assets. A significant amount of rebuilding had been necessary after the depredations of the last war and Illyria had more than its fair share of fatherless children and disabled veterans. He was now among their number, he supposed, but his father had promised him a supervisory position as soon as he completed his convalescence.

Sybilla realized with a start that it was her turn to play. As she studied her hand and debated which way to go, she said apologetically, "I'm sorry, Gideon. I was woolgathering. What did you just ask me?"

"It wasn't terribly important. I was wondering where Darius and Daniel are today."

"They left first thing this morning to hunt wild boar. When I told Daniel they'd better either miss or eat their game on-site, he just laughed."

"What did Darius say?"

"He shrugged. Then he kissed me on the cheek and wished me a pleasant day. That's what he always says."

"He doesn't spend much time with you, does he?"

"Oh, he's just getting the last two years out of his system. It has a lot more to do with that than it does with me."

"I enjoy spending time with you and I would say that if I could see."

"Why, Gideon, you aren't flirting with me, are you?"

"Maybe I am, and it's about someone did. You're a charming lady and your husband shouldn't leave you alone so much. I enjoy female company as much as the next man and that didn't stop when--" he hesitated, "when this happened."

"Be that as it may, I'm going out with three in my hand. What have you got?"

"Hah. I undercut you again. I've only got two. Three plus my bonus for undercutting you makes twenty-eight. At one cent a point, let's see what that comes up to. Aha. This hand'll buy me an entire cup of coffee, maybe even a beer."

"Oh, shoot. You do it to me every time and I already told you I was flat broke." Sybilla looked at the cards on the table again. "No, that score's wrong. You haven't been subtracting your own points, you crook. This hand's only one, not three. You were cheating and you have been all along. Oh, I'm lucky I found this out before you ruined me."

"Something tells me we'd better give up this particular game while we're still friends and my hunger pangs

are saying it's lunch time." Gideon felt his timepiece. "I'm right. It is lunchtime. I don't know about you but I'm hungry enough to eat a bear."

"That might just be what you'll be getting, or elk or something equally wild. Oh, what I wouldn't give for a domestic lamb chop for a change or a poached chicken breast. This place is getting more and more like the banquet at the beginning of that ridiculous video. Without the female captives and belly dancers of course."

"What video?"

"The one that's supposedly about Darius's grandfather and my grandmother. It's called 'The Mountain King.' Did you ever get to see it?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. It would seem your grandmother was quite a lively girl. Frisking through fountains and forest glades in the buff like that. Tsk."

"Actually, she was nothing of the sort and would have had a purple fit if she'd ever seen that video. Why, Momma ...."

It hit Sybilla again that Sidonia was gone forever and she abruptly fell silent.

Gideon reached across the table and took her hand. "It's all right. My mother and I were close too and I lost her when I was just about your age. It's why I went into the intelligence service."

"How old are you?"

"I'll be thirty on my next birthday. I hadn't expected to be spending it quite this way but I knew the risks and this kind of thing goes with the territory. Did you know your brother Carlo once made me undress in a snow bank? In subzero weather yet."

"Carlo did that? Why?"

"It's a long story but I can assure you there was never anything in the least bit untoward between us. We wound up the best of friends and spent the remainder of that evening in a nearby tavern getting pie-eyed on their local brand of hot spiced wine."

"You spent quite a bit of time in Lodebar, didn't you?"

"That I did. So much so I'd begun to consider the place my second home."

"Wasn't it dangerous?"

"Not nearly as dangerous as Giulliam's spaceport. In all my years in Lodebar, I never got caught. One moment's carelessness on Seira was all it took. It makes wonder if this damnable war will ever really be over. In some ways, it's worse now than it was before."

"I know. That really came home to me when I was trying to find a replacement for the cook. The security requirements were unreal and I lost a couple of promising applicants because they couldn't pass muster. This business of having to carry a gun and wear body armor all the time is getting old, especially now the hot weather is coming on. And I worry about assassination every time Daniel and Darius leave the palace."

"I agree with you that it's no way to live, but I really don't know the answer. Even the Emperor of Seira looks over his shoulder these days. According to my friend, Alexander, the security at their Spring Solstice festival was thicker than fleas at a shaggy dog convention."

"We'd planned on being there but Darius was otherwise engaged."

"So was I and not by intention either. Speaking of your husband, he was kind of sweet on Timothy's daughter, wasn't he? Or is that a sore subject?"

"It's a very sore subject and we don't talk about her if we can avoid it. It's my understanding Princess Genevra is to make her official bow in the autumn. She'll be the debutante of the year, of course, and with her money and background, should make an absolutely brilliant marriage."

Ouch. That sounds like unfinished business to me. Darius spent two years on Seira. Is it possible he's still carrying a torch for her? I've heard she's really something to see. Not that it would do me any good, of course.

Gideon reached for his cane and stood up. "Come on. Let's go see what game dish the kitchen's come up with this time. And you may very well be right. It could be bear."

Anna Lisa poked her head around the door of her brother's office. "Are you busy, Carlo?"

After he let his siblings take their pick of the late Queen's personal possessions, Carlo had Sidonia's former workroom refurbished. Sybilla asked for her mother's desk and big leather chair and both pieces had long since been shipped to her new home in Illyria.

He himself kept nothing. When Sybilla asked why, he said simply, "Momma's memory is enough. I don't want to be reminded of her everywhere I look."

Queen Sidonia's office decor had been surprisingly feminine, with delicate flower paintings on the rose-colored walls and silver-framed pictures of her children and household pets scattered everywhere. Crystal bowls of potpourri had adorned the tables and the desk along with brilliantly decorated porcelain vases of whatever cut flowers were in season at the time. At least one of the palace's multitude of pet cats would be sprawled in an easy chair or even on the desk itself, and she'd had a large cushioned basket in one of the corners for her favorite hunting hound, an ancient drooling creature of uncertain temper named Boris.

In contrast to his late mother, Carlo's taste was spartan. His immense black desk looked to Anna Lisa like a granite cube. The flower paintings, silver framed pictures and easy chairs were gone and the new rug he'd put in the place of Sidonia's rosy carpet was gray. Several antique maps of Illyria and Lodebar adorned on the walls and the only color was in the leather-bound contents of the floor to ceiling bookcases on either side of the desk. The palace cats knew it was more than their lives were worth to invade Carlo's domain and Sidonia's ancient hound Boris had long since join his illustrious ancestors.

Without waiting for her brother's answer, Anna Lisa curled herself up in one of the two black leather wing chairs in front of the desk. Then she waited for him to look up.

He kept reading for several minutes, then without raising his head, he asked "What is it?"

"I just wanted to see you. I never see you at breakfast or dinner, you have lunch at your desk and you work far into the night."

Carlo signed and sealed the document he'd been reading. Then he threw down his pen and smiled at his sister. "I'm always in the dining room at seven. If you ever got up before ten we could have breakfast together, but you're right about lunch and dinner. I'm trying to tie up all the loose ends before we leave for Aretz. Or had you forgotten the beginning of the social season?"

"No, I hadn't forgotten. But I wasn't sure about you."

"Momma already made plans for your coming out ball at the Embassy and left strict instructions that nothing was to interfere with your debut. Baron's father will preside over the Grand Council in my absence and this is the last of the paperwork."

He touched a button on the side of the desk. A young man entered and Carlo handed him a sheaf of documents. "See these get out this afternoon and notify Count Kardanian that my desk is clear. He knows where the ciphers are and the current codes. I'm taking the rest of the day off and you know where to reach me. Unless there's an aerial attack or this building's burning to the ground, I would prefer not to be disturbed."

The young man bowed. "Very good, Your Highness, and may I wish you both a pleasant trip."

"Thank you. When you're done with these and your call to the count, you may as well take the rest of the day off too."

When the secretary had gone, Carlo rose from his chair and held his hands out to Anna Lisa. "Come on, little one, I'm all yours for the rest of the day. Let's go find Baron. Then we can all go out and paint the town red."

Anna Lisa's face lit up. "Do you really mean that? Baron's in the solarium with Baby Alia and her nurse. I just came from there and it's time for Alia's nap."

Carlo thought about Alia's mother and his face darkened. Seeing it, Anna Lisa slipped her hand into his. "I think about her too. At least Solaria and Momma are together and we have Alia."

Carlo squeezed her hand in return. "Sybilla called this morning. She said the baby kicked for the first time and even Darius seemed pleased."

"Darius." Anna Lisa made his name sound like a snake's hiss. "Poor Sybilla. What could Momma have been thinking when she forced her to marry that man? Then she sent her off to Illyria, of all godforsaken places."

"Actually, she seems quite happy and Illyria's a beautiful country. The palace and the capital are very attractive and the lake they sit on is one of the prettiest on Betelgeuse."

"But the Illyrians are so uncouth. I've heard the food is dreadful and the climate's worse."

"Neither is all that different from ours. Far from being uncouth, the Illyrians are renowned for their culture and beautiful manners. Prince Darius speaks more than a dozen languages and King Daniel is reputed to be a fine landscape artist."

"Be that as it may, Darius is still a cripple and he's got a vicious temper. Besides that, he's in love with someone else and Sybilla knows it. That's why she tricked him into making her pregnant the night before they were married."

"*What* did you say?"

"Momma set it up with King Daniel's help. Didn't you know?"

"No, I didn't. Who is Darius supposed to be in love with?"

Anna Lisa almost purred. "Why, Emperor Timothy's daughter Genevra, of course. They say she's absolutely gorgeous. Momma and Daniel drugged Darius, then they put Sybilla in his bed. He thought he was having a dream about Genevra because Sybilla was wearing her perfume and a wig. She and Momma told me the next day."

"He doesn't *know* ? How does Sybilla explain her pregnancy?"

"Darius did his duty on their wedding night but I doubt he's touched her since. Knowingly, that is."

"If that's the case, I don't know which of them to be more sorry for. That's got to have been a dreadful humiliation for poor Sybilla and heaven knows what Darius will do if he finds out. I had no idea Momma ever did anything like that. If I'd known what she was up to, I'd have stopped her."

"That's why she didn't tell you. Momma knew how you felt and wasn't taking any chances."

"She told *you* ."

"Everyone tells me everything. That's because they think I'm stupid. Dumber than a hammer, that's what they call me."

Carlo looked at her narrowly. "You're not, are you, little sister? There are times when I think you're the smartest one in the family. Had Momma realized that, she'd have married you off to Darius rather than Sybilla."

"But she didn't, did she? And now Momma's gone, I intend to pick out my own husband."

"I imagine you will. Just do me a favor and make sure he's filthy rich and from a good family."

"Oh, I'll do that all right. A rich man is as easy to love as a poor one and I like the finer things in life. When we were on Seira, I saw a couple of possibilities. They seemed to like me too, especially Timothy's son Jonathan."

"To be honest, I saw a possibility too and after what you've told me, I may pursue it. That's assuming I don't come across someone more appealing during the season."

"Well, remember what you told me. Money and family are very important, you know."

"Oh, she's got both. Actually, I was quite taken with her."

"Who is she?"

"I thought you would have guessed by now. Timothy's daughter Genevra, of course."

Darius frowned at the delicate mechanism on his workbench. He was concentrating so hard, he didn't hear Sybilla come in.

When she spoke, he jumped and the two pieces he was holding fell to the floor. "Don't sneak up on me like that."

He bent to retrieve them and saw the look on her face. "Sybilla? What is it?"

Her voice broke. "It's Gideon. He--he ...."

Darius took her by the shoulders. "Whatabout Gideon?"

"Rufus found him in the bathtub. He'd cut his wrists."

"Is he ...?"

"No. But it was close. If he'd come in even a couple of minutes later-- Oh, Darius, what would make him do such a thing? He's always seemed so--so ...."

"Cheerful? Yes, he was. Almost too much so. Dammit, I should have spent more time with him. Where is he now?"

"On his way to the clinic in a MedEvac. They flew him out a couple of minutes ago. Daniel's with him and he told me to come get you. There's a flyer waiting."

As they went up to the rooftop landing site, Darius asked, "Did he leave a note or anything?"

"Yes, he did and it's addressed to you. After Daniel read it, he showed it to me. But I'm not sure ...."

"Where is it?"

Sybilla took a folded paper from her pocket.

Darius snatched it from her and read its contents. "Now I understand your hesitation. How long has this been going on?"

"How long has what been going on?"

"This thing between you and Gideon. That's what it's all about isn't it? All those afternoons you two were supposedly playing cards on the terrace. Were you reading him love poems while you held hands or were you snuggled down together in his bed? Oh, this is rich. If I so much as look at another woman, Father banishes her and all the time, you-- you and he .... Oh, this is too much."

"How can you possibly say such a thing? And about Gideon, of all people? He's not only one of your

best friends, he almost died for you. There's been absolutely nothing going on. If you'd been around more, you'd have known that."

"Then, explain this!" Darius shoved the paper in her face. "The man says he loves you and can't live with it any longer. He wouldn't have done such a thing without encouragement. And don't think I don't know about your customs in Lodebar. You and your siblings all have different fathers, don't you? A man's only purpose there is to service women and give them children. Isn't that right?"

"This isn't Lodebar and there's never been anyone but you."

"More's the pity. Well, you had your wedding night and you're certainly pregnant by me. Or is there something else you've overlooked telling me? For a one shot deal, I'm either amazingly accurate or that child isn't mine."

Sybilla took a deep breath. "If you have any doubts, I'll get a DNA test as soon as we reach the clinic. You can even watch if you want just to make sure they don't switch the results."

"All right. You do that and I will watch. And, lady, if that child ain't mine, I'll be filing for divorce while the lab report's still warm."

"Oh, the baby's yours, all right. But if you're that hot for a divorce, Your Highness, I'll give you one any time you say." The words caught in her throat and she turned away to hide her sudden rush of tears.

As the pilot reached down to help Sybilla into the flyer's cabin, Darius frowned.

Is she be telling the truth? And if she is, what does Gideon's letter mean? If I care so little, why am I reacting this way? This surely can't be jealousy. Not of her.

He reflected somewhat guiltily on his fantasies about Genevra and how desperately he yearned for her each time she came to his bed. An illusion she might be, he was unfaithful to Sybilla each time he took her in his arms.

His dreams of his beloved Jenny were becoming increasingly vivid. The last time he'd awakened from being with his phantom mistress, he'd scented a trace of her perfume on his pillow and could have sworn he saw the swirl of her white gown as his bedroom door was closing.

It had never occurred to him that Sybilla might have fantasies of her own or that any man would be even remotely interested in his homely little wife.

But Gideon was *blind!*

The doctors had said his chances for a normal life were limited at best and Darius thought he could understand why he might have been attracted to Sybilla. With her melodious voice, bright intelligence and gentle warmth, the little princess must have been a brilliant ray of light in Gideon's dark existence. Under the circumstances, it wasn't surprising he'd fallen in love with her.

Darius had to admit his bride's limber supple body had been an agreeable surprise on their wedding night and had he not been so resentful, he might have continued their physical relationship.

Sybilla had actually given him considerable pleasure and he wouldn't have resisted if she'd come to him again. But she never had and he'd been in no position to go to her. He'd never invited Sybilla back to his

bed because of his pride and his continuing obsession with Genevra and he hadn't realized he even cared until he'd seen Gideon's letter.

Now the words were burned into his brain and they'd be with him for the rest of his life.

Gideon's letter read:

"To my friend, Darius,

"Sybilla came into my bleak existence like rain falling on an arid desert and she brought a part of me back to life that I had thought permanently dead. Never have I envied any man until now but I envy you your wife with every fiber of my being. I have nothing to give her while you have so much and now I know for certain there's no future for me. Life without Sybilla simply isn't worth living. Only the permanent sleep of death will make it right."

As the flyer touched down on the clinic's roof, Darius wrenched open the door and asked the waiting attendant, "Where is he? I have to see him."

"He's in Intensive Care, Your Highness, and holding his own. His Majesty's downstairs."

He looked past the prince as Sybilla awkwardly made her way out of the flyer's cabin and gave her his hand to help her down.

Daniel met them outside Gideon's door. "I've just been in touch with Hugo de Blanc. He's agreed to help him and I'm shipping him to Aretz as soon as he's stable enough to be moved. Rufus has agreed to accompany him and I trust there'll be no objection from you."

"Of course not. It's the least we can do."

"Vasek's on his way. Gideon's his only son and I'd just as soon he didn't see that letter."

Daniel turned to Sybilla. "I'm sorry, but I have to ask this. Was there ever anything between you and Gideon?"

Her eyes filled with tears. "No, there wasn't." Then her tone grew vehement. "For his sake, I wish there had been. Then I could have brought a small degree of happiness to *someone*. I'm not doing very well in that department, am I?"

"I'm sorry. In view of Gideon's letter, I had to ask."

Daniel gave Darius a searching look. "I'm satisfied your wife is innocent of any wrongdoing, and I trust you are too. If anyone's to blame, I am. I should have given more thought to the consequences of throwing them together."

"I've offered to submit to a DNA test while I'm here," Sybilla said quietly, "to reassure Darius the child I'm carrying is really his."

Daniel frowned sharply at his son. "You *didn't*."

The prince flushed and bit his lip. "I apologize for doubting you, Sybilla. The test really isn't necessary."



"Oh, yes it is. After I have the results, I'm going to blow them up into a poster. Then I'm going to have it framed and hung on your bedroom wall as a permanent reminder."

Daniel abruptly turned his back and began coughing while Rufus did his best to hide his smile.

The door opened and a doctor came out. "Gideon's stable and he's asking for you, Your Majesty. Has his father arrived yet?"

"I'll stay here and wait for him," offered Rufus. "I'll be along just as soon as his father gets here."

Gideon turned his head as they came in and his voice was very faint. "You saw my letter, didn't you?"

Daniel's voice was gentle. "There's no shame in loving a beautiful woman but it's not necessary to kill yourself over her. You have more of a future than you realize and now, thanks to Sybilla, you're not quite as dead as you thought you were."

"That's true," said Darius. "For what it's worth, I've taken your words to heart. I've had a tendency to overlook Sybilla's feelings and if it makes you feel any better, I'll be paying more attention to her from now on."

"You'd damn well better or you might lose her to me yet. I know you're there, Sybilla, because I can smell your perfume. I'm sorry if I've caused you any trouble."

"You haven't. But, please don't ever do such a thing again. What were you trying to do, anyway? Complete Jemma's work for her? That's what it would have amounted to and you would have left me a lifetime of heartache and regret besides."

There was a stir in the hall and they heard Vasek's upraised voice.

Daniel said quickly, "It's all right, Gideon. We haven't told your father about the letter. As far as he's concerned, you were despondent over your condition."

Gideon sighed with obvious relief. "Thanks."

Darius put an arm around Sybilla and drew her outside. "Are you really going through with that test?"

"As long as you keep holding me like this, I won't."

He put his other arm around her and pulled her closer. "How about this?"

"That's better yet, and you're certainly on the right track." She rested her head on his chest and listened to his heartbeat. "Gideon's going to be all right and it seems to me you have a perfectly good bed at home. A big one too, as I recall."

"Just how would you know that?"

Oops, thought Sybilla. Then she said quickly, "I oversee the palace's housekeeping and inspecting the bedrooms is part of my job."

"Including Gideon's?"

"His medical attendants do that. I just see he has clean sheets and towels. Your room's a different story. Your bed looked very comfortable, as I recall."

"You seem very fixated on my bed all of a sudden. Would you care to test it?"

"I thought you'd never ask. If you should happen be present that would be even better. I'd like to find out if our wedding night was just a fluke."

"A fluke? What do you mean by that?"

"Being you've never invited me back, I've been wondering about your--er--capability. You know. Whether you can rise to the occasion or not."

"Whether I can *what*? Woman, are you questioning my *manhood*?"

"Why, I wouldn't dream of it. But you must admit that your apparent lack of interest would leave a girl wondering."

When Darius saw they had a fascinated audience of medical personnel, he cleared his throat. "It seems to me we ought to continue this conversation in private. Don't you agree?"

Sybilla swallowed the laughter welling up in her throat. "Er, yes. Absolutely. And your room would be just fine. Are you sure it wasn't a fluke?"

"Shut up, Sybilla. No it wasn't a fluke and if you'll come home with me, I'll prove it."

Sybilla looked up him in obvious astonishment. "You will? Are you absolutely sure you can?"

"Rrrr," growled the prince and grabbed her by the arm. "Come on." he ordered her and began heading for the roof. "That pilot had better be there. If he isn't, I'll fly you back myself. I'm going to settle this business once and for all. Fluke, my ass."

Well, you certainly do have a nice one, reflected Sybilla but thought it wiser to keep that particular comment to herself. If matters proceeded as she hoped there would be plenty of opportunity for those kinds of compliments later, then Darius's phantom mistress would finally disappear into the dream world where she belonged.

When they reached Darius's door bedroom, Sybilla hesitated. Suddenly, she wasn't sure of herself. This was the moment she'd been dreaming about for months, yet Genevra's ghost still stood between them.

Will he recognize me? she wondered, *and am I going to be in trouble if he does? Oh Momma. Where are you when I need you? What do I do now?*

"What's the matter, Sybilla?" Darius's tone was mocking. "Are you afraid of me? Believe me, wife, I'm not going to rape you. Contrary to popular belief, that's not an Illyrian custom." He added sarcastically, "The men of my country are so charming, they generally don't have to ask twice."

"Oh no. It's not that. It's just that I--Oh, it's very difficult to explain."

"Mmm." The prince looked at her thoughtfully. "The bathroom's through there and you may use my robe if you wish."

After ushering Sybilla inside, Darius locked the bedroom door and pocketed the key. He sat on the edge of the bed and casually removed his boots. Then he put his feet up. Leaning comfortably back against the big pillows, he proceeded to watch her through slitted eyes much as a cat does a hapless mouse trapped under its paw.

Sybilla picked up the robe near his feet and disappeared into the bathroom.

As he awaited her return, the prince picked up a book and started leafing through it. His military training had given him the art of relaxation on a moment's notice. Now his initial anger had passed he was beginning to enjoy himself. He'd been at other peoples' mercy for long enough and it felt good to be in charge for a change. Amused by Sybilla's discomfiture, he was looking forward to teaching her a lesson she'd never forget.

According to Illyrian custom, Daniel had summoned a famous courtesan from the city to initiate his son in the arts of love when Darius reached the age of fifteen. The young prince learned his lessons well and the courtesan told the King she'd seldom had a more apt or charming pupil. It had been with real regret that she'd bidden Darius goodbye, and she told him during their final session, "You'll break many a heart before you're done. Mine will only be the first."

By way of reply, Darius gently kissed each of his teacher's eyelids, then her mouth. Then he'd shown her in full and satisfying measure how much he'd learned.

When Sybilla had been brought to him on their wedding night, she'd been trembling with fear. She'd timidly lifted the covers and slipped into bed beside him and he'd been ready and waiting. In view of his obvious resentment about their marriage, Sybilla had been surprised and relieved by the prince's obvious patience and found him a considerate and gentle lover.

Darius saw no point in needlessly scaring his new bride but he certainly hadn't been motivated by any kind of passion.

Sybilla had wondered from whom her bridegroom had learned the art of lovemaking. He had known exactly where and how to touch her and his technical skills had been of a high order. He'd played with her body like a musical instrument, and if her responses had been melodies rather than feelings, every last note would have rung true.

After it was over, his eyes had met hers for a moment and they'd been utterly cold. Then he'd turned his back and gone to sleep.

When Sybilla left her husband's bed the following morning, it had been with a feeling of utter desolation. Only as his phantom mistress, could she make him love her and the last time she'd come to his bed, he almost caught her in the act. She'd known it was unwise to continue but her midnight trysts with Darius were as addictive as any drug and try as she might, had been unable to stay away.

When she came out of the bathroom with his robe around her, Darius lounged on the bed reading. Then he realized she was there and looked up. Setting the book aside, he beckoned to her, patted the coverlet beside him and said, "Come on. I promise I won't bite."

"Darius? May I try something first?"

He looked somewhat surprised. "If it'll help you, I'm game. What did you have in mind?"

"Hold still."

Sybilla took a silk scarf and tied it over his eyes. She grasped his hands, then pushed them away from the blindfold. "It's midnight and you're dreaming. You don't know who I am because I'm coming to you out of the mists of memory but your hands know me better than your eyes do."

She joined him on the bed and put his hands against her naked breasts. After touching her blindly for a few moments, he gathered her to him and breathed in the fragrance of her hair. "It was *you*. It was you all along. I wasn't dreaming was I?"

She nuzzled her head against his chest. "You weren't dreaming. I knew you'd never feel about me as you did her so I did the next best thing. I love you more than life itself and I'd have done anything to make you mine."

He chuckled. "And I was going to teach *you* a lesson? If you're not a witch, you're something very close to it. What kind of a potion did you feed me anyway?"

"Technically, Rufus fed it to you. It was an herbal mixture of Momma's. The queens of Lodebar give it to their lovers as an--er--encouragement. They say it does the trick every time."

"Hmm. Did Sidonia feed it to my father?"

"I don't think she needed to. As far as I know, all she did was spill some wine on him. You know, to get him out of his clothes."

"And how are you planning to get me out of mine?"

Sybilla's hands unfastened his shirt. "Like this. Now lie still and I'll show you how it's done." He felt her hesitate, and her voice trembled. "You aren't angry are you?"

He thought for a moment. "I should be but I'm not, and I'm beginning to see how poor Gideon fell in love with you so easily. Incidentally, now I can't see you, I find you absolutely gorgeous. Are you offended by that?"

"Not in the least. Momma told me once all cats are gray in the dark. Obviously, she was right."

## Chapter 8 A Member of the Club

Alexander looked at Hugo from the other side of the operating table with a question in his eyes.

The older man nodded his approval. "You definitely have the touch. You're a gifted healer, Alexander and you'll be a worthy successor after I'm gone."

"Surely you're not leaving, Doctor de Blanc. You've built this Institute single-handed and it wouldn't be the same without you." He noticed Hugo's green eyes looked tired and his formerly ruddy skin had a grayish pallor. Telling his assistant to finish, he stripped off his gloves and came around the table. "What is it?"

"Too many hours in the lab breathing in the fumes of heaven knows what. Too many days spent over a surgical table. Too much travel and too little rest. Not to mention the bad meals and the demanding company."

Hugo sighed. "It all catches up with you eventually. For as far back as I can remember, I've been trying to be all things to all people. I just can't do it any more."

"When was the last time you had a physical?"

"No time."

"Typical. You, of all people, know better than that. You wouldn't tolerate this kind of behavior for one mother-loving second from any of your patients and you know it. Let's get down to my office, Doctor de Blanc. I'm about to check you out from stem to stern and don't want to hear any lip about your not having the time. That's the last surgery for today and there's nothing scheduled that your assistants can't handle."

When Hugo opened his mouth to say something, Alexander held up his hand. "Don't argue."

"I wasn't about to, Your Imperial Highness. Dammit, you're every bit as autocratic as the rest of your stiff-necked family. All I wanted to do was invite you to dinner. There's an interesting little restaurant in the warehouse district you might enjoy and I'm sure my wife would like a night out. Do you think that charming assistant of yours would care to join us? Or did you have other plans?"

Alexander looked at his assistant who was just finishing up. "My only plans for tonight were to take a hot shower and go to bed. Incidentally, Tara Lee's my first cousin but I'm sure she'd be delighted to join us anyway."

"She is? I thought all your cousins were male except Genevra."

"Oh, you mean my *legitimate* cousins. My Uncle Nathan has a traditional harem and Tara Lee's the daughter of one of his concubines. Her mother Michaela is one of my favorite aunts and she and Aunt Ariel are the best of friends. They've known each other their entire lives and are like sisters. After Michaela's parents were killed in an accident, Ariel brought her into their household and encouraged her relationship with Uncle Nathan."

Hugo shook his head. "I can't even begin to imagine it."

"Seira's a very ancient civilization and it's part of our tradition. Technically, Aunt Michaela and Tara Lee are slaves. Uncle Nathan freed them ages ago along with the rest of the women in his household. As King of Ophir, he rules over one of the most traditional parts of Seira and his harem's an important mark of prestige. Uncle Timothy, on the other hand, has been severely criticized because he has no harem. Shortly after his coronation, he got so ticked off with the press' sniping, he threatened to set up a traditional harem in the Palace and staff it with the ugliest crones he could find. Aunt Gee finally talked him out of it."

Hugo laughed. "It's good to know that even the Emperor of Seira has domestic problems. To hear the press tell it, he sits on a cloud above it all and is treated like a demi-god."

"Obviously, you don't know Uncle Timothy. He's mortally henpecked by my Aunt Gee and his kids have him tearing his hair out. Especially Jenny. He's constantly mediating family squabbles and every dispute on Seira seems to wind up on his desk. Then you can add his problems with the Synod Assembly. They're always on his back about trade but whenever some little tinpot government wants financial aid, they know right where to go. Timothy gives it to them too. As soon as they're back on their feet, they start sniping at him again."

"I can see why the members of the press aren't his favorite people."

"And where do you think you're going?"

"To my office to call my wife. Then I'm going to take a much-needed nap. I've been up for thirty-six hours straight and I think I've earned it, don't you?"

"*After* I've examined you. What am I supposed to do? Put you in a headlock? Incidentally, don't think I can't."

"Damn. I thought you'd forgotten."

An hour later, Hugo put his feet up and accepted the drink Alexander handed him.

The younger man turned back to the scans on his office wall and studied them intently.

"It doesn't matter how long you look at those," observed Hugo. "It's not going to change one damn thing."

"You knew?"

"Of course, I knew. I'm a doctor, remember? I did my own scans and tests months ago then double-checked them with an old friend at the university. He thought he was looking at one of my patients and concurred in every respect."

"Have you told Leda?"

"No. And you aren't going to either. If I tell her, she'll immediately start some sort of death watch. She'll insist on spending every minute of our last months together and I'm not sure I could stand that. Saying goodbye to her and the children will be bad enough, I don't need to do it for every waking hour I have left. I have a lot of work to do and intend to leave the affairs of this Institute in good order."

"No wonder you've been tearing around here like a three-peckered billy-goat. But your wife has a right to know. If you're so concerned about her reaction, why don't you tell her what you just told me? Leda's an intelligent educated woman who's not given to hysteria and I'm sure you can find her something to do here. Then she can spend time with you and still leave you in peace to continue your work."

When Alexander reached across the desk, Hugo looked alarmed. "Who are you calling?"

"I assume our dinner date's still on. I'm calling Tara Lee."

"Oh," Hugo subsided into his chair. "Well, be sure to tell her to wear a skirt. It's not formal, but the restaurant owner's a stickler about dress codes. She doesn't care to see her female customers in pants or those little shorts and translucent tops that have become such a rage. When you're done, I'll call Leda and tell her to meet us."

Alexander smiled, "I doubt that Tara Lee has so much as one pair of shorts in her entire wardrobe and she wouldn't be caught dead in a translucent top. She grew up in a old-fashioned harem and my aunts are the last word in conservatism. They made her take a chaperone to med school and I had to swear on my mother's head I'd keep an eye on her while she was here."

That's going to be the trick of the week, thought Hugo.

Alexander's cousin was a tiny delicious blonde who could take one look at any man and make him melt right down into his socks. But now he understood why Alexander seemed so uninterested in her charms. If he'd been Tara Lee's father, he'd have sent an entire squad of dragons to keep the men away from her any time she was out of the house. One smile from Tara Lee and he'd been almost ready to forget that he was a married man and twice her age.

Her effect on his staff had to be seen to be believed. Even old Craven, the head medical technician, had been smitten. He dropped an entire box of test tubes the first time Tara Lee entered his lab and was struck speechless every time he encountered her.

For her part, Tara Lee either ignored the devastation she was causing or was unaware of it.

Hugo was looking forward to the restaurant owner's reaction when they arrived for dinner. A favorite hangout for the rich and famous, Rose's Club was located in an unassuming building in the warehouse district. Rose Delacourt was a retired madam of some renown and her establishment was unconventional to say the least.

The restaurant consisted of an enormous high-ceilinged kitchen with tables scattered here and there. Each was covered with a white damask cloth and glittering with crystal and silver.

As a friend of Hugo's had once put it, Rose's menu prices were outrageous enough to make a whore blush but she would be the first to explain to any customer she actually liked that those were her social climber rates. She refused to take reservations and once her tables were filled, would bar the door to all comers. Rumor had it she'd once turned away the Emperor of Seira and Hugo believed it.

Fortunately there were still a couple of tables when their party arrived.

Rose met them at the door. After giving Hugo an enormous hug and his beautiful wife a peck on the cheek, she stepped back to assess Alexander. "You are the handsome one aren't you?" Then she cast a professional eye over Tara Lee. "Oh, my dear, you could make an absolute fortune in the business without even trying. If you ever decide to quit whatever you're doing and enter the life, give me a call."

Tara Lee never batted an eye. "Thank you. I'll keep that in mind."

After seating them at a table near the fireplace, Rose said cheerfully, "Don't bother with the menus, dabchicks. I'll start you off with a crab soufflé to die for, then a beautiful filet mignon wrapped in pastry surrounded by fresh spring peas and baby carrots. You can finish the whole thing off with a cup of my fresh raspberry sorbet with chocolate sauce. Hugo, you're looking a mite peaked. I'll bring you a cup of my special beef soup."

As Rose left to greet another set of customers, Leda looked at her husband. "She's right, Hugo. *You are* looking a bit peaked."

"That's why he's taking the day off tomorrow," said Alexander.

Hugo gave him a quizzical look but said nothing.

Tara Lee glanced from the one to the other with a puzzled expression.

"Oh, Hugo," cried Leda. "Why don't I leave the twins with the neighbors? Then we can go up to the lake for a long weekend?"

"Why don't you do that, Hugo?" suggested Alexander. "We can keep things hung together until you get back."

Alexander was a gifted telepath and he told him silently, *"If you don't spend some time with your wife this weekend, I'll spill the beans right here."*

Hugo, like his wife Leda, was a descendant of the legendary Romany people who'd once traveled the highways and byways of the entire universe and called no place home. Along with their trademark blonde hair, high cheekbones and green eyes, he'd inherited his ancestors' gifts for magic and telepathy.

He answered Alexander without hesitation, *"You do, and I'll turn Tara Lee into a frog."*

Alexander had a few supernatural gifts of his own and he just laughed. *"Tara Lee is like me and has Medean witch blood. I wouldn't try it."*

Tara Lee had been following their mental exchange. "Oh will you two just quit it. Leda, how do you put up with this man?"

"Not easily. The problem is, I love him and he's the only Romany I know. Alexander, thank you. Hugo, you need to listen to this man."

"Umm." Hugo turned to Alexander. "Isn't that new patient arriving from Illyria the day after tomorrow? He's a war casualty, I believe."

"His name is Gideon Zivon and he happens to be an old friend. Tara Lee and I will greet him when he arrives and I'll do his preliminary exam. He'll be ready when you get back."

"If I didn't know better, I would suspect a plot. All right, Leda, I'm all yours for the weekend." He noticed Rose at his elbow.

She placed a steaming cup in front of him. "Drink up, Doctor. You look as if you need it. The soufflé will be here in just a moment and I want you to eat it while it's hot. All the way down to the pattern on the plates."

"We'd better do as she says," said Hugo, "or she'll never allow us in here again."

"Surely, you're joking," said Tara Lee.



"Oh no," Leda assured her. "Rose is very picky about her customers. With the clientele and backing she has, she can afford to be. When one of the Emperor of Nublis's nephews came in here drunk she threw him out and banned him for life. Janus apologized to her personally but she still wouldn't let his nephew back in. Fortunately for us, she really likes Hugo. Doesn't she, dear?"

Rose had overheard Leda's last remark. "That I do. If Doctor de Blanc ever decides to leave home, he knows where he can come. I truly love this man and he needs feeding up. When you're ready to leave, my dear, remind me to send a few things home with you for your larder."

Oops, thought Tara Lee as Leda flushed slightly. *Do I detect a barb there ?*

Leda's lack of domesticity was a running joke around the Institute, as was Hugo's penchant for greasy takeout food. Even Tara Lee had heard about it and she found herself agreeing with Rose. Hugo did look tired and drawn and his movements were those of a man almost twice his age. She wondered briefly if Alexander had noticed, then remembered their conversation in the operating room.

So that's what it's about. Alexander must have persuaded Hugo to let him give him a physical and he's told him to get some rest.

In the month since she and Alexander had been at the Institute for Neuro-Physiological Studies, Tara Lee had found herself deeply impressed with Hugo's work. But she had become even more concerned over his grueling schedule. Doctor de Blanc drove himself harder than anyone she'd ever seen. He seemed obsessed with cheating death and she'd watched him tackle injuries no other doctor would have touched.

Alexander had already told her about Gideon Zivon. "His injuries are virtually indescribable, but they're not the result of an accident or the battlefield. He was brutally tortured by a former Lodebarian intelligence chief. Considering what she did to him, it's little wonder he's suicidal. After Gideon cut his wrists, King Daniel of Illyria called Hugo. But I'll be honest with you, Tara Lee. I've seen his scans and I doubt that even Hugo can repair the damage. His eyes are only part of it."

"What did she do to him?"

By way of an answer, Alexander took her into his office and showed her Gideon's pictures.

Tara Lee looked at them for a long time. "How could one human being do something like that to another?"

"This is only one example of the atrocities the Illyrians and Lodebarians have committed against each other. Prince Darius may have only been fifteen when he was captured but he and his teenage death squad did things every bit as bad as this, or worse."

"He seems like such a charming young man."

"He is, but a murderer nonetheless. A Lodebarian terrorist group has been trying to get its hands on Darius to make him pay for his war crimes. They were torturing Gideon for the necessary information when a Seiran battlecruiser crew stopped them. The doctor who worked on him told me it might have been more merciful to let him die."

"It sounds as if we're going to have our work cut out for us. This Gideon sounds like quite a character. He was an intelligence agent I presume, like you."

"Who told you I was an intelligence agent?"

"Oh, Alex, it's as obvious as the nose on your face. Uncle Timothy uses you on special assignments all the time and I've heard Aunt Elena's complaints. You were Darius's jailer when he was on Seira and in charge of the security for his wedding."

"Well, for your information, Miss Snoopy Nose, I'm now retired and would appreciate your keeping your opinions about this to yourself. But you're right about one thing. Gideon was an Illyrian spy and a good one. He looked enough like Darius to be his twin but couldn't have been more different. Instead of murdering innocent people, Gideon saved countless lives on both sides. He risked his life repeatedly on delicate missions into Lodebar and told me he felt like strangling Darius because the prince's unauthorized raids screwed up so many of his operations."

"Yet he refused to betray Darius under torture and almost died for it. You know the prince, Alex. What's he like?"

"Darius changed a lot in those two years on Seira. He's not the murderer he was and now he's trapped in an arranged marriage to a woman he doesn't love. He was only a kid when they caught him and is barely eighteen now. That's a bit young to be stuck with a life sentence. Basically, that's what they've given him."

"I watched his wedding on the viewscreen. After seeing Darius's bride, I won't argue with you. She certainly doesn't have anything in the looks department, does she?"

"That's one thing Darius will never have to worry about. No man will ever lose his senses over poor Sybilla. Were it not for this forced marriage, she would probably have died a spinster and a virgin at that."

"Sheesh," muttered the medical attendant as he secured Gideon's second wrist to the stretcher. "You may not be able to see but you certainly can fight."

"If you had one lick of compassion, you'd get me that guard's sidearm and let me end this misery once and for all. What's the matter with you people, anyway? If we were on the battlefield, you'd have done it long ago. It's even part of your friggin' oath or had you forgotten?"

"We're not on a battlefield, and we're under strict orders to keep you alive and get you to Aretz as soon as possible. A doctor there claims he can help you."

"Oh, yeah, right. Likely story. Some whiz kid in a white jacket's going to restore my sight. Then, when he's done with that particular miracle, he's going to rebuild the rest of me. In a pig's eye, he is. I may not be able to see but I can hear perfectly well and I know exactly what that friggin' Jemma did. If I'd only had access to a gun the other day, I'd have done the job properly. Then I wouldn't be lying here on this stupid stretcher having a pointless conversation with a half-assed cretin like you."

Rufus's voice came from somewhere above him. "I can see you're back to your normal self. For your information, we've been keeping you alive for your father's sake and on Daniel's specific orders."

He took Gideon's hand and squeezed it. "You and I are going to have the dubious pleasure of each

other's company for the next week. Unless you plan to spend the entire trip fastened to that stretcher, I strongly suggest you simmer down and watch your language. The attendant's only doing his job. He and the other people caring for you do not deserve this kind of abuse."

The attendant interrupted "It's okay, Major. The Captain's absolutely right. I should know after three tours of duty with the Mountain Corps. Up until now, I've always been true to my oath, and for what it's worth, Captain Zivon, my sympathies are entirely with you. If it were been up to me, I'd honor your request and let you end your life with dignity as a fighting man should."

Even though he knew Gideon couldn't see him, the attendant saluted. "They'll be loading you on the shuttle any minute for the trip to the spaceport, Captain. I wish you godspeed."

He made a note in the computer hung on his belt, then pulled out Gideon's medical chip and gave it to Rufus. "Take good care of him, Major. Give this to the ship's doctor and tell him this one's a special case."

"He already knows." Rufus took the chip and gestured to the two waiting shuttle pilots. "All right. We're ready."

Gideon felt the stretcher begin to move and thought about Sybilla. He hadn't had a chance to say goodbye and wondered if they'd ever meet again. He hoped Darius meant what he'd said because it was painfully obvious where Sybilla's affections lay. Hearing the anguish in her voice, he wished he'd been whole again so he could take Darius apart and pound him into the floor.

As to what she looked like, he could only imagine. He'd never seen the little princess or paid much attention to any of her pictures. If her sisters were anything to go by, she wasn't lacking in that department either. Sybilla's warmth and intelligence made her a jewel among women and it was been a complete mystery to him why Darius should be so cold and unfeeling toward her. Well, she was on her own now and he could only hope life would be kinder to her than it had been to him.

When the shuttle landed, Rufus spoke. "Well, Captain? Do you want to go aboard under your own power or are we going to continue this nonsense? You've got five minutes to make up your mind. Either way, it makes little difference to me."

Gideon sighed. "I'd just as soon go aboard under my own power."

Rufus unlocked the restraints holding his wrists to the stretcher. After helping him sit up, he draped a coat over the young man's shoulders, then put a pair of dark glasses in his hand. "Put these on while I help you with your shoes."

Once Rufus had clipped the sonar imager to the lapel of his coat and activated it, Gideon raised his head and looked at the shapes around him. He could see the outlines of the two shuttle pilots and directly in front of him an erect figure that could only be the major.

Just behind Rufus, he made out the shape of the shuttle's doorway and could hear the hubbub of Betelgeuse's busy spaceport. "Where exactly are we?"

"On the landing pad next to the docks. King Daniel's ship is directly in front of you. The bay doors are open and they're waiting for us."

Gideon held out his hand to the closest shuttle pilot. "Thanks for the lift."

"It was our privilege, Captain, and we look forward to doing it again soon. On behalf of Lieutenant Harkanian and myself, I wish you luck."

"Thanks, Lieutenant." Gideon lifted his hand in a salute.

Both pilots saluted back and he turned toward the outline of the shuttle door. Rufus went to take his arm but he shook him off. "Just tell me if there are any steps or obstacles. Outside that, please leave me be."

"There are two steps down from the shuttle door, then it's clear sailing until you get to the dock."

Gideon put out his hand and Rufus gave him his cane.

A tabloid reporter stood with a photographer on the concourse's upper deck. The photographer raised his camera. "Who's that? That's a royal Illyrian shuttle so they must be VIP's."

The reporter raised his field glasses. "One of them's the Crown Prince's aide, Rufus. While the other--could he be Darius? If so, where in the hell are they going?"

The photographer squeezed off several shots. "He certainly looks like Darius. If that's the prince, where's Madame Sybilla? Reportedly, she's so jealous she never lets him out of her sight. So why would he be here without her? Can't you check with your source in the tower and see where that ship's cleared to?"

"Good thought." The reporter punched a code into his communicator. "Sweetie, this your ever-loving honey lamb. Do me a favor, babykins. The Royal Illyrian flagship's getting ready to leave. Did they get their clearances yet? Uh huh. Uh huh. Really? Now that's interesting. Aretz, huh? Thanks, lover. Yeah, same time tonight. Champagne, roses, the works."

The photographer grinned. "If Babykins ever finds out about your wife and six kids, you're dead meat, buddy."

The reporter looked innocently back. "And who's going to tell her, Mr. Horseplayer of all time? I don't think so. Unless you plan on me telling Ginny where your last paycheck really went."

"Who me? Rat on you? Never. Incidentally, what did your honey lamb say that was so interesting?"

"Darius and his blushing bride left for Seira last night. They took a shuttle from the palace roof in Illyria and met one of Timothy's cruisers in orbit. My sweetie in the tower was on duty. She was scanning the airwaves and caught the inter-ship chatter. It was on a scrambled frequency but she used the decoder I gave her. Apparently, the newlyweds are having a delayed honeymoon and she said there was something about a ski trip in the mountains of Phasga. So that's obviously not Darius."

They watched Gideon make his tortuous way up the dock. "If that's not Darius, who in the hell is he? He certainly looks enough like him. It's too bad we can't get a gander at his face. Old Rufus is hovering like a mother hen. He must be a VIP because the ship's commander is waiting to greet them."

The reporter refocused his field glasses, "How close in can you zoom that thing? There. You see. He's turning. Now he's in profile. Damn. You might know. He's wearing dark glasses. Well, maybe someone

back at the office will know something. Wait, there's something on his lapel. Let me focus in a bit further. Well, what do you know? That's a sonar imager. If he's using a sonar imager, that means the guy's blind."

"Blind?" the photographer stopped and thought. "It seems to me I heard something-- Yeah, that's it. Darius has a double. The Illyrians used him as a decoy after the wedding. That was when they had everyone shooting off to that resort on Nublis to cover the honeymoon."

"I certainly do remember. When we got there, it wasn't Darius at all. The guy was an Illyrian army captain and the blonde babe with him was a real eyeful. She couldn't have looked less like Sybilla. He looked enough like Darius to be his twin and he certainly wasn't blind."

"Hah." The photographer snapped his fingers. "Now I know who this guy is. His name's Gideon Zivon and he's reputed to be one of the higher ups in Illyrian intelligence. Officially, the guy had an accident. Unofficially, the story's juicier than that. Did you ever hear of the P.I.D.?"

The reporter watched the bay doors slide shut. "Who hasn't? There was an unsuccessful bomb plot at the Nublis spaceport before the wedding and a whole bunch of them were rounded up. Then, about three months ago, one of their top leaders was caught in the raid on 'The Berean Dragon.' So, what does this have to do with Gideon Zivon?"

"Everything. One of the medics who took care of him goes with my sister's best friend. The bitch's name was Jemma Carlane. She was dismembering him when the Synod arrived."

"What bitch? Not your sister's friend, surely. Oh, you mean Jemma. She's the P.I.D. leader?"

"The very same. Now she's supposedly locked up in maximum security on Nublis."

"*She* blinded him? Yecch."

"That isn't all she did. When Sis gave me the full description, I lost my lunch."

"Poor bastard. But why?"

"The story is Darius had arranged for a secret trip for surgery on his legs. The P.I.D. got wind of it and snatched Gideon at Seira's spaceport. Jemma was pumping him for information because they wanted to grab Darius. He never talked and the Synod got to Jemma just as she was going to kill him."

"Since Darius is no longer wearing leg-braces and is skiing up a storm, we can assume the surgery was successful. So what do you think this is about?"

"That Illyrian ship was cleared for Aretz and there hasn't been any announcement. My guess would be Gideon's heading for that same clinic."

"In that case, there's probably a story in it. What do you say we head back to the office? Then we can sweet talk our editor into giving us the assignment, do some research and pick up a couple of vouchers. I have a feeling there's more to this than meets the eye and that this mysterious Gideon may be the key."

"Sounds good to me. The Imperial Stakes are being run on Aretz this year."

"Well, don't come to me for another loan after you've lost your shirt. I don't care how much of a sure thing it is, I'm not covering for you again. If you sell your return ticket this time, you can damn well thumb

your way home. There's a reason why horse-racing's called the sport of kings."

"All right. I'll bite. What's the reason?"

"Because it's not for po' folks, you ninny. Horse-racing's a rich man's game. They're the only ones who can afford it."

Them wended their way through the spaceport's busy concourse arguing the whole time and it was obvious they'd had this conversation many times before. The reporter knew he'd bail his buddy out again. The photographer counted on it because they were the best team in the business. They had never failed yet and this time wasn't going to be any different.

"No. I have no comment. And how did you get this number anyway?" Hugo slammed down the phone.

Leda looked at him mildly from the opposite side of the fireplace. "Another reporter?"

"Who else? The way they keep pumping you'd think they'd never heard of doctor patient confidentiality and I'm tired of asking them what it is about the word 'no' they don't understand."

She sighed, "I suppose it's that rumor about Prince Darius again. Why don't you tell them he never was at the Institute and has no plans to come there?"

"I've tried that but they don't believe me. But that's not what's got me concerned. It's the Foundation. The Board's heard the stories and they've been asking some very searching questions lately, especially about the annex. I saw pickets the other day. Their signs said, *No to the Monster of Lodebar* or some such nonsense. We've even had a couple of bomb threats. The staff is getting nervous and some are threatening to quit."

"Maybe you should let them. They'll be easy enough to replace. When push comes to shove, the Foundation needs you one hell of a lot more than you do them, so does the university. Neither puts in enough cash to keep a bird alive and you've got more surgical patients than you can handle."

"Alexander's been a godsend. He and Tara Lee have assumed the lion's share of the load and it's giving me time for my research."

"Thank heavens for Alexander and Seira. Without Timothy's help, I don't know what we would have done. That little Tara Lee's charming, isn't she?"

"Bright too. That new patient, Gideon Zivon's arriving from Betelgeuse tomorrow. He and Alexander know each other which is going to make things easier. I looked at his scans before I left and frankly, I'm not sure that even I can help him. He's already suicidal and a failure here is liable to drive him over the edge."

"Well, we have one more day of our mini-vacation left and that's enough shop talk for tonight. Tomorrow morning, you and I are going out on the boat at sunup and we're not coming back until supertime."

"That sounds good to me." Hugo stood up and stretched, "I don't know about you, love, but I'm for bed. My system isn't used to all of this fresh air and wholesome food and it's making me sleepy."

"Not too sleepy, I hope. Or are you too tired for that too?"

"Never."

As they went into the bedroom, Hugo knew he was going to have to tell Leda about his illness very soon. But not now. "You're right, sweetheart. Tonight is ours and tomorrow will be here soon enough. Come here, you gorgeous thing and let me show you how much I love you."

She replied impatiently, "I thought you'd never ask." Then she went into his waiting arms.

Anna Lisa gave the reporters a big smile as they came up the dock and waved to the waiting crowd. "I'm actually beginning to like this. Do you think they'll name me Debutante of the Year?"

Carlo smiled. "If looks have anything to do with it, they will. There's the Synod Assembly President just ahead, with his wife beside him. Now, make nice."

"What a crone," hissed Anna Lisa. "And he's almost as ugly as she is."

"Maybe so. But they've got an unmarried son and they're richer than Croesus."

"Who's Croesus?"

"He's-- Oh, never mind. Just take my word for it, they're stinking rich. Third generation Andromedan mining money."

"Well, where's the son? Oh, don't tell me. Not that pimply little monster."

"That much money covers a multitude of sins. Now, smile as if you mean it."

Anna Lisa graciously extended her hand and the Synod Assembly President bowed and kissed it. Then he solemnly presented his wife and son.

Carlo scanned the crowd. Jemma had broken out from her prison a few days before and she was supposed to be here on Aretz.

When he'd asked "Why Aretz?" his security chief had replied, "Unfinished business. The P.I.D. has ideas of making you king of Lodebar. You should let them think you're not averse to the idea."

"Being regent's bad enough and the word king is just not in my lexicon. I've got twenty years of servitude before Alia reaches her majority and that won't be any too soon for me. I suppose Baron and his little group of hotheads are fomenting trouble again."

"You've got that right. And Baron's not nearly as averse to the idea of occupying the throne as you. Nor is Anna Lisa and she's the next in line. But the day she marries a foreign national she'll be out of the succession, just like Sybilla."

Why couldn't Momma have just hung on for a few years longer? thought Carlo. *Or at least until Anna Lisa was married.*

He shook the President's hand, then kissed his wife's. The President offered Anna Lisa his arm, his wife did the same for Carlo and they began crossing the concourse.

Then he saw them.

A group of young men in the colors of Illyria ran toward them with signs in their hands. One raised his hand as if to throw something.

Carlo grabbed Anna Lisa and threw her to the ground.

Someone shouted, "This one's for Gideon."

A blinding flash was followed by the sound of automatic weapons. Bodies were falling everywhere.

Anna Lisa was sobbing and when he put his arms around her, he could see something red and wet. The still body of the President's young son lay beside them and somehow he knew he was dead.

*Gideon? What does Gideon have to do with this? The last I heard, he'd had an accident but why would anyone want to avenge that?*

His security guards would already have fanned out across the concourse with their weapons at the ready. Aretz's police were probably doing the same.

He realized someone was saying something and recognized the uniform of a senior spaceport official. "What happened?"

"We're not sure. Please, Your Excellency. We've got to get you and Her Highness away from here. That was an S.B.H. suicide squad and it's hard telling what else ...."

"I couldn't agree more. Our best bet is to go straight back to our ship. What about the President? And his son?"

With his arm around the hysterical Anna Lisa and surrounded by security guards, Carlo headed for the dock before the official even had a chance to answer. Their ship's bay doors opened and they hurried inside. As the doors were closing, Carlo heard the commander say, "As I live and breathe, will you look at what's coming in to port? That's timing, if you ask me."

Carlo looked at the big wall screen, then watched in horrified disbelief as the unmistakable lines of King Daniel of Illyria's personal flagship came into view.

He forced himself back to reality. "This has got to be a coincidence. I cannot imagine that King Daniel had anything to do with what just happened. The S.B.H. has as much to do with him as the P.I.D. has to do with us. Isn't that right, Anna Lisa?"

She drew in a deep shuddering breath. "Speak for yourself. As far as I'm concerned, the P.I.D. may be the only hope we've got. We should never have lowered our guard against Illyria. Those maniacs won't rest until they've taken Lodebar and slaughtered every last one of us."

Carlo took her by the shoulders and shook her. "This is madness. Anna Lisa, come to your senses. The Illyrians had no more to do with what just happened than we did. There has to be an end to this insanity."



Do you hear me?"

The ship's commander was listening to something over his personal communicator. "It's the Tower. The concourse has been cleared but they're asking us to stay put until they can get an extra security force to the dock. They're asking if anyone's been hurt."

Carlo looked at Anna Lisa. "Are you all right?"

"Of course I am. But there's blood all over my skirt and I ...."

He beckoned to her lady in waiting. "Take the princess to her cabin and help her change. I'll be with you as soon as I find out what's happened." Then he told the commander to switch to a news channel. "If I'm right, they'll know as much as anybody."

The face of an anchorman appeared. "...interrupt our regular programming to bring you the latest from the spaceport. I repeat, a few moments ago, there was a terrorist attack by an Illyrian splinter group known as the S.B.H. or the Sons of Blood Honor at the Aretz spaceport. Three are dead at the scene including the only son of the President of the Synod Assembly. Two members of the Lodebarian Royal Family were in the concourse. They returned to their ship under guard and are believed to be unhurt."

Carlo turned to the commander. "Call the Tower and have them put us in contact with the Illyrian ship. Tell them I want to talk with whoever's in charge. Then prepare a shuttle to take me to the Embassy. I'm leaving Her Highness here until further notice."

The news anchorman's image was replaced by a grave-faced man with silver hair in the black and silver of the Illyrian royal fleet. "Commander Baris of the *Royal Eagle*, at your service. What can I do for you, Your Excellency?"

"By now, you should been apprised of the emergency."

"That is so, Your Excellency. Like you, I'm holding my passengers here until further notice. May I inquire as to your status?"

"No one in my party was hurt. I'm taking it this was not a hostile action on the part of Illyria."

"I can assure you it was not. We're as mystified as you and just as deeply concerned. Our mission here is peaceful and we're here for humanitarian purposes only. One of my passengers claims to be personally acquainted with Your Excellency. A gentleman by the name of Gideon Zivon."

"Put him on, by all means. Gideon? Are you there?"

"I'm here. Unfortunately, there's no snowbank or tavern handy. How are you, Carlo?"

Snowbank or tavern? thought Rufus. *What in the hell is he talking about?*

The Illyrian ship's intercom crackled.

"That's the Tower, sir. There's a security force on the dock and the harbormaster is asking to come aboard."

"Open the doors and let him in. Then close them again. Otherwise, our status will remain the same until

further notice."

Gideon turned his head. "Do you wish to continue with this transmission?"

"Absolutely." The commander beckoned to one of his officers. "Prepare one of the shuttles. We need to get the captain to the Institute as quickly as possible."

"In the meantime, I'll go out through the concourse." said Rufus. He pointed to one of the officers. "You're approximately Gideon's height and coloring. If you'd put on his coat and dark glasses and accompany me, I'd appreciate it."

Carlo's voice came from the screen. "Gideon? Are you there?"

"I'm here but we have to stop meeting like this."

Carlo laughed. "I suppose so. What's this I hear about you and an accident?"

"That's why I'm here. The body shops here are pretty good at repair and reconstruction. I thought I'd check them out and get a few estimates."

"As long as we're both here, why don't you let me know where you're going to be? We can get together for old times sake and tip a few. Just contact our embassy. They'll know where to find me."

"I'll be sure to do that." Gideon made a mental note to do no such thing. "It was good talking to you again, Your Excellency. Please give my regards to your family."

As Gideon's image faded, Carlo thought, *Repair and reconstruction? How badly was he hurt anyway?*

He turned to the waiting commander. "The princess will remain here until further notice. The opening festivities will probably be canceled and she'll be returning to Lodebar. When I have more of a handle on the current situation, I'll let you know what to do. In the meantime, stay on full alert until you hear from me."

Tara Lee met Alexander at the Institute's front door. "Have you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"There's been a bombing at the spaceport. It was some Illyrian terrorist group called the S.B.H. The Lord Regent and Crown Princess of Lodebar were in the concourse at the time and the son of the Synod Assembly President's been killed. The Royal Illyrian flagship was in the process of docking when it happened and no one knows what's going on with them. The spaceport's sealed off and I haven't been able to get a call through to anyone."

Alexander went swiftly into his office. "Get me the Seiran Embassy, stat. As soon as they answer, activate the scrambler and get off the line." He took a small device from his pocket. "You'd better leave me alone. This is a security matter and the less you know, the better. Make sure Gideon's room is ready and notify Security to have a reception committee on the roof. Our new patient's going to be arriving any minute."

"What's going on?"

Before he could answer, the phone chimed and he gestured for her to leave. "Yeah, I'm here. It's about what we'd expected. Right. The S.B.H.? A suicide squad? That figures. Security's pretty tight but I can always use reinforcements. If he hasn't already, tell Timothy to put Moriah on alert. They're on their way? Thanks, I'll owe you one. No, but I'm expecting him momentarily. A decoy to the Embassy? Excellent. I'll let you know as soon as he arrives."

Alexander hung up the phone and took the stairs two at a time. After he reached the second floor, he unlocked the elevator control and punched the button for the roof. Emerging from the elevator, he heard the click of a weapon. "Password please."

Alexander stopped and thought for a moment. "Black leopard."

"Very good, sir. Incidentally, you were right about that attendant. She was on the P.I.D.'s payroll and we found a box of poisoned cartridges in her locker. How did you spot her?"

"Just lucky I guess." Alexander had no intention of telling the guard he was a telepath. Then he looked at the sky. "Here he comes."

The sleek black shuttle was emblazoned with the silver cat of Illyria and Daniel's initials. After hovering over the roof for a moment, the pilot set his gleaming craft on the landing site as lightly as a feather. There was barely a whisper from the shuttle's powerful electric motors as he shut them off.

The door dropped open with a hiss, revealing a set of steps. Almost before the bottom one touched the ground, Alexander was in the cabin. "Gideon? We've got to get you into the building as quickly as possible."

"I've had all the cloak and dagger activity I can stand for one day, thank you. Rufus went out through the concourse with a decoy and they took a ground transport to the embassy. Someone took a shot at them when they arrived but no one was hit. Prince Carlo of Lodebar wants to get together for a drink. He said for me to call him and let him know where I was."

"I'll take care of it. Now, come on. Are you wearing body armor?"

"Of course. But they won't let me have a sidearm for some reason."

Alexander glanced at the bandages on his friend's wrists. *I can see why.*

"You aren't exactly up to target practice, are you?"

"Not exactly. But I feel naked without one."

Alexander unloaded his weapon and handed it to Gideon. "Does that feel better?"

The younger agent checked it with his fingers. "It's empty."

"Right, and it's going to stay that way. You complained about feeling naked but nothing was said about shooting anyone. Incidentally, you're welcome."

"Oh er, thank you. Now, I suppose we'd better go."

Gideon thought about trying to get the ammunition from Alexander's pocket but abandoned the idea. The Seiran agent was smart and a telepath besides and he had a feeling he'd already read his mind.

Alexander was shocked by Gideon's appearance which it was even worse than he'd feared. The young man's hands were cruelly scarred and the acid used by Jemma on his face and eyes had left its indelible mark. He could only imagine what the rest of his body looked like and dreaded the coming physical examination.

Well, Tara Lee,*the scans didn't tell the half of it. We're going to have our work cut out for us with this one.*

Starting with the day of Gideon's arrival, the Illyrian Embassy was besieged by hordes of protesters from the university. Apparently under the impression he was Darius, the student agitators waved signs and marched up and down outside the embassy fence. When they weren't caterwauling some freedom song or other, they howled obscenities at anyone going in or out of the building.

"The Ambassador hasn't had a wink of sleep, " Alexander said gleefully, "and he's complaining mightily to the Palace. Unfortunately for him, Daniel thinks the situation's hilarious. Especially since you aren't even there and Darius is light years away. He's cavorting in the snows on Phasga with Sybilla. This particular Embassy is the easiest duty in the Synod and Daniel says it's time the old bat did something to earn his money besides going to fancy parties and pinching every woman in sight."

Gideon sighed. "Yeah, I know. Security's fielded enough complaints about him to last a lifetime. It used to be part of my job to soothe the ruffled feathers. It's been a mystery to me why he hasn't been replaced."

"Then His Majesty would have to put up with him at home. The king says he has enough problems as it is."

"I should have guessed. You guys on Seira have all the information and we don't. Who in the hell are your sources anyway?"

"A fly on the wall perhaps? Or a bird in the air? You used to drive the Lodebarians crazy in the same way, remember?"

"Oh, sure, I remember. Until one of them put me out of circulation."

"Well, that's what we're here to take care of. Now sit back and keep quiet because I want to do some measuring. According to the scans, there's plenty of room for the implants under that thick skull of yours but I just want to make sure. Now, hold still and keep your bloody hands to yourself. This isn't going to hurt, I assure you. You might feel a couple of funny sensations when I place these needles under your skin."

Needles?

But Alexander had been telling the truth. Apart from some odd buzzing sounds and a feeling around his eyes almost like a crunch, there was no pain. The examination took hours, and by the time Alexander and his team were finally done, Gideon's neck was aching from the forced immobility.

"I see they gave you fake eyeballs," remarked Alexander. "For stainless steel, they're not bad-looking."

"Thanks," Gideon's voice was dry. "According to the medic who patched me up, they give my eyelids something to do. As long I keep them closed, I've been told I'm not quite so unnerving to look at."

Unnerving enough, thought Alexander as he finished his examination. *Especially, those burns on his upper face. We can do some reconstruction at the same time we do the implants. Then it won't look quite so bad.*

"Incidentally, what color eyes would you like? Do you want to look the way you did before or are you up for a whole new change of pace?"

"I get to pick my eye color and a different face? As far as looks are concerned, I've been a dead ringer for Darius all of my life and am a bit tired of the resemblance."

"Was there a reason for that?"

"As a matter of fact, there was. It's supposed to be a family secret, but I might as well tell you. Knowing Seiran Intelligence, you'll probably ferret the damn thing out anyway."

"Now, you really have me going. So you may as well spit it out. That's if you know what's good for you."

Gideon ignored the gibe. "You may or may not know that King Daniel had two brothers. When he was seventeen or so, the youngest prince fell madly in love with the daughter of the captain of the palace guard and she with him. The families disapproved and did their damndest to separate the pair. Hormones and nature being what they are, the only thing that accomplished was to drive the kids into each other's arms. With the inevitable result."

"She got pregnant?"

"Yup. But that wasn't the worst of it. Right after she found out, her royal lover was killed during a border skirmish. He was inspecting a sentry post. Like an idiot he wasn't wearing his helmet. The strap was broken or something. He'd tossed it onto the front seat of his vehicle and was saying goodbye to the post's commander when a bullet hit him in the back of the head. It was pure dumb luck because the sniper had no idea who he was."

"They got the sniper?"

"Within about thirty seconds but it was too late for the prince."

"Then what?"

"With the sniper or the pregnancy?"

"The pregnancy, you dolt."

"Oh. With the prince gone, the two families came to their senses. To avoid a public scandal, they made an arrangement with a young guard in the palace. He agreed to marry the girl, I made my appearance seven and a half months later and everyone lived happily ever after."

"I can just imagine. And when did you find all of this out? I'm sure they didn't volunteer the information."

"I was about fourteen when I saw a picture of my real father in one of the royal family albums. It was like looking into a mirror. Daniel happened to be in the room and I asked him about the resemblance."

"Knowing Daniel, he told you."

"Sure, and it was a bit of a shock. The resemblance came in handy later on when my bosses needed a double for Darius."

"You have a pretty good relationship with your adoptive father don't you?"

"He and Ma were devoted to each other and he's always treated me as if I was his own. Dad had been sweet on Ma before she took up with the prince and bailing out the Royal Family didn't hurt his career any."

"You seem a mite cynical."

"If you knew my Dad, you'd understand why. The man is nothing if not calculating. He deliberately steered me into this business as soon as I graduated from the university and there's no question that he used his marriage and me to get close to Daniel. It didn't bother him one whit to send me on those missions into Lodebar but my suicide was not part of his agenda. I wouldn't put it past him to have talked Daniel into sending me here and I have no doubt he'll send me out in the field again as soon as I'm back on my feet."

"Why?"

"As bait for Jemma. She's escaped from Nublis hasn't she? Dad wants her so badly he can taste it and he'll stop at nothing to get his hands on her."

"In revenge for torturing you?"

"Revenge, nothing. Jemma and my Dad are old antagonists and this whole business is nothing more than a game to them. I happened to be a pawn that got in the way. I sure paid for it, didn't I?"

"Don't sell yourself short. We're going to make you well, Gideon, and once you're back on your feet, you'll be your own person. The war between Illyria and Lodebar is over and the game you speak of doesn't prevail any more. You'll no longer be any part of your father and Jemma's diabolical equation and you can tell them both to go to hell if you want. The important thing is you'll be able to see again, live a full life and belong to no one but yourself."

That'll be a first. To belong to no one but myself.

If Gideon had his way, the face looking back from the mirror would be that of a total stranger. He wouldn't resemble Darius or anyone else he knew of, including the long dead prince who'd fathered him.

Two days later, Gideon awoke, swathed in bandages, with his head pounding.

A woman's voice said, "He's coming around. These levels look good. All things being equal, we should have the coverings off his eyes tomorrow afternoon. In the meantime, don't let him move around too much or talk. If he complains of a sore throat, give him one of these. Other than that, he's to have nothing by mouth for at least twenty-four hours. Here's the feeding schedule. Do you have any questions?"

A male voice answered but his tones were too low for Gideon to make out what he was saying. He heard a hiss next to his right ear and smelled something medicinal. Keyboard music was playing in the distance and he sensed people moving around. A gloved hand took his and plastic-covered fingers pressed down on his wrist "Gideon? Can you hear me?"

"Yes. I hear you just fine."

"Good. Your surgery's over and all you need do from now on is rest. Don't try to talk or move around. What you feel is your feeding tube. There'll be a slightly cold sensation but don't worry. It's just the stuff going into your system. Just call it an instant meal. Are you hurting anywhere?"

"My head. It--hurts like all--billy hell."

"Where?"

"My eyes and all the way around to the back. It's like a hot metal band pressing down."

"Don't move. Just hold on for a minute, I'll be right back."

A door opened and closed, then he heard the woman's voice again. "My name is Tara Lee and I'm one of your doctors. I'm giving you something for the pain in your head. You'll feel a slight sting. There. If that doesn't give you any relief, let the attendant know. Give him one of these every four hours. If that doesn't hold it, we'll try the pump. Hugo and Alexander went home to get some sleep and will be back in the morning. I'll be here for the rest of the night. Don't hesitate to wake me if there are any changes."

*Changes? What's going on? Where's Rufus?*

Then he remembered. Rufus was at the embassy with the decoy from the ship. As to the rest, his hands were heavily bandaged and he couldn't tell to what degree the doctors had undone the rest of Jemma's handiwork.

Was it even possible for them to put him back together? He asked himself for the hundredth time, what kind of a fool he'd been to hold out against his torturer's relentless questioning. If he'd told Jemma where Darius was, the Crown Prince would still have been safe and he could have saved himself all this agony and mutilation. Over and over, he'd told himself there was no way the P.I.D could have breached Nephtali's security systems. Better yet, they could have wiped themselves out trying it.

*"That's true,"* came a small voice from somewhere deep inside him, *"but she'd have killed you anyway. And there's no guarantee the P.I.D didn't have moles on Nephtali who could have reached Darius once they found out he was there."*

*I'll never know, will I? But one thing I'll make sure of. Dad and Jemma can play their sick little game of cat and mouse without me. While the war may never be over for them, I'm done forever with the world of secrets, the poisoned dart that comes out of nowhere and the bullet with my name on it from some unknown assassin's gun. When this is over, I will take Carlo up on his offer*

*of a drink. Taverns and snowbanks indeed. But he's at least civilized and who knows? His Excellency might even offer me a job.*

He laughed at the very thought.

Tara Lee's shot must have worked because the pain in his head was gone. Idly, he wondered what she looked like as he drifted off to sleep. While the lady doctor sounded charming, with his luck, she would either be grossly fat or painfully skinny and as ugly as sin. Ah well, he'd find out soon enough. On that happy note, he sank into oblivion.

"Well, that's the last of them." Carlo signed one final document, then beckoned to his young male secretary. "Shoot these out to Lodebar as quickly as possible, then get me the ship. We're getting out of here just as soon as we're done with the funeral tomorrow. Incidentally, did you complete all the cancellations for the coming out ball?"

"Yes, Your Excellency. It's getting pretty late and you missed dinner. Would you like me to order some food from the kitchen?"

"I'd certainly appreciate it. While you're at it, get something for yourself too." Carlo stood up and stretched. Then he crossed the spacious room to the high windows overlooking one of the city's many parks. "What's all that noise down there?"

"Demonstrators outside the Illyrian Embassy. They're protesting Prince Darius's presence here."

"That's ridiculous. Darius isn't anywhere near here. He's completely over his surgery, in fine fettle and enjoying a second honeymoon on Seira with Sybilla. Unless I miss my guess, Gideon's also somewhere else entirely. At the first hint of trouble, the Illyrians would have flown him out immediately. He may even be on Nublis for all we know. If I know anything about our friends down the street, there's no one in their Embassy but a decoy. I expect they'll be inviting the press in to meet him at any moment."

Sandro snapped on the viewscreen.

"And now we'll go to Megan LeFerra and the protest outside the Illyrian embassy."

The reporter's piquant face appeared. "Thanks Morgan. This is Megan LeFerra at the Illyrian embassy. There's been a development ...." She listened to her earpiece for a moment. "The Illyrian Ambassador has just invited the press into the embassy to see for themselves that Prince Darius is nowhere on the premises. According to His Excellency, the Crown Prince has no plans to visit Aretz now or any time in the future. King Daniel has sent his condolences to the President and his wife for the tragic loss of their son and assured them he will not rest until the perpetrators have been brought to justice."

"Those who aren't already dead," remarked Carlo. "Daniel's secret police are probably using this as an excuse to round up every dissident in the whole damn country and it's unlikely the liberal element is going to say one damn word about it. Whoof. What a mess. Maybe the fuss will have died down by next autumn and Anna Lisa can make her debut then."

"I have the ship for you now, sir, and just heard a knock on the door. It's probably the food."



Carlo shut off the viewscreen and picked up the phone. "Commander. How's my sister holding up? She did, huh? Tell her ladies to get her back into bed and have the doctor sedate her again. After my appearance at the funeral tomorrow we're heading straight home. No, absolutely not. The excitement's all down the street. Actually, things are very quiet here. Have the shuttle pilot collect us as soon as we get back. Stay on full alert and keep the battlecruiser on standby. I don't expect any trouble but you never know."

When the door opened and Carlo saw who stood there with the food cart, his mouth dropped open. "Are you out of your friggin' mind? What possessed you to come here of all places?"

Jemma smiled sweetly. "It was the safest haven I could think of, Carlo, darling. I don't suppose anyone told you about poor little Gideon. Judging by the expression on your face, I would guess not. Do you have any idea where he might be? He's obviously not in the Embassy. Didn't you and he discuss meeting for a drink while he was still on his ship? He and I have some unfinished business and I'd really like to get together with him. For old times sake if nothing else."

Carlo made a mental note to find the security leaks and plug them permanently. In the meantime, he was going to have to deal with Jemma. "What did you do to poor little Gideon? And do I really want to know?"

"If I give you the grisly details, you may lose your appetite. Let's just say he wasn't the least bit cooperative. He was so damn stubborn, I became quite upset and went somewhat beyond my usual bag of tricks. It was a pity because he was a very nice-looking young man. Almost a dead ringer for Darius, in fact. By the time I was done, well--let's just say that he wasn't too appetizing to look at."

So that's what he meant by repair and reconstruction. As for the dark glasses .... She's right. It doesn't bear thinking about. There's nothing I can do for him anyway except make sure she doesn't get her hands on him again.

"Since I have no more idea of where Gideon is than you, I don't see how I can be of any help."

"Maybe not,"

Jemma wheeled the food cart into the room and directed Carlo's secretary to close the door. "Knowing you and Sandro would probably be hungry, I prepared this myself. I'm an excellent cook, I'll have you know."

As she picked up a plate and began to fill it, Carlo found himself marveling at her. Jemma was as beautiful as his mother had been and as capable of dealing out death and love at the same time. "You didn't poison this, did you?"

"No, I didn't, although I will admit that I gave it more than a passing thought. Even though you and I don't see eye to eye, you're the strong force our throne needs and there's no one else capable of doing the job. You've given our people a sense of national purpose and there's no question of your loyalty to our ancient traditions. I wouldn't trust Baron for one second as Regent. He'd find a way to set aside our constitution and crown himself king. As for dear little Anna Lisa, she may not be nearly as stupid as she appears but she's as venal and self-seeking as Baron. I wish you'd rethink your position and throw in with us."

He shook his head, "Queen Sidonia left me a clear mandate and I have to honor it. She wanted

something planted in our fields besides gravestones and had a vision of an entire generation who could go to bed each night without fear. We must say, 'Enough', lay down our weapons once and for all and turn them into tools. You're an intelligent woman. Why can't you see it?"

"It's certainly a seductive vision and I wish I could believe in it. But you saw what happened at the spaceport. Illyria's as poisonous as ever and we can't afford to let our guard down for so much as a second. With all your talk of peace, Your Excellency, you haven't relaxed your vigilance along our borders in the slightest. You don't trust Daniel any more than I do and despite his marriage to your sister you have no more time for Darius than you do his father. Isn't that right?"

"I'll admit that, and the incident at the spaceport has certainly given me food for thought. But there's got to be a middle ground somewhere."

"If you ever find it, let me know. Now I must leave you. But remember this, Carlo. Only your fierce loyalty to Lodebar and your dedication to your mother's memory have saved you thus far from assassination. There are watchers in the shadows, Your Excellency, and not all of them are friendly."

"Ah, no. No, please."

Gideon awoke drenched with sweat. He lay shaking with relief when he realized the horrors had only been a dream.

A soft whisper came out of the shadows. "This is no dream. We have unfinished business, you and I. Now it's time to conclude our transaction."

No. This can't be happening.

Something was in his mouth, stifling him.

He heard a gentle chuckle, "That's right, my love. This is your old friend, Jemma. You can struggle all you want, honey lamb, but it won't do you a bit of good. And don't you worry your head about your attendant here. He'll sleep peacefully until morning and never know what hit him. But back to us. Since it really doesn't really matter whether you say anything or not, this time, I've silenced you. We're not alone here and I'll never be able to work on you if you start yelling. It would never do to wake all these nice people from their beauty sleep, would it? Incidentally, sweetheart, your beloved King Daniel is now history. He sleeps with his ancestors, and Darius and Sybilla won't be far behind. The hand holding the knife will be the one they least expect, and once they're gone, Illyria's Royal House will be no more."

Her hands pulled back the covers, then he heard her sigh. "What have we here? Oh my. They do nice work, don't they?"

His desperate cries strangling in his throat, Gideon struggled fruitlessly against the restraints holding him to the bed.

Something thudded and Jemma's voice swelled into a scream. Then it choked off into a dreadful liquid gurgle. The sudden silence was broken by Alexander's voice. "I'll teach you to mess around with my handiwork, you miserable bitch. What do you know, Hugo? I think she's dead. Well, no matter. This old world of ours is no poorer for the loss of the likes of her."

Hands loosened the restraints around Gideon's wrists and the bandage from around his mouth. As he spat out the gag and coughed and struggled for breath, Alexander spoke again. "Are you all right? If you are, say something for pity's sake. I would hate to think we went to all this trouble for nothing, especially after the work we did on you."

Gideon lay there for a few moments breathing hard. He was soaked with icy sweat and his heart pounded so fiercely, he was afraid it would jump right out of his chest. "What do you mean ...? You went to all this--trouble? You were *expecting* her?"

"Well, yes. We were. We--er--put out a feeler to let her know you were here."

Gideon leapt up in the bed and reached for Alexander's throat. "You dirty son of a bitch. You set me up. You knew she was coming and used me for bait. Do you have any idea ...?"

His words caught in his throat and he fell back panting.

Alexander settled him against the pillows. "I'm sorry, Gideon, but it was necessary. We hoped she'd come after you because it was the only possible chance we had of catching her."

"The attendant ...."

"He's all right. We were here the whole time and weren't about to let her hurt you again. I got a mite enthusiastic and squeezed her throat a little too hard. Inadvertently, of course."

"Oh, sure you did. The day you make a mistake like that pigs'll be flying around the moon. As you said, the world will be none the poorer for the loss of the likes of her and I seriously doubt anyone will fault you for it." He stopped for a moment. "She said something about Daniel sleeping with his ancestors. What did she mean?"

"I'm sorry, Gideon, but Daniel's dead. He was assassinated this afternoon. I got the flash from Seira right before Jemma arrived."

Gideon's voice was so quiet Alexander had to strain to hear him. "Who did it?"

"All we know is it was someone close to the king and Illyrian Intelligence has them in custody. Since she knew about it, I would guess that it had something to do with Jemma and the P.I.D."

"The attack at the spaceport ...."

"I don't think the S.B.H. had one damn thing to do with it. The whole thing was a P.I.D setup. Their intention was to kill either the President or a member of his family in order to put an end to the Synod Assembly's peacekeeping effort."

"You're right about that. Rufus told me there never was a bomb. The President's son died from a precision shot to the head and the sniper got away in the confusion."

"I thought so. Carlo and Anna Lisa never were the targets and it was pure dumb luck the Illyrian flagship was coming into dock when it happened."

"That and Carlo's cool head. It was a gift from providence that you and he already knew each other or the whole thing could have escalated into a really nasty mess. The demonstrators were a bunch of spaced

out kids with no discernible ties to the S.B.H. or any other group. They were doped to the gills on some hallucinogenic drug and the survivors don't even remember who gave them the stuff. Their brains are totally wiped and they'll be in custodial care for the rest of their natural lives."

"That sounds like Jemma all right. When it came to political provocation, she was an expert, and has mounted this kind of operation before. Remember the raid on the Siriun embassy about five years ago? A bunch of hopped up students came in with guns blazing and dropped a dozen clerical workers before the troops got there. They were supposed to be Illyrian sympathizers too."

"Yeah, and there was all hell to pay before it was over. Since there weren't any survivors, no one knew who the raiders were. After Sirius broke off diplomatic relations there was a big push to expel Illyria from the Synod and condemn them as a terrorist state."

"Timothy really stuck his neck out on that one and I don't know what Daniel would have done if he hadn't. He knew Jemma was behind it but no one believed him except the Nublians."

"And Sidonia," said Alexander dryly. "In the late Queen's defense, she tore strips off Jemma for it and threatened to demote her. It was months before she'd even speak to her again."

Gideon's tone was sardonic. "I don't suppose it ever occurred to any of you birds that I might have been the source of that particular piece of information. I was running a deep cover operation centered in the palace itself and happened to be a fly on the wall during that particular conversation. It was only after Timothy and the Nublians saw the video and heard Jemma's admission to Sidonia that they would give us any help. Up until then, they were on the fence. The Synod Assembly was talking about assembling an emergency force to attack Illyria and Daniel was up the creek without a paddle."

"To give Timothy the benefit of the doubt, he couldn't believe Daniel would be that stupid. Even before he knew the truth, he was doing his level best to defuse the whole issue. He and the Nublians took the video to the Assembly's Executive Committee and that was the end of any talk about an emergency force. You know, Gideon, I'm beginning to see why Jemma hated you so much. You must have been the bane of her existence."

"I did manage to tweak her a time or two. Had Darius given me a half a chance, I'd have gotten his miserable little lieutenant out. But the damn kid came roaring in on a personal rescue mission with his little gang of leather-clad commandos and that was all she wrote. Not only was my plan shot to hell, he compromised my entire operation with his shenanigans. I was lucky to get away with my life. If the bloody Lodebarians hadn't gotten to him first, I would have probably strangled him myself."

"Did you ever tell him that?"

"To what purpose? The damage was done by then. Darius was depressed enough as it was and there was no sense in making him feel worse. In the long run, it may all have been for the best. The prince's capture brought Daniel to the treaty table and he only stayed in line because the Synod Assembly retained him as a hostage."

"Daniel would have broken the treaty if they'd given Darius back?"

"In a heartbeat. Especially after finding out what kind of shape he was in. He'd have gone after Sidonia with his bare hands. Then he would have laid waste to Lodebar from end to end."

"Something tells me you weren't averse to our keeping Darius, then."

"I wasn't. And I had a pretty good idea where he was at least two days before Daniel located him. I was crossing my fingers the Nublians would get him out of there in time, and they did."

"Thanks to a sudden warning that came out of absolutely nowhere. I don't suppose you know anything about that, do you?"

"Me? Alexander, how could you even think such a thing?"

"Yeah, right. I can't imagine what got into me. Well, I can see that you aren't going to get much sleep for the rest of the night? How about a game of cards?"

Gideon waved his bandaged mitts, "With these things? What are you doing, Alex? Making fun of me?"

"Oh, right."

Scissors crunched and Gideon felt cool air on his hands. He flexed his fingers a couple of times and rubbed them together. "My cards are in my pack. If you can find them, you're on."

"Hmm. What's this? Braille? I didn't know they used that any more. What are we playing anyway? Gin?"

"Well, I use Braille. And for your information, smartass, it works very well. Yes, we're playing gin and the stakes are a credit a point. Now, shut up and deal. We're not getting any younger here and I plan to clean your clock. In fact, I'll own you, lock stock and barrel, before this night is over."

## Chapter 9 Reunion

Genevra blew her line for the fourth time.

"All right, cut," said Elf. "We may as well get some rest and pick it up again tomorrow."

He beckoned to Genevra. Her distress was obvious, and he could see that she was almost in tears. "It's all right, hon. This is only your second day and I can understand if you're nervous. Is it something about this scene?"

Genevra glanced down at her scanty costume. The few wisps of artfully placed chiffon did little or nothing to conceal her physical charms. The only part of her covered was her face which was completely hidden by a golden veil. "I -- er -- Everyone's looking at me and I might as well have nothing on at all."

"Hmm. I see. But this is exactly what your grandmother wore when she was presented to Ephraim for the first time. She was just about your age when Ephraim asked her father to provide him with a paid companion. Thamar was a harem slave and this was normal attire for her. She was attracted to Ephraim the first time she saw him and anxious to make a good impression. This is what she was raised for. She knew her body was beautiful and took pride in it. She was miserable in her father's house and this was

the only way out. He was a wealthy young lord with a kindly face who had much to offer. Even though she was afraid of what lay ahead, she desperately wanted him to lift the veil from her face. If you're to succeed in this role, you have to forget who you are and put yourself in Thamar's shoes. She wouldn't have been in the least embarrassed by this costume. She was high-born like you and had been chosen over all the other women in the harem. She came before Ephraim with her head held high and her lute under her arm, and charmed him so much he accepted her on the spot."

Genevra bowed her head for a moment. "I hadn't thought about it quite like that. All right, I'll try again and, next time, I'll get it right. Are you saying that it was love at first sight for Ephraim and Thamar?"

"It was for Thamar. Ephraim was an experienced man of the world and a product of his culture. To him she was a paid concubine to be enjoyed for a few months, then discarded. The actual love came later."

"But he risked his life to save her from the fire on the ship."

"That he did and was roundly criticized for it by his fellow Seirans. They considered it the height of irresponsibility to do such a thing for a creature as easily replaceable as a concubine. It was only in response to public opinion that Seira gave him a commendation and awarded him compensation for the loss of his ship."

Genevra's dresser put a wrap around her mistress's shoulders and Elf smiled. "You'll do fine as long as you think of yourself as Thamar. Can you can do it?"

"Now you've explained it, I can."

Elf saw two visitors approaching the set. He recognized Darius and extended his hand. "I heard you were cavorting in the snows around Phasga. You're looking very well."

Darius pulled Sybilla forward. "I don't believe you've met my bride. Sybilla, this is Elf. You've seen him in the role of my late grandfather, King Lysias."

Sybilla blushed. "Er, I'm delighted to meet you."

She turned inquiringly to Genevra who stood near Elf with her face still veiled.

Elf lifted the veil away. "This is one of the stars of my new epic, 'The Sixth Plutarch.' Darius, you and the princess already know each other, I believe. Sybilla, this is Princess Genevra of Seira."

Genevra's eyes met Darius' and she saw his glance at the gold signet ring on her left hand. "Your Highness. May I congratulate you on your marriage. I hope the two of you will be very happy. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go."

Gesturing to her dresser to follow her, she walked quickly away with her head held high. Inside her dressing room, she broke down in tears.

Darius looked after her with his mouth open, unconsciously fingering her handkerchief which he still carried everywhere. He had never beheld a sight more beautiful than Genevra when Elf lifted the veil from her face. When she raised her huge violet eyes to meet his, he had all he could do to keep from crushing her in his arms.

Watching her walk away, a knife twisted in his gut and he wanted so badly to tell her, "Stay with me,

Jenny, and I'll never leave you again. There'll never be anyone else but you." But he couldn't.

Vaguely he heard Elf's voice. "What is it, Darius? Are you feeling all right?"

He forced himself back to reality. "I'm fine. It's probably something I ate. You said something about giving us a tour. If Sybilla's up to it I'd be very interested."

Elf looked solicitously down at the little princess. She was quite attractive despite her admittedly homely looks.

Like her husband, she was looking a little pale.

"Are you up to it, ma'am? If you're not, we can do it another time."

"Oh, no. I'm fine. The exercise will probably do me good." Sybilla spoke with a brightness she didn't feel.

She'd seen Darius's reaction to Genevra. No matter how long she lived or how much she loved him, he would never look at her that way.

Oh, it's no use. I've just been fooling myself. She stands between us as much as she ever did. All she had to do was look at him and he fell in love all over again. Even though I'm carrying his child it's as if everything we had never existed. I wish I didn't love him so much. Then it would at least be easier to bear.

What's going on here? wondered Elf as he escorted Darius and Sybilla around the studio complex. *The two of them were fine until they met Jenny. Now they're both acting as if they're snake-bit. Oh, don't tell me Darius is still carrying a torch.*

To his relief, his wife Cornelia awaited them near the small building that housed the production office.

As Elf had feared, he'd had to shoot around her as her pregnancy progressed.

She was close to term, but just as she had been with their twins Cornelia glowed with health and her smiling good humor was infectious. "You must be Sybilla. Let's get out of this baking sun. If Elf's secretary is on the ball, she'll have a tray of cold drinks waiting. I could certainly use one."

Darius smiled. "That sounds good to me too and I have a hunch Syb would like to put her feet up."

Sybilla had to admit that her back was aching, and the desert sun was certainly beating down. "How do you stand it in that costume?"

Elf looked down at the black armor he was wearing for his continuing role as the Emperor Julian. "This costume is lighter than it looks. It's only when I have to wear the flight helmet that it gets really hot. Fortunately, most of those scenes are interiors. The one who really suffers is the actor playing Ephraim because he has to do so many scenes on horseback. The scene at the funeral pyre damn near roasted him to death and the procession across the plain was a real killer. He had to ride bareheaded and hold up a huge banner at the same time. The whole thing has given me a real respect for Ephraim's intestinal fortitude, especially when his white armor made him such a fantastic target. Julian and Cassius got to fly around in their fighters in relative comfort and didn't have to put up with all this choking dust on the plain."

"What does Ephraim think of all this?"

"Oh, he's getting a huge charge out of it. He and Thamar have been such a help, I'm thinking of putting them on the payroll and giving them a mention in the credits. Ephraim helped me start this studio and rounded up most of the financing for 'Julian and Cassius'. Thamar's coaching Genevra and it was she who came up with the costume for the banqueting scene -- what there is of it."

Darius raised an eyebrow. "Yes. I -- er - noticed."

Elf glanced at Sybilla. "Neelie. You said something about cold drinks. I'm absolutely parched."

Cornelia led the way into the building. "I suggest you find a chair and flop down. Acting is hard work and this is where we unwind at the end of the day."

She looked somewhat anxiously at Elf. "You are all done shooting for today, aren't you?"

"I am and if you folks will excuse me, I'll go change. Make yourselves comfortable until I get back. Then we can see about dinner. Neelie, have my secretary call Genevra and see if she'll join us. She can use a break and I feel like hitting the fleshpots tonight."

"That sounds good to me. Thamar and Ephraim said they might join us later. There's an auction at the old slave market and Darius and Sybilla might enjoy seeing it."

"A slave auction?" Sybilla looked a trifle stunned.

"Not quite in the sense you mean. The participants are professional concubines and male companions. Once a month, those who are looking for a situation come to the slave market. An auction is held for their services. Acceptance of any contract is voluntary and the whole thing's strictly regulated. It's an old tradition and really something to see."

Darius smiled, "It seems to me I've heard something about that market. Isn't that where the Synod Assembly politicians go to find their mistresses?"

"Years ago, before my great-uncle Ephraim came to the throne, they used to buy them outright," said Cornelia. "That was where the Plutarchs used to send their concubines who'd fallen out of favor."

"Is slavery still legal on Seira?" Sybilla was curious.

Cornelia bit her lip for a moment. "Actually it is. It's legal on Nublis too, but no one there keeps slaves any more. At one time, everyone on Nublis was a slave. Every person on the planet was the property of the Emperor to dispose of as he wished. Then, about five hundred years ago ...."

She broke off as Elf entered the room.

Comfortably dressed in a knit silk tunic and pants of dull blue, he looked at her inquiringly. "You sound as if you're beginning one of your stories, love."

"Oh, I'd like to hear it," said Sybilla. She looked somewhat anxiously at Darius.

"Of course," agreed the prince, "if I can refresh my drink in the meantime."



Elf grabbed his glass. "Allow me. Genevra's on her way and she's bringing a date."

When they were all settled, Cornelia picked up where she'd left off. "Approximately five hundred years ago, a young Emperor had just acceded to the throne of Nublis. As required by law, he had taken a bride from within his clan. He had done his duty on their wedding night and she was with child."

Darius glanced at Sybilla but she didn't notice.

Cornelia continued, "The new Empress told her husband she wanted nothing further to do with him and directed her servants to bar him from her apartments. Since he had no siblings or close friends, he was deeply saddened by his bride's action and, as the days went by, grew lonelier and lonelier. He could have forced the issue but was a considerate man who wanted nothing more out of life than to love someone and be loved in return."

"His only confidant was a wizened old nurse who had raised him from infancy and when he could bear the solitude no longer, he turned to her for advice. 'Go to the slave market tomorrow at sunrise,' she told him, 'and purchase the first man or woman you see offered there, no matter how ugly or at what price. He or she will tell you how to cure your loneliness.'"

"The Emperor didn't know his nurse was a witch from the wild mountain country or that she had actually been sent to him as a gift by her father at the time of his birth. Her name was Nyria and in her true form, as lissome and beautiful as the young willows in the spring. Being a witch, she didn't age and had grown to love the young Emperor after he became a man. Fearful of the jealousy of his mother and the other women of the Imperial Court, she'd assumed the visage of an ancient crone on her arrival. She remained close to her beloved after he grew to manhood and no one questioned her continued presence in his household."

"As the nurse had directed him, the Emperor rose at sunrise and went in disguise to the slave market in the center of the city. When he beheld the first offering, he shrank back because it was the ugliest, foulest creature he had ever seen. Whether it was man or woman or even human, he couldn't tell. When the auctioneer directed the foul creature to stand in the center of the platform, the crowd began to titter and jeer. "You must be joking,' they scoffed. 'What kind of an insult is this? No buyer in his right mind is going to make an offer on this piece of stinking filth.'"

"A hail of small stones showered onto the creature from all directions and it shrank to the floor of the stage with a whimper. Then a voice came from the back of the crowd, 'I'll take this creature off your hands for a hundred credits.'"

"The Emperor turned but couldn't see the speaker. Mindful of what the nurse had said, he cried 'Make that one fifty.'"

"The crowd parted to allow the other bidder to come forward. A tall swarthy horsebreeder from some southern clime much harsher than Nublis, he looked down at the young Emperor with obvious displeasure. 'What kind of a farce is this? I tried to do you a favor by taking this miserable creature off your hands and now you have a shill bidding against me?'"

"The Emperor was unaccustomed to being addressed in such a fashion and drew himself up angrily. 'I assure you I am no shill. What do you intend to do with this poor creature, assuming your bid is successful?'"

"The horsebreeder sneered, 'I raise fighting dogs. They could use the sport.'"

"You're going to feed that poor thing to your dogs?"

"It'll have a chance to outrun 'em but no one ever has. I come here regularly for the culls and the runts, the losers no one else will bid on. And what may I ask will you do with that miserable piece of putrefaction, assuming *your* bid is successful?"

"I certainly won't feed it to my dogs. Furthermore, I'll try to alleviate its suffering as best I can. No living creature, no matter how ugly, deserves to be treated like this."

"The auctioneer became impatient. 'Do I hear another bid? Come on, gentlemen, make up your minds. I have much merchandise to get through and the day isn't getting any younger. Do I hear two hundred?'"

"All right. Two hundred,' snarled the horsebreeder. 'It seems I'm destined to save this young fool from himself.'"

"Two fifty.' called the Emperor."

"I don't believe this,' shouted the horsebreeder, 'but my hounds are hungry. Three hundred.'"

"The crowd had fallen silent and was watching the verbal duel with fascination. The creature had gotten back to its feet and was avidly following the proceedings from the stage."

"Back and forth went the bids went, rising higher and higher. The word spread through the marketplace and the crowd swelled until it seemed as if half the city was there. Finally, when the bids reached an astronomical level and the Emperor was beginning to question his own sanity, the horsebreeder threw in the towel. 'I don't even know why I'm doing this. I could have bought an entire herd of cattle for what I've bid here. You want that thing so badly, it's yours, my friend, and I wish you joy of your new acquisition. Yecch.'"

"Fortunately, the Emperor had brought plenty of gold and the crowd watched curiously as he counted out the coins. He beckoned to the creature and it shambled off the stage. He caught one whiff of its stench and turned away and retched. When he recovered, the Emperor told the creature, 'Follow me.' Without looking back, he began to make his way toward the palace."

"As the two of them crossed the market square, the crowd gave them as wide a berth as possible and the Emperor wondered what he was going to do once they reached the palace. When they came through the gate, the servants threw their hands up in front of their faces and shrank away. It was obvious none was willing to come near let alone touch, his purchase. 'Stay there.' he ordered the trembling creature."

"He strode inside the palace and angrily ordered the servants to take buckets of water, soap and towels to the courtyard and leave them there. When the Empress heard her husband's raised voice, she came to the edge of her balcony and looked curiously over the railing. Seeing the Emperor roll up his sleeves and approach the creature, she began to laugh. 'I always knew you were a fool. Until now, I never realized how much.'"

"The Emperor ignored her and began instead to minister to the trembling creature. 'Take off those rags,' he said gently."

"As the creature slowly began to remove the assortment of shreds and tatters with shaking hands, the Emperor gestured to a couple of hovering servants to take the reeking pile away. Gingerly, they picked

up the remnants on the end of a stick as the creature discarded them. Holding their fetid burden as far away from them as possible, they hurried away to burn it."

Darius had become engrossed with Cornelia's story and the evening shadows were lengthening outside the office window.

Being already familiar with the tale, Elf sipped at his drink and watched him.

Unnoticed except by Darius, Genevra had come in and seated herself quietly in the corner. She looked down at her hands as she listened, twisting his ring back and forth on her finger.

Cornelia gave her a smile of welcome, then continued. "When the creature had finally removed all its clothing, it wrapped its arms around itself as if in shame. Then it sank in a crumpled heap on the stones of the courtyard and lay whimpering with its face hidden by its greasy strands of hair."

"The Emperor glared up at his wife where she stood mocking him from her balcony. 'Begone and don't show your face again until I call for you.'"

"The Empress's mouth fell open because her husband had never spoken to her like that before. She made as if to say something and he reiterated, 'Woman. Get out of my sight before I have you forcibly removed.'"

"Well, if you feel that way about it,' she said haughtily. "I won't inflict my presence on you any longer.'"

"Good,' snapped the Emperor and turned his back on her. He bent toward the shivering creature and lifted it to its feet. 'There's no need to be afraid. No one's going to hurt you.' As it lifted its face, he saw the creature's eyes for the first time. Sparkling green like the finest emeralds, he could have sworn they were smiling. 'Who and what are you?' he breathed, 'and why is it I feel as if I know you?'"

"After he started sponging off its naked body, the creature took the cloth from him and washed itself from head to foot. When the last of the dirt and grime were rinsed away, the Emperor saw the creature was a woman and that she was young and comely. As she picked up a towel and wrapped it around herself, the woman smiled shyly at him. She washed and rinsed her hair, patted it dry and combed it over her naked shoulders with her fingers. 'You do know me, Your Majesty. In fact, you've known me all of your life. My name is Nyria.'"

"The Emperor shook his head. "I know no one by that name and you're a stranger to me. But I was told you would cure my loneliness.'"

"She shook her head in disagreement. 'Only you can do that.'"

"But how? You can clearly see that I have no friends. There are servants everywhere I look and my lady wife is no companion.'"

"That's the problem, don't you see? You're alone because everyone in your kingdom's a slave. When you hold the power of life and death over another creature, there's no way they can be your friend. Friendship is only possible among equals, and you have none. To everyone here, you're a god to be worshipped from afar. No one has the temerity to come close to you.'"

"What of my wife? She's not afraid of me and you saw how she is.'"

"She is afraid, Your Majesty, and mortally so. Your Empress treats you as she does out of wounded pride and because she's carrying your child. No matter what she says or does, she knows you'll take no action against her until your son's born. By then, she may not care any more."

"For one so young, you're very wise. But despite what you say, Nyria, I was promised if I purchased you at the slave market this morning, you'd cure my loneliness."

"No. That's not what you were told."

"The Emperor drew himself up and his eyes flashed. 'Who are you to argue with me? You need to remember, woman, you're not only my property, you're worth less than nothing. You mean no more to me than that sparrow in the dust or this beetle beneath my feet. I can crush you every bit as easily.'"

"That's why you're lonely. Despite the fact that I love you more than life itself, even I can only be your servant, never your friend. Such a thing is only possible between equals. You have none."

"What if I free you and raise you up to be my equal? Will you be my friend then?"

"Ah, now you're on the right track. But freeing me is not enough. If I were free, I might exercise my right to leave you. Then you'd be even lonelier than before. All those around you smile and tell you what you want to hear because they must. If they were free to say what was really in their thoughts, they might not be so kind. Have you thought of that?"

"In other words," said the Emperor, "the only friendship with any value is that which is given freely."

"Well?" asked Nyria. "Do you want to cure your loneliness or not?"

"My people should love me because they want to," replied the Emperor, "not because they must. They can only do that if they're free." He glanced up at the Empress's empty balcony. "Even if I free my bride and make her my equal, she still may not want me."

"That's true, but that's a risk you're just going to have to take. However, don't despair. You're a handsome young man with winning ways. Believe me, you're easy to love. I of all creatures know that."

"As of now, Nyria," the Emperor said solemnly, "You are a free woman. You may go or stay as you please but I'd like it very much if you'd remain here with me."

"She smiled at him, then kissed his hand, 'I'll stay for as long as you need me. When you're no longer lonely, I'll return to the mountains from whence I came.'"

"The Emperor issued a proclamation freeing all his people from the highest born aristocrat to the meanest beggar on the street. That was the last slave auction ever held on Nublis and no human being has been bought or sold there since that day."

Darius asked curiously, "What became of the Emperor and his wife?"

With a glance at Sybilla, Elf replied. "They must have gotten together. She gave him several more children and they lived together into their twilight years. True to her word, Nyria did stay with the Emperor for a time. Whether they were lovers or not, no one really knows. As for the Emperor himself, he lived to be over a hundred. When he was finally gathered to his ancestors, he was deeply mourned and, from that day forth, was never lonely again."

"That's nice," said Sybilla, almost to herself.

Elf continued. "After Nyria returned to the mountains, she was never seen again. Legend has it she still dwells there in the deep forests and is as young and beautiful as ever. A spring in one of the glades is supposed to have been enchanted by her. Heartsick lovers go there to this day to drink its waters and seek a cure for their loneliness."

"Do they ever find it?" asked Darius softly.

"Perhaps. But Nyria was right, you know. The answer to that lies within ourselves."

"Be that as it may," said Cornelia, "we'd better have dinner pretty soon or we're going to be late for the auction. Just remember, dear, Sybilla and I are eating for two. I don't know about the rest of you but I'm starving."

"Then, by all means, let's go," agreed Elf.

As Genevra rose to her feet, the young man with her took her hand in a proprietary way. "I've got my own transport. All you need do is tell us which restaurant and we'll meet you there."

Genevra suddenly looked up at Darius and his heart lurched. At least she hadn't given him back his ring. He felt in his pocket for her handkerchief and lock of hair.

Some day, my love, he told her silently, *I'll keep my promise and come back to you.*

An unspoken vow passed between them and Genevra turned abruptly away to hide the tears in her eyes. Then she swallowed hard. "Thank you for the drinks and the story. We'll see you later at the restaurant. Where are we going, by the way?"

"A little bistro called The Grand Taverna. It's right by the marketplace," replied Elf. "My secretary reserved the back room and it's within easy walking distance of the auction. Besides serving a wide variety of native dishes, the Taverna has a couple of musicians and a belly-dancer. There's a large sign and you can hardly miss it. If you get lost, just ask for directions. Everyone knows where it is."

With a cheerful wave, the young man escorted Genevra outside and Darius gave Sybilla his hand. "Are you all right? You look a little pale."

Of course I'm not all right. *And I never will be as long as she's around. Oh, why did she have to be so beautiful? It's just not fair. Dammit, Darius. She's already got everything else. She doesn't need to take you as well.*

"I'm a bit wobbly on my pins, but that's probably because of the change in altitude. I'm as hungry as a bear and those native dishes sound interesting."

Elf gave her a wicked grin. "Stay away from the sheep's eye stew and a couple of other things we won't mention. Some of those dishes are very native indeed."

Cornelia laughed. "I'll tell you which ones to avoid. If you rely on the waiter's advice, you're liable to find yourself eating fried grasshoppers or something equally strange. The natives have a warped sense of humor and get a charge out of recommending such things to the tourists. Then, when the poor souls are

done with their meal, some local yokel will tell them what they actually ate. I grew up here and know all about it."

"Well, we eat fried grasshoppers in Illyria too," said Darius. "In fact, they're considered a great delicacy. The first time Sybilla had them she thought they were some kind of shrimp. Didn't you dear?"

"Oh, don't remind me. You could have told me before I took that second helping."

"I was too busy wondering how Dad could keep a straight face while you were stuffing them in. Let's be honest, Syb. Until you found out, you thought those grasshoppers were delicious."

"That was the first and last time. The very thought makes me go yecch. Cornelia, I'll count on you to order me something normal because I can see Darius is going to be every bit as unreliable in that department as the natives."

"Oh Syb. Where's your sense of adventure? What's the point of traveling if you never try anything new?"

As he listened to them banter, Elf thought, *Whatever the problem was, it seems to have left with Geneva. This is what it might have been like for me, heaven forbid, if I hadn't been able to marry Neelie.*

He thought about that terrible evening when he'd been abducted by Deborah's thugs, and shuddered slightly.

Cornelia squeezed his hand. "I know what you're thinking and it makes me so grateful for what we have now."

Then they led their guests into the star-filled desert night and their waiting transport.

His guests were finishing their desserts and Elf was about to propose a toast when the Grand Taverna's owner hurried in. He whispered something in his ear and the star looked sharply at Darius. Then he set down his glass and left the room. A few minutes later, he was back with a half dozen uniformed officers from Seira's internal security force.

"I'm sorry to break up the party. Darius, you and Sybilla are needed urgently at the palace. Geneva, these men will take you home and stay with you until further notice." He beckoned to Ephraim and drew him outside.

The former Emperor shook his head, "Don't tell me."

"I don't have to, do I? You knew the second the restaurant owner came into the room. We've got to get everyone out of here as discreetly as possible before the press descends and I have a feeling they're about to. There's a flyer just outside the back door. You and Tamar get them out through the kitchen while Neelie and I go out through the front."

Darius joined them by the door. "Something's happened, hasn't it? Has war broken out again?"

"Nothing like that. I was suggesting to Ephraim that you go out through the kitchen. One of Timothy's flyers is waiting and he'll brief you as soon as you get to the palace."

"It's my father, isn't it?"

Elf's face told Darius all he needed to know and he sagged against the doorway. Ephraim put a steadying hand on his shoulder. "I'll go get Thamar and Sybilla. Hurry now, before the press gets here and finds you."

Blindly, Darius allowed Elf to lead him through the Taverna's busy kitchen. He handed him over to the flyer crew and they helped him into the craft's spacious cabin. The prince sank into a luxurious armchair and sat staring out of the window. When Sybilla took his hand, he didn't seem to notice.

As soon as Ephraim and Thamar settled themselves, the former Emperor signaled to the crew to prepare for takeoff. Once they were safely in the air, he beckoned to one of the cabin stewards and whispered something. The attendant filled a tall glass with a dark colored liquid and put it in Darius's hand. The prince drained it in one gulp and held it out for a refill. The attendant looked questioningly at Sybilla. "That's Aquarian brandy."

"Fill it again and bring him as many as he wants. Better yet, bring the bottle."

The attendant glanced at Ephraim and the former Emperor nodded.

After the flyer landed on the Imperial Palace roof and Darius was making his way to the door, the attendant murmured to his colleague, "I've certainly never seen anything like this. I just watched him drink that entire bottle with my own eyes. He should be passed out flat on the floor right now. For all the effect it's had on him, it might just as well have been water."

"You're certain it was brandy?"

"Oh, it was brandy all right. I tasted it myself to make sure. It was our highest proof too."

Timothy was waiting at the landing site and took the younger man's hands in his. "Come on downstairs to my study, we need to talk. Ephraim and Thamar will take care of Sybilla."

"Oh -- er -- yes. You said we might be meeting again, Your Majesty. I hadn't expected it to be quite like this."

Timothy put a reassuring arm around his shoulders. "As soon as I received the flash about Daniel from our people in Illyria, I contacted the studio. They located Elf. My flagship's waiting in orbit with a battlecruiser escort. The word is just now filtering out to the press."

"What happened? It couldn't have from natural causes. Dad was perfectly fit and well when we left."

"It wasn't. Whatever information I have is scanty. As near as my people can tell, it happened about three hours ago inside the palace. The assassin or assassins were trusted members of the household. They're in custody. We're still not sure what took place or even how your father died. Illyria's blacked out all communications and your people are being remarkably closemouthed. That's probably because they couldn't find you right away and didn't want you learning of your father's death from a newscast or some stray reporter. I've used a private channel to notify them you're here and when you'll be on your way home. I delayed sending any information on your whereabouts because I wanted to get you and Sybilla

to a safe location first."

Darius looked at the Emperor blankly. "I'm not ready."

"None of us is. I was much older than you when my turn came and reacted the same way. I have a living father to guide me while you, bless your heart, are on your own. My dear friend Julian of Nublis once told me what it was like for him. He was the most reluctant of all monarchs when he assumed his throne and reigned for fifty years. Even though he hated every mother-loving minute. Julian was a wise and benevolent ruler and became the model for us all. You could do worse than emulate him."

"Or your father. He didn't come to the throne easily, did he?"

"No, he didn't. To hear him tell it, he was even more reluctant to accept the crown than Julian. You've just given me an idea. I'll send Ephraim and Tamar to Illyria as my representatives for the funeral and they can stay on for a while. Ephraim's a gifted telepath and can sort out your friends from your enemies very quickly. I'd like to have you stay here but your people want you back as soon as possible. As things have turned out, it was just as well you were away from the palace. You were probably targets too and you might very well have been killed along with Daniel."

The Emperor searched his massive desk. Then he handed a document to Darius. "For security reasons, I'm sending you and Sybilla back on different ships. From now until your son's born you must always travel separately. Here's a list of numbers where I can be reached, day or night. Punch them into your communicator and don't hesitate to use them, especially during the first month or so. The line to these numbers is scrambled but it's not totally secure. If you feel the need to discuss anything classified, contact me and I'll get back to you on a secure line. Incidentally, son, you'd better get used to being addressed as 'Your Majesty.' That's your title now and you'll be hearing it ad nauseam until the day you die."

Sybilla gazed blindly out of the window at the star-filled night. A food tray was on the table in front of her but she showed no interest in it. Tamar was anxious. "You must try to eat something my dear, if only for the baby's sake."

She glanced over to see what Sybilla was looking at and distinguished the distant outline of Darius's craft. "Would you like to talk to him? I can have one of the stewards set up a viewscreen call. It might help."

"You saw how he was. He's locked himself away in a world of his own and there's no way I or anyone else is going to be able to reach him."

"He's in shock right now and that does funny things to people. I've been there and know all about it. Darius cares about you more than you know or he even realizes. If any voice can reach him, it will be yours."

Sybilla turned around, tears streaming down her pale face. Her tone was so pitiful it cut Tamar to the heart. "Oh, no, not mine. There's only one person who can reach Darius and she's light years away. I realized it when I saw them look at each other today. He'll never love anyone else as long as he lives, least of all me."

"You surely don't mean Genevra? But honey, that was a puppy-love thing. They were just kids, Sybilla. He's married to you."



Sybilla put her hand over the gentle curve of her belly. When she felt a slight flutter, she was strangely comforted.

Thamar saw it and smiled. "May I?" Sybilla took the former Empress's hand and guided it to the spot. "Ah. Tell me, sweetheart. Has Darius ever felt the movements of his son?"

"Yes, he has. But I'm not sure it meant very much and he changed the subject as soon as he took his hand away. Now Daniel .... " Sybilla paused, because she'd never again see the King's ready smile or hear the rumble of his voice. "Poor Darius. They had such a short time together after he came back and now ...."

"Now he's going home to bury his father and assume the duties of the throne. You'll have to be there for him, he really has no one else. But you're not alone in this, my dear. Ephraim and I will stay for just as long as you need us and Timothy and your family are only a call away."

"But we don't even know what happened or even how Daniel died. If someone from Lodebar killed him, what will I do? I loved Daniel as if he was my own father. If I had anything to do with bringing about his death, I'll never be able to forgive myself."

As Sybilla broke down in tears, Thamar took her in her arms and shushed her. "Now, you listen to me. You had absolutely nothing to do with Daniel's death. We know how much you loved him and you would never have done him the slightest harm. It's the assassins who are responsible for killing him and whoever sent them to do this evil deed. But however he died, Daniel's at peace now. No one can hurt him any more."

"But it's hurting Darius. It's tearing him apart and there's not one damn thing I can do to help him."

"Yes, there is. There are different kinds of love and I've seen the two of you together. You may not realize it but Darius has a real affection for you. His son's going to mean the world to him just as he did to Daniel. That will create a bond between you. Your husband may not care for you the same way he does Genevra but you and he can still forge a partnership. You may be doing most of the building at first but you need to persevere. Believe me, there'll come a day when you'll look at each other in perfect understanding and neither of you will be able to imagine going on without the other."

Sybilla remembered something her mother had told her about Thamar. "You do understand, don't you? There was a time when Ephraim didn't love you either."

"That's right, and at the time, it was even worse for me than it is for you. Ephraim was being forced into marriage for the sake of our unborn child and planned to divorce me right after the ceremony."

"He was going to dump you and his child?"

"He was giving me a huge amount of money and the child and I would have had the protection of his name. But, basically, you could say that. He had no plans to see our baby after it was born and was definitely going to dump me."

"Since he obviously didn't, what happened?"

Thamar blushed. "Well, er -- Ephraim had been terribly injured in the fire on his ship and he thought he couldn't. . . To make a long story short, he -- er -- kissed me during the wedding banquet, we -- er --

kept on kissing. He found out he was wrong and we ended up in my bed. After that everything was fine and it has been ever since, if you know what I mean."

"Oh, you mean *sex*. Ephraim thought he couldn't perform after the fire and that's why he didn't want to marry you? But *sex* isn't the problem with Darius and me. That's the least of it."

Thamar blinked, then arched her delicate brows. "Oh, I see. But surely, if you're getting together in bed on a regular basis, you're three-fourths of the way there. Aren't you?"

"Physically, we're fine. But his mind and heart are elsewhere the rest of the time. After seeing Geneva this afternoon, it's going to be worse than ever."

"You really love him, don't you?"

"You don't know how much. But he doesn't love me back and I don't think he ever will. Once I thought I could live with things the way they are. Now I'm not sure I can bear it. I mean, the way he looked at her. She still wears his ring and he carries a lock of her hair everywhere he goes. It's wrapped in one of her handkerchiefs and he sleeps with it under his pillow."

Even though she knew he was grieving bitterly for his father, Thamar had a sudden urge to give Darius a sharp smack. Had he been anywhere within range, she would have done so without the slightest hesitation. Since he wasn't, she decided to do the next best thing. She beckoned the steward over and asked him to set up a viewscreen call to Ephraim. Then she told him she'd take it in her private suite. One way or another, she was going to get Darius straightened out and flying right. If he didn't plan on sleeping alone for the foreseeable future, Ephraim was going to help her.

"We need to get some rest," she told Sybilla gently. "Tomorrow's going to be a long difficult day. Now come along, dear. Once I've got you settled, I'm going to bed myself."

When Thamar had finally bidden Sybilla goodnight and reached her own cabin, Ephraim was waiting on the viewscreen. "Is there something I can do for you, dear?"

From long experience, he knew Thamar was about to tell him exactly what was on her mind. Once he learned what she wanted, he shook his head. "It's always unwise to interfere in someone else's marriage. You of all people should know that, my love."

Whenever she made up her mind to something, Thamar was like a force of nature and as impossible to withstand. So despite his reservations, Ephraim sighed and told her what she wanted to hear.

After concluding his conversation with Thamar, Ephraim returned to the main cabin and looked sympathetically at the young king.

Seemingly in a world of his own, Darius was staring out of the window. The meal in front of him was untouched and he hadn't spoken a word or changed his position since he'd come aboard four hours before.

As Ephraim watched him, he said to himself, *Well, Darius. It seems that, grief or no grief, you're about to get an object lesson on how to treat your wife. Unfortunately, I'm the one elected to give it to you.*

He beckoned the steward over. "It's time His Majesty went to bed. While I'm getting him to his cabin,

give the doctor a call and have him meet us with a sedative. The king needs his rest and that's the only way he's going to get any sleep. The press will be out in full force when we arrive and Darius needs to be on his toes when he encounters them. Not to mention all those damn dignitaries who'll be waiting to greet him."

A long-time veteran of Seira's interplanetary fleet, the steward had traveled with Ephraim before. He smiled his understanding and went to comply with the former Emperor's request.

When Ephraim tapped him on the shoulder, Darius was startled out of his reverie. He moved and found his joints stiff from sitting in one position for so long.

"It's time you went to bed, son, and I can use some sleep myself. Tamar called a while ago. She said Sybilla's fine and wished us both a good night. Come on. We need to get you to your quarters."

Darius allowed Ephraim to lead him to his cabin and help him out of his clothes. He barely noticed the doctor shooting something into his arm and found himself settled on the pillows with the covers over him without remembering how he'd gotten there. When he shut his eyes, the jumbled memories of the day flashed before him. All at once, the black waters of oblivion closed over his head.

Darius stood in the crowded slave market of a dusty desert town he'd never seen before. The paving stones were hot beneath his sandaled feet and all around him cackled a myriad of strange tongues. He saw a stir in the crowd and the first offering of the day appeared. The figure was plainly that of a woman but a long black veil concealed her features and her form. As the slave-master herded his property toward the front of the raised platform, she resisted him at every step. He pulled the veil away with a flourish and she stood before them in her naked glory, shielding herself from the crowd's insolent gaze with her hair and arms as best she could.

The slave-master turned his unwilling merchandise this way and that with a practiced hand as he gave her provenance and enumerated her considerable charms. "This one's a certified virgin. A captive princess from the far regions of the south, you can see from her shy ways she's never known the hand of a man. This incredible copper shade is her hair's natural color. It's had no help from the dye pot and these delicate curves owe nothing to the surgeon's knife. This is a rich ornament, my friends, worthy of any royal harem. It's only due to the vagaries of chance and my own financial misfortune that such a rare creature is being offered in a backwater like this at all."

The bids started coming fast and furious but Darius stood silent.

He heard a chuckle and a gravelly voice said "You're not bidding on this delectable morsel, young master? In this particular instance, I can assure you the slave master speaks the truth. This little southern Princess is indeed a rare gem and it's been many a long day since our market saw any offering quite so beautiful. Did your breakfast not agree with you, perhaps? Or are you out of sorts for some other reason?"

Darius looked at the fat little man beside him. "My house has adornments enough. If you find her so damn desirable, Jaco, why aren't you bidding on her yourself?"

"Alas, my purse is flat and my chief wife Xantha is a jealous, spiteful creature who'd never let anything that gorgeous within fifty yards of the house. She's the reason my harem is filled with crones. Most are cross-eyed to boot."

"I won't argue with you there, and how you ever let yourself get into such a pickle, I'll never know. But I told you, my house has enough such decorations already. Besides, she's not my type. I doubt she can cook and have no wish to deal with her homesick tears. There, you see. Old Ortho just put in a bid and he's got more money than the rest of us put together."

"You're never going to find her, you know, and don't think I haven't seen you come to this market day after day, searching. Whoever you're looking for isn't here, Darius, chances are, she never will be. That's probably because the woman you seek doesn't exist. Even if she did, you probably couldn't afford her."

By way of an answer, Darius took a golden locket from the pouch at his belt and looked at the delicate features pictured within it for a long time. "Oh, she exists all right and one of these days I'll find her again. We met in a garden and our hands barely touched but I knew then she was the only woman in the universe for me. I'll never rest until I find her again. She gave me this locket to remember her by, then she took from me my father's sacred amulet."

"You fool. You could have bought a whole caravan of these golden lockets for what that amulet was worth? If your father knew what you'd done, he'd be spinning in his grave. Your dream girl probably pawned it to some greasy Siriun before you were out of sight, it's a certainty you'll never see its like again. Incidentally, do you even know her name?"

"She said her name was Mariel. She claimed her father was one of the mountain wizards and was only in town for the day."

"Now, that's the final limit. As if seeking some phantom woman isn't bad enough, now you want to go courting some mountain wizard's daughter? Do you have any idea what her father would do if he caught you? Turning you into a toad and tossing you into the bottom of a deep well would be the least of it and you'd be lucky if he only did that. As for finding her in a slave market like this, you'd have about as much luck locating a Berean dragon. And the last of them died over a hundred years ago."

Darius returned the locket to his pouch with a sigh. Then he started walking toward the nearby river.

Jaco hurried along beside him, his short legs pumping as he tried to keep up with the taller man's pace. "Just remember," he panted. "You already have a beautiful wife and she's given you a fine son. You have a magnificent house, a harem that's the envy of every man in the city including old Ortho and everything a man could possibly want. Why can't you be content with the riches life's given you?"

"My wife was selected by my father for business reasons and my harem consists of a bunch of irritating, ignorant, giggling concubines with little more on their minds than clothes and jewels. They spend most of their time trying to bribe the eunuch who watches over them to persuade me to summon one of them to my bed. If I had my druthers, I'd bring the whole lot to the market tomorrow along with their fat old keeper."

"Why don't you?"

"I'd never hear the end of it from my mother. She picked out most of them. Outside their never-ending competition for my favors, she and my wife and concubines are the best of friends."

"From what little I've seen of your household, I would say your mother has excellent taste. Your women may not have much between their ears but they're not lacking anywhere else and you certainly have enough of them. What do you do with them, anyway? Sleep with them by rotation?"

"Nope. Although it really isn't any of your business, my dear Jaco, I'll tell you how I handle it. I seldom if ever sleep with any of them. Or my wife either, when it comes to that."

"Oh, now I've heard everything. This idiot's living in the lap of plenty and starving to death. What is it with this Mariel anyway? It sounds to me as if she has you seriously bewitched."

"Maybe she does, but I swear I'd give up everything I have for one night with her."

"Well then, for your sake, I hope you never do find her again. Her father might just take you up on your offer. Mountain wizards are notoriously avaricious and, wealthy as you are, he'd find that offer hard to resist."

As Jaco was speaking, Darius realized that they'd reached the gate of his house. He led the way into a shaded courtyard. "Come on in, my friend, and rinse the dust from your throat. I have some sparkling wine from a new vendor and would value your opinion."

A sturdy small boy barreled toward them from behind the carved stone fountain. Like Darius, he had dark hair and blue eyes and Jaco knew this must be his son. As his father set him on his shoulders, the child crowed with delight and tugged at his hair while Darius's graceful blonde wife watched from the doorway with a wistful expression on her small face.

"Welcome to our house," she told him gravely as they entered the cool marble foyer which seemed quite dark after the brilliant sunlight.

From the garden beyond, Jaco heard bell-like voices and the sound of a guitar.

"They're practicing for your son's birthday celebration." his wife told Darius. She looked at Jaco as her husband set the boy down. "He'll be three tomorrow."

As Darius asked his wife to bring refreshments, a brilliant flash lit up the foyer from end to end. The child buried his face in his mother's skirts while Jaco shrank back in fear.

A glittering white mist appeared before his wondering eyes, and from it, the form of a woman. Her dark hair framed her delicate face and when she spoke, her melodious voice was like nothing he had ever heard. She held out both her hands to Darius. "Did you really mean what you said? That you'd give up all of this for just one night with me?"

"Mariel. You've come back to me at last, and lovelier than you ever were."

"No, Darius!" Jaco cried. "You can't do it." He picked up Darius's small son, and held the sobbing child up to his father. "Is she worth this, you damn fool? Now choose, dammit. Choose."

The women's voices joined with Jaco's. Above it all, Darius could hear his small son's weeping. Only his wife stood silent as she waited with bowed head for his decision. As he looked deep into Mariel's eyes and she held out her arms to him in welcome, the voices continued to echo, "Choose. Choose. Choose."

He was repeating it to himself over and over like a litany when he woke. The dream was so vivid he looked around for a moment wondering where the house and all the people in it had gone. He could still hear his small son's weeping and feel the tug of Jaco's voice calling him back to sanity. Most of all, he remembered the light shining on his wife's bowed head and her tears splashing to the marble floor.

It was only then that Darius realized how much Sybilla loved him and what he had come so perilously close to throwing away. He murmured into the surrounding darkness, "Thank you, Jaco, whoever you are." Then he fell asleep again.

Ephraim told his sleeping wife with a smile, "Well, Thamar, I sent Darius the dream you asked for. I hope you're satisfied."

In her cabin on the other ship, Thamar stirred restlessly. "How could I not be, my love? But tell me truthfully, if I'd been the witch and you were in Darius's shoes, would you have given it all up for one night with me?"

"Fortunately for us, that's not a choice I'll ever have to make. I honestly don't know."

A week later, Darius sat silent at the lunch table toying with the food on his plate while Thamar did her best to make polite conversation.

He finally pushed back his chair and stood. "If you'll excuse me, Vasek Zivon is waiting and I have a matter I must urgently attend to."

Ephraim glanced at him from under his brows. "Of course, Darius. Thamar and I will stay here and keep Sybilla company. We'll see you at dinner perhaps?"

Darius inclined his head slightly. "I'll look forward to it." He lifted Sybilla's hand and brushed it his lips. "Until later, dear." Then he turned on his heel and left.

Sybilla sat looking after him for several minutes. "He's been this way since the funeral and doesn't talk any more in private than he does in public."

"An execution is always very unpleasant," remarked Ephraim. "I suspect Darius is dreading it, even if they are Daniel's assassins. Count yourself fortunate you don't have to watch the proceedings. I imagine even he will be relieved when this afternoon's grim work is over."

Sybilla thought of the grim wooden scaffold with its masked executioners, burning brazier and ancient instruments of torture and shuddered. Even if those two had murdered Daniel in cold blood, it was an unbelievably horrible way to die. Had it been up to her, she would have opted to give them a more merciful end. But the penalty for high treason in Illyria was an awesome one. Coupled with regicide, there was no possible leniency.

It made little difference that one of the assassins was a young woman. She would still die inch by agonizing inch and her shrieking soul would only be released after she'd seen her traitorous partner draw his last breath on the rack beside her. Not only was Darius required to preside over every minute of the afternoon's dreadful festivities, he who would have to deliver the final blow.

Tickets to the massively publicized execution had been scalped at record rates. Bidding on souvenirs from the doomed pair had risen to a fever pitch and the interplanetary press was out in force. The Synod's gambling syndicates were offering astronomical odds on whether the condemned would last long enough for the king to kill them and the whole thing would be carried in living color across the entire Synod. Only a few isolated voices had spoken out in protest and they'd been quickly silenced. No

sporting event had ever caught the public's interest like the public execution of King Daniel's assassins and nothing was going to interfere with their entertainment.

Oh, Momma. *Solaria never knew how lucky she was.*

She found herself wondering all over again how a gentle girl like her former housekeeper Lucia and Daniel's trusted steward could have become so enmeshed in the labyrinthine world of Jemma and her Partners in Death. But for the fact that she and Darius had spent a couple of extra days on Seira, they too would have been on the receiving end of the assassins' savage knives on that bloody afternoon.

By pure chance, a young scullion from the kitchen had been near the terrace and witnessed the murder. The boy had no business in that part of the palace and had only come to the royal drawing room in search of his pet ferret which had escaped from its cage. The youngster had tripped over one of the King's two dead security guards in the drawing and seen the faces of the two assassins through the window as their knives rose and fell over Daniel's fallen body. He'd managed to keep his wits about him and remained silent and undetected. He'd known full well what his fate would have been had either killer seen him. He stole away as quietly as he'd come. As soon as he was safely out of earshot, he fled as fast as his feet could carry him and raised the alarm. But for the scullion's prompt action, the traitorous pair would have gotten away clean and bided their time until they could strike at Darius and Sybilla.

By the time the palace guards arrived on the scene, the assassins had returned to their posts. They appeared as shocked and horrified as everyone else and Lucia's weeping had been especially pitiful.

Daniel had been alone on the terrace as was his wont at that time of day. He wouldn't have been on his guard against anyone as trusted as Lucia because the graceful young woman had been coming regularly to his bed to comfort him in his lonely grief.

Under chemical interrogation, Lucia confessed she had long been the steward's paramour and had been placed in the royal household precisely for this purpose by Jemma Carlane years before. Her instructions were to seduce the King and bring about the deaths of the entire Illyrian Royal Family.

It had been a matter of pure luck that Sybilla promoted her to the position of housekeeper and the steward had only remained in the king's service out of malice aforethought. He was as involved in the vendor kickbacks and stealing as the former cook, the housekeeper fired by Daniel was his aunt and he hated the Royal Family with a passion. He was already entangled with Lucia when Sybilla came on the scene and his scheming paramour involved him in her murderous plans with no difficulty. He was violently jealous of Daniel's interest in Lucia and when she became the king's mistress, came close to losing his reason.

The poison on the assassins' blades killed Daniel almost instantly. Before he hit the stones of the terrace, he was already dead.

Puzzled by the butchery of his corpse, the interrogators concluded Lucia's hatred of Daniel was such she'd continued to stab him over and over, and infected the steward with her savagery.

Vasek appraised the situation. Unsure of Darius and Sybilla's whereabouts and with no way of knowing who else might be involved, he placed the terrified scullion in protective custody and ordered the guards to say nothing. He barred the press from the palace, blacked out all communications and ordered a roundup of all known dissidents within Illyria's borders. When he learned Darius and Sybilla were safe in Timothy's palace, Vasek had been mightily relieved. He cloaked the royal couple's return in secrecy and made no announcement of the new king's arrival until shortly before his ship docked at Betelgeuse's

spaceport.

The canny intelligence chief waited twenty-four hours before taking action against the steward and Lucia. Then he summoned them separately to the King's private office. He told the steward he needed to discuss internal security arrangements and sent a message to Lucia requesting refreshments.

When Lucia entered Daniel's palatial office, Vasek took the tray from her hands and set it on the desk. He asked her to take a seat and offered her a drink. Wise in the ways of men, Lucia bridled slightly. "That's very kind of you, sir, but I need to be getting back to my duties."

When she turned to go, two security officers came in and stood between her and the door. Vasek smiled. "Your duties can wait, Madam Lucia. Your friend the steward will be joining us shortly and we have one or two things to discuss."

"Well, in that case, I will take that drink. The steward told me he was meeting with you on a security matter and you might want some input from me. Tell me, sir, do you have any leads on who might have done this terrible thing?" When Lucia noticed Vasek admiring her legs, she reached for the black-edged handkerchief in her pocket and dabbed at her eyes. "Daniel was such a wonderful man. I loved him dearly as a man as well as a king."

"Did you now?"

The door opened to admit the steward and he looked at Lucia in surprise. Two more guards followed him in and stood behind him as he spoke. "What are you doing here? You should be preparing Their Majesties' rooms and making sure all is in order for their arrival. There's no time to be sitting round or making social visits."

"This is not a social visit." snapped Vasek, "Kindly sit over there."

As the guard behind Lucia's chair seized her arms and pinned them down, a second forced her mouth open and shoved a gag between her teeth. Then he took a needlegun from his pocket and shot something into the side of her neck.

As she slumped down unconscious, the horrified steward sat frozen in his chair. Weapons clicked and he saw two pointed at his head. The door opened again and he looked to see who had come in.

When he saw the kitchen scullion, he sniffed. "What in the hell is he doing here? When he disappeared yesterday, I thought the thieving little bastard and his damn ferret had run off for sure. We've been counting the Palace silver to see what he took."

Vasek beckoned the quaking youngster forward. "It's all right, Tonio, no one's going to hurt you. Now, tell me exactly what you saw."

The boy gulped. "I saw him, sir. Him and Madam Lucia. The king was lying on the ground just outside the window. They had knives in their hands and were stabbing him over and over. They had medical gloves on and long white jackets over their clothes. They were all covered with blood and she was laughing. The king's bodyguards were on the floor inside the drawing room. I tripped over one and he didn't seem to be breathing."

"You lying little son of a bitch!" yelled the steward. "You killed him yourself. That's why you were in that part of the palace. You need to ask this murdering little bastard who else is involved, he sure as hell didn't



do it alone. You're surely not going to take his word over mine."

"Oh, but I am, and I've had just about all of you I can stand. Tonio's a brave lad. He kept his head under pressure and I have a feeling he's destined for great things. Were it not for him, you and that bitch there would have gotten away clean. I'm not only putting him in for a medal, that damn ferret of his is going to get a commendation as well. Take this stinking carrion away. Before you chain her up, check that miserable bitch for a poisoned tooth or implant, I'll be damned if she's going to cheat the executioner of his due. As for you, Steward. You've got a date before the Royal Council and I'll have no doubt they'll find you guilty before this day is out. This is one hell of a homecoming for our new king but I can at least make him a gift of his father's assassins."

Vasek thought about his only son and the price he'd paid for his loyalty to Darius. "Once and for all, we're going to root out this nest of snakes and exterminate them, and Daniel and Gideon will be avenged."

Sybilla heard a faint cheer from the crowd in the square outside the palace and knew the grim proceedings had begun. Once again, she thought about her older sister and thanked her private gods for sparing Solaria from the same fate. Lodebar's law was as savage as Illyria's and Solaria's position as Crown Princess wouldn't have saved her from the verdict of the Great Council. Like Darius, Sidonia would have been required to preside over her traitorous daughter's public agony and she too would have had to administer the final blow.

Ephraim shook his head. "Such things are necessary in times like these. I did no less after Seira's revolution was over. When I assumed the throne, my first action was to execute my predecessors and any of their heirs who might give me trouble. Had I left any alive, they wouldn't have rested until they'd assassinated me. On the plus side, this execution will give Darius some closure for his father's murder, and remember, Sybilla, he's no stranger to killing."

"I know and the execution will give some closure to me too. I blame myself for putting Lucia so close to Daniel."

"It wouldn't have made any difference. With the steward in her pocket, she'd have gotten close to him anyway and was in place before you came."

Thamar took Sybilla's hands in hers. "I've been where you are, dear, and understand. Now, I think you should go lie down for a while. Once this dreadful day is past, we have to start looking forward to the coronation, don't we?"

Sybilla looked from one of them to the other with tears in her eyes. "I don't know what I would have done without you. You've been so kind. As for Timothy ...."

"Timothy badly wants peace in this corner of the Synod," replied Ephraim, "and you have much to do with that."

"And Darius and Genevra's sacrifice. If I'd known how they felt about each other, I never would have consented to this marriage."

"Maybe it's just as well you didn't. Genevra will be all right. She's very young and her heart will mend in time."

"Darius' won't, will it?"

Ephraim couldn't argue. He'd seen into the young prince's soul the night he met Genevra. Darius' love for her was undying and he hoped he'd never be faced with the choice he'd shown him in his dream. Ephraim's answer to Tamar had been the truth. If she'd been the witch and he'd been in Darius's shoes, he honestly didn't know what he would have done. One night with her would have been worth everything he had. The former Emperor smiled at his wife and counted himself fortunate that was one decision he'd never have to make.

## Chapter 10 Gideon Redux

"All right, Tara Lee, give me those scissors," said Hugo's voice. "Alex, lower the lights. Gideon, I'm uncovering your eyes now but I want you to keep them closed for the moment. There! Now just let me check a couple of things. Uh huh. That looks good. Everything seems to have healed up nicely and I must say you've grown an impressive set of new eyelashes. All right, you can open them now and tell me what you see."

Gideon blinked a couple of times. Gradually the shapes around him swam into focus. Then he realized the ones above him were faces. "Hello, Doctor de Blanc. Oh, and there I see Alexander's ugly puss."

He looked very surprised, then continued in a somewhat aggrieved tone, "You can't possibly be Tara Lee. I had you pictured in my mind as fat and homely. But you're ...you're beautiful!"

Alexander did his best to hide his smile.

Obviously stung, Tara Lee snapped, "What, may I ask, is wrong with that?"

"Well, er," Gideon faltered. "I was planning to ask if you'd have dinner with me after I got out of here. Now ...."

"You wanted me to go out with you when you thought I was ugly," asked Tara Lee in honest bewilderment, "and now you don't?"

As Alexander made a choking sound and abruptly turned his back, Hugo could see he was shaking with silent laughter.

"Well, it's just that when a girl looks like you ...."

"Oh, I see. You're one of those bastards who only goes out with homely women because they're less likely to turn you down when it's time to say good night!"

That was too much for Alexander who shot out of the room and slammed the door behind him. As Hugo followed him, he could hear his colleague guffawing all the way down the hall.

"Oh, this isn't going right at all," Gideon said hopelessly. "Tara Lee, I know you probably don't have a free moment in your social life for at least ten years but I'm going to ask anyway. When they finally cut me loose from this place, will you go out with me?"

"What social life? Except for Alex, who's my first cousin and doesn't count, not a single living soul has asked me out on a date since I got here."

Gideon groaned, "Oh shit! I should have known this was too good to be true. If it wasn't for bad luck, I'd have none at all. I can't go out with you, dammit."

"Now what?" shrieked Tara Lee who by now was almost jumping up and down with frustration.

"Well," Gideon explained gloomily, "if you're Alex's first cousin, that would make you an Imperial Princess or something. I'm only a commoner and from Illyria at that. It wouldn't work."

Tara Lee felt a strong urge to pick up the water pitcher and dump its contents over Gideon's head. She managed to restrain herself albeit with some difficulty. "You know, Gideon, you're nothing but an out and out snob. Would you consider asking me out if I told you I wasn't a princess?"

"Of course I would! But telling me that isn't going to alter the facts. If you're Alex's cousin, you're a princess and that's that!"

When she started to laugh helplessly, Gideon became really annoyed. "I don't see anything in the least bit funny about this situation. I can't help the fact I'm just a working stiff."

Tara Lee managed to get herself under control. "But that's all I am. Honestly, Gideon, I'm not a princess. While it's true Alex is my first cousin, my father's never been married to my mother. It's all perfectly respectable. Daddy has a traditional harem and Mama's one of his official concubines. When it comes to any kind of social status, I'm at the bottom of the heap not the top. I'm technically nothing more than a freed slave. If anything, your family might not think me good enough for you."

Good for you, Tara Lee, thought Alexander, who had tiptoed back and was listening with Hugo outside the door. *That seems to have rendered Gideon speechless for the moment, which is just as well. All he does is get into trouble every time he opens his friggin' mouth. Just as long as you don't tell him about all the money and properties Uncle Nat's settled on you, you should be home free.*

"Well, in that case," said Gideon somewhat sheepishly, "would you consider going out with me, after all? While I only have my pension and normally don't have much money, I can afford to take you someplace nice because I just cleaned Alex's clock in a card game. Incidentally, I don't give a rat's ass what my family thinks."

Hugo looked at his colleague inquiringly and raised an eyebrow.

"He cheats!" hissed Alexander.

Hugo grinned. "In Braille? Tsk! However, that is one way we can slip him some extra money and still leave him his self-respect. And the sooner he's on his feet and out of here the better. I have a sneaking suspicion, Tara Lee intends to take over the rest of Gideon's recovery and I do mean recovery in every sense of the word."

The day after Gideon's disappearance from Hugo de Blanc's Institute, three major intelligence services began hunting him at the behest of his frantic father. Fearful that the agent had been kidnapped in reprisal

for the death of Jemma, the hunters spread their nets far and wide throughout the Synod.

The wily Gideon easily eluded their search. With the use of money and resources he had previously hidden away, he'd gone to ground the moment he left. When the coast was clear, he quietly emerged from his hiding place and went on his way.

When still been at the Institute, Gideon realized he was falling deeply in love with the delectable Tara Lee. Given his lack of money and prospects, he'd clearly seen how little he had to offer. Legitimate or not, Tara Lee was still a king's daughter and she'd grown up in the circles of wealth and privilege.

Being who he was, Gideon had already written Tara Lee a letter of explanation. He planned to send it as soon as he was established in the new life he had crafted for himself. With his background and qualifications, he could easily find a modest clerical position in Illyria's burgeoning bureaucracy and he'd long since learned to support himself on a pittance that, for anyone else, would have been barely enough to keep a mouse alive.

Gideon arrived quietly at Betelgeuse's spaceport the morning of the coronation. From there, he took a regular public flight to Illyria. With his changed features and eye-color, no one recognized the young agent when he arrived, least of all his father.

As he came nonchalantly up the ramp toward the outside exit of the city's magnificent new air terminal, Gideon observed the king's security chief with a group of his senior intelligence officials at the gate. They were scrutinizing all new arrivals and inspecting their papers as they passed through the turnstile. After Gideon submitted to the same scrutiny, his documents were returned to him.

He calmly walked past his unsuspecting father and hailed a transport into town. As he expected, there wasn't a hotel room to be had anywhere in the city but that was no problem. Unbeknownst to his father or the agency which employed him and for reasons he himself had never quite understood, Gideon had always maintained a one-room convenience apartment in one of the city's outlying complexes. He rented and paid for the place through an anonymous mail drop and an intermediary.

Neither the intermediary nor any of the complex's tenants knew him by name or by sight. Like the apartment, the sporty little runabout parked in its numbered garage space was in a name other than his. The keys were waiting in the complex manager's office when he arrived.

On his way to his new home, Gideon stopped and ate well at one of the many new restaurants which had sprung up in the capital in response to the recent tourist influx. Even though the menu prices were higher than he'd expected, he decided just this once to indulge himself. Thus it was fairly late in the evening when he slapped his palm on the ID pad, then inserted his electronic key into the lock of his apartment door.

As the door slid open to admit him to his new home, the living-room lights sprang to life and automatic draperies drew themselves silently together to cover the glass wall at the apartment's far end.

"Fine," Gideon muttered to himself. "All I need now is an artificial cat to wind itself around and around my legs in welcome. Then I'll have all the comforts a man could possibly want."

"Some would give you an argument there," came a familiar voice.

Gideon's mouth dropped open as a tall figure unfolded itself from one of the apartment's easy chairs. With lightning speed, a gun appeared in the agent's hand and its muzzle was pointed at the intruder's head

before he had time to take a second breath. "What are you doing here? More to the point, how in the hell did you get in?"

Alexander smiled as he raised his hands above his head. "You're not the only pebble on the beach, you know. Since I happened to be in the capital for the coronation I decided to look you up. Is this any way to greet an old friend?"

"I suppose my father's men are on their way."

"Not at all. No one knows I'm here, your father least of all. Believe me, Gideon or whatever your name is now, your secret's safe with me. Even Tara Lee doesn't know. Incidentally, the poor girl's been crying her eyes out ever since you left and I finally had to promise I'd do my level best to find you. Now, will you please put that damn thing away before something happens both of us will regret?"

As Gideon put away the gun, Alexander indicated the low table in front of the two easy chairs, and a brightly wrapped package. "I thought you could use some company on your first night in your new home and brought you a housewarming gift."

"Dammit, Alex! How did you find me anyway? Incidentally, I don't recall inviting you to make yourself at home."

"You didn't. As to how I found you, I've known where you were ever since you sneaked out of the Institute. As soon as I notified him, Timothy ordered me to stay on your tail and keep you safe. That's exactly what I've been doing and it's why I'm here. Thanks to a couple of judiciously planted stories, the press and the P.I.D. think you're dead. For your sake, it's probably better if things stay that way. Incidentally, a burned up body in a highway wreck was found shortly after you disappeared. It's been tentatively identified as yours."

Gideon sank in the chair opposite Alexander. "You haven't told anyone?"

"No one but Timothy. Believe it or not, he understands better than anybody why you did it." Alexander handed the package to Gideon. "Open it."

After Gideon tore off the wrappings, he started to laugh. "I might have known. Aquarian brandy and a deck of cards."

"Well, you do owe me a return match. And now tell me, mine host, do you have any glasses in this hovel of yours or are we supposed to take turns swigging from the bottle?"

"Speaking of hosts," replied Gideon as he hunted through the apartment's tiny kitchenette, "aren't you supposed to be at the ball? Or did you put on that elegant evening attire just for me?"

"I looked in on the ball when I dropped off Tara Lee. It was not only extremely boring, she had so many would-be dancing partners homing in on her I doubt she saw me leave. If it eases your mind any, I left a message I'd be back to pick her up around midnight. Which gives us plenty of time for that card game."

Gideon located a couple of mismatched glasses and some napkins, then poured them each a generous shot. "How is Tara Lee?"

Alexander broke open the deck and began to shuffle. "Very upset. When she saw the story about that highway wreck, she came unglued and Hugo had to give her a leave of absence. She keeps insisting the

body in the wreck was misidentified and you're still alive somewhere. She's been begging me to find you. Tonight, she was so damn pitiful I almost told her the truth. I had all I could do to persuade her to pull herself together and get ready for the ball."

Gideon winced visibly. Alexander started dealing as if he hadn't noticed. "She really loves you, you know. Personally, I consider you a complete and utter idiot. If it were up to me, I'd taken you by the scruff of the neck, hauled you back, and forced you to apologize to her on your bended knees. Your father's pretty upset too, incidentally. As for Sybilla, she's gone into permanent mourning. Unfortunately, Uncle Timothy sees things a bit differently and has ordered me to keep hands off. To that end and on his specific orders, I removed all pictures of your new face and any other possible identification from your file at the Institute as soon as you disappeared. Incidentally, it was I who set up the body in that wreck. There's only one other person who suspects you're not really dead. Prince Carlo of Lodebar. He's nobody's fool and sought me out privately to request that I give you a message. He said his offer of a drink is still on and mentioned something about a snowbank. He said you'd understand. From his tone, it sounds as if the Lord Regent not only owes you a favor, he wants to return it."

For the first time that day, Gideon smiled. "He's probably planning to offer me a job. Heaven knows, I could use one."

It was Alexander's turn to look flabbergasted. "The Lord Regent of Lodebar would offer you a job? I'd thought I'd heard everything but this is really one for the book. What in the hell has been going on anyway? I thought you two were sworn enemies."

"We were once. I was on active duty in Lodebar when I came across a piece of information that vitally affected the keeping of the peace and the stability of their monarchy. King Daniel ordered me to notify Queen Sidonia and show her the proof. I chose Prince Carlo as my intermediary."

"That must have been the trick of the week. I'm surprised Carlo didn't shoot you out of hand."

"He almost did, especially after I told him who I was. He settled for a subzero strip search instead. If he'd left me naked in that snowbank for another couple of minutes, he wouldn't have had to kill me because Mother Nature would have done it for him. Whoof! I've never been so cold in my life!"

"So you and Carlo finally made common cause against the P.I.D. I should have known. I suspect your subzero meeting had more than a little to do with the roundup and public execution of Prince Carlo's father and his nest of conspirators against the Lodebarian throne. Didn't it?"

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies. Surely, Doctor, you and Timothy have enough intelligence resources of your own. If you happened to miss that one, it's no fault of mine. Assuming I had anything to do with it."

"Well, what do you want me to say? Prince Carlo is scheduled to be at some glitzy farewell reception for the visiting dignitaries tomorrow. If I know him, he'll be expecting an answer."

"Get me an invitation to the reception, I'll tell him myself."

In the face of Gideon's obvious disinterest in their card game, Alexander threw down his hand. Then he reached inside his jacket. "Here, you can have mine. We look enough alike to be brothers. As long as you leave your gun at home, you should pass through the scanners all right."

Gideon took the elegantly engraved invitation and its matching ID chip, then examined them closely.

"They aren't taking any chances, are they? Something tells me Darius' coronation committee doesn't hand these out to any old Tom, Dick or Harry off the street."

"Not exactly but I happen to have a couple of extras. The reception starts at eleven. I have the use of a royal limo and will pick you up here at ten-thirty sharp."

"Rank hath its privileges and boy, are they rank! I should have known my little runabout wouldn't be good enough for the likes of you."

"There you go again. Talk about touchy. No wonder Tara Lee was ready to wring your neck when you kept refusing to go out with her. Incidentally, she's going to be with me."

"Shit! She knows what I look like. I hadn't thought about that."

"Well, I had and it's high time you and she got together. Incidentally, you're going to be introduced as one of our distant cousins by the name of Gabriel Maximus. Remember him? That was supposed to be Darius's cover name at the Institute only he never got to use it. Outside Tara Lee and myself, no one is going to know you. And she'll keep her mouth shut, believe me."

"You just came here to play Cupid, didn't you? That's what you've been up to all along, you bastard. It won't work, you know. I earn barely enough to keep my own body and soul together let alone have a social life or support someone else. Tara Lee told me she doesn't have anything outside her doctor's salary."

"Tara Lee told you wrong. Her father's provided for her very well and she's got more money than she'll be able to spend in two lifetimes. But I may as well tell you up front, when it comes to spending Tara Lee's every bit as chintzy as you. In fact, you two should make an excellent pair. She cheats at cards as shamelessly as you do."

"I can't let a woman support me. It isn't right."

Alexander said in a tone of complete frustration, "That's how Lodebarian women feel about men. Gideon, can't you accept the fact that men and women are equal? In the long run, it doesn't matter who brings home the bacon. You and Tara Lee obviously love each other and should be together. Between you, there'll be more than enough money to go around and that's all that really counts. Gideon, you're better off than you know because you have a choice. That's not true of everyone." Alexander abruptly stood up and went over to the window. He pushed back the draperies and touched the button to open the door leading to the apartment's balcony. Then he went outside and stood with his hands on the railing, gazing out at the lights of the city below. Off in the distance, he could see a shuttle coming in for a landing at the airport.

Suddenly, the entire sky lit up with a magnificent fireworks display.

Drawn by the spectacle, Gideon joined him on the balcony. Together, they watched in silence as one extravagant flower after another burst into radiant bloom, then just as quickly died. Arrayed in glittering gold, silver and every color of the rainbow, a seemingly never-ending panoply of exploding designs across the sky proceeded to turn the gloomy night into a brilliant artificial day.

"Now, that's a proper use of explosives," remarked Gideon. "The ancient race who invented gunpowder had no idea it had any value except as a toy. A more civilized culture came along and taught them to use explosives as an instrument of death. Now gunpowder's back in its proper place as an instrument of

beauty and nothing more."

"Yes," said Alexander softly. He thought of his beautiful young wife, shredded by a terrorist's bomb in a senseless conflict in which she had had no part. "Let's hope it stays there."

Gideon looked at him sharply, "Is something troubling you? There is, isn't there? What is it, Alex? Surely you can tell me."

When he saw the tears on the older man's face, he put his arm around Alexander's shoulders and led him back into the living room. The balcony door closed softly behind them and the automatic drapes drew themselves across the window again with barely a whisper.

"You lost someone didn't you? That was why you went into your country's intelligence service and became a part of our war when you didn't have to. I should have realized long before this."

As Alexander sat in the chair and buried his head in his hands, Gideon went to the entertainment center in the corner. He found a recording and put it in the machine. "Long ago, a young man who'd just lost his son wrote this lullaby. The feelings he expressed through this piece of music say it better than any words possibly could. I first came across it when my mother died and it gave me comfort during those long nights after she was gone. The composer was your Great-Grandfather Julian. His first love had just been torn away from him and he wrote it for their baby."

As the first clear notes of Julian's keyboard stole into the shadows of the room, something in Alexander's frozen heart loosened. Like gentle healing fingers, the intricate shadings of the melody pushed their way into his wounded soul and he felt the long-dead Emperor's sorrow as if it was his own. "She was so young and she'd told me she was pregnant only the day before. I'd just graduated from medical school and we were still living on Aretz. She was so excited about the baby she insisted on going into the city the next day to pick out nursery furniture. I was running errands for one of my old professors that afternoon and we arranged to meet in the lobby of one of the grand hotels. I was twenty minutes late because I stayed too long talking to the professor and got caught in rush hour traffic. Five minutes before I arrived, the bomb exploded. It was in a package under the table next to where my wife was sitting. The authorities assured me she never knew what hit her. It was a stupid random act and whoever was responsible didn't even know who she was. It made the headline news because of who we were. That's probably why no one took credit. Twenty people were killed besides my wife that day. Four were small children. They could have had no more to do with whatever that particular conflict was about than she did."

While Gideon had heard hundreds of similar stories on both sides of Illyria's border, it had never occurred to him Alexander had been a victim. Now he understood what the doctor meant by his poignant remark about being alone.

"My child would have been just about Darius's age and my wife and I married for twenty years. Like you, I want to be done with this grim business and am moving on with my life. Hugo's retiring and he's asked me to take over the Institute. I've decided to accept his offer because I find a real satisfaction in that type of work. Even though the salary's a pittance, I'll be more than happy to be there for the rest of my days. Like Tara Lee, I have no lack of money. Now, on another subject, are you coming with us tomorrow or not?"

"After what you've just told me, how can I say no? And I suppose I'd better come clean with my father. There's no sense in his grieving for me when I'm alive and well. Until this moment, I hadn't realized how cruel that was."



Alexander took a deep breath and rubbed his fingers over his eyes. "I'd best wash my face before I leave. It's getting late and Tara Lee will be looking for me. Until tomorrow, then. We'll be here with the limo at ten-thirty sharp."

When Alexander had finally gone on his way, Gideon thought to himself, *Well, so much for my new life. My face in the mirror may be that of a stranger, inside I'm exactly the same.*

He reflected on Tara Lee and the upcoming meeting with Carlo of Lodebar. Recalling the Lord Regent's message about the snowbank, he smiled.

"Thank you, that'll be all."

Darius gave a sigh of relief. It was the evening of his coronation day and the grand ball was about to start. One of the hottest events of the Synod social season, tickets to the event were as scarce as hen's teeth and scalpers were obtaining record prices for the few still available.

To accommodate the crowds and add his own pleasant note to the occasion, Ephraim had parked Nephtali in orbit above Betelgeuse. The thrice-daily shuttles running between the space station and Illyria's graceful capital city were filled to capacity and merchants in both locations were happily counting the largest influx of tourist credits within living memory.

After the door closed behind the two servants, Darius shucked his brilliantly enameled coronet and tossed it on the bed. Then he unstrapped the jeweled belt holding his father's great golden saber. After removing his sable trimmed half-cloak and glittering black boots, he wearily stripped off his deep green buckskin tunic and tightly fitted riding pants. Dropping them on the floor, he headed straight for the shower.

Tonight's ball was the last of the week's gala events. Sybilla was as weary as he and they were looking forward to seeing the palace return to its normal quiet routines. In another way, he dreaded the end of the busy round of festivities. Then he would really face the loss of his father. Daniel's strong presence had been so pervasive throughout his entire life, he could barely contemplate existence without him.

The first sight to meet his eyes on his return from Seira was Daniel's military coat on a carved chest in the palace's marble foyer. It lay where the king tossed it the morning of his death and everywhere Darius looked were poignant reminders of his father. Daniel's book lay face-down next to his favorite chair and his favorite pair of hounds waited for a beloved master who would never come home again. In his comfortable study, his reading glasses lay half-opened on a stack of documents awaiting his signature and his treasured rifles hung on the wall behind his massive carved desk. Darius found his father's field glasses on the bloodstained terrace where Daniel must have dropped them when he turned to greet his killers.

It was only then that he appreciated what it must have been like for Sybilla the first time she'd returned to Lodebar after her mother's death.

When Sybilla told him of her brother's redecoration of Sidonia's private office and his insistence that he wanted no mementos of her anywhere, Darius had been shocked by the Lord Regent's callousness. Now he understood where Carlo had been coming from. The loss of his mother had been traumatic enough

and the Lord Regent didn't need to underscore her absence every time he entered the office that had once been hers.

Carlo was right, thought Darius as he turned on the shower. *Tomorrow, I'm having Dad's office cleared out and redecorated. Then there'll be at least one room in this house where I won't be constantly reminded that he's gone.*

As he emerged from the bathroom with a towel around his waist, he heard a soft knock on the door and the sound of Sybilla's voice.

"Come in, dear. I'm just getting dressed."

When she saw his beautiful tunic and pants on the floor, Sybilla gave a cluck of disapproval. She awkwardly bent to pick them up and Darius told her to leave them alone.

"That's what I pay the servants for," he grumbled as he rambled around the room in search of his things. "They'll be in to tidy up and turn down the bed as soon as I've left. In the meantime, I've told them to quit fussing and leave me alone. I'm not some friggin' imperial potentate for pity's sake and am perfectly capable of dressing and undressing myself without help. Now, where in the hell is my jacket?"

Sybilla smiled as she assembled Darius's evening attire and dug around in his closet for the right shoes. Apparently, when it came to this kind of assistance, wives didn't count. If the truth be known, she enjoyed such moments of intimacy with her volatile husband and from what she'd observed of him during the previous week, Illyria's new king would have been in a complete panic without her help.

Rufus would have gladly come in to assist and had even offered to do so. But Darius wanted no reminders of the time when he'd been unable to care for himself and had given his old keeper a flat and unequivocal, "No."

Sybilla smoothed her husband's jacket over his shoulders. "I thought this afternoon's reception went quite well, but there was one young man there I'd never seen before. Yet I felt as if I should know him. He was with Prince Alexander of Seira and that pretty little blonde cousin of his. Did you notice him, dear?"

"As a matter of fact I did and I agree with you. At first I thought he was one of Alex's brothers, they certainly looked alike. When I saw all three of them on the other side of the room, I knew that couldn't be right. He and Tara Lee seemed to be together and that may have been how he wangled the invitation. If you really want to know who this stranger is, why don't you ask your brother Carlo? They were as thick as thieves during the reception and left together."

"Good idea. I think I will."

Genevra had been at the reception too. When she'd been formally presented, Darius avoided looking at her and felt Sybilla bristle at the Seiran princess's approach.

Thanks to her well-publicized role in 'The Sixth Plutarch,' Genevra had achieved a celebrity status of her own and there'd been a considerable stir among the spectators when she'd entered the crowded throne room. The current media darling, if she spoke with any man for more than a couple of minutes there was immediate speculation about their relationship but there'd never been so much as a whisper of gossip about her and Darius.

Genevra's curly brown hair and slightly exotic mode of dress were the current fashion rage. Her gown was in keeping with the harem styles in the soon to be released 'The Sixth Plutarch' and designers all over the Synod were said to be planning a similar desert theme.

Much to her amusement, Genevra's grandmother Thamar had also become a target of the tabloids. As a result of Elf's film, the former Empress's tall elegant figure and piquant face were being featured on every newsstand. The whole thing reached a fever peak when Thamar received a highly publicized offer to pose in the nude for a well-known men's magazine. That had been the final straw for her outraged husband and he'd sputtered on and on until Thamar finally snapped, "If you don't shut up this instant, I'll take them up on it. This is a tremendous compliment for a woman of my age and I'll tell you something else. I can stack this body alongside Miss Sugarpuss of the Month any old time and come out ahead."

Ephraim had been shocked speechless. Then he finally recovered his breath. "Since when do you look at things like Miss Sugarpuss of the Month?"

"I usually don't. After the *Male Sophisticate* people made me that offer, Jonathan was kind enough to let me look at his back copies of *Ultimate*. Some of the articles were quite interesting and well-written, but I must say I found the physique of some of the young women in the centerfolds quite extraordinary. I mean, there was one -- well a person has to wonder how she can even walk upright, let alone see anything below her ...."

"I get the picture. You did tell them no, didn't you?"

Thamar giggled. "I can't believe it, you're actually jealous. Of course I told them no. Now the CyberStyle people want to pair Genevra and me as fashion commentators on their new series *Upscale*. It's going to be syndicated Synod-wide and they're planning to do a promotional tie-in with 'The Sixth Plutarch' premiere for the kick-off show."

Thamar's sons reacted with shock at the audacity of the magazine's offer but her grandchildren thought it was absolutely wonderful. Especially Timothy's irrepressible son Jonathan who kept urging her to take them up on it.

While Elf was getting an enormous charge out of the whole thing, Cornelia's enthusiasm was considerably more muted. Their new son made his bow two days after Darius and Sybilla's visit and she was fully recovered.

Cornelia stood somewhat disapprovingly next to her famous husband as Genevra and her parents entered the ballroom. Ephraim and Thamar were right behind them and there was a flurry of photographer activity as the press took in the Dowager Empress' gown.

Even more spectacular than Genevra's, Ephraim actually hesitated when he first saw it on her. There was more than a whiff of the harem about Thamar's hand-printed multicolored chiffon ensemble. Not only did it sport the same bare midriff and jeweled trim, the gown's artful design appeared to leave little to the imagination. Then he realized this was an optical illusion. Thamar's dress actually concealed far more than it revealed and had considerably less décolletage than most traditional gowns. But in addition to it being more flattering to the female figure, the gown's graceful lines were infinitely more pleasing to the male eye.

"Who designed this marvel?" he asked out of the corner of his mouth. "Whoever he is, women all over the Synod are going to be breaking down his doors."

"Actually it was a she," replied Thamar. "Oh, do you really think so?"

"Absolutely. This is going to set an entirely new fashion trend and I'd like to be in on the ground floor. So who's the designer?"

Thamar blushed. "Well, actually, dear, it was me. With a certain amount of input from Geneva and Elf. You might say it was a group effort. It all started because Jenny was so upset over her scanty costume in the banquet hall scene. She came to me for advice about the rest of her wardrobe and this is what we came up with. I'm glad you like it, dear."

Ephraim gave her a sideways glance, "Elf, huh? I should have guessed. With his experience around Deborah and the theatrical world, I suppose I shouldn't be too surprised. That boy certainly does have an original outlook on things. Excellent taste too. But if Elf had anything to do with it, how come his fair Cornelia isn't wearing something like this?"

"Elf asked her and Neelie turned him down flat. She said 'I'm not about to turn up at Darius's reception all tarted up like a seraglio belly dancer,' or words to that effect."

Ephraim hooted. "As tiny as she is, she may very well be right. You need a certain height to carry this off and you do, my love. You certainly do."

Overhearing their exchange, Sybilla had been in full agreement. Such an outfit might look magnificent on Thamar or Geneva but their harem inspired styles would be ridiculous on anyone as short as Cornelia or herself.

As she fastened Darius's diagonal sash, she glimpsed herself in the mirror and decided she really didn't look too bad. Darius' glance met hers in the glass and he eyed her pale rose chiffon gown with its own crimson diagonal ribbon with obvious approval. Then he winked at her. She smiled back and they surveyed themselves one last time.

"We make a pretty royal-looking couple at that. Just think of it, Syb. Tonight's the final bash. After tomorrow, our guests will have gone their separate ways and the palace will be ours again."

*Yes, it will but I'm really not looking forward to it. Daniel's ghost will be haunting this place for years to come and I'm never going to willingly sit out on the terrace again.*

It seemed like a hundred years since she and Gideon had played cards there, but it had only been a couple of months. For the umpteenth time, she wondered what had happened to him, but he had disappeared into thin air the night he'd left Hugo de Blanc's institute.

She recalled her long-ago conversation with Sidonia. The words she'd spoken then had been eerily prophetic.

Her mother had said in reference to Anna Lisa, "She'd be easy prey for the first sweet-talking gallant who came on to her and have both our families enmeshed in scandal in no time at all. I have no such fear where you're concerned."

"You've got that right," she had replied bitterly. "No sweet-talking gallant is ever going to come on to me unless he's blind."

Then the unthinkable happened. Where Gideon's suicidal declaration could have erupted into a messy scandal, instead it brought her and Darius together. Humanity and common sense prevailed and the

damning letter had conveniently disappeared, along with its author.

It only goes to show, she thought, *that you can't ever be sure about anything* .

There was a sharp knock on the bedroom door and Darius called out, "Who is it?"

"Rufus. It's time to go."

Darius glanced at Sybilla, then drew something from his pocket.

"I don't need this anymore," he said softly. When he threw it on the fire, the delicate silk and lace glowed red, then turned to ashes. Sybilla smelled burning hair and looked sharply at her husband.

He returned her gaze steadily. "As you see, my love. There's no one else but you."

Laying a white-gloved hand on his arm, Sybilla suddenly realized the gawky little princess she had once been was gone forever. Now she truly was a queen as her mother had been before her.

When the orchestra struck up the Illyrian national anthem, she gave her husband a radiant smile. He returned it. Then with heads held high, Darius and Sybilla proceeded gracefully down the palace's grand staircase to meet their waiting guests.

## **The End**



Kate Saundby

Kate Saundby lives in rural northwest Tennessee with her husband Herman and a laid-back orange cat named Clifty. Her black and tan Coon lab dog, Jessie Mae, joined her ancestors two years ago and she's still greatly missed.

Kate also has two grown sons. The younger, Nicholas, is the talented creator of her covers and the father of three little girls with a fourth on the way. (Don't ever let Kate get started on the subject of her granddaughters, however, because she'll never shut up.)

Kate's first and second trilogies in the Nublis Chronicles saga, *The Wages of Justice*, *The Wages of Sin*, *The Wages of Greed*, and *Golden Silence*, *Dark Angel* and *The Artemesian Mandate* will be coming soon from Double Dragon. They will be followed by *The Orion Property* and *Fortune's Hostage*. The final titles in the Nublis saga *The Spirit Dogs of Sirius* and its sequels, *Aase's Daughter* and *The Wages of Deception*, were originally released in June 2000 by Starlight Writer Publications and will be re-released soon by Double Dragon.

The forthcoming editions of the Nublis Chronicles have been extensively revised and contain additional material suggested by Piers Anthony and Steve Lazarowitz and new cover art by Nicholas Krueger and Tony de Luz.

*A Circle of Arcs*, Kate's standalone historical time travel, was first released in November 2000 and has been referred to by one SF reviewer as "A grand conceit for the paranormal romance fan". She is presently at work on a sequel titled *A Distant Bell*.

Kate's romantic poem *The Other Woman* was also voted #1 in the Preditors and Editors 1998 Poll.

The covers of Kate's Nublis Chronicles titles, *The Wages of Justice* and *Aase's Daughter*, and her novels *Golden Silence* and *The Spirit Dogs of Sirius* were all finalists in the 2000 Dream Realm Awards, and *The Artemesian Mandate* was recently granted the Environmental Life Award. *The Wages of Justice* was a Frankfurt Awards Nominee in 2000, *A Circle of Arcs* and *The Wages of Greed* were finalists in the 2001 Eppie Awards and *The Wages of Justice* was also recently named a finalist in the upcoming Dream Realm Awards to be held in Dallas at Uncommon.con at the end of November 2001

## About this Title

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