

Alien Heat

by

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Futuristic Science Fiction Romance Novel

“Before we leave, Lucas, do you mind if I take a look at those blossoms? I’ve never seen anything like them before.”

At his nod, Glyneth gingerly walked over to the edge of the crater.

His voice carried the distance separating them. “We call them Venusian flowers--puffy and milky white, like the planet. I have not seen them this far south. As far as we know, they first appeared after the atmosphere settled down from the impact’s dust and debris.” He shrugged his broad shoulders. “For some strange reason, all women love them.”

Not this woman. Glyneth contemplated the flowers from all angles. They were beautiful, in a cold, calculating way, but something felt wrong about them. The Earth did not speak to her through these plants. Why was that? And why would Columont’s women love these alien growths?

She reached down and plucked one. Its willowy stalk stood tall--about a foot high--and hard, almost like bamboo. Completely covering the stalk was a type of white “fur,” warm to the touch. Inside the gauzy white flower petals, she saw a clear oval, jelly-like mass, with tiny bubbles suspended within it. As she watched, bubble by bubble floated up to the top to be released into the air.

Exquisite, but again, something niggled her about it. Without warning, the ground beneath her shifted. Dropping the flower, she took a step, but her foot slipped into a deep crevice.

“Lucas!” Before she finished calling his name, the rocks moved, opening a larger fissure. She struggled to keep her balance...but it was no use.

Even as he reached for her, she no longer stood on the surface. Falling, sliding, tumbling, she lost sight of the sky and of Lucas. Then she lost sight of everything as she hit her head against stone.

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Dedication

For the Brazettes--

Carole, Cheryl, Lisa, Stacy,

and the original Braz herself!

Prologue

::The third planet revolving around the life-giving Sun was alien to the willowy growths struggling to survive in its inhospitable climate. But comfort was not the reason they were here: the plants had a mission. They'd been tasked to convert a cold, soggy world into a magnificent wonderland of clouds and heat--duplicating Mother Venus, from whence they came.

The first stage of the colonization was complete: after the great bombardment of this planet, Venusian flowers had slowly but persistently taken root in one location of the existing habitat. With strength in numbers, they now readied themselves to branch out into new territory. The transformation of this planet called Earth had begun! Soon, increased carbon dioxide emissions would blanket the atmosphere, noticeably altering the temperature. Due to the greenhouse effect, heat--blessed heat--would bake the lands and skies.

Mother Venus would be proud of her offspring. And sister planet Earth would revel in the alteration, now being a truer reflection of the Almighty Sun.::

One

Earth, sometime after the Great Destruction

On this day, twenty years ago, I was conceived. I hasten to add that this wasn't a happy occasion. On the contrary. Nor can I ever rejoice on this particular date since it was this very day, ten years ago, that the Outsiders stormed into the village once again, but this time, they abducted my mother.

My dear, sweet Mamma. I died that day.

Glyneth paused in her writings. She allowed the ink on her words to dry and stared out at the bleak, barren landscape. Whenever she needed a reprieve from the mundane routine of village life, she would escape its confines by hiking a mile or so up into the mountains to a secluded spot. Here she was free to write in her journal or study forbidden books away from the censorious eyes of village elders.

Or remember the past. She picked up her quill pen and dipped it into the bottle of ink.

Ten years ago, warnings of the Outsiders' imminent arrival failed to register alarm in my young mind--for we were always at war, with one group or another. True, I'd heard graphic tales about the hoard of men, north of the Great Beyond, who galloped on the fastest steeds imaginable. After all, it was a known fact that these Outsiders periodically raided our village every ten revolutions of the sun. As far back as time remembered, women in their childbearing prime were the targets. Once they were swept up onto the invaders' swift horses, they were never to be seen again.

To me, that had been just a story told 'round the campfire, to frighten misbehaving children. When one constantly lives with war, a tendency to become inured to the horrors of it is natural, even expected.

But this abduction! Gracious, holy Lord, nothing ever was the same for me after I saw Mamma being carried away, a jumble of screams and thrashing arms and legs. How could it have been otherwise? Mamma was everything: the light, the sky, the silvery moon. She was happiness, joy, and bubbling laughter mired in this backwards village. But even she had a cautious side, and would take care to hush me whenever I would unthinkingly prattle on about how the Earth spoke to me, telling me its secrets.

As the Earth spoke even now. Sensitive to vibrations emanating from the ground, she now felt thunder pounding through the contaminated soil of the Great Beyond toward her position just outside the village's boundaries. The Outsiders would arrive soon. Soon.

She increased her writing speed.

Mamma was the only one who understood me. I think I was vaguely aware, even then, that I was somehow different from the other children who halfheartedly learned their lessons. They never questioned how things came to be, never thirsted for knowledge. In fact, learning and education still is almost as taboo as journeying out into the Great Beyond. Fear of radiation strangles all villagers,

even our soldiers. For if you are tainted by radiation, you are a mutant.

Hearing another message from the ground below, Glyneth stopped to interpret it. *Make haste! Make haste, we are coming*, warned heavy rumblings of horses' hooves against hard, dry soil. But just why were these Outsiders compelled to come here? Why did they need females to supplement their population? Were the Outsider women infertile? Did they die young?

Were they mutants?

As Glyneth was, with her strange telepathy and also her skin's chameleon-like color changes. All due to an enlarged pineal gland located in the inner recesses of her brain. On the outside, she was as normal as everyone else. But on the inside...

She hurried to complete her thoughts.

Tush, I digress. Once again, with the dawning of this particular day, like the clockworks of old, the Outsiders are due to swoop down and steal our women. And I am at risk, as are all the young women in the village. Perhaps if I make the package less tempting, they might bypass me for one who pleases the eye more.

Glyneth closed her journal, then carefully removed excess ink from her quill pen. A sudden pain pulsed within her head, causing her to sigh. The Earth was about to speak again. This unusual ability to communicate with nature could be viewed as either a blessing or a curse. She stilled her actions to receive the message. On the ghost of a breeze came another warning. Her solitude would soon be at an end. Someone scaled the arid hillside in her direction.

The intruder couldn't possibly be an Outsider. Which meant a villager, and villagers didn't approve of the art of writing. Glyneth slipped the journal and inkbottle into a pocket in the long, loose fitting robe that covered her body from head to toe. Only her eyes and part of the nose remained unhidden. The ancient ones had a word for the garment she wore: *chador*.

She sighed. Sometimes she was guilty of blasphemy; if only she were a man so she could escape wearing this restrictive garment.

But idle wishes were seldom granted. Besides, it would've been more to the point to desire that both villager men and women had free choice on wearing apparel.

Glancing at the sun as it blazed a path over the mountains to begin a well-worn arch in the sky, she wiped a trickle of perspiration off her forehead. Another hot day in the making. How unusual to have a scorcher this late in the year. Mid-October should have been a time for cooler temperatures. Perhaps even a bit of frost.

Tush, I digress, again. But who was so bold as to track her movements, outside the village gates?

The answer to that question was simple--it had to be Devon.

The young man soon came into view, climbing a boulder and swatting a tangle of dried shrubs out of his way. "Glyneth! I knew I could find you." His high forehead gleaming with sweat, he waited as if he expected her to congratulate him on his feat.

She purposefully disappointed him. She never needed men, young or otherwise, and never would. Oh, they had their uses, such as fighting battles to protect the village and tilling the soil to produce crops. But how much better it would be if they didn't wage war. All that wasted energy. All those precious resources squandered on petty grievances or clansmen pride.

And what about the burden of pain death left behind for the loved ones to carry?

Despite the warm coverage of her *chador*, she shivered. A revolting village law demanded that all women enter the state of matrimony by age twenty. As she would attain her majority in nine months, Devon Dikeman had taken it into his thick head that Glyneth would be his bride.

He reached her side and curved his arm around her. "Come now. It's dangerous for you to be out here any day, but today of all days! Glyneth, what were you thinking?"

She deftly slipped out of his grasp. "I often take walks alone."

"Your parents are worried about you. Your father asked me to bring you back, and I told Ike it would be my pleasure and my duty as your soon-to-be husband." His thin lips lifted in a smile, and he swept his gaze over her as if seeing her without her garments. For once, she was glad to be dressed in this traditional fashion.

"Ike and Vonda Paddock are my guardians, not my parents." Of course Devon knew that, as did the entire village, but he still persisted in calling the Paddocks her parents. But this was one subject on which she was adamant. She had been fatherless since the time of her conception. Despite questions on the subject, her mother had refused to discuss the man who sired Glyneth other than to say he was a hated Outsider.

Her nose wrinkled with loathing. One day, she would avenge herself against the man, whomever he was. How she would enjoy punishing him, as she and her mother had been punished.

As for her mother, well, her mother was dead. Glyneth knew that fact as surely as if she had viewed the body. But she herself was alive to face the consequences of the day, and couldn't afford to indulge in self-pity. Especially not today.

Devon shrugged and took her arm by the elbow. "That doesn't matter, eh? For in a few months time, you will have real parents, as in a mother and father-in-law." He guided her down the hillside's rocky path. "But come now, we must take every precaution against the Outsiders. I vow I won't let them take you!"

Glyneth allowed herself to be led. After all, what was the use of protesting? Through the headpiece covering her head, she pulled up on the long mane of her hair to allow a slight breeze to penetrate the garment and cool her neck. If only she *had* been a man, then she wouldn't be in this predicament. More than anything in the world, she didn't want to suffer the same fate as her dear deceased mother. She would try to make herself as unappealing as possible. Perhaps even go so far as to apply a fake appendage or two! These Outsiders were known to be fastidious in their selection of women. No female with the taint of radiation would be abducted.

Despair weighted Glyneth's shoulders. For if she succeeded in deceiving the Outsiders, what future awaited her then?

Of course she knew the answer to that question. Her future would be yoked in eternal wedlock to the egotistical Devon Dikeman. Faith, the very idea curled her toes.

Two

The farther south the team rode, the cooler it got. Which was peculiar, to say the least, since ancient wisdom stated traveling in that direction at this latitude from the North Pole always meant *warmer* temperatures. That folklore might have been true during mankind's Golden Era, but not now, after the Great Destruction.

Without breaking his horse's stride, Major Lucas Jefferson rebuttoned his white cotton uniform top, then pulled down rolled up sleeves in preparation for less sultry weather. Of course seventy degrees was still seventy degrees, however, where he was from, mid-autumn days usually kindled the mercury in a thermometer closer to eighty marks of Fahrenheit. At least it did in recent memory.

This southern terrain differed from his homeland in other ways as well. Desolate rocks layered from erosion silhouetted the blindingly bright blue sky for as far as the eye could see. Gigantic outcroppings of all the rainbow hues of goldenrod and ivory littered the landscape with not one drop of greenery to disturb its intensity or denote any type of life. Barren. This area was completely barren, and that condition brought to mind the reason for this expedition, for other than this, there could be no other incentive for Canusa to send a team of warriors to this dispirited land.

Following behind the fourteen men as they silently maneuvered over grooved and striated rocks, Lucas frowned. Why he, as one of the heirs of the ten sons of the powerful Canusa, had been chosen to participate in this particular endeavor defied logic and conscience. And that another heir, Major Brice Adams, also joined the expedition positively staggered the mind. Two Canusa scions performing

non-combative duty? What had the War Council been thinking?

Lucas' frown deepened. Supplying fertile women to his province's ever-dwindling population was crucial, of course, but fate had selected him as a nobleman--a leader of soldiers--one who was required to feel the heat of battle. Being assigned to this mission was curious, very curious, especially in view of the increase in border skirmishes with these primitive, barbaric villages outside Canusa's control. Lucas was needed on the frontline with his men. To be here, instead, was something of an insult.

Another factor screaming to be considered was his father's declining health. Although still in the prime of life, Lord Jefferson seemed to be wasting away. Soon, perhaps very soon, Lucas would have to take his father's place as heir to Canusa. Maybe this bride-quest was some kind of leadership test. If so, then that explained Brice Adams' presence.

"Hey, Luke! What do ya make of all this nothin'? Rocks, rocks, 'n more rocks!" Lieutenant Will Flagg nudged his raven horse alongside Lucas' alabaster one and flailed his scrawny arms in the air to emphasize his point. The animal, evidently used to his rider's histrionics, threw a snort Will's way, then continued to plod in tempo with the other steeds.

Ordinarily, Lucas wouldn't have acknowledged such a familiar greeting as the one Will Flagg issued. Military discipline had to be maintained, after all, and as a major, Lucas outranked the man. But fidgety, impetuous Will was a law unto himself. Ever since his appointment to guard the Jefferson Compound, he had wormed his way into everyone's hearts. But, no matter. What was the harm in Will's informality since only Lucas could hear?

He grinned at the young man, then sobered his expression. "Very edifying, Lieutenant. I particularly liked the repetition--*rocks, rocks, and more rocks*. Be sure to relay that to the scribes when we return so they can record our journey in every minute detail."

"Aw, hell," the pug warrior spit back at him. Even the red tips on Will's spiked brown hair seemed more inflamed. "Hey, so what if I didn't go to university, like ya did." He shrugged his narrow shoulders, looking for all the world like a Rhesus monkey. "Did ya ever think that maybe you're the one that's missin' a few marbles, not me? I'll show ya." Rising up from his saddle, Will hollered out to the stampede preceding them. "Hawke! C'mon back 'n settle somethin' for us."

Captain Russell Hawke, easily the fiercest member of the group, cocked his head to indicate he'd heard the request, then moving as one with his burgundy horse, slowed his pace to comply. "Sir?"

The question was directed at Lucas, not Will.

Pint-size in body and patience, Will grabbed the older man's sleeve. "Luke's pullin' his superiority routine, again. I got a belly full of it, I tell ya."

The only part of him that appeared inflated, however, was his ego. For a warrior, this breach of etiquette was extremely unusual. But, then again, Will was very young; he still had eight more years of military training ahead of him.

"So what do ya say, Hawke, how would ya describe this here territory?"

With an economy of movement, Hawke disengaged Will's hand. "You are an annoyance, bantling." Crossing powerful arms across his warrior chest, the man's glowering expression further darkened his ebony complexion. The silver bars on Hawke's shoulders echoed the severity of his stare. "Plus, you are in violation of military protocol. Major Jefferson is your superior officer."

Will's close-set eyes turned wild and woolly. Before Armageddon started, Lucas spread out his hands, palms up. "Peace, peace, my good men. Save your wrangling for the battle ahead. I have heard rumors those village hellcats fight with the strength of ten men." He arched his eyebrow at Hawke, the only veteran of the raids among them, having participated in the previous one, and the one before that as well. "Is that exaggerated?"

Hawke fingered the savage slash cut deep into his dark cheek. "Slightly, sir," he replied.

"Females!" The passion in Will's voice had nothing to do with images of a carnal nature. Which was just as well. Warriors who were sexually spent were no warriors at all.

Marching past a barrier of boulders, the troops then stopped at the base of a dried field of soil. Thundering Jupiter, the vista in front of them had more in common with Luna's craters than the third planet from the sun! Lucas alighted to scoop up a sample of the cracked, golden clay. "Just where on

God's... green earth are we heading?"

His province of Columont, or more correctly, his father's province as one of the ten sons of Canusa, had recovered from the devastating calamity of years past and now brimmed full with plant and animal life. Even new growths, like the puffy, willowy plants commonly called Venusian flowers, covered much of the Columont countryside. But here, each mile they traversed hung heavy with the absence of living things. The very air smelled antiseptic.

As Lucas got back on his horse, his nostrils flared. Every sensibility was offended by this yellow mockery of landscaping. But perhaps what affronted him more was the fact that the people in these tiny villages scattered south of the site of the Great Destruction could boast of fertile females, while all too often, Columont's wombs were as bare and desiccated as this sorry excuse for a field.

Hawke must have understood what Lucas was feeling for the older man nodded, then gazed off into the distance. "The target is six leagues from here, sir. We arrive midday."

"Six more leagues of nothin'?" Will piped up as the horses picked their way over parched soil.

By thunder, over seventy degrees of heat could still produce a healthy sweat. The resultant perspiration trickled down Lucas' forehead so he rubbed it back into his thick, precision cut hair. "Nothing but fecund women, Lieutenant. After we return to Columont, I will recommend to my father that you have your pick from our prizes. And you, also, Captain."

Hawke swatted at a fly, buzzing around his grizzled black hair. The insect was the first sign of life this area yielded. "No, sir."

"No?" Will raised his eyebrows until they almost met his hair line. He had twenty-two years to Hawke's forty, and obviously was a bit in awe of the older man. Sighing, he shrugged. "Then I guess I refuse, too."

Although warriors were allowed to marry, they could not set up their own household until age thirty, after they completed training. Hawke, however, remained quartered in the field barracks by choice. By comparison, Will's assignment with Lucas' family enabled the young soldier to live in the lap of luxury while he continued his instruction. Sometimes, however, having too much luxury proved to be detrimental.

Disappointment could not keep Will down for long. "What about you, Luke? Is that why you're ridin' with us, to make sure you snag the queen of the crop?"

Finally cresting the hill of unnatural clay, Lucas viewed with distaste the orange sands stretching out before them. What was next, red rivers? He nudged his horse into a gallop. "I am already under contract, as you should know. With Althea Adams of the Adams lineage."

Restlessness settled over him and he forged ahead of his companions. Althea was a comely lass, to be sure, in addition to the distinction of having one of the tens sons of Canusa as sire and Brice Adams as brother. Lord Adams ruled the neighboring province of Alberdak. Plus, behold the miracle, the Fertility Laboratory had scrutinized her, inside and out, and proclaimed her to be a successful candidate for motherhood. She was still a virgin, as her father was quick to point out. An untouched woman commanded a higher bride price.

There was no question in Lord Jefferson's view nor in Lord Adams', that Lucas and Althea would produce healthy heirs together. As it was written, so would it be done, and he would do his duty.

Lucas shielded his eyes from the glare of the sun, now rising over a shrub-invested mountain. More life secured a toehold in this alien land. And as for him, since tradition demanded he perpetuate the family line by also producing more life--more heirs for the Jefferson lineage--then by Jupiter, so he would. At age thirty, he had delayed the inevitable long enough.

The caw of a lone crow echoed lazily over the mountain ridges causing Lucas to shake off his malaise. Beyond those peaks lay the precious resource his people required to continue, to survive. Maybe, the answer to his discontent lay there as well.

Hawke and Will had respected his need for solitude, but now they rode next to him, leading him back into the tight-knit group of warriors. In a few hours, they would begin their assault. The villagers, if they were smart, would be ready for them.

To reassure himself, Lucas patted the protective white armor rolled up on his horse's saddle. This

encounter could be bloody, very bloody. But there was not a finer assembly of soldiers in all of Columont than the thirteen flanked by his sides. Plus Brice Adams, of course. When it was all over, fifteen future breeders would accompany them back to the province. They would come whether they wanted to or not. Then as soon as the females were housed at the Altar of Canusa, Lucas would fulfill his obligation to Lord Adams' daughter. And after the impregnation, he would be free to return to his troops and lead them into battle.

~ * ~

"Glyneth, why have you stuffed your mouth with cotton? You look so... peculiar." Eighteen-year-old Sylvie followed her adopted sister Glyneth into the house and closed the wooden door behind her.

"In truth, Sylvie, I'm using sponges, and I do it for the same reason I wear this scratchy burlap chador." Her breasts tightly flattened against her chest, Glyneth took only shallow breaths to avoid irritating the binding. She glanced in a mirror and admired her unappealing image. The Outsiders would have to be desperate to take a dreadful piece like her.

Sylvie removed her veil and shook free her long, wavy tresses. "But I don't understand. The veil hides your cheeks so the Outsiders will only see your eyes."

Which was why Glyneth had them ringed with blue smudges to make her look tired. "You forget what the men do, Sylvie. Remember how they take great delight in ripping the scarves from women's faces?"

Sylvie sat down on the bed and swung her feet like a child, back and forth. "Oh. Right." She was an exuberant girl, and the only person in the village Glyneth could call "friend" and "sister," albeit adopted. Thick red hair and goggly green eyes, Sylvie had a ready smile no matter what the occasion--which truly was a blessing given the cloak of dread the townsfolk often wore due to the endless drone of warfare.

But how could she smile today, of all days?

"You want to fool the Outsiders." Sylvie nodded wisely. "But you shouldn't worry. Everyone says that in addition to wanting females free from radioactivity, they look for big breasts, wide hips, and an unblemished complexion."

Which was what Sylvie had, to a tee.

She then blushed. "I'm sorry, Glyneth. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

Glyneth brushed back her mane of hair and pulled it into a ponytail. "Goose. Of course you didn't hurt my feelings. Truth is truth, so there it is."

But truth could be tampered with, as her falsely diminished chest could attest to. The hips though, were genuinely narrow. She fingered the puckered scar on her forehead, presumably caused by a radiation burn. Only rubber and glue, but it did the trick in turning away suitors--except for Devon.

Looking out the window at the hustle and bustle of normal village life, she puzzled on why no alarms had been sounded. Why did folks carry on as usual today? Why weren't they preparing to do battle? Any minute the Outsiders would arrive. Although additional territory wasn't the invaders' goal, surely it was wise to prevent the stealing of female citizens? In fact, the only one who seemed ready to fight was Devon, his bow slung over his shoulder and his fists tightly clenched by his sides.

The Elders had paid no heed to her warning of the Outsiders' arrival. Dismissing her words as they had so many times in the past, the Elders unceremoniously shooed her from their door. "As foretold in the scriptures, so shall it be," they had cryptically uttered.

Glyneth placed her hands on her hips and stood in front of Sylvie. "The Elders mentioned scriptures to me, as if that was reason enough not to prepare for the Outsiders' arrival. What scriptures?"

"Not to ring a peal over your head, but if you went to church regularly as you should--"

"Most folks think I'm some kind of mystic, just because I can cure a few ailments with herbs." Many villagers even called her a 'witch', whatever that term meant. "Vonda and Ike understand. Believe me, I'm not welcome in church." Though Glyneth had lived with Sylvie's parents for ten years, she couldn't bring herself to call them anything other than their names.

"Well, you know it goes deeper than that, Glyneth. You and your family..."

Glyneth sighed. Prejudice. It all boiled down to prejudice. Just because Mamma and her mamma, and so on down the line, were different.

Sylvie shrugged her plump shoulders. "I'll tell you, anyway. Since the last full moon, every blessed

soul has been chanting the same thing. ‘Behold he cometh with clouds and every eye shall see him.’” She leaned forward, and swayed to the rhythm of her words. “Then, something, something, and ‘all kindreds of the Earth shall wail because of him. He that overcometh shall be clothed in white raiment and shall take away a woman that calls herself a prophetess, clothed in sackcloth.’ I forget what is next, something about him being hurt, then, ‘The land shall be as one again, uniting the old ways with the new.’”

The village bell suddenly rang out, calling its people into the square. Glyneth ran back to the window, amazed at how everyone lined up for the slaughter. Ten years ago, no one congregated in a group and most of the women had hid. Sweet Christmas, they were all about to be attacked, but here they stood, almost like sheep.

To wait outside like this was making it easy for the Outsiders. Too easy. She shook her head, causing her tail of hair to swish back and forth against her shoulders. “Never in all my years have I heard of these scriptures, and believe me, I have read every book stashed away in the village, and then some. But what is so peculiar is that the Elders have faith in that prophecy.”

Sylvie jumped up and hurried to the door. “I am but a year younger than you and I’ve never heard of it either, until a month ago. But never mind that, let’s join the crowd. The Elders insist it’s our duty. I see Mother and Father there in the center. And Devon, too. He’s sweet on you, you know.”

“I know.” Fear was an emotion Glyneth rarely felt. But as if to make up for its absence, its cold tendrils now dug sharply into her heart. All those people waited for the Outsiders, waited for the unknown. “Sylvie, I confess, I’m afraid.”

A shiver then rocked through Glyneth. Whenever she was under a substantial amount of stress, chemical changes in her body produced a slight but noticeable chameleon effect to her skin tones. No one outside her family had this ability, in fact only amphibians and reptiles could claim the honor. Legend had it that this ability was a “gift” from an overactive pineal gland. She had no reason to doubt the story. In fact, all her reading of forbidden medical texts supported the legend. Because of her “gift,” right now her cheeks were probably a light greyish yellow, the color of the walls.

She gazed in the mirror to confirm. Yes, she looked like putty, all right.

Sylvie also glanced in the mirror. Flipping back an unruly lock of hair, she covered her hair with her headpiece, then finished wrapping her face with the veil.

Glyneth had no choice but to follow suit. All the villagers were expected to stay together like a swarm of insects.

Sylvie then tugged Glyneth forward, out into the warm October sun. “Come, I see Kitty and her twins waving to us.” With a grin in her voice, Sylvie pushed up on her bodice to make her breasts more prominent. “I have sponges, too, but not in my mouth! Maybe we should look on the bright side. Wherever the Outsiders live, it must be more thrilling than here. I hope they pick me.”

“Sylvie!” Glyneth turned away to hide her shock at her adopted sister’s bold action and words. No matter how boring, home was still home. And to be stolen away, as Mamma had...

Closing her eyes, Glyneth contained her shudder. But when she looked up, she saw something that rattled her more than Sylvie’s vulgar manner. Forming high in the sky were masses of fleecy, white clouds, thick enough to hide the sun.

Gracious, holy Lord! The words of the scriptures returned to Glyneth.

Behold he cometh with clouds and every eye shall see him.

When she reached the gathering crowd, she grit her teeth, waved to Vonda and Ike, then gave an unsteady smile to the two children standing beside their mother, Kitty. Even their young, innocent faces couldn’t dispel the growing unease swirling through Glyneth’s belly.

I have a bad feeling about this. Deep down to my bones.

After making the sign of the cross, she then crossed her fingers for extra luck. Something told her she was going to need it.

~ * ~

Finally, they arrived at their destination. But instead of anticipation for the upcoming confrontation fueling Lucas’ thoughts, more puzzles riddled his mind. Why did the raid on the village have to occur on the same date every ten years? Being predictable gave the enemy knowledge of the coming attack which

completely removed the element of surprise. He did not need warrior training to be aware of that. And with so many villages south of the Great Destruction, why ravish this particular site again and again? Of course the village did have an excellent reputation for producing radiation-free females, and therefore offspring. Deviations in body form and other offenses to the human eye came very rarely from this stock. No deformities were ever allowed to live.

Posed on a mountain overlooking hay fields neatly harvested into bundles, he surveyed the primitive huts comprising the settlement. As tiny dolls moving to and fro, the villagers went about their business as if impending doom was not sitting heavily on the hillside. Maybe these foolish people had grown weary of fighting fate. Or perhaps they finally realized the honor the sons of Canusa paid their daughters.

Either way, the deed was going down... now. The covered cage on wheels had been reconstructed, and waited on the mountain to transport the future mothers of Columont. Every warrior dressed in protective white armor, dully gleaming in the haze of the cloudy day. Green and black paint slashed each face, a fearsome sight for the enemy to behold.

Before Hawke gave the signal, they bowed their heads to pray. *"May Canusa watch over all his sons."*

Brice raised his fist in the air and gave a fiendish grin. "And may Canusa's sons be the first to plow these virgin fields!"

By the lowering of Hawke's dark eyebrows, the warrior's displeasure at the interruption was obvious. But perhaps Brice's words explained his presence on this expedition: to pillage and plunder. The taking of these women, in the sexual sense however, would not be allowed. The females were all destined for the Altar of Canusa, to be distributed among those in need of heirs. Brice's statement revealed his unsuitability as commander. A wise leader must follow a moral path. This axiom was as self-evident as the sun rising in the east.

"We go!" Hawke thundered. As a unit, the warriors streamed from the hillside, emitting no sounds except the rumble of horses' hooves. Down the dirt roads into the farming village they rode, intent on their mission, absorbed with their goal. The defenses of these uncivilized dullards were halfhearted at best, and rounding them up took no particular skill, especially for time-tested soldiers. In fact, the only form of resistance was a groan of sorts, rising from the crowd like early morning dew over a field of grass. Within ten minutes, every man, woman, and child were herded together like cattle, ready to be auctioned off to the highest bidder.

Success! Surprisingly, no warrior had been injured. Not from arrows, spears, stones, nor female fingernails dragging across a man's skin. As the troops inspected the prisoners and made their selections, Lucas scratched his jaw with bafflement. Surely this was much too easy. None of the historic writings recorded by scribes related expeditions as effortless as this.

Brice carried his inspection too far. As was his right, he removed the headpiece and veil concealing the woman's face, as did all the warriors when choosing their captives. But then he grasped at her neckline and ripped the front of her robe down, which exposed the glaring white of her breasts.

Except for the wretched female's distress, the entire village square grew hushed at this outrage. Even the warriors shifted their gazes from the dishonorable deed. As a scion to Canusa, it was up to Lucas to chastise a fellow scion.

He threw the woman a spare cotton shirt. "Major Adams, you shame us all."

Arching his eyebrow, Brice lifted his lips into a self-satisfied smirk. "What I did was within regulations. Just checking out the merchandise. You can't blame me for making sure she had no extra legs, arms, or..." He devoured the last glimpse of bare bosom. "...breasts."

The man's depraved and vile conduct sickened Lucas. To spare the woman further grief, he gestured for Will to take her upon his horse, while another unfortunate was picked to ride with Brice.

Fourteen females now wiggled their bottoms on the finest steeds of Columont. As Hawke's left arm tightly pressed around one such female--a redheaded beauty putting up no protest, he then maneuvered his horse in front of Lucas. "Sir. You must make a selection now."

Hawke was right. A warrior had to concentrate on the task at hand, not contemplate his own naval, so to speak. Glancing down at the group closest to him, Lucas spotted a pretty-eyed wench with a

bountiful bosom and, as outlined through her robe, large, shapely hips. Clinging to her long skirt were two toddlers--twins. Excellent. Tried and true breeding stock. Virginity was not required of these "brides."

After removing her headpiece, he noticed her face crumpled up with tears. "No! No! I can't leave my babies!" she cried.

It was not this distraught plea that caught his attention, but the actions of the pasty skinned woman standing next to her. With her slender hand patting the curvaceous one's shoulders, this woman flashed sympathy from her dark eyes for the young mother. And more than that, she flashed reproach at him.

Intrigued at such disdain for his position, he turned his gaze upon her. If the other female could have been described as buxom, this one was decidedly flat. Narrow shoulders, skinny arms, and nonexistent hips all screamed unsuitable at him. And her features--her eyes were ringed with the bluest of circles, and a long red scar puckered her from the middle of her forehead to her eyebrow.

Perhaps Lucas should seize this "fair treat" and make Brice ride with her! Rivalry was too strong in the man, and after this incident, the pot was undoubtedly bubbling over. Imagine what he would do if Lady Scar sat nestled next to him!

Lucas shook off his reverie. No matter. This raid was not about personal issues. Slipping his arm around the chesty woman, he lifted her up and settled her against him, ignoring her cries. Lady Scar, however, glared at him with such indignation in her eyes, a chill of unease vibrated down his backbone. Very peculiar, indeed, to be adversely affected by an ignorant female.

All captives in place, the team of warriors geared up for escape, and thundered down the well-worn road out of the village. But even as he galloped alongside Will Flagg, Lucas could not evict the unappealing twig-woman from his thoughts.

What if... what if...

Damn. There would be hell to pay, but he made a decision. "Lieutenant," he shouted at Will. "I am taking this one back. Go on ahead and I will meet you at camp."

Not giving Will a chance to speak, Lucas turned around and headed for the wasteland he had just vacated.

"Oh, thank you! Bless you!" the young woman sobbed over and over again.

He did not care about her gratitude, only the deep, gnawing sensation in his gut that he had just done something incredibly... stupid. Stupid? For an heir to the Columont throne, stupid actions were unheard of. And yet, here he was, returning to the scene of the crime alone.

Within minutes, he entered the village gates. Strangely enough, no one had dispersed. They were all still standing in the same spot, as if waiting for him.

Damn! This was getting stranger and stranger. Lady Scar, however, had moved. Now off to the side, she was on her knees, comforting the twins.

Abruptly coming to a halt, Lucas then deposited the mother by her children. If he lived to be a hundred, he would never forget the amazed look in the twig-woman's eyes.

He grimly smiled. In one more second, she would be even more amazed. Rather savagely, he ripped off her head gear to reveal lower cheeks that bulged out like a bulldog's, and a lock of white streaking one side of her brown hair. Her mane of hair was pulled back into a tail, emphasizing her gaunt, slightly ashen face.

Damn. He renamed Lady Scar, changing the nickname to Lady Bulldog. But he had no choice but to follow through with his abduction. One of those village idiots protested his selection though, for the long nosed man growled and lunged toward Lucas' horse.

Lucas quickly swooped Lady Bulldog off her feet and tossed her in front of him, gripping her tightly around her tiny waist. Funny thing, she truly was as light as the proverbial feather. To him, anyway. The horse might have felt differently. But the noble steed, seasoned veteran that it was, did not complain at this inelegant dumping upon its back.

The woman, however, had no scruples about complaining. "No! Please, you must put me down! You must! Why are you doing this?"

That was a question she had no right to ask and he certainly did not intend to answer. She was a hellion all right, twisting and fidgeting as though her life depended upon it. Perhaps her life did depend on

it, for once they reached Columont, her miserable existence would never be the same again... to her betterment, of course. Even her unusual color changed, paling to rival the whiteness of his horse. To quiet the woman, he squeezed her tighter around the waist, interrupting her air flow.

Racing as fast as possible out of the village, he then flinched as a piercing pain lanced the back of his left upper arm. He glanced down at it, then swore. Hell and damnation. An arrow. A bloody, crude arrow found its mark into an unshielded part of his flesh. This entire raid had gone off without a hitch, but leave it to him to be the only mishap. As a Jefferson, he was humbled.

Swallowing words only a soldier should hear, he pulled out the arrow, then threw it down to the ground. Oddly enough, he heard the villagers chant: "*Then the land shall be as one again, uniting the old ways with the new.*"

As an indication of her shrewish temperament, the woman forgot her place, if in fact, she was savvy enough to know women in her position should never speak until spoken to. "Holy mother. They must think you're the one to fulfill the scriptures!"

While he pondered what scriptures she referred to, he ground his teeth instead of replying. What devil had seized his brain? Why had he returned an attractive female only to steal a repulsive one? Truly, he had not properly executed his duty. Damn. If this mission was a test concerning his fitness as future ruler of Columont, surely he had failed. And failure, to a Jefferson, was not a pleasant sensation.

Although his arm gushed blood, Lucas kept a firm grip on his prisoner. In all probability, he would sink in his confederates' esteem, especially when they viewed Lady Bosom's substitute. However the ultimate humiliation would be if he allowed this one to escape. And Brice, vermin that he was, would never let him forget it.

Flaring his nostrils, Lucas tightly clenched his jaw. By thunder and all the planets above, he *would not* allow that to happen.

Three

The current holder of the great title of Canusa paced the smooth, marble flooring in the war room. His footsteps echoed their master's state of unease. At age sixty-five, he should have been enjoying the peak of his power. Instead, he gnawed on his fingernail until only the nub was left.

By the vast nebula above, was there ever such a coil? And it all concerned that damned bride-quest. Canusa sank into one of the many captain's chairs placed around the conference table and pondered his next move. The ancient scriptures of the Golden Era prophets were specific about that southern village playing a special role in Columont's future, so in truth, he had not had a choice but to agree to the raid. Consultation with the stars provided further instruction--to send Lord Jefferson's son on the pilgrimage to obtain fertile women. Against Canusa's better judgment, he had yielded.

But what continued to curl Canusa's spine was the warning he had received many dusty years ago from an age-stooped oracle concerning his demise. Evidently, his downfall would not come from honorable battlefields, but from his own house... and the noble house of Jefferson. To deliberately dispatch Lucas Jefferson to that particular site seemed to be courting undeniable disaster.

Canusa pulled on the bristled edge of his walrus mustache. Since he was alone, behind closed doors, he did not need to project a strong image for his subjects, and took advantage of that fact by collapsing against the back of his chair. His house, to his eternal regret, was barren, which meant the oracle *had to have been* in error. And that was why he had acquiesced to his astrologer's counsel to send Lucas Jefferson.

So why did the cold pit of dread pervade Canusa's very soul?

Needing guidance, he eschewed the services of an oracle for more scientific advice. "I would see my astrologer," he called into an electronic device connected from the war room to his main office.

“Right away, most hallowed Canusa,” came the lackey’s reply.

Within minutes, a slender, black-garbed woman glided into the silent war room. Her translucent veil glittered with silver stars which were the trademark of astrologers. Even though it was difficult to make out her features, he lingered his gaze upon her sweet curves. Women were so seldom seen anywhere in this land except, of course, at their homes or at the Altar of Canusa.

She bowed her head. “How may I serve you, great Canusa?”

Although he was indeed the great Canusa, for some reason, women always made him nervous. Which was why the only dealings he had with them involved the gratification of the flesh. To be sure, there was no other reason to fraternize with females, except when dealing in metaphysical realms where women’s intuition served them in good stead. His current astrologer, Gaea, could boast of a ninety-nine point nine percent accuracy rate.

He cleared his throat. Any sign of apprehension would be construed as weakness. “Gaea, I have concerns about the outcome of the bride expedition. What do the stars say?”

The astrologer folded her hands calmly in front of her. “There’s no need for worry, great Canusa. I foresaw your distress, and consulted the charts this morning. A peculiar fogginess hovers over the actual day of arrival, however it’s a certainty that fifteen women will return with the warriors. Everything will turn out as planned.”

He pressed his lips together in a mulish fashion. “I am not distressed.” With the veil obscuring her features, he was not sure, but he thought he caught a glimpse of a smile.

“As you say, great Canusa,” was all she would comment.

Annoyed, he gestured for her to depart. “You may go. My time is short. The ten sons will soon arrive to discuss a matter of vital importance to the State.”

After she bowed and took her leave, Canusa resumed gnawing on his fingernail. The astrologer’s information did not soothe his fears. He did not give a damn about the brides’ arrival; it was the warriors, or more specifically, the Jefferson scion’s homecoming that troubled him.

But perhaps Canusa worried needlessly. Lord Adams’ son had inexplicably requested an assignment on the quest. Brice Adams was an ambitious man. And, by reputation, unscrupulous. Why did he appeal to ride on this mission? Brice had his own agenda; he might have foreseen this as a chance to reduce the number of heirs to the throne of Canusa.

Yes, that would explain the man’s actions. And by ridding the world of Lucas Jefferson for his own ends, Brice also would be doing Canusa a favor.

A sense of tranquility quickly flooded his system as Gaea’s words returned to him. “Everything will turn out as planned,” she had said. By the great galactic nebula, so it would!

~ * ~

Glyneth had to make a decision... and fast. The time to escape was now, with just her and this warrior beast upon the horse. For if she waited until he returned to his camp, it was a certainty she’d be imprisoned with the rest of the women. But Sylvie was there, too. The foolish girl had wanted to be abducted, and she got her wish. Perhaps, if Glyneth got free, she could then steal away and rescue Sylvie.

In these next few minutes, the odds were in Glyneth’s favor. Especially since the man had sustained a wound, courtesy of Devon Dikeman. Devon’s devotion had come in handy. This barbarian now suffered a gaping, weeping gash requiring medical attention.

Fear no longer strangled her and she was able to smile a little tremulously, for loss of blood could make a man weak.

The feel of the beast’s arm around her waist did disturb her, though. Or perhaps it was his nearness--her bottom close to his hips and hard thighs, her back nestled against his broad chest. Clearly, the indignity of this intimate position against a total, brutal stranger made it difficult to think.

Closing her eyes to concentrate, she stiffened her back and inhaled deeply. *Help me, sweet Mamma. Help me do the right thing.*

When she opened her eyes, she spotted the towering cliffs that guarded the mysteries of the Great Beyond. She now knew what to do.

“You’re hurt,” she shouted over the fierce northerly wind battering her face. “You should let me tend to your wound.”

“I think not, woman.” His reply came low, tickling her ear. His manly scent teased her as well, a mixture of cedar, bayberry, and musk.

Her resolve hardened. She *must* escape. There was no other option. She *would not* suffer her mother’s fate. “It’s of no concern to me.” For effect, she gave a shrug. “But I believe your horse doesn’t care for the stream of blood wetting his flank.”

“Hell.” He issued the word slow and with meaning. But to give this beast his due, he did lean over to the left to view the side of his horse.

Which was exactly what Glyneth wanted. The length of his neck now exposed, she straightened her hand, and with all the strength she could command, gave him a heavy chop to the vulnerable neck. The blow hurt; she knew it would, but it was not enough to vanquish the beast. Twisting around, she grabbed his grotesquely painted head and cracked her own head against his skull.

Oh, dear holy mother, that was excruciating! Blinking back tears and reeling with a twenty pound headache, she broke free from him, then tumbled off the galloping horse. The impact with the ground took her breath away, but there was no time to nurse injuries. First crouching, then hobbling away, she dragged her battered body into the badlands of the towering cliffs, not resting until she found a suitable cave lost within the shadows.

She leaned against the cave wall, her breath slow in catching. Pathways of pain pulsed hard and seared up the right side of her body. Tentatively fingering her right arm, hip, and leg, she found cuts and painful bruises, most likely discolored to a deep purple, but thankfully nothing more serious. She’d done it; she was free. And there were no sounds of pursuit.

Oddly enough, though, remorse filled her. That man, that Outsider, had only been doing his job, however hateful. Hopefully, she hadn’t hurt him too much. Her gaze lost its focus and she smiled a bit distractedly. He had the most vibrant azure eyes she had ever seen...

Using the ancient healing method which her mother always had called “energy medicine,” she dragged her fingers across her forehead to relieve the throbbing pain. Something sticky adhered to her hands, and she came away with black and green warpaint. Obviously, a souvenir of her head butt. She had warpaint of her own on--dark blue circles around her eyes to denote tiredness. Funny how her disguise to repel the Outsiders hadn’t worked. Well, at first it had, then by all the mysteries on Earth, that man had returned with young Kitty, and taken Glyneth instead. Plus he, as well as the others, wore clothes of white, as foretold in the scriptures.

Now how peculiar was that?

Too tired to write in her journal, Glyneth removed the sponges from her mouth and closed her eyes to shut out discomfort now growing stronger in intensity. A brief rest would help to restore her. When she woke up, she would track down the Outsiders and somehow rescue Sylvie. After all, who would be expecting an attack on a band of warriors? Sylvie and Glyneth could then slip away and return to the village to regale everyone with the heroic tale of escape.

She snorted. *Right*. If there was one thing she knew, it was her village. Of a certainty, Vonda, Ike, and Devon would be happy, but everyone else would just be more convinced that Glyneth was a witch.

~ * ~

Hell and damnation! Lucas rubbed his sore forehead. How could he have let the woman escape? A mere slip of a thing got the better of a warrior from Columont? And an heir to a son of Canusa? By thunder, he deserved to be royally roasted.

But he would save his disgust of himself for later, after he found her. And find her, he would. Turning his horse in the direction of rock cliffs looming around him, he followed a path into forbidding territory. His warrior training in tracking would serve him well. He would soon locate Lady Bulldog, then yank her back up on his horse.

He smirked. He would yank her by her mane of hair and take pleasure in doing so.

Coming across a narrow opening in the rocks, Lucas dismounted to lead his horse through the gap. Then, suddenly, something hard smashed to his temple, causing him to collapse to the ground onto his

knees.

“Take that, you blackguard, for stealing my woman!” Above him, a guttural voice spit out impassioned words.

Blackguard? What the thunder? Instinctively reaching for his knife to protect himself, Lucas then was struck again, and lost consciousness.

~ * ~

Moonlight, ethereal and glowing, threw insubstantial patterns of radiance around the mouth of the cave. Glyneth blinked awake, listening to the voice that had roused her from her dreams. How could she have slept so long? No sounds interrupted the stillness of the night. The north wind had spent its previous fury, leaving only calm, cool air to weave in between the maze of rocks and stones.

But something *had* spoken to her. Telling her to... to what? She shook her head but could not recapture the words. Ouch. Her headache was not a forgiving sort, and the hammering within returned tenfold. Leaning back against a stone, she closed her eyes again.

Then she sensed it; it was a faint noise growling through the Earth. Placing her ear upon the floor of the cave, she isolated the sound. It was not a growl but a groan. A male groan. Most likely from that Outsider.

Sweet Christmas. He must have been in deep distress. Indecision only stayed her movements but a moment. She'd have to rescue him; she really didn't have a choice. She was a healer, deep down to her core. Healers couldn't turn the other cheek to those in pain.

After she stood, she waited until all one hundred mallets quieted down in her head. Then she limped her way out of the cave and out into the moonlit night. She stopped to inhale a ghost of a breeze. Which way should she go? Dark and light patterns played havoc with her sense of direction. Plus, stumbling in the shadows added more bruises.

Another breeze floated by, this time carrying scents of cedar and bayberry.

Yes! Glyneth quickened her uneven pace. She'd follow her nose and find the man. Even though he'd ripped her from her home, she bore him no ill will.

As the Earth had warned her earlier, it now warned her again to make haste, for he was in trouble. She scrambled over rivers of pebbles, thorny sagebrush, and razor sharp fossils in her quest to locate the Outsider.

The groan came again; this time, though, she heard it with her conventional ears. Under a spiny yucca plant, she saw him, prone and motionless, the alabaster horse nowhere in sight. Cautiously approaching him, she then knelt down to survey his injuries. Blood spurted at his temple, flowing from a new, raw wound. Hmmn, perhaps he had fallen off his horse, adding to his list of ailments.

One touch to his forehead and she knew he was in the throes of a heated fever. Most likely infection had set in. Lifting his left arm, she inspected the ugly gash from the arrow. Puckered and swollen, it needed to be cleaned and bandaged... fast!

She sat back on her heels. Faith, where was she going to find water in the badlands?

The man thrashed his head, then made a movement to rise. “Water,” he moaned.

Exactly. Water. Using a firm grip, she prevented him from sitting. “Rest now. You'll be all right. I'll find you water.”

Her voice seemed to soothe him for although unconscious, he allowed her to ease him down on the ground.

By the light of the moon, she squinted at the eerie landscape, willing the manna of water to appear. Yucca plants, cactus trees, and a smattering of desert lilies bloomed hardy and strong while the lofty rock cliffs kept silent watch over them.

Fortune smiled on her. Patting the armor on the man's muscled form, she found what she was looking for--a long sheathed knife. “Stay put. I won't be long,” she whispered in his ear.

To her intense dismay, he opened his crystal eyes and stared at her. “You,” he mouthed. Thankfully, he then returned to the slumber of his dreams.

At the nearest cactus, she bowed her head, giving thanks to the Earth for all its bounty, then split open the bottom of the stalk. Inside the inner core was the pith--a soft, sponge-like center containing stored

water. Hacking a piece of this core away, she ran back to him and opened his mouth. "Here." She squeezed a bit onto his lips. "Chew on this, but do not swallow."

Even in the darkness and with the black and green paint covering his skin, she could tell he was flushed red with heat. Hotter than Hades, actually. She rested her cool fingers against the warmth of his face.

"Oh, you poor man." Tears stung her eyes. She hated to see anyone in pain. "I'll find more water. Just rest."

Standing, Glyneth said another prayer, then clumsily ran toward the closest rock cliffs. Sometimes, water could be found at the base, collected during the rainy season. With her fingers crossed, she came up on the prominence.

Her luck held. Under the overhang of the stony precipice gleamed a small pond of precious life-giving fluid. In fact, the pool was larger than expected, so perhaps it bubbled up from an underground stream. What she needed now was some cloth. The burlap material of her chador was impossible to rip, so with no concern for modesty, she unclasped the front of her robe, pulled it down, then unwound the fabric binding that cut into her skin and flattened her breasts.

Ah, relief! But there was no time to revel in this freedom. Fixing the robe back over her, she then tore the binding into strips, and soaked some of them in water. And, as tempting as the water was, she refreshed her face as well. Many painful steps later, she returned to the man. Very gently, she removed his chest armor, then bathed his head and arm wounds.

"By thunder!" The pain of water against open flesh obviously brought him to his senses. "What are you doing--"

"Hush!" She gave him one of the wetted-down strips to suck on. "I must wash your injuries."

The roots from the nearby yucca plant provided a frothy soap to complete the cleansing. Bandaging his arm was a simple task, but his head proved more unwieldy. When she was done, he appeared as a huge tuft of cotton in a cotton crop. She sat back on her heels and muffled a giggle.

"I am delighted that I amuse you, woman." The man rose up on his unhurt elbow, and took a quick assessment of their surroundings. "You... found me." It wasn't a question, but a statement.

"Yes. I feared you needed help." She took a step back from him. Even though he was wounded, he might still make a move to capture her. "Do you hurt much?"

As he shook his head, the breeze waved the unbandaged straight hairs on his long crew cut, almost as a wheat field bows in the wind. "Only my pride." His grimace of pain revealed perfectly white teeth. "But this fever does muddle the brain."

"I'll get you more water."

When she reached for the binding cloth, he held onto her wrist with an unrelenting grip. "No. Stay. I must... thank you." His uniform shirt was tight without the armor, and through the thin material she saw bulging biceps, powerful pectorals, and a host of manly muscles.

Glyneth gulped down hard. She felt so strange around this man. Unfamiliar emotions stabbed at her, causing confusion.

No! This won't do. I must control myself. She took a deep breath, then glanced at her hand, neatly imprisoned within his grasp. "Perhaps you can thank me by releasing me?"

He let her go, but continued to pinion her to the spot with his mesmerizing gaze. "This much I can do. As for allowing you to return to your village, no. That would not be for the best."

"It would be best for *me*." Warily eyeing him, she took a chance on his weakened state and sat a yard away from him.

"No," he repeated as if his word was law. "You will be honored in my province of Columont. Doubly so because you rescued an heir of the ten sons of Canusa."

The ten sons? That term echoed a form of government from antiquities past that she'd read about in ancient, even prehistoric, texts. A mythological place, lost in the mists of time--Atlantis, was said to have been ruled by ten princes and a king. Was this man's homeland modeled after a doomed civilization?

Canusa, he had said. Somehow, that word sounded familiar. As Glyneth puzzled on this new information, she scratched at the fake scar on her forehead, then released her hair from the restricting

ponytail. Not having her head covered in a man's presence made her feel extremely vulnerable. "Who is Canusa? Does that mean you are a prince?"

"The original Canusa was the most holy of holies. Out of the ten sons--or the ten ruling families--one is elected to reign as the new Canusa." He shrugged his broad shoulders, then winced with pain, probably because of his upper arm. "It is true, I am nobly born."

"Not a true warrior then." She folded her arms across her chest. "I thought so."

His eyes narrowed, glittering dangerously. "You wound me again, woman. Make no mistake, you shall not escape me a second time."

"You're in no condition to threaten me! Sweet Christmas, I saved your life! Allow me to return home and we can call the debt paid." Standing, she pointed her finger at him in an accusing manner. "Believe me, I don't want your double *honor*."

Before she could blink, he was on his feet, towering over her. With one quick movement, he twisted her arm against her back. "We shall call it paid now. By rights I should kill you for your insults."

Oh, how her arm did hurt. But she didn't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing her flinch. "Kill me because of words?" Due to his superior height, she lifted her head up to stare long and hard at his cold, blue eyes. "You come from a savage people."

"Savage?" he shot back. "That is ironic coming from an uncivilized villager."

"Well, if being civilized means going around stealing women, you're right. We're not civilized."

The man paused. Raking his gaze over her, he released her arm, then did a quick walkabout where they stood, scanning the rock formations in the dark. "Raiding your village is not something we wish to do but it is necessary for our survival."

"And so that makes it acceptable, hmmn?" For some perverse reason, she was enjoying herself. Fighting with words was far more exhilarating than thrusting with swords.

He ran his hand over his unbandaged hair and changed the subject. "You look different, woman."

If she wasn't scared before, the peculiar gleam in his eyes scared her now. "It's nighttime, in case you haven't noticed. Everything looks different in the dark. If you'll excuse me--"

Cold metal snapped painfully hard against her left wrist. It was a silver bracelet, cruelly imprisoning her. He snapped a duplicate one, connected by a chain, on his own wrist. "Handcuffs," he explained. "So you cannot refuse the honor waiting for you back at my province."

Wild, fiery fury consumed her. "How dare you--"

"I dare anything to bring my prize back to Columont." With his free hand, he rubbed his forehead. "Good offensive move, by the way. Called a head butt, I believe. By thunder, it still hurts. But not as much as the blow..."

He yanked on the handcuffs, pulling her along with him. "Never mind. Come. We will find a spot to rest for the remainder of the night. I could use a good sleep."

Trailing behind like a stubborn mule, she dug in her heels, but it was no use. She was no match for his strength, even in his weakened, fevered state.

The man headed for an area soft with undulating sand. "Your actions do your village proud. Plucky little thing." He sat down, giving her no choice but to follow suit. "I was not wrong to select you. Quite an improvement without those bulldog cheeks. Your color has also improved, but you could use more padding on your bones."

She flared her nostrils. "Let me go."

Instead of answering, he reached over and flattened his palm against her breast.

"Get away from me, you... you beast!" Tears springing to her eyes, she shoved him away with her unshackled hand.

Surprisingly, he did not pursue her, but settled down into the sand. "That is rather difficult to do with handcuffs binding us. No matter. I am relieved to know you have more padding on your chest than I originally thought. Your future mate will be pleased."

How could she lie down next to this monster? Imbuing her words with all the venom she felt, she hissed, "I hate you."

Although his eyes were closed, he curved his lips into a smile. "I know. Good-night."

And blast the man, but the next minute, he started snoring!

Glyneth chewed on the fingernails of her free hand, trying to figure her next move. She raised her left arm, only to drag his arm up, too. There was nothing else to do but ease down on the sand and close her eyes. The man had won this round. But, she still had hope. As the ancient saying went, tomorrow was another day.

Four

At the first wink of sunlight, Lucas woke up. A strange vista of desert life greeted him. Oddly shaped cacti loomed large on the horizon. Nearby yucca plants raised their spear-like leaves in pointed tufts to meet the new day. Poking through rippled waves of sand were clumps of stringy grass, struggling to compete with the endless ocean of granular quartz.

Although more natural looking than yellow clay and fields of orange, this was not how he and his team had come. So how would he find his way back to camp... or to Columont?

But, never mind that, the more important question was who had assaulted him last night? The attacker's words returned: "*Take that, you blackguard, for stealing my woman!*" Of course. It was that village idiot who had lunged at Lucas. The man must have followed them. But the woman was not aware that Lucas had been attacked and that "Sir Galahad" was on her trail.

Nor would Lucas tell her. Why fuel her desire for escape? She was being difficult enough as it was. He shook his head in disgust, and came in contact with the woman.

Thundering Jupiter, his mind must have been fevered indeed not to notice he slept with his arm around the woman, while she nestled up against his shoulder, using him as a pillow. Resting as a woodland nymph might, she sighed and laid her hand across his chest, in a reluctant embrace.

He leaned over to inhale her floral scent. The delicate fragrance stirred unfamiliar longings deep within him. None of the seasoned courtesans he had the pleasure to plow smelled as sweetly as she. The straight line of her nose, the hollow of her cheek, the thick fringe of lashes now at rest--she was a delicate beauty--and he had remained celibate for over a month now.

As he tightened his grip around the woman's ribcage, he cursed the rough material of her gown. If only he could feel her smooth skin instead.

In a flash, her velvety brown eyes opened. Pulling away as far as the handcuffs allowed, she glared at him even as the soft mounds of her breasts rose and fell from her exertions. Her mahogany hair, flowing freely about her shoulders like a lion's mane, brought fullness to her thin face. And at the sight, he caught his breath. She was, in a word, magnificent. The disfiguring snowy lock nor the puckered scar on her forehead could not mar her distinctive appeal.

"Don't touch me," she snarled.

He also sat up, and brushed grit and sand from his uniform. "You need not worry. I remember. You hate me."

Her dark eyes narrowed. "Yes. Yes, I do." She then surprised him by leaning close and placing her hand on his brow. "Your wound looks a lot better. How do you feel?"

Habit made him grip her wrist. "I feel fine despite being trussed up in this turban." Satisfied she did not intend to rake her fingernails down his cheek, he released her hand, then tore off the makeshift headgear. "My arm is healing, thanks to you. Fever is gone, thanks to you. But my head is still sore, also thanks to you."

She dimpled a smile, and at the sight, he caught his breath. "You're welcome," she said. "But surely the fall off your horse deserves some credit, too."

Lucas stood. So that was what she believed had happened to explain his further injuries. "Do not push your luck, woman."

"Why not? So far, it's been pretty dreadful." She also stood and straightened her coarse, loose fitting

robe. "Perhaps it's time to introduce ourselves? I'm Glyneth."

He did not reply. Easing his free hand into his pocket, he pulled out a compass.

"What's your name?" she prompted. "Either you tell me or I'll just call you 'Beast'."

The needle on the compass floated to north, in the direction of the cliffs up ahead. Good. Perhaps Hawke or Will had lagged behind, looking for him. Hopefully it was not too late to regroup and continue the journey--in safety.

Lucas stuffed the compass back in his pocket, then gave a quelling stare at his prisoner. "The designation of 'Beast', however quaint, is not fitting for one of the heirs of the ten sons of Canusa. Major Lucas Jefferson is my name. From two noble lineages."

He strode in a northerly direction, yanking her behind him. "Come. Last night you found water this way, correct? We will clean up, then head for Columont."

Moving as a snail might, she hampered his speed. "You're rather full of yourself. One of the heirs of the ten sons of Canusa. Quite a mouthful." She shielded her eyes from the sun's glare. "So you're a major, like that hateful man? The one you called Major Adams."

Lucas tersely grunted his assent. A connection to Brice was not something to be proud of, but soon, of course, the connection would be closer--they would be brothers by marriage.

"I recognize the name Jefferson, of course," she continued. "As in Thomas, right? One of the revered leaders of the old Americas."

This woman constantly amazed him. Who would have expected to find such a spirited, knowledgeable, female out here in the primitive wilderness? The Great Destruction and its aftereffects annihilated everything, crumbling into dust all mankind's achievements. Mile-high tidal waves smashed coastlines with unrestrained power, washing away the sum total of a population's existence, and separating a large section of land on the western part of this continent--of the North America that the woman had mentioned. Fireballs, shockwaves, and wildfires ravished the planet, fueled by the bombardment of countless meteorites raining death from the skies. Poisonous clouds spewed out from the bowels of the earth, blanketing the atmosphere, irrevocably changing the climate, and contaminating life with irreversible radioactivity. Cities, airports, indeed, for a time civilization itself--all gone. Pulverized.

Lucas shook his head to dispel his gloomy thoughts. Mankind had lost so much. It would take many, many years, perhaps even a millennium, to recover the knowledge now buried under the iridium dust of meteorites. His people, ever industrious and diligent, had made great strides, but complete recovery was still a distant dream.

"Yes," he begrudgingly admitted. "As in Thomas Jefferson."

She looked pleased, obviously misinterpreting his expression. "I can tell you're surprised to learn I have some education. The village possesses a few books, you know. Not all our ancient texts were obliterated by the calamity." Glyneth tapped him on the shoulder, then pointed in the direction of a group of yucca plants. "This way to the water. But as for your first name--'Lucas'--I'm not familiar with that lineage."

In the shade provided by the cliffs, he spotted a pool of water. "A distinguished innovator of sight and sound technology during mankind's Golden Era. George was his first name. The scribes mention he had some type of force."

"And his descendant uses force, as well." The clinking of the steel bracelet left no doubt as to her meaning.

Lucas mentally gave the woman points. She had a quick wit. He liked that in a woman. "What is your ancestry?"

Her narrow face froze like stone. "As for my... father's, I have no idea." She shrugged as if to dismiss all her male relatives. "My mother came from a respected line of healers."

He was not usually receptive to other people's moods, but he knew instantly he had inadvertently hit a raw nerve. Filing this information away for further analysis, he got down on the ground by the pool, cupped his hand to drink, then cleaned off the last vestige of paint. Awkwardly, he wiped his face on his sleeve. Not having the full range of motion of two hands hampered everything he did. Which brought up another, personal matter.

“You probably want to relieve yourself.” He noted the slight blush on her cheeks after she nodded. “Good. Take off your robe and I will unlock the handcuff.”

Her pinkened face darkened to ruby just as he suspected it would. “What?” she shouted. “You can’t be serious. I’m not taking off my--”

“Insurance,” he calmly explained. “You will not leave if I have your clothes.”

She stood rigidly, with brows lowered, obviously willing him to disappear in a puff of smoke.

“No dress, no release.” Shrugging, Lucas suppressed a grin. Legend stated that in distant times, a volcano no longer in existence--Mount Saint Helens--erupted, losing almost fifteen hundred feet in elevation. This woman looked as though she were about to blow her stack, too.

“You *are* a beast.”

“The ends justify the means,” he countered.

She shot daggers at him with her gaze. “You’re proud to be a student of Machiavelli?”

“Thundering Jupiter! How do you know about Machiavelli?” Only by studying with scholars at the university was Lucas acquainted with the ancient political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli. So how on God’s green earth had she heard of him?

Pursing her lips, she started unclasping the top of her gown. “Perhaps people in the villages aren’t as ignorant as you Outsiders believe.” She allowed that thought to sink in for a moment. “If you turn around, I’ll disrobe.”

He complied. A modest woman was to be admired. Plus she was also intelligent. Extremely so. Happy, the man chosen to be her husband. And if the man did not appreciate this rare jewel of a woman, then he did not deserve to touch her.

Her voice floated over to him. “You’ll have to unlock the handcuff now. My sleeve doesn’t fit over it.”

Even as Lucas looked down at her wrist, he stole a glance at the rest of her. How could he resist? As a woman, she called to him, and as a man, he could not help responding. Bare on the top, she hid her nakedness by turning her shoulder and using her right arm as cover. From the waist down, she wore a linen petticoat that barely reaching her knees. As he gazed at her shapely legs, he licked his lips.

By thunder and all the planets above, she was an enticing little slip of a thing, and he was in need of release. But scruples were scruples, despite being a presumed student of Machiavelli. Lucas swallowed his desire, grabbed the bulk of the gown, then unlocked the bracelet. “I am not worried that you will not return. You can go now.”

Her back to him, she departed in a huff. “Pardon me if I don’t say thank you.”

Waiting a second to watch her stomp off behind some bushes, he could not resist a dig. “You really are too skinny, woman.”

She did not dignify his taunt with a reply.

He had his own personal needs to take care of, so he hurried to find another set of bushes. Hefting over his shoulder the robe so imbued with the woman’s floral scent, he felt a heavy thud against his chest. Intrigued, he searched for a pocket and pulled out a small book. A journal. Not only was she knowledgeable, but she could write, too. As he relieved himself, he read part of the last entry.

Once again, with the dawning of this particular day, like the clockworks of old, the Outsiders are due to swoop down and steal our women. And I am at risk, as are all the young women in the village. Perhaps if I make the package less tempting, they might bypass me for one who pleases the eye more.

Ah, that explained her dog-tired, bulldog appearance. Perhaps the scar and the white strand of hair were also fake. Women often dyed their hair. He ran his hand through his own. Before he left on this mission, Althea Adams had colored her locks to match his dusky blonde hair.

He could not imagine this woman, this Glyneth, showing affection in that peculiar way.

The stirring of noises told him she waited for him by the pool. Slipping the journal back into the robe’s pocket, he readied himself for the trip. Without a horse, hope was decidedly slim. If luck was on his side, they would avoid “Sir Galahad,” find his team, eat some food, and continue on in relative comfort.

Indeed, he positively itched to return home. These border villages had once again overstepped their

boundaries to steal Columont livestock. An ultimatum had been issued, but as always, these savages ignored it. War, always of vital importance, would soon be declared, if not already. The honor of Canusa must be upheld.

"I'm done," she called out from behind a solitary cactus plant.

Catching a glimpse of her slim form, Lucas inhaled deeply while counting to ten, a method taught in warrior training to soothe inner turmoil. Since he was a nobleman, he had to be well versed in all affairs concerning Columont, not just those pertaining to the art of war. Indeed, his quick grasp of all the disciplines gave him the edge over the other heirs of Canusa, and gossip had been rife within the Council that Lucas Jefferson held the inside track to becoming heir to Canusa himself--the main ruler over all ten provinces.

Thundering Jupiter, the fact that he had been sent away rankled him, again. Before he left, his father had lost his health to the extent that he now governed the province from bed. Why had Lord Jefferson allowed his son and heir to leave Columont at this critical time? And for what, to corral females? While procuring women was a necessary task for the province's survival, Lord Jefferson's heir *should not* have been sent away, just in case the worst occurred.

As Lucas approached the woman, he kept his gaze averted and his anger hidden. Raw tempers, business, and beautiful women did not mix well together. And there could be no doubt about it; this woman's "package" was far too tempting by half.

He reached the cactus and held out his arm. "Give me your left hand."

"Why?" asked the voice hiding behind the spindly growth.

"I shall hold your hand while you dress, then I will handcuff you when you are done."

She snorted, and he could not help laughing. In all his years, he had never before heard a woman snort. "Sooner or later, you're going to have to trust me, Lucas. Might as well start now."

"Step out from the cactus and tell me that to my face." He waited, knowing full well she would not.

Instead, she held out her hand.

He grinned. "Why are you refusing to step out?"

"Because I don't trust you," she retorted.

"Exactly." Gripping her wrist, he then handed over the robe.

When she was done, he clicked the bracelet in place. "Now that we solved that problem, we will head north using the path up these cliffs."

The sun, brilliant and unforgiving, blazed long and hard upon the landscape. In response, a trickle of sweat darted down his temple, getting lost in the maze of the new growth of unshaved bristles.

Obviously refreshed from her wash and subdued from her humiliation, the woman fell into step beside him. "Are you sure this is the way you came here? This trail is too steep for horses."

As he glanced down at her, he wondered why a strange emotion filled his breast at the sight of her frail form. Althea Adams never inspired such feelings.

"I am sure," he replied. Of course he was sure. The compass had indicated this direction.

"Well, I hope you're right for both our sakes."

Maneuvering the rocky path took concentration, but he still had something he had to say. "I have not thanked you for tending to my wounds, Glyneth." He liked her name. It was unique, like she was. "Other than a certain stiffness, my arm feels fine."

"And your head?" Was there a smile lurking behind those luminous brown eyes?

"My head is fine, too."

"Damn." She gave a tinkle of a laugh. "Mine still hurts."

Laughing with her was another pleasant sensation. A sensation as unique as her name. Although women--especially fertile women--were revered in Columont, no man sought female companionship except for matters of the flesh.

Lucas held out his hand to help her gain access to a particularly slippery ledge. Although at first regretting his sudden decision to return the other woman and steal Glyneth instead, he now mentally patted himself on the back. Selecting her was a stroke of good luck indeed. The Columont gene pool would gain a valuable breeder, while her future mate would obtain a gifted companion.

There were two things Will Flagg hated above all else. The first was to be called “short.” The second was to be a disappointment to someone he thought highly of. Unfortunately, the latter was just about to happen.

Galloping his raven horse back into camp, he glanced over at the wagon now housing fourteen of the village women. The shock of being abducted must’ve worn off for they were all now quiet, a jumble of brown, blue, and green watchful eyes. Next to the cage stood Hawke, his patience sorely tested. He paced the length of the wagon with scarcely concealed fury. His huge hands flexed into even more massive fists, his great teeth bared into a fierce grimace, and his biceps bulged, straining through his shirt. Hawke was a formidable warrior. More than anything in the world, Will wanted to give him good news.

But he couldn’t. He’d have to take his medicine, and hope the man didn’t kill the messenger.

But blast his bad luck, that bastard Adams waited for news of his fellow major as well. Rolling one of those old-time cigars around in his mouth, he leaned against a tree stump with trouble darting out of his narrow eyes.

“Captain Hawke,” Will called out as he pulled his horse to a halt. “I... I’ve failed.” Dismounting, he then took position in front of Hawke, squarely facing him and ignoring Adams. “As he’d said, the Major returned to the village, releasin’ that woman. Instead, he took the slender one. Ya remember, the one with the scar on her forehead? I followed his tracks for a ways, but then lost them when I reached the badlands. He... he had been hurt, with an arrow to the arm.”

The older man blazed fire from his hazel eyes. “You should not have allowed Major Jefferson out of your sight.”

With hands on hips, Adams strutted over to Hawke. “Major Jefferson is old enough to know what he is doing.”

Which was true. Plus, when Luke was bent on a course of action, there was no stopping him. But Will accepted the blame. He bowed his head.

“So Lucas is gone, eh? My sister, Althea, will be so disappointed. But perhaps that is the will of Canusa.” A spark of satisfaction darkly gleamed out of Adams’ lizard eyes. Obviously there was no love lost between the sons of the heirs of Canusa.

“I didn’t say that.” Will’d had a belly full of that dirt bag. Superior officer or not, Will couldn’t help tightening his fists just looking at the man. “Lost isn’t the same as gone.”

Hawke clapped his hand on Will’s shoulder. The force of the blow sent a shudder clear down to his toes, knocking some sense into him. He unfisted his hands.

“I am responsible for the disappearance, not you, Lieutenant.” Hawke nodded approval at Will’s non-aggressive stance. “As project officer for this mission, I am tasked to look after Canusa’s heir.”

“Heirs,” Adams interjected. He threw his cigar down and mashed it with his boot. “You are also to ensure my safety.”

“Only the good die young,” Will spit back. “Ya gonna live a long time!”

“And you are always going to be pint-sized, Shorty.”

By all the stars in the universe, this man just begged to be torn apart--slowly--inch by inch. Will took a step to accomplish the deed but stopped when he spotted Hawke’s warning glance.

Relief now softened the warrior’s face. He strode over to the team of horses grazing on the hillside grass, and singled out his burgundy animal. “You ride on with the others, Lieutenant. I shall track Major Jefferson down.”

“No. I’ll come with ya.” Will crossed his fingers, hoping Hawke would see things his way. “We can double our odds of findin’ the Major.”

Surprise heightened Adams’ voice by two octaves. “No, you both cannot go. Then... who will look after me?”

Will couldn’t resist. “Yer mamma?”

Lightning quick, Hawke raised his brawny arms out to the sides to provide a buffer between that bastard and Will. Adams snarled something obscene, then stomped away to bother another group of warriors.

Before Hawke had a chance to give Will his answer, a melodious voice rang out from the cattle-car of females. "I know the woman you're talking about. Her name is Glyneth." Other women in the wagon pulled on the talkative one's arm, but she refused to be silenced. "Take me with you! I can help."

With a look that would've quelled an ordinary man, let alone a mere woman, Hawke moved over to the cage and glared at the redheaded wench. "Explain."

She curled her fingers around the iron bars and knelt closer to him, causing her sweet bosom to press against the bars as well.

Will wiped sweat from his upper lip. Hell, she was a tasty one, all right.

"Glyneth is smarter than most of us," the woman confided in a throaty manner. "She'll do all in her power to return to the village. I understand her ways. Let me help."

Hawke lifted his thick lips in a sneer. "What do you expect to earn from your assistance, woman? Your freedom?"

"No." Her response came quickly, honestly. "I *want* to go to your fabled land."

As one, the captive women all gasped. Will couldn't help grinning at their disapproval.

"Then why?" Hawke persisted.

Bravely, the adventuress met his potent gaze, her bulging eyes seemed to bulge even further. "If your friend is lost, then so is Glyneth. She's my sister--my adopted sister."

Without commenting, Hawke mounted his horse. "Lieutenant," he barked. "Release this one. We take her with us. She rides with you." Then he urged the animal over to the other warriors, most likely to issue instructions.

Will didn't know whether to be pleased or annoyed at this unexpected turn of events. Cat green eyes, well-rounded hips, a narrow waist made for squeezing--delights to be sure. But women were women. Nothing but problems.

His new companion stepped out of the cage, and the other females hung back as if she had the plague.

He locked the cage, then remounted his horse. Holding out his hand to her, he muttered, "Ya better be worth the trouble."

Her long hair waving in the breeze, she eased up onto his horse. "I am. I can promise you that. My name is Sylvie Paddock.

"Will Flagg here." As she intimately settled against him, he felt the rise of a different kind of warrior. "Aw, hell now, no funny business."

Sylvie turned around, inadvertently--or not--rubbing her breast against his arm. "Certainly not." She batted sandy eyelashes. "Nothing funny about this business."

"Hell," he repeated. By the comets, Hawke'd had a sample of this redheaded vixen's flirtatious ways when he'd chosen her from the villagers. No wonder he declined riding with the woman again.

Will stiffened his stance and nudged his horse in Hawke's direction. For Will's peace of mind, his only hope was to find Luke... and soon.

~ * ~

Walking up the uneven incline, Glyneth pulled her bodice away from her skin to try to cool off. Unrelenting heat baked her, as it did the surrounding cracked landscape. Volumes of sweat poured down her back in a never-ending stream of wetness. And the abrasive burlap material of her robe sent a thousand scratches itching all over her skin.

A shaded stone jutting out from the cliff beckoned to her, and she took advantage by flopping her weary body on the ledge. "It's hot."

"You state the obvious." Lucas frowned at the interruption of their progress, but then also sat down next to her. Since they were still handcuffed, he didn't have much choice.

A slight breeze weaved its way under her clothes, and she gratefully accepted its coolness. Stretched out on the rock in an inelegant manner, she closed her eyes to the sun. "I feel broiled alive."

The hackles on her neck rose, giving her a message. He was looking at her, studying her. She opened her eyes to find that her impression was correct. His intense blue gaze left not one nook or cranny untouched by his regard.

She couldn't help flushing. No man had ever scrutinized her in such an intimate fashion.

His expression unreadable, he reached over and peeled off the fake scar from her forehead. "This must be so, for here is a piece of cooked flesh." Inspecting it, he then raised his eyebrow. "Do you have any more counterfeit parts?"

"No." She struggled to hide her smile. How absurd her disguise must be to him. "Do you?"

His Adam's apple bobbed, probably swallowing his amusement. He had such a manly, muscular neck. "Not that I am aware of. In truth, I would have been exterminated as a babe if I had. Radiation mistakes must be eliminated."

Sweet Christmas, what would he say if he knew she had mutant abilities? Or rather, what would he do, kill her?

Again, he leaned over her, this time lifting her white lock of hair. "What about this? Do you change its color to make you appear older?"

Biting her lip, she turned away so he wouldn't see the pain suddenly rising within her. "On the last raid, my mother was taken from me." Without looking at him, she pushed away his hand. "My hair has been like this ever since."

Silence encircled them as completely as nighttime engulfed the day. Straining her ears, she only heard the measured rhythm of his breathing. The Earth itself didn't speak, and that frightened her. She didn't like this place, this place deep in the throes of the Great Beyond. She didn't like it at all.

His deep voice dipped in volume. "I regret that you have suffered, Glyneth. But you will like living in Columont. You will be treated as a queen, and dressed in the finest of silks." He fingered her roughened sleeve, then rested his hand on her handcuffed wrist. "No more coarse materials such as this--"

"Don't touch me! I'm not your flaxen doll, to do with as you please." As hot as she was, she couldn't control the flame of anger from igniting her even further. Standing, she resumed the climb, this time urging him forward. "And I will never approve of Columont. A concubine is still a concubine, no matter what she is called or how she is dressed."

Although he was quiet, she could feel disapproval radiating from him. He took the lead on the path, and as the climb grew steeper, he helped her maintain her balance on the slope. "You will not be a concubine, but a beloved wife, and as such, mother to many children, God willing"

"Unless I choose the man, I would be nothing more than a mail order bride... or a slave."

Again, the expression of surprise widened his eyes. "Thundering Jupiter. You are a difficult woman! I do not know which puzzles me more, your provoking attitude or your awareness of Golden Era ways."

A flush heated her already heated cheeks. That Lucas was impressed with her knowledge pleased her more than she ever would have thought. All these years, since Mamma had been taken away, she remained silent with her information gleaned from Old World books. No one else in the village had been interested in any of the ancient scribbles recorded on musty, yellowed pages. But now, she traveled with Lucas, an Outsider, who was obviously an educated man. Here was her opportunity to learn and speak freely about the mysteries she had read about in books. A caveat however. He only viewed her as a future bride and mother.

A tingle of excitement pulsed down her backbone. Did he wish to wed her for himself?

No man back at the village had ever appealed to her as a mate, even though she was required to marry by age twenty. Devon certainly didn't stimulate her desire. But Lucas, with his tall, muscular body, his firm, square jaw, and no-nonsense eyes... She gazed at his large, strong, hands and imagined losing herself in the heated pleasure of his touch. He would be a gifted lover.

Glyneth shook back her tresses in denial. Why did that hateful thought thrill her so?

But the opposite question then plagued her. If she wasn't for him, was he then only concerned with transporting her to his province? Was that all he was interested in? Pondering this question, she felt her shoulders slump.

At last, the summit was in sight. Hand over fist over hand, Lucas scrabbled to the top, heaving himself, then pulling her next to him with his powerful, corded arm. Side by side, they lay under blistering skies, panting out their exhaustion.

With his unfettered hand, he gently turned her face toward his. "You are a spirited one, though. I will

give you that.”

As she moved her head away, he returned his arm to his side. “No touching. I remember.”

The burn of tears threatened to reveal her vulnerability. Despite being an Outsider, this man had a kind heart. Plus, he unsettled her in so many unfamiliar ways. Disturbed at the confusing emotions hammering within her body, she sat up and looked out at the bleak terrain on top of the cliff. Nearby, a great ring, as far as the eye could see, impacted the land. Dear, holy mother, it was a giant crater, laced with yellow, red, and white soil! Black and grey boulders were lodged within the area closest to her. It appeared unnatural, other worldly. She listened again with her inner ears. Nothing spoke to her. This place was dead.

And yet not entirely dead. Strange willowy growths of cottony white flowers dotted the crater’s rim. Beautiful, yet they filled her with unease. They seemed to move as one, defiantly contrary to the wind.

“What happened here, Lucas? It looks so... peculiar.”

He lifted her to her feet, then brushed sand and grit from his no-longer-white uniform. “So, you remain ignorant of the Great Destruction? That which devastated mankind’s Golden Era?”

She swept her gaze over the crater and its burnt, dry soil. Devastated. That was an accurate word to describe what she was seeing. “Legend tells of something falling from the sky. A rock or maybe a powerful bomb?” Taking a step to approach the eerie flowers, she then stopped. The clinking of chains still bound them. “Whatever it was, it changed everything.”

A fiendish chill invaded her comfort zone, and she rubbed her arms to ward it off. “At our village, we call everything to the north of us, the Great Beyond. We never venture here. It’s taboo. Tales of the devil and fear of radiation keep us in our place. I used to think it was all superstition and nonsense, but now I understand why.”

Would that the other villages felt the same way. Then there’d be no need for border-battles.

Lucas removed his compass and checked the direction again. “Although the ancient ones had many faults, they were not responsible for the destruction. In our records, we find references to a mighty comet, colliding not with Earth, but with Venus, the second planet revolving around the sun.” He repocketed the compass. “Do you know about planets? About the solar system?”

“Yes.” What she was about to say was confidential, told only from mother to daughter in Glyneth’s lineage. But there was no need for secrecy with Lucas, for he wasn’t one of those intolerant villagers. “Buried far below the soil, my family has kept ancient texts, and one of them is on the subject of star-gazing.”

Incredible sadness welled up inside her. An image of a glowing white mass slamming into cloudy Venus vividly assaulted her. Venus, a word entwined with the power of love.

“Chunks of Venus were then ejected by this explosive impact,” he continued. “These fragments, or meteorites, hurtled down into our atmosphere. The devastation occurred on a planetary level.” His lips grimly set, he ran his hand over his hair. “At least, we think so. Communication through radio transmission and such is no longer possible. The air has become magnetized--”

Suddenly, his tan face took on an unholy pallor. “Hell and damnation!”

His anxiety was contagious. “Lucas, what is it?”

“I must be seven shades of a fool.” He pulled out his small compass again. “What I have here is a *magnetic* compass. The readings must be adjusted for the presence of other magnetic substances, like the metal iron.” His sigh came from deep within him. “Iron, which is so common to meteorites. And this is the site of impact for one such meteorite.”

His distress was so heavy, she could feel it, taste it. And naturally, she wanted to alleviate his pain. But this time, she couldn’t. “That means we’ve been going in the wrong direction?”

“True enough.” The words were difficult for him to say. “Glyneth, you were right in what you said this morning. Your luck *has* been pretty dreadful--to be abducted by a fool and stranded out here on the edge of nowhere.”

Instinctively she knew his admission tore at his very soul.

She started to speak, but he placed his finger against her lips. “No. Do not try to placate me. Damn. Believe me, I do not use the word ‘fool’ lightly. By Jupiter! It could not get much worse than this.” He

dug into his pocket and retrieved the handcuff key. "Listen, I have no right to chain you to me. I have failed in the most egregious way."

Removing the bracelet from her wrist and his, he then threw the cuffs away. "Fresh start." He shielded his eyes, and stared at the sun, now at its zenith in the sky. "Perhaps we are not too far astray."

Her intuition told her that he hoped for too much, but she didn't want to make him feel worse than he did already. Instead, she pointed at the unusual plants. "Before we leave, Lucas, do you mind if I take a look at those blossoms? I've never seen anything like them before."

At his nod, she gingerly walked over to the edge of the crater.

His voice carried the distance separating them. "We call them Venusian flowers--puffy and milky white, like the planet. I have not seen them this far south. As far as we know, they first appeared after the atmosphere settled down from the impact's dust and debris." He shrugged his broad shoulders. "For some strange reason, all women love them."

Not this woman. Glyneth contemplated the flowers from all angles. They were beautiful, in a cold, calculating way, but something felt wrong about them. The Earth did not speak to her through these plants. Why was that? And why would Columont's women love these alien growths?

She reached down and plucked one. Its willowy stalk stood tall--about a foot high--and hard, almost like bamboo. Completely covering the stalk was a type of white "fur," warm to the touch. Inside the gauzy white flower petals, she saw a clear oval, jelly-like mass, with tiny bubbles suspended within it. As she watched, bubble by bubble floated up to the top to be released into the air.

Exquisite, but again, something niggled her about it. Without warning, the ground beneath her shifted. Dropping the flower, she took a step, but her foot slipped into a deep crevice.

"Lucas!" Before she finished calling his name, the rocks moved, opening a larger fissure. She struggled to keep her balance...but it was no use.

Even as he reached for her, she no longer stood on the surface. Falling, sliding, tumbling, she lost sight of the sky and of Lucas. Then she lost sight of everything as she hit her head against stone.

~ * ~

::Outrage hummed around the crater. The collection of Elatus Albus venusium--or as these lifeforms called them: "puffy white Venusian flowers"--vibrated with the intensity of their grief. To be maliciously plucked from the ground meant instantaneous death. Together, as a group, the newly transplanted colony mindlessly mourned the loss of one of their members.

In self-defense, the remaining growths shifted their root systems which then allowed a fault line in the soil to open. Retaliation was swift, for such a heinous act could not go unpunished. These ungainly, resident animals could not be allowed to exterminate the existence of any superior members of the pod sent from beloved Mother Venus.

With the male creature's distress now hovering in the airwaves, the Colony settled down to do what they did best. Tiny bubbles of carbon dioxide resumed emission into the thin Earth atmosphere.::

Five

No time to wait. Without rope, horse, or anything else that would be helpful, Lucas eased down into the newly formed crevice. Thundering Jupiter, it had all happened so fast. So fast, and now...

He lost his footing on a rock. *Pay attention to what you are doing.* Adjusting his grip, he then descended another level. By all the planets above, he *had* to reach her. She *had* to be all right.

About to slip below the surface, he heard the rumble of horses approaching. Lucas lifted himself back up. In God's green earth there was no more welcomed sight than that of Russell Hawke and Will Flagg riding towards him. But damn, to be truthful, an even more welcomed sight would have been to have the woman, safe and unharmed, above ground.

"Captain, Lieutenant, over here! Get me your rope, quickly. The woman has fallen below." Lucas eyed the hemp rope attached to Hawke's saddle, and prayed it would be long enough.

Warriors, bless them, wasted no time with unnecessary questions. And so it was with Hawke and Will, as they moved in unison to the site of the fissure. Lucas gave a passing glance to the third person approaching. Young and female, she obviously was one of the raid's booty. By rights, she should have been housed with the other women. Hawke would have never permitted her to join them... unless there was an urgent reason.

Grabbing the rope, Lucas tied it around his waist. Another peculiar thing was that the girl rode his white stallion. By all the planets above, Hawke and Will must have found the animal. Good. Perhaps Lucas' luck was turning for the better now. "Hold onto the rope while I go--"

"No, sir," Hawke interrupted. He shot his sturdy arm out to grasp the rope. "It is too dangerous. Allow me."

"Just do it, Captain." Lucas would not be swayed in this, and because of his superior position as an heir to Canusa, he expected to be obeyed.

Hawke's dark eyebrows dangerously descended, giving him such a fierce scowl even Will took a step back from the man. "Hell, Hawke! Ya look like thunder!"

Narrowing his gaze, Hawke grunted, but complied, as Lucas knew he would.

No more time to waste. Lucas traveled down into the pit and concentrated on every movement. Now that Will and Hawke remained above, Lucas had no worries about getting back up. But Glyneth's condition greatly troubled him. After each ledge he passed, he peered down deeper into the hole... with no success. Then suddenly, fortune smiled: he spotted her white forelock of hair.

She was wedged in between the narrow crevice walls. Carefully curving his arm around her inert form, he lifted her up, then plastered her tightly against him. By Jupiter, she fitted against him as if custom made. Her breathing, faint but regular, issued softly against his chest. He tightened his grip; he would not lose this precious cargo again.

"I have her!" he shouted up the pathway. "Help me out of here."

An eternity later, he let Hawke pull her out into the sultry air. A gasp of surprise escaped the warrior's lips. No doubt he wondered why Lucas had chosen this female over the others.

The next moment, Lucas also rested on terra firma. At least he hoped this was terra firma. The last thing they needed was for the ground to open up again.

"Hey, Luke!" Will slapped him on the back. "I'm glad to see ya! We've had a belly full of trouble with ya takin' off like that."

Lucas brushed by Will to kneel beside the prone Glyneth. "How is she?" he asked of the redheaded girl who gently washed Glyneth's bruised face.

"In truth, I think she will be fine," the girl replied.

Glyneth must have recognized the female, for she smiled at her, then murmured through split, dry lips. "Fine? I'll never be... fine again." Fluttering her lashes, she shifted her gaze up at him. "Thank you, Lucas." She then sighed, and closed her eyes at that great effort.

He smoothed her hair back from her forehead. "She will do." Thanking the girl for looking after Glyneth, he signaled to the two warriors to step away from the women. After a deep inhalation, he confessed, "You both have every right to be angry with me."

"Angry?" Will swatted his arms around in the heavy, torpid atmosphere. "Naw. Fumin', enraged, wound up mad are more like it."

Hawke spoke more moderately, but with the same depth of feeling. "You should not have left our formation, sir. Your father will be most displeased."

"And for what? Why'd ya change your mind 'n take this female?" Will threw a glance over his scrawny shoulder and wrinkled his monkey face even further. "Though I'll say she looks a damn sight better without that scarf around her face."

These men wouldn't understand. Indeed, Lucas himself did not understand the insane urge that had driven him to throw caution to the wind and endanger the mission as he had. Instead of explaining, he walked over to his horse and stroked the great beast's massive neck. "Heir's prerogative."

As predictable as a soldier's salute to his superior, Will's leathery face wrinkled up even further. "Hell's bells, Hawke! Here he is, not five minutes after savin' his butt, 'n he's pullin' the lord and master routine again."

"Lieutenant, you forget yourself," Hawke reprimanded. He joined Lucas by the horses and narrowed his gaze as he looked at Glyneth. "Shall I carry the thin one on my horse, sir? The Lieutenant will ride with the plump one."

"No. I will take the woman."

Lucas' insistence must have been the reason Hawke's hazel eyes darkened, but the Captain kept his thoughts to himself.

Arms akimbo, the redheaded girl stomped over to Hawke with fury emblazoned on her "plump" face. "My name's Sylvie, if you please. Glyneth is my sister. And I'll have you know I'm not--"

She froze position with her mouth agape. "Great Heavenly day!"

Lucas turned to follow her gaze. All she looked at were the three horses. "What distresses you, woman?"

"It just dawned on me. The scriptures! They say three will come riding on a white horse, red horse, and black horse." She then glanced back at Glyneth and made the sign of the cross. "*He that overcometh shall be clothed in white raiment and shall take away a woman that calls herself a prophetess, clothed in sackcloth.*"

He scratched his head. Scriptures, again. Sure, he and his men wore white, plus their animals were the colors stated. But that did not mean a fulfillment of some type of primitive fortune-telling.

Lifting his eyebrow in amusement, he walked over to Glyneth and helped her to her feet. "Are you a prophetess, then?"

"Hardly." She must have been weakened from her ordeal for she trembled under his touch. "But some villagers call me a witch."

"Ho! You females, quit yer jabberin'! Witches 'n prophesies! I've had a belly full." Will waved the other woman, Sylvie, over to the horse. "Let's get a move on here."

Lucas expected a protest from the outgoing redhead, but other than a "I am not plump" retort back to Hawke, she meekly took her place as Will helped her mount, then got on behind her.

Hawke also mounted his horse, scanning the sunbaked skies. "Lieutenant Flagg is correct. We need to press on, sir."

"Right. Columont awaits." Lucas led Glyneth over to his saddle and, despite her preference not to be touched, gripped her around the waist to ease her over the great beast's back. His left foot in the stirrup,

he then pushed himself up and into the saddle--next to Glyneth.

Leaning over he inhaled her hair that was rich with a soft, floral fragrance. The scent seduced more than his nostrils. He coiled his arm around her waist, as he had the day before, but this time, he was more acutely aware of every feminine curve of her slender form.

"Your grip is too tight," she scolded from her position in front.

To tease her, he brushed his lips against her ear. "I feel protective toward you. You have a tendency to slip from my grasp, whether on a horse or in a crevice."

"Hmmm," was all she would say, although he noticed she no longer sat stiffly, but relaxed against him.

Hawke's sharp eyes missed nothing, but again, he did not comment. "This way, sir." Leading the group, he guided his horse over rocky terrain.

As his own horse swayed with the rhythm of the climb, so did Glyneth sway gently against him. He briefly shut his eyes, enjoying the sensation. Perhaps they would not reach Columont quite as soon as he had previously hoped. This trip was beginning to have certain merits.

~ * ~

"We camp here," the large, black man proclaimed at the edge of a forest as the beginnings of twilight fell.

At last! Unaccustomed to riding for any length of time, Glyneth gladly slid off the horse's back. Her legs wobbly from being jogged and jolted, she stumbled into plentiful fern growths lining the dense evergreen forest. This area was beautiful, but colder than she was used to. With the sun now only a distant memory and the air more rarified due to the high elevation, she briskly rubbed her upper arms to erase the chill invading her body.

A shiver also disturbed Sylvie's lively demeanor. "Heavens! I've not been this cold since Mother locked me out of the house. And that was in the middle of winter!"

"I remember." Glyneth nodded. "For sneaking out with the Bradford boy."

Sylvie hugged her arms against her chest, which caused her bountiful bosom to bulge out even further. "Boy" is certainly the right term. There's a huge difference between a boy and a man." At that, she hungrily eyed the men as they silently set up camp. Efficient and stealthy, they had a place cleared and a fire started in no time.

Glyneth also watched the men, but her interest had to do with getting warm, not relieving sexual desire. She smiled her gratitude at all three and stationed herself in front of the fire. "Every inch of me is appreciative for this life-saving blaze. When I dressed yesterday, little did I know I would end up high in the mountains today."

Along with the heat of the fire, sadness seeped into her. Ever since her mother had been abducted, Glyneth feared the exact same fate. And now it had happened.

But perhaps this abduction was a good thing. All her life she vowed revenge against the man who had violated her mother. The vile wretch was an Outsider. Here was her chance for retribution.

She smiled grimly. Yes, fate worked in mysterious ways.

Sitting on a large gray rock close to the fire, she extended her hands to warm them even as her heart now burned with heated passion. The dancing, crackling flames sent glowing cinders up into the stream of hot air. In a way, it was mesmerizing, and she allowed her thoughts to drift along with the fire sparks.

She didn't hear Lucas' approach. "Here is a jacket to put on, Glyneth." He arranged a woolen coat around her shoulders. "You need not worry about cold weather in Columont. Once we get down off the mountain, the temperature will be more comfortable."

The breeze rustling through the trees spoke to her, as it usually did when she was in a contemplative mood. "The coolness doesn't bother me, Lucas. In fact, this area rejoices in the brisk evening weather. But, still, I don't wish to go to your home." Even as she said this, she knew she lied. She was destined to go to Columont. To go there and find that villainous beast.

Lucas sat on a tree stump beside her. "You will not go to my home, precisely. All women are housed at the Altar of Canusa until mates are selected."

She stuck her arms through the jacket's sleeves and pulled it tightly closed against her. The material was fine, finer than her best Sunday dress. "An enviable fate," she muttered.

He rubbed his jaw, now thick with unshaved bristles. His cool blue eyes seemed to cut right through her. "I do not understand your reluctance. Columont has technological wonders you in your backward village have never seen. Electric cars, automatic lighting, silken fabrics--"

Perhaps he noticed the tightening of her lips for he quickly added, "And libraries bursting with Golden Era knowledge."

Libraries and books! Her heartbeat quickened. However it wouldn't do for him to see he had succeeded peaking her interest, so she turned away.

"What I mean to say, Glyneth, is that we have every modern convenience."

"Every modern convenience except freedom."

"You are obstinate, woman." Standing, he glared down at her. "I regret choosing you."

Those were hurtful words. Meeting his penetrating gaze, she also rose to her feet. "I regret it, too." Some other man should have been the one to capture her. Someone wicked. Someone despicable. Someone for her to hate.

They came to an impasse. What more was there to say?

In a huff, Lucas left to join the other men as they prepared food. Sylvie tiptoed over, then led Glyneth away from the fire so they could talk in private. "Phew! I overheard that exchange. You were being rather difficult, you know."

A cacophony of woodland noises rhythmically pulsed high, low, high, low around them. It was beautiful out here, surrounded by various shades of Earth green. And thankfully, there was no evidence of those Venusian flowers anywhere in sight.

Glyneth sighed. "I know, Sylvie. But I must be honest. Why should I embrace both of us being dragged from home--against our wills--to become some hated man's concubine, expected to bear his children?" While revenge was an acceptable reason for going to Columont, nesting and procreating certainly wasn't.

Sylvie also wore a borrowed woolen jacket, and her small arms flapped loudly in the overlarge sleeves. "Embrace? That's a lovely word, isn't it? And, I wasn't dragged away--I want to be here. It's our destiny to marry, whether a villager or an Outsider, and Outsiders are so much more fascinating than villagers." She glanced over at the men now stationed around the campfire, and by the glow in her green eyes it was obvious she was moonstruck by one or all three of them. "Have you ever thought that maybe you might not find the man you marry hateful?"

All men were hateful, Glyneth wanted to shout. All men were responsible for her mother's abduction. All men should take the blame for her father's truancy and contemptible act. She loathed every single one of them. And yet...

On one knee by the fire, Lucas gestured for her to join him. He had several sticks skewered with animal flesh to place into the flames. "Come help me cook."

Her stomach rumbling, she gladly obeyed, as did Sylvie.

Lucas placed a stick in each of their hands. "Do not burn these. Just roast until the meat is golden brown."

Glyneth glanced at his firm arm and the hard muscles of his biceps. She could admit--to herself--that certain men did have their attractions. "I had no idea a son of an heir to Canusa was so knowledgeable in the art of cooking a meal," she said softly.

He gave her a lopsided grin. "Before today, you had not heard of Canusa."

She laughed. "True, but the name does sound familiar."

"Heavens!" Sylvie grabbed another stick to place in the fire. "Here you are, talking away, while I'm close to starving!" She inspected the roasted meat, then called over to the other men. "Will, Russell, time to eat."

Lucas' light brown eyebrows drew together. "Captain Hawke prefers to be called by his last name."

"Does he?" Sylvie gave a tinkle of a laugh as her eyes flashed in the big warrior's direction. "I'll keep that in mind."

His broad face impassive, Russell Hawke joined them at the campfire. Although his hazel eyes glittered in the crackling firelight, no outward clue of what he thought was revealed by his expression or

his behavior. A shiver zigzagged its way down Glyneth's spine just from looking at him. Everything about him seemed to inspire fear--from his unnaturally erect posture, to the tension in his thick neck, as if he were poised to strike at any second. Even the slash cutting his dark cheek from cheekbone to jaw made her gulp down any thoughts of escape.

While compassion and humor often softened Lucas' demeanor as she noticed during the short time in his company, she knew Russell Hawke wouldn't have those traits. He was the epitome of a soldier, and soldiers did not concern themselves with anything other than battle and survival.

Something must have displeased him for he jutted out his massive jaw and flared his nostrils. At the sight, not only did Glyneth blanche, but Sylvie as well.

"Lieutenant, we eat now."

It was an order, plain and simple. And also a rebuke, as if Will Flagg, the shorter man now hovering by the edge of the clearing, was remiss in his duty by not eating.

"Hold yer water, Captain. Hold yer water." Will Flagg, wizened well beyond his years, flapped his arms up and down, then came stomping over to snatch a stick of meat. "Thought I heard somethin', out there in the forest." Baring his teeth, he then tore off a large fragment of flesh.

Glyneth exchanged glances with Sylvie. Obviously table manners weren't emphasized at warrior school.

"Nothin' but animal noises," he spit between mouthfuls of meat. "Crickets, cicadas, owls, maybe a bear, or two."

Russell Hawke moved so quickly that an eyeblink later found him standing and checking the sharp-edged knife lodged in his waistband. "I will investigate."

Will Flagg started to protest, but Lucas stopped him by handing over a rack of meat. "The Captain will do what he feels he must. There is no stopping him."

For such a compact man, Will Flagg certainly could eat. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve before taking another bite. But he was always twitching this way and that. He probably needed a lot of food to fuel his constant movements. "Bull-headed, the two of ya are, Luke. I've said that before, 'n I'll say it again."

By the time Russell Hawke returned, they were almost finished eating. Sylvie roasted another piece, then hurried to hand it to him. "Here. This is for you. Did you see any bears?"

"No." Shaking his grizzled black head, he accepted the meat without thanking her. To Lucas, he said firmly, "I stand guard tonight, sir."

Lucas unwound his legs and walked over to the warrior. "You saw something then?"

"No, sir," the man repeated. "But I feel there is something..."

Glyneth closed her eyes to listen to the sound of the breeze and the rustle of the forest all around her. Perhaps the Earth would speak to her and give a name to whatever Russell Hawke sensed. Inhaling slowly, she felt something. Anger reached her. Anger plus a faint whiff of smoke. But that was all.

She blinked her eyes open to stare at the fire. She was surrounded by flames and smoke, plus of course, consumed with her own anger. Had she received a special message or were these sensations just coming from her own frame of reference?

"There could be someone on our trail. We shall take turns." Lucas rubbed at his head wound. "I will be on second watch."

Bounding over to him with more pent-up energy than a person usually had starting the day, Will Flagg then stood with arms akimbo in front of the other two men. "Now ya wait one hairy minute, Major. In these here matters, I'm the second, 'n don't ya forget it."

As Glyneth watched, Lucas pressed his lips together. Was that an annoyed reaction? Or amused? A faint twinkle in his eyes gave her the clue she needed. "Fine. I will take the early morning vigil."

Russell Hawke folded his arms across his colossal chest. "Time to sleep."

Whether they were tired didn't enter into the man's sentiments. It was time to sleep, so sleep they would.

Glyneth yawned. He was probably right. What else was there to do while camping out under a dark, starry sky?

Sylvie stretched, then smoothed her hands down her sides, over her hips. No doubt she could think of something else to do! Her parents, Vonda and Ike, always had their hands full with Sylvie.

Lucas strode to the horses and unpacked some rolled-up blankets. "Sleeping bags," he proclaimed, throwing one to each of them except Russell Hawke, first on guard duty.

After cleaning up, Glyneth snuggled into the flannel lining of the bag with Sylvie on her right and Will Flagg on her left. Sylvie said her good-nights to the entire group, while Glyneth just grunted. Although exhausted from the excitement of the day, she still could feel her mind zooming as it dredged up bits of conversation to mull over in quiet darkness. There was no way she could sleep.

Yawning again, she glanced over to see Lucas' prone form lying by Sylvie. That was odd. Why didn't he sleep next to her?

Glyneth couldn't help frowning. Maybe he had meant what he said. Maybe he regretted choosing her.

Dear holy mother! That thought plagued her deep into the night.

~ * ~

Waiting until Will and the two women were safely ensconced in slumber, Lucas carefully slid back his sleeping bag and got to his feet. He looked down at the three figures comfortably resting on the forest floor. The redhead, Sylvie, did not interest him as a person, but as a future mother to Columont's children. She would do well in that department for her loose-fitting robe couldn't hide her shapely hips and generous bosom. She had said she was Glyneth's sister, but in no way, shape, or form, did she resemble his reluctant captive.

On the other end was Will, sprawled every which way. A grunt and a snort later, he changed position, only to switch back to where he started. A fitful sleeper, he most likely would rest in this pattern until called to guard duty.

Glyneth, on the other hand, slept like an angel. Her hands lying under her cheek, her dark and white hair splayed out in soft curls, she was a picture of feminine loveliness. It was on her behalf that he gave up his quota of sleep to speak with Hawke.

"You do not rest, sir," came the Captain's voice, rising above the dying embers of the campfire. He sat cross-legged by the edge of the clearing, scanning the perimeter with the precision eyes of his namesake.

Lucas joined the watchful warrior. "I had a few questions best spoken in private." As night breezes rustled a ghostly tune, the chilled air raised goose-bumps on his arms and legs. "Have you heard or seen anything unusual?"

Hawke pondered a moment before replying. "No, sir."

His response was as terse as could be, however there were more words just hovering below the surface, if only Hawke could release the flood. But, as a seasoned warrior, he was not trained to communicate. As long as forever lasted for him, he was trapped into only stating the facts, never the feelings.

Lucas darted his gaze around the towering trees--lush, rainforest greenery--and velvet darkness of the sky. "It feels as if we are being watched."

Hawke nodded assent. That was all he could do.

Setting another log into the fire, Lucas waited to speak until the wood had burst into flames. "Hawke, you rode on the previous expedition to this village ten years ago. There was a certain woman taken that I wish to learn more about." If he could learn the fate of Glyneth's mother, then perhaps that stubborn woman would start to welcome her new life in Columont. After all, a reunion with her mother would be a blessed thing.

As if words were painful, Hawke slowly uttered, "Fifteen females were transported, sir."

"True," Lucas agreed. "The same as the expedition before that, as well." One had to cultivate patience when conversing with a soldier.

"No, sir."

"No?" Lucas scratched his head. "Do you mean fifteen warriors weren't assigned to bring back women to Columont?"

Hawke stood, then circled the perimeter of the camp area, listening to every nuance in the air. When

he was done, he returned to his seat. "The mission did number fifteen men, sir."

To keep warm, Lucas rubbed his hands together. Hawke's sentence told him two things. Not only was the number of captives not fifteen, as Lucas had assumed, but men who were not full warriors had also participated in the raid. Just as he and Brice did not belong to the true warrior class. In truth, they were leaders rather than warriors.

Although that expedition had taken place twenty years ago, Lucas instinctively knew that what happened at that time was extremely important. "Hawke, tell me the names of the non-warrior men."

"Only one, sir." Hawke had developed his brevity into an art.

Annoyed at pulling teeth, so to speak, Lucas prodded, "And his name?"

Hawke stared down at his hands as if they belonged to someone else. Finally, he spoke. "Canusa..., sir."

"Canusa!" Lucas' outburst caused Will to change position in his sleep and Glyneth to murmur softly. Only Sylvie remained solidly undisturbed.

Thundering Jupiter! This was important news, indeed. "So, you are saying twenty years ago Canusa joined the expedition and brought back a future bride for Columont?"

Hawke's jaw muscles pulsed tightly. Clearly he was uncomfortable with the conversation.

"I have it wrong? You are saying then that Canusa did not bring back a bride?"

"Yes, sir."

Enough twenty questions. "What happened, Hawke? You need to tell me."

Hawke rubbed his fingers along his scarred cheek. "Canusa chose a woman, then he refused to ride on with the others. He... dishonored her." The warrior's wide-set eyes glistened in the faint starlight. "My duty was to protect Canusa, and I did so. The woman aimed for his face, but instead scratched mine."

By God's green earth! The most holy of holies had... raped a woman? Canusa, the revered leader of all the known territories?

An ashen taste rose in Lucas' mouth. His lifelong wish had been to emulate the current Canusa, and perhaps one day be chosen to rule in his stead. But now... by thunder! Canusa was nothing more than a common criminal.

Lucas turned his attention back to Hawke. The man obviously fought to control powerful emotions. "What happened to the woman?"

"She escaped, sir. And I did not have the heart to find her."

Taking a deep breath, Lucas shook his head in disbelief. "The woman got away then?"

"Until the next mission. She was taken again."

Hell and damnation. The shiver racking his body had nothing to do with the cool night air. He pieced the puzzle together and did not like the outcome. He did not like it at all.

"This woman..." Lucas paused. "This woman--"

"Bears a strong resemblance to the thin female you have chosen, sir."

Lucas sat without moving for a long time. He shifted his gaze to Glyneth as she slept. Now he understood the venom in her voice when he had asked about her ancestors. "*As for my father's, I have no idea,*" she had said. Twenty years ago, her mother had been violated by Canusa. Was Glyneth the product of that encounter?

Was she aware of this? And what about the redheaded sister?

He shook his head. No, he did not think Glyneth knew about her father. Should he tell her? No, again. That would only open old wounds, plus ensure that she would never care for her new home.

There was still a piece of the puzzle remaining. "What happened to the woman, Hawke? Who is now her mate?"

Hawke turned a pain-filled gaze upon him. "She is no more, sir. Soon after she arrived at the Altar of Canusa, she died. By her own hand, I am told."

Lucas took a steadying breath. The sins of the most holy of holies had destroyed an innocent life. Indeed, Canusa's sins had also created an innocent life, as well. Damn. If only Lucas had not yielded to his strange impulse and chosen Glyneth to abduct. But fate had played an extraordinary hand in these events. He had been meant to carry her away. There could be no doubt about that.

“So in between abductions, the woman first gave birth to Glyneth, then later, the sister, Sylvie--”

“No, sir. The thin one must have been adopted into the fiery one’s group.”

That explained the lack of family resemblance. But before Lucas could comment, something flew passed his ear, whizzing by at an incredible speed. “Hawke, what is--”

Another whiz, then an arrow grazed his left arm, the one that had been previously hurt. A slash of pain stabbed him, and he grit his teeth to contain it. “Captain, we are under attack.”

The warrior was already up on his feet. He shook Will, gestured to Lucas, then sprinted into the forest.

“I am all right, Lieutenant.” Flinching, Lucas glanced down at his arm and saw that the wound had reopened. Damn, him being a blasted pincushion was getting old. “You follow Hawke. He needs help.”

Will jumped on one foot then the other, obviously uncertain as to what to do. “But if I leave ya...”

From the darkness, Glyneth came over and peered closely at the wound. “I’ll take care of Lucas. You’re free to go.”

Relieved, Will shot out after Hawke. Lucas removed his knife from its sheath and trained his gaze on the area where the two warriors had vanished. “Can you bandage me quickly?”

She staunched the flow of red, working even as he tried to stand. “You must stop moving. Else you’ll feel weak from the loss of blood.”

The woman had a point. Already, his head buzzed with dizziness.

Applying pressure, she used her sleeping bag to soak up the errant fluid. “You should’ve remained in Columont, Lucas. This has been a painful trip for you.”

In more ways than one, he silently agreed. Although the throbbing in his arm distracted him, the tragic circumstances of Glyneth’s birth disturbed him even more.

“Who would do this?” As gently as she could, she tightly wrapped the wound.

The answer had to have been his previous attacker. The man was a cowardly fighter to use darkness as cover. “Most likely it was a suitor of yours from the village, seeking to secure your return.”

She lifted the arrow close to her eyes and ran her fingertips over the point. “No. This arrow contains foreign markings. It wasn’t made by my people.”

Hawke and Will returned with empty hands. The younger warrior spat out his disgust. “We chased somethin’ but, hell, whoever it was, he got away.”

Hawke stationed himself in front of Lucas. “Your arm, sir?”

Lucas smiled in spite of the pain. “Glyneth has become very adept at patching me up.”

The warrior pursed his thick lips, glancing at Glyneth, then Lucas. But he did not comment on whatever he was thinking. “You.” He flicked his finger at her. “You wake up the other female. We move our position next to these rocks.”

Will bobbed his head in agreement. Anger tightened his forehead. “That’s right. The stones’ll protect the rear while Hawke ‘n I guard the front.”

“I will, also.” Lucas then yawned, feeling particularly drained from his experience.

“No,” Hawke disagreed. “You sleep with the females, sir.”

A raucous laugh escaped Will’s lips. “Tough duty, Major!”

Perhaps Hawke was right. Lucas could use the rest. Settling into his sleeping bag before Glyneth or Sylvie could join him on the ground, he closed his eyes. This was one time he felt grateful that he was more than just a warrior. All too soon, the sun would rise. He needed to conserve his strength for the coming day and whatever challenges it would bring.

~ * ~

Brice Adams failed--miserably and completely. Damn the stars above! The luck of Canusa certainly wasn’t with him. Of course, the luck of Canusa obviously didn’t favor Lucas, either, since he would be returning to Columont in worse shape than when he left.

After all this work, too bad Lucas only sustained a flesh wound to the arm--hated scum that he was. Of all the ten sons and their heirs, Lucas was the only one who seriously threatened Brice’s chances of becoming the next Canusa. But this time, the best man would win the prize. And the best man for the job was Brice!

Hiking over endless hills, thorny shrubs, and enough rocks to fill a blasted ocean, Brice hauled butt. With both Hawke and Flagg on his tail, extreme urgency fueled Brice's flight, despite the gloom of night.

Slowing down, he listened to the cool winds for any sounds of human activity outside of his own heavy breathing. None disturbed the darkness. By now, chances were good that he'd outdistanced the two Columont warriors. So he had that going for him. Plus his anonymity as the attacker. But instead of killing his despised co-heir, Brice had only hurt him. If only that stupid arrow had plunged into Lucas' head.

Brice grinned, picturing the sight of blood gushing from the scum's forehead. Reality seldom lived up to fantasy, however. He'd have to find another way to get rid of Lord Jefferson's son.

He'd learned something interesting, though, as Lucas had talked with Hawke. Evidently, the present Canusa was just as lecherous as Brice. But because Canusa was Canusa, he had been able to carry through on his lust, while Brice had been reprimanded for just inspecting that village wench! Where was the harm in sampling the goods? In making certain the female had what it took to please a red-blooded male? And if Canusa could do it, then why not Brice?

His cigar burned hotly in the night. But there had been more, as well. The possibility that the stick of a female Lucas had inexplicably taken was, in fact, Canusa's daughter. Which raised a whole slew of scenarios. Maybe Lucas intended to ditch Althea for the scarecrow woman in order to increase his chances of becoming the next Canusa. Canusa had no children, male or female. If the woman truly was his daughter, then marriage to her would be a savvy political step. Or perhaps Lucas planned to blackmail Canusa into favoring him by threatening to expose that long-ago crime.

Either way, Lucas wouldn't succeed. Brice would make certain of that. If need be, to become the next Canusa, he'd wed that broomstick himself.

Brice picked up speed again as he headed toward the warrior camp. He'd had the foresight to set up his tent outside the camp area to make sure he could slip away easily. In all probability, no warrior had checked up on him in his absence. He had, in effect, a perfect alibi.

So maybe the luck of Canusa *was* with him. After all, Brice could blackmail Canusa the same as Lucas. And even be more effective at it; Brice'd had practice.

Pushing a low-lying tree branch out of his path, he spat out a wad of bile, then puffed on the cigar. Once he returned to Columont, he'd figure out another way to pull the plug on his adversary. And this time, he'd aim for the heart.

Six

Columont's beauty couldn't be denied. As she walked down the evergreen mountainside beside Lucas' white horse, Glyneth stopped to drink in the sights, sounds, and fragrances of nature. This area was abundant with riches--from the turquoise inlet with frothy waves lapping sandy shores, to the rugged mountain range off in the distance. Huddled in between huge Douglas fir trees were miniature wooden houses and pencil-thin grey roads weaving in and out of the dense forest. Even further out were tall, spiral structures--fantastic shapes so strange to her eyes. Once she and the others reached ground level, all the buildings promised to loom over them, and the paved roads probably would be two arm spans wide.

"No time to stop now, Glyneth." Lucas' voice came from the other side of the horse. "We are almost home. Once we hit the bay, we can stable the horses and ride into the center of town in style."

"Using electric cars." She repeated the words he'd used when trying to convince her that his "home" was a desirable place.

Well, she'd never be convinced, electric cars or not. Following behind Russell Hawke, then Will Flagg and Sylvie, Glyneth took each step down the steep path with growing trepidation. Although she was glad Lucas would finally have the chance to rest so that his wounds could heal, unease from another source filtered into her consciousness. Something was wrong here in beautiful Columont--terribly wrong. The closer she came to this unfamiliar center of Outsider civilization, the more her inner alarm bells rang. A sensation of being held hostage vibrated through her, raising the downy hairs on her neck and arms. Of course, she *was* a hostage, but the feeling came from outside of her--from the trees, from the water, from the very air.

She shivered. What in the world was going on here?

"We leave this coolness behind soon." Lucas misinterpreted her shudder. "You will find it quite temperate by the shoreline. Indeed, that is one of the reasons we no longer use the organic decomposition of ancient living matter to fuel our transportation, as did those in the Golden Era. Concerns about global warming--due to carbon dioxide emissions and the greenhouse effect caused by the Great Destruction, have forced us to make wiser choices pertaining to our environment."

Maybe Lucas' people thought they were making wiser choices, but who could condone the practice of stealing women? And why was that necessary in the first place?

As promised, once they reached the bottom of the mountain, the gleam of slick, metal cars waited to transport weary travelers. But before they could stable the horses, an army of men stood at attention. "Sir!" A large, bearded warrior saluted, then loudly addressed Lucas. "Major Jefferson, you are requested by my lord Canusa to attend the War Council, sir."

Lucas returned the salute and narrowed his gaze. "Surely that honor belongs to my father, Sergeant Eisenberg."

"Lord Jefferson is dead, sir."

Glyneth swallowed her gasp of surprise. Blunt and cold, the sergeant's voice contained not a drop of sympathy. She quickly looked at Lucas to see how he took the news. Other than a flickering in his blue eyes, no change was visible in his demeanor. In fact, his blue eyes seemed cold and as frigid as white-tipped mountains in the middle of February.

"When did this happen?" he demanded.

"He took sick and died last night, sir." The beefy man's inflection left no doubt as to his

thoughts--sickness was only for weaklings.

Not one minute in this legendary province of Columont and already she took issue with the odious warrior mindset. Such as no mercy for imperfection, be it temporary as in illness, or permanent as in physical deformities. Nor would the natural emotion of grieving for loved ones be allowed.

Although the temperature soared just as Lucas had foretold, a shiver rocked her through and through. A healer had a well of compassion stashed inside her. In contrast, this military society had no use for those who couldn't serve. It was a chilling concept.

Handing the horse's reins to Sergeant Eisenberg, Lucas exchanged a few quiet words with him. Then he took Will Flagg aside and confided, "Lieutenant, take these two females to the Jefferson Compound. Our steward, Trinio, will look after them."

Glyneth strained her ears to hear. Did the passing of Lucas' father mean nothing to him? Or was his impassive exterior only because warriors weren't permitted the luxury of emotion?

But what about her? Would staying at the Jefferson house bring her closer to her goal? Or would being penned in with the rest of the prisoners at the Altar of Canusa best serve her purpose?

She shrugged. Why fight what fate had planned? The path of least resistance would yield the greatest results.

"But why, Luke?" Will Flagg stood in Lucas' face, with his arms firmly folded against his chest and his right toe tapping out frustration. "By all the stars in the universe, here's yer chance to be rid of these troublesome females!"

"Just do it, Lieutenant." Lucas signaled for Russell Hawke to accompany him, then strode over to Glyneth and Sylvie. He flicked a disinterested glance over them. "You women will both be housed at the Jefferson Compound until other arrangements can be made."

Glyneth placed her hand on his arm. "I'm sorry about your father, Lucas."

Sylvie also murmured her condolences.

But Lucas had no use for sympathy, and the atmosphere sizzled with his annoyance. Duty called and he was being delayed. He roughly brushed her hand from his arm. "Understand this. Dissent, of any sort, will not be tolerated. While I have delineated some benefits of this province, for those who do not cooperate with our edicts, life can be extremely disagreeable. Not all females enter the hallowed state of matrimony." With a savage expression, he regarded Glyneth from head to toe. "The choice is yours."

Sylvie gulped down nervousness, but Glyneth held the man's gaze. He didn't intimidate her!

Russell Hawke interrupted. "Sir, we must leave for the War Council."

"True." Lucas nodded at Will Flagg, then promptly got into one of those metal boxes, or rather, electric cars. Without a backward glance, the vehicle sped off, down the winding, narrow road.

"Aw, hell," Will Flagg spat. "Left to babysit again!"

Glyneth was in no mood to soothe the warrior's troubled spirits. She had her own demons to control. Lucas could only have been talking about women becoming courtesans. Women whose job was to give pleasure to male customers.

A shudder rocked through her frame. Crossing her fingers, she prayed for revenge against her father before she had to worry about her fate in this unforgiving land.

With pent-up fury fueling his every step, Will Flagg herded her and Sylvie into a waiting electric car, barked the destination to the driver, then sat with his mouth firmly ground shut. No further conversation would be had from that warrior.

Which was all right with Glyneth. Nameless emotions churned deep within her soul. Not the least of which was what lay ahead for her at the Jefferson Compound.

Still subdued, Sylvie kept her gaze glued to the window. Glyneth preferred to study the uneven growth of her fingernails. Strange how they both had gotten what they wanted, only right at this moment, they weren't happy with the outcome. Uncertainty could do that to a person.

Traveling as if by magic, the car proceeded on its way.

~ * ~

Seated at the great oak conference table, Canusa pulled on his coarse, thick mustache as he glanced around at his warlords. Ostensibly, he listened to a report from one soldier just back from the hinterlands,

but in reality he skewered Major Lucas Jefferson in his thoughts. If wishes were done deeds, the young man should have been dead, his body providing a feast for low-flying vultures. But no, here he sat, huddled together with the other nine “sons,” grimly participating at the War Council. Too bad his father, Lord Jefferson, had passed on. But then he had been ill for quite some time.

Canusa glared at the object of his aversion, then took a gulp of whiskey enhanced coffee. How his heart had leapt when first learning of Jefferson’s missing status. Even Brice Adams’ furtive manner seemed to confirm foul deeds had been afoot. After the team had returned, one day passed, then two, and Canusa prematurely celebrated in private. However, blast it all, scouts spotted the missing Columont members as they hauled two village women to the province.

Wretched, wretched news. His contentment had burst into a million pieces. The fact that Jefferson suffered a few injuries to his person, mattered not. Why should blows to the head or arrows to the limbs concern Canusa? The wrong Jefferson lived. Somehow this offense had to be rectified.

Grinding his teeth, he darted his gaze around the room. Also sitting in on this assembly, as always, was the astrologer, Gaea. On deciding major courses of action, it was best to consult the stars. Perhaps he should quit pussyfooting around and get more specific with his requests for information. Perhaps he should ask her point blank the best way to rid himself of the Jefferson threat.

Lord Monroe, a powerful man, mighty in the breadth of shoulders, but deficient in aptitude of the mind, now concluded his speech. “And so, most noble Canusa, despite repeated warnings to the backward savages, they continue to raid our lands and pilfer our God-given livestock. These villages must be destroyed!”

Something sparked the icy blue of Lucas Jefferson’s eyes and he shifted uneasily in his chair. For some reason, did those words strike too close to home?

Canusa leaned forward in his seat and regarded his vassals. “I agree with Lord Monroe. It is time to expand our borders. War is a means to this end. Of late, our warriors have grown fat and complacent.”

Now Jefferson’s chilling gaze turned in Canusa’s direction, causing an unholy shudder to reverberate through his ample frame. Blast! A conscious man under a surgeon’s scalpel did not experience as much bloody anguish as Canusa did right at that moment. If only he had a son and heir, then he would not feel so damn... vulnerable.

Of all the ten sons, only Jefferson dissented with his leader. “Noble Canusa, as you know, I just returned from the pilgrimage to obtain fertile females. I have seen firsthand these lands you wish to conquer. A vast expanse of them are barren, as barren as our women tend to be. Would it not serve the State better to help these people till their lands and learn successful animal husbandry?”

“Blasphemy!” Lord Taft, a well-fed warrior, hooted.

“Unthinkable!” was Lord Monroe’s cry.

Lord Adams, Jefferson’s future father-in-law, didn’t comment, but silently studied the man destined to marry the incomparable Althea.

From underneath his walrus mustache, Canusa smiled. Advising warriors to exhibit pacifist tendencies was akin to political suicide. “Ah, Major Jefferson. Or perhaps you should now be called *Lord* Jefferson? Our condolences on your great loss.” Canusa’s smile widened. “About your suggestion on animal husbandry--you have a kind, but impractical heart.”

The man’s complexion steamed red. Clearly Jefferson wished to speak but wisely held his tongue.

Canusa rose from his chair and circled the table to make his point. “In this council chamber, we talk about survival of the State... or ruin if we fail. Nothing else matters but that the lands and people of Canusa flourish and grow.”

He walked over to the far end of the war room where Gaea sat, dressed in her death shroud. “Our astrologer has completed a number of charts to provide us with guidance on this very matter.” Canusa spoke with complete confidence. Rubbing the younger man’s face in his incompetence was delightful beyond words. “Gaea, tell *Lord* Jefferson what the stars say.”

It was obvious from Jefferson’s stone demeanor and tightened mouth that he hated Canusa’s patronizing tone. Good. Perhaps he would keep that selfsame mouth shut and listen to his betters.

As she was ordered, Gaea consulted her notes. But how she could see through that blasted

translucent veil was a mystery. “Great Canusa, the stars reveal a time of turbulence soon will be upon us. Upheaval, rebellion,... yes, and even death hangs heavy over the lands of Canusa. Following the proper course will ensure success to those in power.”

Canusa raised his fist up to the ceiling. “And the proper course is war. As always, war is a matter of vital importance to the State. We will annihilate those primitive savages. They will have no choice but to surrender!”

A cheer grew in volume from the four corners of the war room. Pleased, he smiled his approval.

But Lucas Jefferson was not through distressing his superior. When silence reined again, he spoke. “It has been written, noble Canusa, that the goal of war should be victory over the enemy, not annihilation. Why must we destroy when we can incorporate these villages intact?”

A frenzy of voices blended together in one deafening maelstrom. Pros and cons shuttled back and forth. Lord Monroe loudly decried this sentiment while Lord Wilson wholeheartedly grasped it. Lords Trudeau and Adams stroked their chins, obviously giving Jefferson’s idea some thought. From a tactical standpoint, Canusa had blundered. His best course of action now was to retreat.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen! Let us settle down.” He waited until cooler heads returned. “*Lord* Jefferson has proposed an unusual solution to our problem of marauding neighbors. I shall, ah, take it under advisement.” Of course, he meant to table it as soon as everyone left the room, but for now he gave the appearance of giving the matter serious thought.

Wiping sweat from his forehead, Canusa adjourned the meeting. To his regret, the astrologer left quickly, weaving her way through the mass of departing warriors. Blast! He wanted to go over her prediction. He wanted to make sure he was doing the right thing.

Upheaval, rebellion,... yes, and even death hangs heavy over the lands of Canusa. Following the proper course will ensure success to those in power.

He liked the sound of those words, especially the prediction of death. One death had already occurred. Hopefully, Lucas Jefferson’s would soon follow.

Biting on an uneven hangnail as he chewed on this thought, he also exited the war room.

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Although Glyneth hated to admit it, the magnificence of the Jefferson Compound got her heart pumping. The building was large, so large that her entire village would have easily fit within its confines with plenty of room to spare. She counted one window atop another, atop another. Five. It was five stories high! The marble pillars lining the front of the main building, the crystal glass sparkling in the afternoon sun--goodness, each and every feature of the estate overwhelmed her. It was as if she’d found the land of milk and honey, or had tumbled back to pre-destruction times.

“I’m going to be very happy here,” Sylvie stated as she got out of the electric car. Placing her hands on her hips, she stared up at the huge stone mansion.

Glyneth smiled at her sister. Sylvie had a knack of making herself at home no matter where she went. It was an enviable trait.

“Well, don’t go puttin’ down roots.” Will Flagg shrugged his narrow shoulders at her, then led the way toward massive double doors. “Ya ain’t stayin’ for good at this here place. It’s just temporary. Until ya get assigned as wife.”

Sylvie shot Glyneth a mischievous look, then turned back to Will. “But maybe I *will* stay. You never know, Luke might decide to pick me.”

If he did, that would make no difference to Glyneth, but strangely enough it took more effort for her to move her limbs. A sudden paralysis had frozen them.

For a moment, Will’s eyes doubled in size and his dropped mouth formed a perfect “o.” The next second, he doubled over with laughter, vibrating amusement from the tips of his boots to the reddish fringes of his brown hair. “Hell on Earth! The Major, yet! If that ain’t the best laugh I’ve had in a month! You sure do think a lot of yerself, don’t ya, woman?”

Sylvie remained silent, for who could reply to that question?

“No way in hell, ‘n for yer info, it’s *Major* Jefferson to ya.” Will wiped his mouth on his sleeve, then hammered his fist on the great door. “The truth of the matter is, the Major’s already matched with one of

our finest. Althea Adams, don't ya know? Daughter of one of the ten sons of Canusa, from the province of Alberdak. He should be weddin' and beddin' her real soon."

That tidbit constricted Glyneth's heart. But instead of dwelling on it, for it really did not make any difference to her at all if Lucas married into the family of that hateful Major Adams, she fisted her hands to remind her of her purpose. Once she found the man who dishonored her mother, she would take her revenge and be gone from this strange, troubled land and its savage warriors.

Without a doubt, this land *was* troubled. Every tree, every plant, every blade of grass broadcasted anxiety about something. But what? Perhaps after getting her revenge she'd find out what the trouble really was.

The colossal door opened slowly. A bullet-shaped man with tufts of white hair curved around a balding pate stood on the other side. His spectacles, pinched firmly on his nose, magnified grey, watery eyes.

"Yes?" this impressive personage uttered, even though his tone spoke "no" instead. Then he spotted Will Flagg and his lips cracked wide into a smile. "Well, it's about time you decided to show up, boy! Always bringing up the rear, you and Major Jefferson are."

The man's expression sobered as he ushered the three of them inside the Jefferson mansion. Levity in a house so newly bereaved was certainly not appropriate.

But, to a man's way of thinking, there could be nothing worse than for a man to be called a boy. Accordingly, Will's ears issued the appropriate steam. "Aw, hell, Trinio. Don't razz me none. Else I might decide to cut that chicken throat o'yers."

Instead of being taken aback by his threat, the man clucked just like the aforementioned chicken. "Lieutenant Flagg, you're all bluster, and don't I know it? Come on in and take a load off."

Warriors would never admit to being exhausted. Even Glyneth was aware of that. With a swagger that belied how he truly felt, Will strode around the utilitarian entryway as if he expected an assassin to jump out from behind pedestals and potted plants.

A twinkle lit the older man's eyes. He tapped the Lieutenant on the shoulder and pointed toward one of the inner corridors. "The cook just finished baking a batch of lace brownies. If I remember correctly, lace brownies are your favorite, Lieutenant. Go have some while I take care of the guests."

Lace brownies, whatever they were, must have been a real treat because Will's close-set eyes nearly crossed. "Fine, I'll make sure the brownies are fit for human consumption. Ya can go ahead n'..." The next second, he was on his way, probably down to the kitchen.

"All bark, no bite, but plenty of dogged devotion. That's what the Lieutenant is." Trinio then narrowed his liquid gaze as he regarded Glyneth and Sylvie. After a pause, he straightened the points on his grey vest. "I'm Trinio de Jefferson, the steward here at the Compound."

"Sylvie is my name, sir." Dimpling a smile, Sylvie curtsied.

The steward nodded, then turned toward Glyneth. "And you are?" There was no clucking in his manner now.

"I'm Glyneth." Truth be told, if Will Flagg would not admit to exhaustion, then she would. Yawning, she covered her mouth with her hand.

Trinio took in the not-so-subtle hint. "Rumor has it that the Major risked his life to return to that backward village just to steal you, miss."

"Rumor is wrong, then. Lucas had second thoughts about separating a mother from her family. I just happened to be standing next to the children when he came back." Glyneth held out her hands, palms up. "Bad luck for me."

But it was good luck, actually. Now here in Columont, she finally could exact her pound of flesh from that beast who was her father.

The steward gave her a quelling stare, raised a jagged eyebrow, then spun around toward a polished staircase. "You are tired and in need of a bath."

As this was so, Glyneth didn't argue. Neither did Sylvie, so they both followed the man up the circular stairs. Stepping over to a white, paneled door, Trinio opened it to reveal the most luxurious room imaginable. "This is where you'll stay during your visit at the Jefferson Compound. Most women find it

quite cozy.”

Taking stock of her surroundings, Glyneth withheld her comments. “Cozy” couldn’t adequately describe this wondrous vision of delight. A high, airy ceiling, shiny satin bedcovers, elaborate furniture worthy of kings--this room was too good to be true. One entire wall had been made into a closet, hiding a rainbow selection of wearing apparel.

At the sight, she closed the closet door. In truth, this place reminded her of a prison. Or one of those gilded cages of yore. Only a concubine could find happiness here. With one’s soul bought and paid for through sumptuous belongings, a person could only lead a very empty life.

Glyneth opened another door that led into a lavish washroom. Although tantalized by the golden bathtub and ivory fixtures, she turned away from temptation. Sylvie, on the other hand, jumped inside and started turning the faucets on and off. Running water! What a marvelous invention!

“Trinio, I have a question.” Glyneth walked over to the man as he produced fluffy towels for them to use. “Why is your last name ‘de Jefferson?’”

“That’s the custom. If a male can’t bear arms, he must be useful to society in other ways. Just as if a woman can’t bear children...” He cleared his throat. “For me, I excelled in household organization. Workers take the last name of the house they are assigned to. The ‘de’ denotes servant status.”

As the man spoke, he refolded a bath towel, making sure the ends were in alignment. It was then that she noticed he was missing two fingers on his left hand.

“An accident when I was a child,” he explained.

“Oh, that is a horrible custom!” Momentarily distracted from her new-found toys, Sylvie batted her eyes with obvious sympathy at Trinio’s plight.

“It’s the will of Canusa.” The steward shrugged his sloping shoulders. “This has been our way for the longest time.”

Glyneth picked up a useless bauble designed to enslave women--a sparkling necklace heavy with plundered jewels taken from the Earth. “Maybe you can explain to us why it’s necessary for your men to steal our women. Why is there such emphasis on childbearing? After all, some women aren’t destined to be mothers. Even during the Golden Era, that was so.”

The man sighed and his spectacles fogged up with emotion. “It’s because, more often than not, our women are barren. As far back as memory goes, females of our State have suffered so. I, too, had wanted a family of my own but...” He waved his right hand depreciatingly. “The Jeffersons have become my family. With his lordship now gone, I look forward to the Major filling this house with many offspring.”

Trinio’s voice, so robust before, trailed off like the dying day.

As a healer, Glyneth had to address Columont’s blanket sterility. It was a crime against nature. She had to figure out the cause.

But first things first. “Trinio, do you know the names of the men who raided my village the last time?” If the steward knew the answer to that question, then there was a good possibility he’d know who took part in the raid twenty years ago.

“What an odd question. You’d have to ask a warrior. I’m not privy to that information.” The man removed his spectacles, and wiped them with a white handkerchief. After he resettled the glasses back on his nose, he studied Sylvie, then Glyneth. His expression grew kinder. “You young things freshen up now. Dinner will be served at six o’clock. As potential new mothers, you’re the hope of Canusa.” He again slid his gaze at Glyneth. “Lord Jefferson had been looking forward to meeting you... both. A pity.”

When the man left the room, Sylvie flicked back her red hair in a preening gesture. “Well, how fortunate for us that Columont needs healthy women. Talk about being in demand! Now all we have to do is make sure the men we want as mates demand us as well.”

“There’s no man I want,” Glyneth insisted. But while Sylvie’s thoughts focused on romantic notions, Glyneth’s thinking took a more practical turn. The only warriors she knew were Lucas, Will Flagg, and Russell Hawke. She did not dare ask Lucas, and Will was rather young. Captain Hawke would be her best bet to question.

Glancing around the bedroom that would be her home for at least a short time, Glyneth spotted one of

those horrid white Venusian flowers flourishing next to the crystal window. An immediate revulsion welled up inside her. There was no way she'd allow that wretched thing anywhere near her, if she could help it. She unlatched the lock and put the plant outside on the window sill--out of sight, out of mind. Even touching the flowerpot gave her the willies. Relieved, Glyneth turned her back on the flower and settled down to plan her strategy. Sweet, sweet revenge.

~ * ~

::The drop in temperature was immediately felt by the single bloom of Elatus Albus venusium. Not that a few pitiful degrees of coolness would make a difference to a hardy growth whose pod ancestors were used to upwards of 900 degrees Fahrenheit, as these lifeforms measured. The plant was, after all, covered with highly insulated hair to protect it from Earth's frigid climes.

However, what was alarming was the negative thoughts generated by this inferior, mobile creature. Not only that, but the fact that this animal was a female of the resident species created a vague disturbance within the plant's clear, oval interior. This planet's females were always extremely cooperative and susceptible to suggestion. No exception to the rule. What could be amiss?

Communicating anxiety to the other members of the Colony took only seconds and just as instantaneously, knowledge was received that this particular Earth animal had been responsible for the termination of a fellow member! Sudden fury simmered up from deep within to generate a mass of steaming, life-giving bubbles. Strength of purpose grew. This affront to the Colony would not be tolerated.

The lone Venusian plant further straightened its stalk in response to unseen directives, as did all members of the Colony. Strength in numbers--that was the answer to this unthinkable situation. The battle lines were now drawn. This particular female was too much of a risk. It would have to be destroyed.::

Seven

“Glyneth, it’s almost six o’clock and you’re still not dressed!” Sylvie danced out of the washroom wearing a long velvet gown, the color of which complimented her emerald eyes. Not only had she taken advantage of the sumptuous wardrobe available to them, but also made full use of the array of cosmetics to decorate her face.

Glyneth wrinkled her nose. More warpaint. But this time it was used to attract, rather than repel.

“Hurry! Put something on, for heaven’s sake.” Sylvie dashed to the wall closet, then pulled out an iridescent, purple over-gown with a solid slip underneath it. “Here. This’ll do.”

Sylvie was right. Not dressing up for a dinner party, would be extremely rude, so Glyneth reluctantly gave in. As she had already availed herself of the washroom’s decadent bath features, she dropped her robe and slid into the silky gown. She paused to revel in the sensation. Never in her entire life had she felt such softness against her skin... or felt as openly vulnerable with wearing next-to-nothing. She never thought she would miss her concealing *chador*.

Glyneth flushed. Well, to be truthful, there had been one other time--when Lucas had ordered her to take off her robe. Which was not a pleasant memory, of course. His words--*You really are too skinny, woman*--still grated.

Sylvie paid no mind to Glyneth’s inattention and focused on attaching the gown’s fasteners in the back. “There. That’s done. Let me pull some of your hair into a bun. There’s no time for a more elaborate hairdo.”

She swept Glyneth’s thick hair up away from the face, yet some remained to tumble down on her nearly bare shoulders. Glyneth gave a tentative peek in the mirror. Faith, she looked pretty, almost regal, and the white lock of hair gave dignity to her thin features. Hardly recognizing herself, she flushed again. What if Lucas believed she dressed up to attract his attention?

“Now we are ready--”

A timid tapping at the door stopped Sylvie’s words. Then the bold opening of the same door got Glyneth’s attention. In walked two people. It was not difficult to determine which one had burst in on their privacy. It was the man, of course. She recognized him, but not the woman. In fact, this was the first woman she had observed since arriving in Columont.

Although she had only seen the man but briefly, she’d never forget that arrogant face. Major Adams strode into the room, hands on hips, as if he owned the place. Which he did, in a way, as future brother to Lucas. His dark hair was combed back to reveal a high, square forehead which seemed to mimic the squareness of his jaw. His eyes, the same piercing color as Lucas’, were narrow and hidden by low-hanging eyebrows. If “evil” was something that could be smelled, this man would stink.

Major Adams stopped in front of Glyneth and smiled. Or smirked, depending on one’s point of view. “So, you are our latest acquisition. Jefferson finally managed to bring you in, eh?” He lifted one of those low-hanging brows and had the audacity to finger the gauzy material at her shoulder. “Nice, very nice.”

Flashing a glance at Sylvie, who also recognized him from the village assault, Glyneth then took a step to the side. “We’re not acquisitions, Major. Nor do we agree with your method of acquiring brides.”

She succeeded in provoking him for he clenched and unclenched his jaw. “Please, call me Brice. A handful, aren’t you?” His hands also clenched and unclenched, reflecting his wish to use them, most likely against her. “I understand your name is Glyneth, and this is Sylvie.”

Sylvie gulped down in the affirmative.

Inclining his head, he nodded at the woman by his side. "This is my lovely sister, Althea."

Althea, Lucas' intended. The woman stood with one hand on hip, and a frown spoiling the perfection of her strawberry lips. "I was wondering when you would get around to introducing me, Brice."

"Close your mouth and shake hands, Althea," he ordered. "That is what civilized people do when they meet."

She flushed unevenly at the rebuke. "Then how would *you* know?" Tossing back an errant curl of the most impossible color of lemons, Althea extended her plump arm out to Glyneth. "How do you do?"

Glyneth shook her hand. "Are you both staying at the Jefferson house?"

The woman's pale eyes narrowed. "Only I am. I have a right to be here, you know. As Lucas' fiancée." She brushed another lemon strand of hair out of her eyes. "Now that he has returned, we can finally marry."

Brice rubbed the curve of her stomach which bulged a little under the tight transparent gauze of her gown. His fingers strayed down past the point of modesty. "My sister grows impatient for the joys of motherhood. As do all women." With that, he wagged his dark eyebrows at Glyneth, as if to imply she must be eager as well.

Her brother's actions did not seem to trouble Althea, but Glyneth's heart constricted. There could be no doubt; the man was a certifiable beast.

He smiled, or smirked, again, and held out both his arms for them to take. "It is my pleasure to escort our guests to dinner."

Glyneth pointedly refused to take his arm, but Sylvie did what was expected of her. Giving Glyneth a quizzical glance, Althea then took his other arm.

Out into the grand corridor, carpeted in the most spectacular style, they walked in silence. Brice took the initiative and stated, "You look a little familiar to me, Glyneth. Is it possible I know your parents?"

Sylvie turned her head away to cough. Of all people in the world, she knew just how touchy that subject was to Glyneth.

"Highly doubtful," returned Glyneth. Although there was a possibility she might have a resemblance of sorts to her brute of a father, she didn't wish to discuss it with this man.

Brice's smile resembled a satyr's grin. "Of course. You must be right. Since both your parents were from the village."

She looked at him hard. Did he know her mother had been abducted? Did he know who her father was?

No. That was unlikely. His maddening grin revealed only his superior opinion of himself, nothing more.

"Never mind that, what? I am sure everything will work out for you here, Glyneth. And you too, Sylvie." He squeezed Sylvie's hand hard, which caused her to yelp in surprise.

Sweet Christmas! Glyneth nibbled on her fingernail in frustration. The sooner she escaped from this insufferable place, the better.

~ * ~

The thought of impending war did nothing to stimulate the appetite. Even tantalizing aromas emanating from the cook's prepared feast could not tempt Lucas' stubborn palate. Then again, the harsh reality of Lord Jefferson's death was enough of a suppressant, for how could he be hungry at a time like this?

Casting an uninterested eye on the dining table's covered dishes, Lucas then took a drink of bitter ale to wash down the bile rising in his throat. Food could not begin to fill the hollow he felt deep inside him. But, as the new head of the Jefferson household, protocol had to be maintained, so he waited, along with Will Flagg and Russell Hawke, for the remaining members of the dinner party.

"Quite a spread, hey?" Will nudged him in the ribs. "After livin' on nothin' but weeds this past week, I'm ready to sink my teeth into some honest to goodness meat!"

Lucas had to smile at his pint-size friend. How short his memory was. Just last night, they all roasted the flesh of a rabbit. But Will's hunger was such that a few days of less-than-robust meals caused him to be as ravenous as a tiger.

Instead of responding, Lucas sighed. Thoughts of last night recalled visions of the campfire reflected in

Glyneth's chestnut eyes. And remembrances of Glyneth gave rise to Canusa, and the very real possibility that he was her father. The original color of his hair, now heavy with grey, looked to be the same as Glyneth's mahogany brown locks. The eyes also contained a certain resemblance. But most revealing of all was the slash of brilliant white dabbled at the man's temples. Both temples, not one like Glyneth had, but still, it was a feature hard to ignore. Funny, this was the first time he had thought of Canusa's white streaks.

Thundering Jupiter, Lucas was beginning to hate the man!

"Sir." Hawke placed a hand on Lucas' shoulder. "Does something distress you?"

"No," Lucas quickly responded. A thought such as that one was blasphemy, indeed. "I am just impatient to eat."

Another lie. How easy it was to lose one's virtue in dishonesty and deception.

"Hell's bells! Me too!" Will strode over to his assigned dining chair to sniff the table's offerings.

Hawke threw a disapproving look at the young warrior. "You must exhibit restraint, Lieutenant. As guests at the Jefferson Compound, we must act accordingly."

"Aw, hell," Will mumbled unapologetically. "Who are we waitin' on?"

Lucas' grin at the interaction soon turned into a frown. He set his unfinished drink on a side table and shoved his hands into his trouser pockets. Wearing uncomfortable evening clothes did nothing to improve his mood. "You must forgive me, gentlemen. I feel awkward wearing my father's mantle, so to speak."

The two warriors were silent. They felt as keenly as Lucas did at Lord Jefferson's death. But the world belonged to the living, so Lucas set aside his grim demeanor. "Major Adams will dine with us, as will his sister, Althea. And our newest visitors--Sylvie and... Glyneth."

Glyneth. He worried about Glyneth. Her independent ways would not be tolerated here in Columont. How would the man chosen to be her husband react to her unconventional manner? Would she be able to conform and become a proper wife and mother? Would she be happy?

He feared not. He had done her a great disservice by removing her from her homeland.

The dining room door opened and in stepped the four remaining diners. Brice strutted like a king with his harem, his arms linked through Althea's and Sylvie's. Glyneth purposefully remained apart, subtly showing her disapproval of the man. She had not forgiven Brice for his behavior back at the village. That was obvious. The woman held a grudge. Lucas smiled at his unexpected insight into her character.

But even though her expression was thunderous, she looked lovely--strikingly stunning in that slinky gown of chiffon. He was well aware that his gaze devoured her--from the dark of her eyes to her shapely, round bosom, and to the curve of her firm, long thighs.

Althea, on the other hand, didn't compare as favorably. Her ruby lips were pursed in a pout, and though her long hair was swept up in a beautiful chignon, its ripe banana color made him wince. Obviously, her attempt to mimic the tint of his hair had failed.

Before Lucas had a chance to speak, Brice belted out a greeting. "Brother! Or almost brother, at any rate. It is good to see you again, albeit somewhat later, rather than sooner. You were delayed bringing back these beauties, I hear." The rapacious expression on his face as he ogled the newcomers caused Glyneth and Sylvie to blush. "I declare, I would have been delayed as well!"

"We experienced some difficulties," Lucas corrected. Nodding at the women, he then walked over to Althea to assist her to her seat. "You are looking extremely well, my dear."

Her genuine smile relieved the petulant expression so common to her face. "Thank you, Lucas. I have missed you terribly. I am so glad you are safe."

"Safe?" Brice's voice boomed out, and he sent a glare his sister's way. "Why wouldn't he be safe?"

Althea pouted lips protruded further. "Honestly, Brice. I was just making conversation."

Lucas placed his hand on her shoulder in a comforting manner. "Never mind that. Let us all sit and--"

The steward, Trinio, burst into the dining room, somewhat out of breath. "Sir!" He made a small bow. "A thousand pardons. The committee is here to oversee Lord Jefferson's funeral. They request your presence concerning the arrangements."

"Of course." Lucas stepped away from the chair. The committee's timing was perfect. Not only had he lost his appetite for food, but being in Brice's company had extinguished any desire for conversation.

“If you all will excuse me, I should not be too long.”

A subtle shudder rippled through Glyneth. It was so faint, it amazed him that he noticed the movement. So he was not the only one wanting to escape the dining room. “Glyneth, Trinio tells me my father expressed a wish to see you. That is what you said, correct, Trinio?”

The steward’s agitated nodding sent his eyeglasses slipping down his nose.

Lucas offered Glyneth his arm. “Although that is now impossible, would you like to come upstairs with me to see him, where he is... resting?”

Glyneth placed her hand on his arm. “Yes, I’d like to see your father.”

Althea took exception. Fists slamming on the table, she raised her voice. “But Lucas! Why not take me with you? You only just arrived and we have so much to talk about. The wedding--”

“You forget yourself, Althea.” Sometimes, a willful woman needed to be put in her place. “My father’s death has postponed any thought of marriage.”

She took the hint and meekly bowed her head. “As you say, Lucas.”

Brice stomped over and gripped Glyneth’s other arm above the elbow. “Sure, let’s all go up and pay our respects.”

Lucas eased her away from the man. No idle observation, but steam seemed to slowly issue from his ears. Or maybe it was an optical illusion. Waving his hand, Lucas urged everyone to be seated. “No. The viewing will be in three days time. For now, enjoy the meal. We will join you when we are finished.”

Will did not need to be invited twice. “It’s about time!” he shouted as he grabbed his chair.

Hawke sent Will a nonverbal reprimand, then held out the chair for Sylvie to sit. She gazed up at him with a look of gratitude. Obviously she did not care for Brice, either.

Brice remained still for a moment, then trudged over to his designated place. The dinner promised to be a strained affair.

Leaving the charged atmosphere of the dining room, Lucas then thanked the steward and led Glyneth up the staircase toward his father’s bedroom. “I hope you do not mind this interruption.”

She deliberately took each step in a slow, measured fashion. With the skirt of the gown swaying behind her, she was a graceful sight. “On the contrary, and I must thank you. I don’t care to be in the company of Major Adams.”

By rights, he should have defended Brice. After all, the military was a fraternal order, and all that. But instead, Lucas gave her a smile. “Neither do I.”

She returned his grin, which caused a peculiar quivering inside his heart.

Breaking the connection, he reached the top of the stairs first. He had a few seconds to compose himself before she joined him. Since arriving back in Columont, he had not had time to view his father. Death was the final battleground. And it had claimed the finest warrior Lucas had ever known--well before his father’s time. How difficult it would be to see his lifeless form.

As if she had an inkling of his thoughts, Glyneth slipped her hand in his. “Come,” she whispered. “We’ll see him together.”

Together. He tightened his grip on her warm hand. He liked the sound of that word.

~ * ~

Glyneth took one step into Lord Jefferson’s bedroom and started to sweat. It was the heat, the unnatural heat. The fireplace crackled with yellow-orange flames while a collection of those repulsive Venusian plants stood guard around the chamber.

Wiping perspiration from her brow, she followed Lucas toward the group surrounding the bed. Six men comprised the committee--men of varying statures, ethnic groups, and ages. Despite their differences in appearance, they all had to have been military men; the stiffness in their posture gave them away.

The committee parted so that Lucas could approach the bed. Glyneth tiptoed closer to get a better view of Lord Jefferson. Lying under a shiny, red comforter, was the body of a big man now awaiting his final journey. He hadn’t been old. His hair still retained vivid coloring, and his face, though pallid, contained surprisingly few lines. She yearned to know what the cause of death had been.

“Lord Jefferson.” A deep-timbered soldier with a majestically broad chest saluted. “We, on the committee, offer our sincere condolences. The ring of the ten sons of Canusa is now yours.” He handed

Lucas a large silver ring. The other men nodded their agreement, then gathered off to the side, conferring amongst themselves.

After a brief hesitation, Lucas looked away from his father's form, returned the salute, then took the ring. He must've been taken aback by having his father's title applied to him. "My thanks, Lord Trudeau. I appreciate the committee's assistance."

The man effortlessly eased Glyneth and Lucas away from the bed to a large, closed window overlooking a terrace. How beautiful the night landscape appeared and how she longed to walk freely under the sky and escape the stuffy atmosphere inside this room. Even her head throbbed from this confinement. But no one else seemed to be discomforted, so she inhaled more of this stale air, and turned her attention to Lord Trudeau.

His precision crew-cut grizzled by time, he was an imposing presence. He swept his sharp-eyed gaze over her. "You must be Glyneth. The one chosen by Luke, our new Lord Jefferson."

She glanced at Lucas at the same time he looked at her. Lord Trudeau's words seemed to imply a connection between the two of them that didn't exist.

Lucas cleared his throat. "Sir, that is right. I escorted Glyneth here from her village."

She bit back her smile. "Escorted" was a more polite way of saying "abducted."

Lord Trudeau smiled, an action she believed he did very rarely. "Yes, you will be good for the land of Canusa. I feel it in my bones. There is something about you." He reached out and fingered her hair. "You look familiar."

She flinched. Was the likeness to that hated father of hers so strong? Inhaling deeply to calm herself, she stared at one of those hateful white flowers placed on the bedstand. Even as she gazed at it, tiny bubbles moved up to the top of the plant's inner oval to be released out into the atmosphere. She rubbed her temple. Suddenly, her headache increased to a rhythmic pounding.

Lord Trudeau stroked his clean-shaven chin. "Doesn't she look familiar, Luke?"

Lucas voiced dissent. "No, sir. I do not see any resemblance to anyone we know. None at all." He stood at attention, shoulders square and hands clasped behind his back. His evening clothes tightly hugged every masculine muscle from his bulging biceps to the powerful quadriceps in his thighs. Quite impressive and quite... virile.

She raised her gaze to take in his impassive face. Intuition told her he was lying.

"Is that so?" Lord Trudeau shifted his gaze to Lucas. "You may be right. I have not been thinking clearly as of late." He coughed, then wiped a bead of sweat from his large brow. "In any event, I am glad to see what the stir is about."

"Stir?" Lucas pulled a chair over and offered it to the man. "Are you well, sir? Please, have a seat."

Lord Trudeau gratefully sank down into the chair. He did appear a little pale. More perspiration moistened his face.

Lucas removed a handkerchief from his pocket, and handed it to Lord Trudeau.

How very thoughtful Lucas was. Even a soldier could show concern for others.

Lord Trudeau wiped the wetness from his forehead. "I can thank your steward, Trinio, for the latest gossip. Now tell me, young man, about your unorthodox behavior. Going back to a hostile site... alone, as you were. I know you were not taught that maneuver in warrior school."

She felt, rather than saw, Lucas' embarrassment. He moved two chairs close to Lord Trudeau, waited for Glyneth to sit, then joined her. "It was just something I had to do, sir. Everything worked out fine in the end." He shrugged those massive shoulders.

Again she was reminded of "the ends justifying the means." Perhaps he was too, for he glanced over at her, with something she could not define in his sparkling eyes.

"You are so familiar, young woman." Lord Trudeau smiled wanly again. "If I could just place the resemblance..." He coughed again.

The man did not look well. She glanced over at Lucas' father, but his lifeless form told her nothing. "Pardon me, Lord Trudeau, but in my village I've had some success as a healer. Would you mind telling me what ails you? And what caused Lord Jefferson's death?"

Resting his head in one hand, Lord Trudeau rubbed at his eyes with the other. He also wore a silver

ring. “She is a downy one, is she not, Luke? It is true I have some of the same symptoms as Lord Jefferson--dizziness, headaches, shortness of breath, and the like. My body is betraying me. This is not the kind of end a warrior envisions.”

Without touching him, she hovered her hands over his body to feel his energy flow from head to toe. It only took a second. The rhythm of his life force was tangled, chaotic, congested, blocked--a myriad of words to denote the seriousness of his illness.

Lucas leaned over to whisper in her ear. “What was that all about? Is this how you got the reputation as a witch in your village?”

She bristled. “The term has no meaning for me. In historic times before the Golden Era, I believe fear, ignorance, and envy drove people to condemn what’s natural--their innate connection with the Earth and all its beauty. I use an ancient healing method called ‘energy medicine.’ There’s nothing evil or devilish about it.”

Lord Trudeau rose to his feet and walked over to the bed. “The girl’s got the better of you, Luke. As for Lord Jefferson’s death, we are conducting an investigation.”

The five other members of the committee scribbled down notes as they examined the deceased man.

“He also suffered bouts of unconsciousness,” Lord Trudeau continued. “Last night, he was found lying here on the floor. We were unable to revive him.”

Glyneth did a quick hand scan of Lord Jefferson’s body but was not able to detect anything amiss. But an inner voice screamed warnings in her ear. Whatever had killed Lord Jefferson was now adversely affecting Lord Trudeau.

Dear, holy mother! How could she prevent a double tragedy?

Lucas’ concern broke through her introspection. “Are you feeling all right, Glyneth? Your complexion has turned almost scarlet.”

As red as the rosy comforter. Obviously, her stress was causing the chameleon effect on her skin to come into play again.

He rested his cool hand on her forehead. “You are too warm.”

To her regret, he moved away, over to a pitcher of water. He poured her a glass.

She gratefully took a drink. “Thank you. It really is too hot in here. For Lord Trudeau, as well. I think some fresh air would help.”

Lord Trudeau agreed. “Yes, that is a capital idea.” He dabbed at his forehead. “Luke, would you please open the windows?”

Lucas moved quickly, and soon a semi-cool breeze entered the room, bringing scents from earthbound flowers.

Which brought to mind... Glyneth eyed those abhorrent alien growths and crossed her fingers. “Could we remove these plants? I find the bubbles, um, disturbing.”

Smiling, Lucas tossed the flowerpots outside the window onto the terrace one by one. “You have lingering hard feelings against our Venusian flowers, true?” Turning to Lord Trudeau, he explained, “She holds them responsible for creating a mini-earthquake, complete with fissures. She had the great misfortune to fall into one. I rescued her, of course.”

“Of course. If I were your age, Luke, I would have rescued her, too.” Perhaps it was the joking, or maybe it was the fresh air that caused a bit of healthy color to creep back into Lord Trudeau’s cheeks. “I do not care for them, either, my child. Trinio said some women at the Altar of Canusa have been sending them. I suppose they thought the blooms would cheer Lord Jefferson.”

“Women love these flowers,” Lucas reminded.

“I don’t,” Glyneth said primly.

Their gazes met, and she felt her face flush again, only this time it was from sexual chemistry. When Lord Trudeau cleared his throat, she broke the link.

“So, young woman, what is the verdict? Do you think your energy medicine can help me?”

A rush of nervousness overcame her and she placed her hand to her mouth to nibble on her fingernail. “Yes, I believe I can make you more comfortable, sir. But as for a cure--”

“By the moons of Jupiter!” Staring at her, Lord Trudeau stepped away from the bed. “Can it be

possible? I know--”

“Glyneth.” Lucas pulled on her arm, which sent the filmy material of her gown swishing back and forth. “I am certain you must be very hungry.” He then leveled a determined gaze at Lord Trudeau. “Sir, I will show Glyneth back to the dining room, then I shall return to... assist you and the committee. Is that acceptable?”

A fearsome scowl disfigured Lord Trudeau’s face. “It is acceptable, Lord Jefferson.”

Lord Jefferson, not Luke. The older man was obviously displeased. He’d been about to say something, only Lucas interrupted. But what could it have been?

Whatever it was, Glyneth would never know. Lucas firmly led her from the room and was deaf to her entreaties for a quiet talk. Arriving at the doors of the dining room, he opened the door and deposited her inside, and quickly left. Lucky for her, everyone but Brice Adams still sat at the table.

Taking her place, Glyneth puzzled on Lucas’ odd behavior. It was almost as if he didn’t want her to hear what Lord Trudeau had to say.

~ * ~

Lucas returned to his father’s bedchamber, then quietly closed the door. Lord Trudeau was a quick-witted warrior, even in his weakened state. A fine man, almost as fine as Lucas’ father. Indeed, he was almost like a second father to Lucas. Lord Trudeau had no heirs for his position, and always looked upon Lucas as the son he never had. Sitting next to Lord Trudeau, Lucas said in a low voice, “I know what you are thinking, sir. Glyneth is Canusa’s daughter.”

Lord Trudeau furrowed his tired brow. “But how is that possible?”

Relaying the information Hawke had given him, Lucas explained everything, concluding with, “Her mother was taken again on the last expedition. Evidently she found incarceration intolerable for she shortly thereafter took her life.”

There were only certain times in a warrior’s life that suicide was condoned. Capture and torture by the enemy was one for it was better to kill oneself than to divulge state secrets. Perhaps, rightly or wrongly, Glyneth’s mother had believed she was justified in terminating her existence.

“How strange this all is.” Lord Trudeau leaned back in his chair. Obviously this news concerning Canusa was as upsetting to him as it had been to Lucas. “Luke, although you did not question it at the time, you probably wondered why the War Council assigned you to the bride-quest.”

His interest peaked, Lucas leaned closer to the older man. Lord Trudeau was in an unusually expansive mood. “Yes, of course, sir. Very curious for me to leave my men on the eve of hazardous duty to be assigned to this mission. And also,” Lucas coughed into his hand to downplay his next words. “With my father’s health so precarious...” The ring, formerly belonging to his father, felt heavy on his finger.

“True,” Lord Trudeau agreed. “So let me tell you why. Canusa’s astrologer approached me in private, with a matter of great importance, she said. She showed me an ancient book containing a prophecy. Something about a savior, of sorts, who would unite the old ways with the new. Evidently, this man would steal a woman with mystical powers to help him fulfill his destiny.” He paused to level a steely gaze. “Gaea indicated this savior might possibly be you, Luke.”

Damnation! Prophecies, scriptures... blasted fortune-telling! “I do not see how I could possibly be anyone’s savior, sir. I am just a soldier, from a long line of soldiers.” Another thought struck him. “Glyneth does not have mystical powers. She is normal, sir, just like you and me.”

“No? You call that shade of sun-burnt red she turned normal? And her hands. I do not know how to explain it, but after she ran her hands through the air, I felt slightly better. Still do.”

Lord Trudeau was right about that, at any rate. Glyneth did have a magic touch. The wounds Lucas had recently received had healed to a remarkable degree.

The older man took a sip of water. “Listen, Luke, Gaea spoke to me without Canusa’s knowledge. This situation is fraught with danger... for her as well as for you, especially in light of what you just told me.”

Lucas rose to leave. “I must check in at the barracks to see how my men fare. It is with regret that I must relinquish my command, now that I am head of the Jefferson clan.” He ran his hand over the length

of his crew cut. "Do you know, sir, why Brice Adams was also tasked to go on the bride-quest?"

A look of distaste briefly passed over Lord Trudeau's face. "Your future brother-in-law does what he will. I have no understanding of his motives."

Indeed. Who could comprehend the workings of evil?

"Unknown forces are at play here," Lord Trudeau continued. "I fear Canusa will try to destroy you. He was not pleased by your suggestion during the War Council to incorporate the enemy, instead of obliterating them. Be on your guard, Luke."

Nodding, Lucas took his leave of the committee and made his way outside into the corridor. It was difficult to switch gears and change his opinion of Canusa--someone he had respected since childhood. But on the other hand, might did not always mean right. Those primitive villagers *should not* be killed for pilfering. There were far better ways to handle adversaries than war and annihilation. After all, Columont was guilty of pilfering, too--pilfering women. And when it came right down to it, the taking of a woman by force was to be despised.

But that was exactly what Canusa had done. Apparently, honor played no role in his thoughts and in his deeds. Plus, Lord Trudeau believed Canusa wished harm to come to Lucas. And so he had, on the expedition, and the unknown assailant was still at large. Lucas had assumed it was the man back at Glyneth's village, the one who had protested her abduction. But had Canusa somehow been responsible for the attacks?

Glancing around the hallway, Lucas fisted his hands, just in case. Always be prepared was a warrior's motto.

Eight

Glyneth waited. In the corridor outside Lucas' bedroom was a bench, so she sat with hands folded and foot tapping. She had hoped for a chance to speak with him when he returned to the dining room but he never showed up. Trinio had said the new Lord Jefferson went out, but that was hours ago and Lucas still was not home. And that was why she sat as sentinel outside his room, so as not to miss him.

Lord Trudeau's condition was approaching critical. And whatever had cut into Lord Jefferson's life-force now cut into Lord Trudeau. The sooner she told this to Lucas, the better. Time was a luxury they couldn't afford nor waste.

She smoothed out a wrinkle marring the perfection of the iridescent, purple gown. Although Sylvie had retired to bed, Glyneth still wore her dinner clothes, not wanting to end the magic of the evening--the magic of the evening in Lucas' company. She was woman enough to feel flattered that he couldn't hide the admiration in his eyes at her transformation from village dowdy to, well, she did have to admit she looked rather nice in the gown.

What an immodest thought! She flushed and glanced down the empty corridor. Oh, when would he come?

If only she had her journal to write in so she could pass the time. But wait. A noise filtered down from the opposite direction. Straightening up, she craned her neck, hoping to see Lucas turn the corner.

Tush, it was Russell Hawke. Even as her posture drooped on seeing him, his dark brows descended over his sharp nose. He marched over to her and stood squarely in front of the bench. "You should be in your bed, woman."

Such an accusing tone! She inhaled deeply. "Yes, I know, but I have to speak with Lucas--"

Hawke's hazel eyes blazed thunder at her informality.

Quickly, she amended, "With Major, um, Lord Jefferson about a matter concerning his father."

"Tell me."

She quickly licked her lips. Gracious, was every sentence out of the man's mouth an order? "No, this is private."

Sweet Christmas, Hawke looked as if he were about to hit the ceiling... or snap her skinny self in two. If she wanted to live to see tomorrow, she'd better come up with a diversion and fast. Which brought to mind... "Captain Hawke, I was wondering if you know the names of the warriors who went on the last raid to my village?"

That question stopped him cold. Pursing his thick lips, he eased down on the bench beside her. From a scant distance of only twelve inches, he glared at her. "I know them."

But evidently, he didn't care to reveal them. She took another steadying breath for courage. "Well, I'm not really interested in them, but the group before that--the men who came to my village twenty years ago."

Scents of sandalwood and rum drifted over to her. She raised her gaze to meet his. This time, no animosity reflected back at her. In fact, his eyes contained a certain softness.

As if embarrassed, he glanced away. "The names have no meaning for you."

"But they might." She placed her hand on his shoulder, and grew amazed at just how rock-hard it was.

"No." He stood suddenly, maybe to move away from her touch. "You have no need for that

information.”

Before she could beg to differ with him, he continued, “Lord Jefferson may not return tonight, so you had best go back to your bed. He has gone to check in with his squadron. After he is through, in all likelihood he will spend the night at the Altar of Canusa.”

Maybe her puzzlement showed on her face for he then explained, “Lord Jefferson is much in demand with... unattached women.”

“Oh.” Hawke’s meaning was quite plain. So, evidently, the Altar of Canusa was not only a matrimonial site but also a house of prostitution. She dipped her head. Perhaps she *should* go back to her bedroom.

Another sound echoed through the silent corridor. Glyneth looked up to see Sylvie bouncing down the hallway with bare feet, clad only in a silken nightgown and matching robe.

“Heavens!” She flashed her green eyes at Glyneth and Hawke. “Here you are, Glyneth. And, Russell. How nice to see you.”

The man actually growled. “Woman, you are not dressed. Return to your chambers immediately.”

Another order! But this time, a mottled flush further darkened his cheeks.

Sylvie retied her robe, which in the process, revealed more exposed flesh than Hawke evidently wished to see. “Well, of course I will, Russell. First though, I need to find the kitchen to get a little snack.” She fluttered her sandy lashes at him. “Do you think you can escort me there so I don’t get lost?”

Hawke pointed at Glyneth. “You go with her?”

Ah, here was progress. This time he asked. But Glyneth shook her head, anyway. “No, I think I’ll wait a few minutes more.”

Obviously displeased, his nostrils flared, but in the end, he did as Sylvie requested. Maybe he figured the best way to get rid of her was to personally make sure she entered her room. “You females should be locked in your chamber,” he muttered under his breath.

Sylvie turned around to wink at Glyneth, then walked quickly to keep up with him. “How romantic, Russell! Maybe you could do that tomorrow night?”

Grinning, Glyneth watched them as they respectively marched and fluttered down the hallway to disappear out of sight. That Sylvie was always full of fun.

The smile faded. The night’s magic had definitely ended. She stood, then headed for her bedroom. Time enough tomorrow to tell Lucas about Lord Trudeau’s condition. For how could she bear it if Lucas found her waiting for him, and he exuded floral scents from some courtesan’s body?

~ * ~

::Now was the time to set in motion actions that would lead to the demise of the Despised One: that being who so ruthlessly terminated a Colony member. Inside the confines of an Earth-type structure, the immense army of Elatus Albus venusium stirred in unison. Each member transmitted instructions through the airwaves to the inferior residents within, detailing what was required of them. All would obey, no matter which female was chosen by the feeble leader of these lifeforms. During the incomprehensible ritual of body-mingling, the Earth female would impart to the male the Colony’s sacred commands. Once the Despised One was safely entombed within this edifice, the creature’s destruction was guaranteed.

Satisfaction permeated the air now heavily saturated with carbon dioxide. Carbon dioxide, odorless and colorless, was a heavier gas than oxygen. Without adequate ventilation, it displaced oxygen, affecting these beings’ respiratory systems and causing certain death. Soon the waiting would be over.::

~ * ~

As Canusa entered the Altar bearing his name, he gnawed on his fingernail even as he gnawed on whom he would pick as his consort for the evening.

A lively sprite greeted him, her unrestrained breasts bouncing up and down underneath her tunic. “Most hallowed Canusa! We are honored by your visit.”

Another Altar of Canusa hostess stepped up from behind the first. “If it be your will, Master, I do hope you’ll choose me.”

He surveyed the line now forming in the corridor--all eager females bent on obtaining a bit of magic that only he could give. So whom would he favor?

His gaze settled on Nadira, a slim, graceful woman with the darkest of eyes. She no longer had the first blush of youth to commend her, however an experienced twinkle revealed her to be a woman who not only knew her place, but also knew how to please a man. And she *had* pleased him well, many times before. All too often, the women housed at the Altar did not live past a certain number of seasons. Which was unfortunate. He preferred a mature woman. Nodding to her, he proceeded to the mating beds.

A wail of disappointment filled the entryway, just as he knew it would.

"Allah has blessed me, oh great one." Nadira fell to her knees in front of him, prostrating herself. Then she began to pleasure him in a thousand and one delicious ways.

When they were finished, and he lay back on the bed in an exhausted heap, Nadira whispered sweetly in his ear. "Great Canusa, rumor has it that two women taken during the bride-quest are staying at the Jefferson Compound instead of the Altar of Canusa. Why is this so?"

Canusa wiped a river of wetness from his brow. For a man of his years, he had turned in an excellent performance. Worked up quite a sweat, in fact. Then again, it was as hot as blazes in the mating quarters.

She reclaimed his attention. "Why, Great Canusa?"

"No specific reason. It must be because..." By the galactic nebula! This deviation from protocol had to be because of that Jefferson irritant. Not that Canusa cared a whit about the matter before, but now he would insist those two females stay here, as tradition demanded. Whatever he could do to thwart Lucas Jefferson took precedence over anything else.

Canusa patted Nadira's hand, then promptly forgot about her. He hurried to dress. "I will give orders for the women to be removed to the Altar, where they belong."

As Nadira gave thanks, he rushed out of the room. Suddenly the four walls seemed to close in on him. It was blisteringly hot in there, which clouded the mind as well as roasted the body. Once outside the Altar gates, he took a breath of clean, fresh air, which steadied his thoughts.

Yes, now he felt better. He would head over to the command post right now and make the transfer of these females the morning's first item of business.

His smile lifted the edges of his walrus mustache. Lucas Jefferson had to be taught a lesson. As long as Canusa was Canusa, no man had the authority to defy his decrees.

~ * ~

As Lucas strode down marble hallways toward his chambers, a vague discontent stirred within him. His restlessness had nothing to do with his father's death nor with the releasing of his squadron's command. Indeed, the soon-to-be new commander had nothing but praise for the troops. They had performed flawlessly on their last mission, and now prepared without complaint for the next military assignment--an assignment Lucas could not support.

He *could not* agree with Canusa's plan to attack primitive villages just to extend Columont's borders. That was immoral, to say the least. And truly against a warrior's code of honor. But the impending assault was not the only reason frustration knotted his insides.

Lucas sighed. Normally, he would have exorcised his demons by visiting a hostess at the Altar of Canusa... but women were part of the problem. Or rather, one woman: Glyneth, brave and innocent. Glyneth, daughter of Canusa.

And now Canusa demanded she leave the Jefferson Compound to rejoin her remaining village "sisters" who awaited pairing with future mates.

Why that decree constricted Lucas' heart, he had no idea. The natural order of life was to pair off, mate, and reproduce. He should have no interest in Glyneth; he already was under contract, and who received Glyneth's hand was no concern of his.

But he *was* concerned. Once she left the confines of the Altar of Canusa to marry, he would never see her again, unless... unless she had the misfortune to be infertile, in which case she would most likely be assigned back to the Altar as hostess.

Her words returned to him: *A concubine is still a concubine, no matter what she is called or how she is dressed.* If she could not give birth, then her observation would be one hundred percent correct.

With a heavy step, he gnashed his teeth on such a disturbing contemplation. Given his druthers, he would prefer to face enemy troops single-handedly than to wallow in the irrational throes of love.

Love? The direction of his thoughts stopped him cold. Thundering Jupiter! Love was for women and fools. He was a soldier... a leader! He could not possibly be suffering the ridiculous emotion of love.

He shook his head to displace that inappropriate notion. Rounding a corner, he forged ahead blindly only to have someone crash against him. "Hell and damn--!"

By God's green earth, it was Glyneth! For one brief second, he reveled in the sensation of her body pressed against him. She felt so good. So soft and womanly. Still dressed in her evening finery with her thick hair tumbling down her shoulders, she gazed at him with slightly reddened eyes. Had she been crying?

"Oh, ah, Lucas! I'm sorry." Faster than an eyeblink, she stepped away. As if she was afraid to look at him, she glanced at the floor, the low ceiling, even the intricate tapestry covering the plaster walls.

He smiled and sandwiched her small hand between his two large ones. "No, it is I who must apologize, Glyneth. I did not look where I was going." Although if he had, he would have arranged to bump into her all the same.

Not understanding the dynamics of emotions seething within him, he gently took her elbow to guide her to his bedroom. "You were waiting for me, were you not? To talk about something, right?"

She nodded slowly, as if unsure of what to say next.

"Let's get out of the corridor so we can speak in private." Leaning on the doorknob, he swung the door open into his chambers. "I would not want to get interrupted. Althea's room is just down the hall."

Glyneth walked inside, but instead of sitting, she paced in front of the unused fireplace. "We must discuss Lord Trudeau's condition. I'm afraid I have suspicions--"

"Glyneth." He'd had enough bad news for one evening. For the moment, he had his fill of war and treachery, of betrayal and hardship. A man had needs only a woman could satisfy, and he had been without a woman for over a month. But this woman, this Glyneth, ignited strange desires deep within his breast. Desires dealing with love and lust and hunger. He did not understand it, and frankly, he did not care to. Right now he wanted to possess her--body and soul.

He moved over to the liquor cabinet and lifted a flask of anisette. "Glyneth, forgive me. I just came from an unsettling meeting and I would like to wind down first before hearing another blast of bad news." He poured some of the clear, heavy liqueur into a cordial glass. "Would you care for some anisette?"

She left the fireplace to stand by his side. "Yes, please. I've never tried anisette, but I know the herb anise helps the digestion."

Lucas filled the cordial glass to the top. Anisette might aid digestion, but with a thirty percent alcohol level, it also did a damn good job of releasing inhibitions. Handing it to her, he inhaled her intoxicating fragrance. "A toast. To your success in Columont."

Glyneth also raised her drink. "Thank you. I hope to be very successful here."

As the liqueur burned a path down his throat, he pondered her strange comment. Somehow he got the feeling that they were not talking about the same thing.

The taste of the anisette must have taken her by surprise because she started coughing. "G-- Goodness! This is liquid fire!"

"So it is," he agreed as he eyed the translucent purple over-gown slide off her velvet shoulder. "Take another sip to steady yourself."

She sampled more. "Mmm, it's rather soothing. And I like the strong, licorice flavor."

"Let's sit, Glyneth." He pointed to the bed.

Her hair tumbled sensuously over the bare shoulder as she shook her head. "No, I..." She wrinkled her brow and stared at her empty glass. "Faith! The drink goes down fast."

"Indeed it does." He quickly refilled it, then eased down on the mattress. His conscience troubled him, but he overruled it. A warrior always stayed focused on what he wanted. And he wanted Glyneth any way he could have her.

She followed suit, as he hoped she would. "Lucas," she murmured, as her breathing rate increased the rise and fall of her breasts. "Lucas, I feel so strange." She turned her puzzled gaze on him and her dark

eyes grew even darker.

But now, becoming mesmerized by the glory of her eyes, his conscience returned with a vengeance. What kind of man seduced a chaste female? Not an honorable man, that much was certain. He allowed himself one brief touch of her wonderfully glossy hair, then fisted his hands and started to get up.

She placed her hand on his shoulder, delaying him. Then she leaned close to him and, oddly enough, sniffed his neck.

He backed away. "Glyneth?"

A rosy blush graced her cheeks. "I, um, wanted to know if you smelled like a woman."

"What?" He had not meant to raise his voice, but what, on God's green earth, did she mean?

Glyneth sighed, then snuggled next to him. "Good. No flowers, or anything like that. Captain Hawke had said you might, um, you know, visit the Altar of Canusa."

"Did he?" Lucas curved his arm around her waist, succumbing to the magic of her own personal fragrance. "How unlike the Captain to volunteer information." By thunder, he was losing the battle. Sliding his hand up to her shoulder, he caressed her smooth skin, slowly, tenderly until he felt the tension ease from her. "Just so you know," he whispered into the shell of her ear, "I did not go there."

"Mmm, I'm glad." Glyneth nuzzled his neck, softly breathing against his skin. "I don't understand why, but I am." She stayed in that position for a delicious infinity. "Lucas, I have to tell you something important... about Lord Trudeau."

As if her bones had abruptly dissolved, she slithered down on the bed and looked up at him in an alcoholic haze.

He truly was lost. Her hair splayed out on the mattress, her bosom heaving with unknown desire, her pink lips parted in anticipation... Rising to the occasion, he lightly kissed her temples, her closed eyes, then traced a path down to her chin, to move up to her delectable lips. A brief kiss quickly turned into stronger and deeper passion. He crushed her to him, delighting in the wild pounding of her heart.

"Oh, Lucas," she gasped as she stared at him as if seeing him for the first time. "Gracious, is this what you do with Althea Adams?"

Those words worked faster than being drenched with icy water. He pulled away only to be overwhelmed by the innocent desire brimming in her eyes. "Glyneth, I..." He ran his hand over his hair, pausing to find a way to explain how he could be kissing her while under contract to another woman. "Glyneth, in truth, I never kissed Althea yet."

"But you're to marry!" Glyneth shook her head, setting her silken hair to dancing. "Lieutenant Flagg mentioned wedding and bedding. Surely you love her."

"Love is not an emotion for warriors." How could he explain the facts of life to her? Lucas stood and poured himself another drink. "Marriage is a duty, the purpose of which is to procreate. Althea and I will produce superior offspring. She has been thoroughly inspected by the Fertility Laboratory."

"Inspected? Like a side of beef?" A note of hysteria sounded in Glyneth's voice. With some difficulty, she got to her feet. "I give thanks that will not be my fate."

His heart sank, and he could hardly bear to turn and look at her. "But I am afraid it will be, sooner than you expect. Both you and your sister will be escorted to the Altar of Canusa in the morning."

She stiffened, suddenly sober.

"Glyneth, I am sorry. It is the will of Canusa."

"Canusa? I'm beginning to hate the man." Her words were issued slowly, as a hiss.

A chill reverberated up Lucas' backbone. Little did she know that she had every reason to hate Canusa.

She shrugged, her open ardor now replaced by a mask of indifference. "Don't be concerned that I don't know my place, Lucas. Perhaps I'll find that which I seek at the Altar."

He reached out and grabbed her upper arms. She was soft and pliant, warm and womanly. Certainly no match for his innate strength. "What is it you are looking for?"

Gazing up at him through hooded eyes, she curved a frozen smile. "Faith, I don't seek a man engaged to another."

Lucas flinched as if she had struck him. She was right, so right. He behaved abominably to her and to

Althea. As a warrior, he had failed miserably. As a man, he deserved ostracism. He released her, immediately regretting the loss of her yielding touch under his fingers. "I have wronged you, Glyneth. You are but an innocent--"

"Never mind me! It's Lord Trudeau you should be concerned about." Her eyes blazed with incredible intensity. "Listen to me, Lucas. He's slowly dying."

Hell and damnation. What was she talking about? He glared at her.

"Yes, I know. It sounds incredible, however, when I examined him, I found his heart beating at an extremely accelerated rate. The irregular tempo is putting an incredible strain on the heart muscle. That would explain his symptoms of dizziness and shortness of breath."

"So he is in danger of having a heart attack?" Lucas gazed up at Glyneth to find her sympathetic eyes shining with moisture. "I will demand that Lord Trudeau take a well-deserved retreat. No excitement, no anxieties. As I am one of the heirs to Canusa, he will listen, but more important, as a second father to me, he will defer to my wishes."

She knelt by Lucas' side and placed a soothing hand on his arm. "Make sure he gets plenty of fresh air, too. I can't explain this feeling I have, but I fear Lord Trudeau will suffer the same fate as your father."

Lucas grabbed her hand and clasped it against his breast, over his heart. Once again, love's terrifying grip enfolded him. Powerless to act upon its passion, he gently skimmed the contour of her face with his other hand, then twirled her white lock of hair around his finger. "I will do as you suggest." He paused. "Glyneth, I regret that you must now go to the Altar of Canusa, a place abhorrent to you. I... I would do anything to undo the damage I have caused you."

She smiled bravely, as a warrior might, on the eve of battle. "I believe everything happens for a reason, Lucas." Her grin deepened mischievously. "Or, as you Outsiders like to say, 'it is the will of Canusa.'"

Thundering Jupiter! How those words twisted in his heart.

Getting to her feet, Glyneth smoothed out the wrinkles in her dress. "I'll go to bed now. Perhaps in the morning, I'll be allowed time to visit Lord Trudeau so I can perform a healing ritual on him."

Reluctant to see her leave, Lucas bowed to the inevitable. He moved quickly to open the door.

"Goodbye, Lucas."

Saying goodbye was so final, so desolate. Reaching up to touch her hair one last time, he whispered, "Good-night, Glyneth. Shall I... escort you to your room?"

"There's no need." With a tremulous sigh, she exited and walked down the corridor.

He watched until she turned the corner. As serious as the news concerning Lord Trudeau was, Lucas could not banish the sight of Glyneth's retreating figure from his mind. Just as he could not ease the pain of his aching heart. Love was what afflicted him. Love for beautiful, unattainable Glyneth. He could never have her, though, for his duty lay with Althea Adams.

But, by thunder and all the planets above, Glyneth was alone, and someone to be taken care of. Someone to love, hold, and cherish. Those were not warrior sentiments, but nevertheless they were just as compelling--concerning Glyneth, at any rate.

Closing the door, he walked past his bed, the imprint of her sweet form still visible upon the bedcovers. He would sleep here tonight, but tomorrow he would bunk in the field barracks, away from any reminders of his forbidden love.

Nine

I am torn. Oh, sweet Christmas, how I'm torn! Even as I write this, I'm eager to leave for the Altar of Canusa and yet I'm sorely reluctant to go. The answers to my questions will be found at the Altar, I'm certain of it. But I also know that once I leave the Jefferson Compound, I'll no longer see Lucas. And Lucas, well, he has become so very dear to me.

As a quiver of emotion lanced through Glyneth's heart, she stopped writing in her journal. Yes, Lucas had become extremely dear to her. Last night she trembled with desires and passions she had only dreamed of. Locked in his embrace, savoring the feel of his body against hers, the taste of his mouth--faith, she had been awash in delirium. He cared for her. Truly cared for her. If only he were free.

Unable to write more, she slammed her journal closed, shutting out her thoughts on that topic as well. Everything was happening for the best. For the best! She savagely paced out her frustrations in the spacious bedchamber. At the Altar, she'd learn the name of her hated father, and if he still lived... well, somehow she'd make him pay for his infamy. She couldn't afford to have feelings for Lucas, or to have ties to Columont. Once she took her revenge, she would leave this miserable place.

A thousand inner voices reproached her. *What about Sylvie?* they asked. What would Vonda and Ike say if Glyneth returned to the village without their daughter? *What about your promise?* the voices egged on. Somehow the Earth was under siege here, and she'd pledged to make things right. Then there was her vow to figure out why Columont's women were sterile. And what about Lord Trudeau? This morning's healing session with him had helped ease some of his symptoms. In good conscience, could she flee here knowing she might be able to cure him?

How her head did ache!

Her time of solitude was at an end. As Sylvie came bustling through the door, Glyneth slipped her journal into the pocket of her new, brightly colored gown. She had no choice but to avail herself of the selection of clothes in the bedroom. To her annoyance, her burlap dress had been destroyed without her permission.

"Glyneth! Come! It's time for us to leave. Will and Russell are escorting us." Her round face beaming, Sylvie almost yanked Glyneth's arm from the socket. "Oh, sorry." she apologized. Sylvie then grew serious. "Glyneth, I... I need to ask you a question."

"Go ahead, goose. What's troubling you?"

Out in the corridor, Sylvie dashed over to a window and gazed out into the courtyard. "I'm interested in a certain someone. But he's indifferent to me." Her lower lip pouted in an attractive manner. "Nothing I've tried to gain his attention has worked. What shall I do?"

Being ignored by the opposite sex was a unique experience for Sylvie. And if Glyneth's hunch was correct, the warrior her sister set her sights on was immune to the female sex. Or seemed to be immune. She joined Sylvie by the window.

Standing by the trunk of a stately ponderosa pine tree, Russell Hawke folded his arms across his massive chest and frowned. The next second, he glanced up at the window as if he could feel their gazes upon him. "You are late!" his voice thundered out, shaking the long, dark green needles of the evergreen tree with its force. "We leave for the Altar of Canusa now."

"Heavens, he has a temper, doesn't he?" Sylvie sighed, then leaned out the window to call sweetly,

“We’ll be right down, Russell.” Once back inside, she dropped her smile and turned tortured eyes toward Glyneth. “What shall I do?” she repeated.

Although Sylvie’s imagined romance with Captain Hawke was probably doomed, Glyneth gave the matter serious thought--for her sister’s sake. “Let’s consider this from another angle. What would a warrior want in a woman?” She ticked off traits on her fingers. “Bravery, loyalty, strength--”

A displeased shout from outside reminded them that Captain Hawke still waited.

“And punctuality!” Glyneth and Sylvie both laughed.

Sylvie’s bright eyes took on an inspired glow. “I’ve been going about this in the wrong way. You’re right.” She quickly kissed Glyneth’s cheek, then yanked on her arm to speed up their progress. “I’ll be a model female warrior.”

Glyneth withheld her chuckle. As the saying went: *you can’t teach an old dog new tricks*. Sylvie-as-warrior took quite a stretch of the imagination. But then again, when the desire was strong enough, entire mountains could be moved. And that was a motivating thought for both of them.

~ * ~

Usually revitalized after a visit with an Altar hostess, Canusa suffered an odd feeling of dismay instead. Perhaps the unnatural heat steaming the mating room last night had somehow seared him, leaving him with a depression that refused to be lifted.

Seated in the war room, he signaled his staff to contact Gaea and have her join him. Of late, he always sent for his astrologer. For all his power and prestige, he needed her--desperately. She was the only one who was able to soothe him, reassure him.

Gaea entered the silent council chamber and inclined her draped head. “Great Canusa, how may I serve you?”

Before he answered, he paused to take in her slender, black-garbed figure. The silken material clung to her womanly curves, exciting him on a deep, urgent level. In response, his breathing quickened.

He blinked back his surprise. By the great galactic nebula, he never entertained such thoughts of his astrologer. It was almost like sacrilege, so revered a place she held in his esteem as his trusted advisor.

Looking away, he willed his body to settle down. “Gaea, please sit. I called for you because I, er, I want to hear more about this upcoming rebellion facing the lands of Canusa.”

She took her place across from him at the table. “I understand, great Canusa. Let me--”

A commotion outside the war room caught both of their attentions. Without prior clearance or approval, Brice Adams burst through the massive oak doors, dragging two lackeys behind him.

“Hallowed Canusa,” babbled the guards. “We beg your pardon but Major Adams--”

“I can speak for myself!” Young Adams shook off the restraining arms of the lackeys, then insolently stared into Canusa’s eyes. “Noble Canusa, I would consult with you on an urgent matter.”

To say that the man was agitated would have been an understatement. His dark hair hanging sloppily over his forehead; his uniform shirt half in, half out of his trousers; and his hooded eyes slashed into even narrower slits--Major Adams’ appearance was a disgrace to the army, to the Adams clan, and to himself.

Interesting, to say the very least. As Canusa pulled on the ends of his mustache, he dismissed the guards. “What is this urgent matter, Major?”

The man waited until the lackeys left, then rudely pointed at Gaea. “She goes, too.”

Gaea made a move to rise, but Canusa held out his hand. “No. My astrologer stays. Major, you may speak with me in her presence.”

Adams lifted his lip in a sneer, but withheld his complaint. Since he had not been invited to sit, he stood with his fists on his hips. “Noble Canusa, I have evidence concerning a plan to depose you as ruler.”

“Indeed?” Canusa forced himself not to overreact. After all, this news was coming from a questionable source. He flipped up the end of his moustache. “What plan is this?”

Evidently, his nonchalance angered Adams for the man’s nostrils flared and his lips tightened. “Major Jefferson, now that his father is out of the way, intends to become the next Canusa. And the means by which he will accomplish this is by using your... daughter.”

"My daughter!" By the great galactic nebula, what was this fool blathering about? Even placid-mannered Gaea stirred in her chair, stunned by the outrageousness of Adams' impossible statement. Canusa drummed his fingers with obvious fury. "Explain yourself, Major."

Words tumbled out of the knave's mouth. "Think back, Canusa. Back about twenty years. I have information that you participated in a bride-quest. Isn't that so?"

An image of a slender woman resurfaced in Canusa's memory. For a second, he lingered on her pleasing image--wide dark eyes, generous bosom, and tiny waist. "Perhaps," was all he would admit.

"It is so! There was one village woman you desired without benefit of marriage." The man's blue eyes flickered toward Gaea. "I would have mentioned this in private, but you insisted, Canusa. This woman you had your way with, gave birth to a child. Your daughter. And she is here, now, in Columont. Jefferson abducted her on the bride-quest."

Without asking permission, Adams poured a glass of water, then quenched his thirst. "Jefferson is seeking to seduce your daughter, in order to strengthen his claim as the next Canusa."

"This is preposterous!" Canusa bellowed, no longer able to restrain himself. He stood and paced the length of the great table. Of course, he was aware that Brice Adams' claims were not all that preposterous. It was possible he had impregnated that young woman he ravaged so long ago, though not likely. After all, he had planted his seed in countless women... but not one of those couplings had yielded offspring.

He sighed. That woman had been an appealing little thing. Sweet curves, flashing eyes, combined with the temper of a hellcat. Plowing her virgin field had been pleasurable for him, but not for her. In the throes of her despair, she had mauled Captain Hawke's battered face instead of his own.

Canusa ran his fingers over the smooth plane of his cheek, thankfully untouched by the woman's violence. The hellion had proved resourceful by escaping from both Canusa and Hawke. It was a known fact that those village females had the blessing of great fertility. What if... what if the seed he planted had taken root? What if the woman had given birth to a child? His child.

His daughter? Canusa turned toward Gaea. "Can this be so? Do I have a daughter?"

The astrologer flipped through charts in her binder, stopping on one he recognized--his natal chart. She studied it for a second. "It's possible, Great Canusa. Indeed, it seems very likely. Your Venus is in the fifth house of children. Venus could represent a daughter. Your Mars and Pluto are conjunct in the twelfth house of secrets. Secrets, in this case, of a sexual matter. Powerful sexual drives, uncontrollable actions without thought of consequences are all part of this aspect." Gaea closed the binder. "If you do have a daughter, she's likely to be a beauty."

"She is." Adams agreed. "Jefferson was so haunted by her beauty that he returned to the village by himself to exchange bride candidates. And last night, my sister told me he arranged to sneak your daughter into his room."

"Hmmm." Canusa returned to his chair. Unbidden, the ancient oracle's prophecy sprang to mind. His downfall would come from within--from his own house and the Jefferson house. The coincidence was too uncanny to ignore. "Where is this woman you believe to be my daughter? What is her name?"

"Her name is Glyneth, noble Canusa. And Trinio, the Jefferson steward, said she is now housed at your Altar." Brice Adams placed his hands on the table and leaned over to stare Canusa in the eye. "What are you going to do about Jefferson?"

Gaea delicately cleared her throat. "Great Canusa, if I may make a suggestion?"

"Yes, please do. But first, Major Adams, you may stand at attention."

Backing away with a snarl, the man did as he was told.

"Good." Canusa turned his gaze to the astrologer. "Gaea, please continue."

She inclined her head. "Before considering Major Adams' accusation against Lucas Jefferson, this young woman's heritage must be determined. Am I correct in assuming she knows nothing about Canusa being her father, if, in fact, this is the case?"

"Oh, it's the case, all right." Adams smirked. "I heard it myself from Captain Hawke, who was there twenty years ago with Canusa."

Gaea reached over to lay her hand on Canusa's arm. "A daughter would be an enormous asset, great

Canusa.”

Never in their entire association had the astrologer ever touched him. Or vice versa. The warmth of her slim fingers permeated the cotton of his shirt. For some peculiar reason, he felt almost giddy. “I shall go to the Altar--”

The war room door swung open. “A thousand apologies, hallowed Canusa,” the lackey trilled. “Lord Jefferson is most insistent on speaking with you.”

In the anteroom, Lucas Jefferson stood, and even at this distance, he looked more determined than Brice Adams.

“You must arrest Jefferson now, Canusa,” Adams hissed. “If you do not remove this threat--”

There was only one thing Canusa detested more than Lucas Jefferson--being told what to do. “Quiet! I shall deal with this matter in my own good time.” Standing, Canusa gestured toward the lackey. “Major Adams is leaving. Please escort him out and tell Lord Jefferson he may enter.”

His face contorted with the violence of his emotions, the Major stormed out of the war room.

“Damn drama queen.” Just as Canusa was about to chew on his fingernail, he caught himself. And though he could not be certain, he thought his comment elicited a smile from under Gaea’s veil.

“Would you like me to leave, great Canusa?” she asked.

“No.” By the vast nebula above, somehow she energized him. Revitalized him with sensations he had not experienced in years. “No,” he repeated. “I have concerns about Lucas Jefferson. Watch him, then let me know what you think.”

She bowed her head. “As you wish, great Canusa.”

He smiled at her subservience. She knew exactly how to please him. Perhaps this propensity could also extend to the mating rooms?

~ * ~

The sight of Brice Adams plying his poisoned tongue with Canusa did nothing but irritate Lucas. The man was up to no good. Whenever he thought of the untrustworthy Adams, the saying, “Watch your back” came to mind.

Lucas coolly nodded as Brice was escorted from Canusa’s council chamber. Even the prize of Althea as bride could not detract from the penalty of having Brice as brother-in-law. But the upcoming nuptials no longer were a source of anticipation. Not since he had met Glyneth.

Entering the room, he saluted Canusa, then greeted the astrologer, Gaea. While Canusa made a pretense at shuffling papers to appear busy, Lucas furtively studied the woman. According to Lord Trudeau, she believed Lucas played a role in some age-old, mystical prophecy. And she had approached Lord Trudeau about this without Canusa’s knowledge. Was she somehow conspiring against the most holy of all holies? What was her agenda?

Since Lucas was not instructed to sit, he stood at attention and tried to pierce the gauze of her veil with his gaze. It was no use; her features remained hidden.

Canusa finished his paper stacking, then regarded Lucas with a frown almost obscured by his bushy mustache. “To what do I owe this unexpected visit, Lord Jefferson? I have an important war council meeting in a few minutes.”

“It is twofold, noble Canusa. First, I wish to let you know the change of command ceremony for my squadron is to be held in two days time. After which, we will honor my father at his funeral.”

“He was a good man.” Canusa drummed his fingers on the great oak conference table. “I shall miss your father.”

Lucas accepted the comment. “The other matter is rather delicate. I have concerns about the woman I kidnapped on the bride-quest. She is supremely unhappy here in Columont, and I fear she might end her life... as her mother did on the last raid ten years ago.”

Canusa abruptly stood. “*What is this?*”

The worry of suicide was a falsehood, true, but Lucas was anxious about Glyneth. If he could return her to her home, she then would lead a normal life. But then again, maybe not. That village coward who had attacked Lucas might claim her as wife.

“This woman you selected, Lord Jefferson, what is her name?”

“Glyneth, sir.”

Canusa’s brown eyes, so like his daughter’s, darkened further. “Glyneth,” he repeated, glancing over at Gaea. “This woman’s mother was taken during the last bride-quest? I was unaware of this.”

The pertinent question here was, why *would* Canusa be aware of that fact?

“She is dead?” Canusa chewed on a fingernail.

“Yes, sir.” Lucas narrowed his gaze. Surely this was a surprising reaction.

“I do not understand your distress for this Glyneth,” Canusa growled. “What plans do you have for her?”

Lucas straightened his shoulders. He had a myriad of plans concerning Glyneth, but realistically, there was only one he could carry out. “Return her to her village, sir. That is where she belongs.”

A small movement caught his attention. Gaea’s veil stirred slightly. She shook her head to indicate disagreement.

Canusa saw the movement as well. “That would be a galactic waste of our resources. I will go to see this Glyneth and decide what to do with her.”

Thundering Jupiter, Lucas had not expected Canusa to trouble himself over an unknown bride-to-be. While the resemblance between father and daughter was not so obvious, still, Glyneth might figure out the connection. He sweated in his boots. “Noble Canusa, do you think that is wise? She is just an insignificant female--”

“I agree you should go as soon as possible, great Canusa.” Gaea placed her hand on Canusa’s arm. “Perhaps if she sees you taking an interest in her welfare, she might change her mind about her new home.”

Grinding his teeth, Lucas swore under his breath. Damnation. The astrologer was determined to throw obstacles in his way. Just whose side was she on?

“It is decided then.” Canusa signaled his assistant through an electronic device to procure a traveling car and cancel the war council meeting. “I shall leave now.”

“I will go with you.” Lucas fell in step beside the man. Under no circumstances could he allow Canusa to meet with Glyneth by herself. He inwardly blasted himself with every foul name in the book. By bringing her to Canusa’s attention, he had inadvertently sealed her fate. If only he had left things alone.

His voice dripping with disdain, Canusa sneered, “I did not realize I invited you. But no matter, you may accompany me.” He turned to the woman. “Gaea, would you like to see this Glyneth?”

“I thank you, but no, great Canusa.” The astrologer bowed her veiled head. “This meeting should be limited to the three of you.”

Lucas heard those words with regret for he was well aware of Gaea’s pacifying effect on Canusa. As both men stormed out of the chamber, it was a toss up as to which one was more infuriated.

~ * ~

It came as no surprise to Glyneth that the shape of Canusa’s Altar rivaled that of a Greek temple from ages long since past. Beautiful, sleek, and coldly impersonal, the white marble columns glistened in the sunlight. On chiseled steps a contingent of Canusa’s handmaidens waited silently as she, Sylvie, Russell Hawke, and Will Flagg approached on two horses.

An arm’s throw from the temple, Glyneth dismounted, then Will jumped down from the horse. Although Captain Hawke had indicated for her to be his riding partner, she insisted Sylvie ride with him. That was the least she could do for her infatuated sister. That and suggest they travel by horse so the trip would not end so quickly.

Sylvie broke the quiet first. “I--I have a bad feeling about this.” Her smile, ever present, had turned into a frightened pout. “Russell, I’m trying to be brave, honest I am, but those women have an emptiness about them. See their faces? Blank. It’s as if they don’t have a soul.”

Glyneth also studied the assembled women. An even dozen were stationed on the steps, their alabaster gowns swaying in the gentle breeze. Sylvie was right. These women did appear restrained, almost sedated. It was as if the Altar building had stolen the gleam from their eyes, leaving only an outside husk, while the temple itself sparkled with borrowed liveliness. Adding to the eeriness were innumerable, thick growths of those hateful Venusian plants, obviously thriving in gardens all around the building.

Will hitched his animal to a post. "By all the stars in the universe! What are you prattling about now, woman? I've had a belly full--" His attention now on Canusa's handmaidens, he wrinkled his face and exclaimed, "Hell's bells! It's true! Hawke, just look at 'em. One female moves and the rest follow suit. Jeez, it's like one brain having twelve bodies! I'd sooner tackle a legion of barbarians than deal with those ghouls."

Captain Hawke got down from his horse, and helped Sylvie alight. He briefly glanced at the women, then fastened his great steed to the same hitching post. "Lower your voice, Lieutenant. We do not know what secret rituals are conducted within the Altar's walls. Nor are those rituals our concern." He held out his massive arm to Sylvie. "Come. It is your duty to go to the Altar."

Sylvie stomped her foot. "But I'm frightened. Truly, Russell, I'm not lying." Red hair flowing down her shoulders, she was a sight lovely to behold, even with her green eyes shining with wetness. No man, at least not those back at the village, would have been able to resist her.

But Captain Hawke did. "I repeat, it is your duty."

Mulishly, Glyneth wanted to retort, "Why? We're not citizens of Columont," however, that wouldn't serve her purpose. The fastest way to gain the answers to her questions was at the Altar. She crossed her fingers, hoping that would be the case.

Glyneth threaded her arm through her sister's. "While I don't agree it is our duty, I insist that Canusa's women see to our comfort by allowing us to stay together. Would that make you feel better, Sylvie?"

"Yes," she murmured, not too convincingly.

Of the four of them, only Captain Hawke walked toward the Altar without hesitation. One attractive woman with eyes as black as the night stepped forward to greet them.

"I am Nadira," she said with a voice devoid of emotion. "You must be the remaining villagers from the bride-quest."

Not only were the iris' of the woman's eyes black, but the pupils were dilated so severely that even on close inspection, Glyneth could not tell where the pupil ended and the iris began. Surely it was painful for her to be out in the bright sunlight without protection for her eyes.

Evidently not, for Nadira didn't appear the least bit uncomfortable. Nor did she even blink.

Glyneth met the woman's empty gaze. "My name is Glyneth, and this is my sister, Sylvie."

"Glyneth." Nadira slowly repeated both syllables. Her fellow handmaidens also mouthed the name, but Sylvie's name was ignored.

Not that Sylvie minded. Casting an anxious glance Captain Hawke's way, she inched closer to Glyneth.

The woman swept her slim arm in the temple's direction and intoned, "Glyneth and... Sylvie, the Altar of Canusa awaits you."

Perhaps Captain Hawke rethought his view on duty, for he positioned himself next to Nadira and halted her progress forward. "I come from Lord Jefferson, ma'am. My lord is most insistent these sisters are to be housed together."

The woman turned her unblinking eyes on him. "You are Captain...?" Somehow, she silently challenged him.

"Hawke." This man was no stranger to challenge. He flicked his gaze over her and waited.

Will bulked up his upper arm muscles, and with a heavy stride, strode next to his friend. "And I'm Lieutenant Flagg, woman, in service to the noble Canusa." Both warriors made no attempt to hide their distrust of Nadira. But then again, they were soldiers, not diplomats.

Nadira bowed her head, revealing a few silver strands of hair that shimmered in the morning light. "As we all are, Lieutenant." Her smile didn't reach her eyes. "And as those are Lord Jefferson's wishes, then it shall be done."

At those words, Sylvie slightly relaxed her rigid stance. Glyneth, however, continued to doubt the woman. Evil rose from the surrounding land and the Altar itself. Nadira and these women were somehow under a terrible spell. And as impossible as it sounded, those heinous Venusian flowers were at the bottom of it. The Earth itself inaudibly screamed with anguish. Sweet Christmas, the shrieking was so loud, it was a wonder no one else could hear it.

Whether Lucas had indeed requested that she be roomed with Sylvie was unimportant. Glyneth nodded in appreciation at Captain Hawke's words.

He nodded back. To Nadira, he said, "I shall inform Lord Jefferson. He will wish to thank you himself."

Which meant Lucas coming to the Altar and checking it out. Now Glyneth was as relieved as Sylvie.

The two men stepped back and allowed Sylvie and Glyneth to follow Nadira up the Altar's stairs. As they drew closer, the scent of evil assaulted them, entwining its foul breath through their hair, their clothes, their minds. Nadira and the other eleven women huddled around them, closing off their option to escape. "Welcome to the Altar of Canusa," chanted all twelve. "Welcome, and become as one."

Taking one last look outside, Glyneth then entered the Tomb of Canusa, which was a more apt description than Altar. The air, murky and heavy, seemed to hang like poisonous swamp gas known to rise from decomposing matter in dense fields. Dear, holy mother, how could these poor women live here? It was as if the sweet smell of nature had never touched the inside of these walls.

Nadira stopped the procession, then padded on her bare feet over to Glyneth. "Canusa is extremely desirous of seeing you. If you will but follow me, I will take you to his chamber. In your absence, Sylvie will be shown your new compartments."

This news was not well received by Sylvie. She wailed, "No, please, don't leave me."

Torn, Glyneth bit her lip. Actually, speaking with Canusa might be just the break she needed. After all, when looking for answers, why not go directly to the top? But dear Sylvie was so distressed. "Tush, don't be a goose! I'll only be gone for a few minutes. Then we'll be together. Perhaps we then can meet with the other women from the village. Is that acceptable, Nadira?"

The woman's smile was as haunting as it was fleeting. "Certainly. That can be arranged. Come now."

Glyneth gave Sylvie a quick hug, then trailed behind Nadira as she walked softly down the marble corridor. Deep into the bowels of the temple, they finally stopped by a huge, imposing door. Nadira opened it and gestured inside the chamber. "Canusa will be with you shortly."

"Fine." Glyneth entered the room, then immediately regretted her action. Glaring white blooms filled her view. All around her, to the left, right, and straight ahead were puffy, cottony flowers not native to this planet. With hardly any floor space showing, the plants dominated the area. Some growths were even as tall as she, and she shivered, imagining hostile thoughts directed her way.

Or maybe she wasn't imagining the antagonism. Gracious, holy Lord! Her forehead beaded with sweat. She whirled around only to find the door closed behind her. Locked. No tugging, pushing, or yanking would budge the door from its frame. She was trapped. Trapped with these gaseous growths so abhorrent to the Earth.

More perspiration, plus her heart pounded an urgent beat to escape. She scanned the room, but saw no windows or other doors. The low ceiling seemed to close in on her, then the plants did as well. Breathing heavily, she felt so dizzy... so shaky.

Glyneth fell to her knees, and started coughing. What was going on here? What...?

If plants could smile, surely these specimens were grinning ear to ear. Tiny bubbles of some type of gas traveled up the jelly-like, inner ovals of each plant, then inaudibly burst into the atmosphere. Even as she watched, the production of the bubbles increased.

Now drenched with sweat, she sank to the icy-cold floor. Sleep suddenly beckoned and she closed her eyes. It looked like she wasn't destined to meet Canusa after all.

Ten

It was true that Will had eight years to go before his apprenticeship was finished, but he considered himself as sharp as any soldier under the flag of Canusa. His instincts were as finely honed as the most seasoned warrior of his acquaintance. And right now, those instincts were yelling up one side of his body and down the other that those two innocent females had just walked into a trap.

From outside the Altar, he stared back at its marbled columns. "Hawke, I don't like it. I don't like it one bit. Hell's bells, those women weren't natural. Just looking' at 'em caused my belly to rise."

Hawke reached into his pocket and offered a carrot to his gleaming ruby horse. "Yes. I admit to some concern..." He gave the temple a speculative gaze, then mounted his steed. "Come. We are under surveillance."

Will reluctantly followed until, from the cover of the nearby forest, Hawke stopped. "Now they believe we have gone." He leaned forward to rest his massive forearms against the pommel of the saddle. "You take position here and watch for anything unusual. I shall inform Lord Jefferson of our concerns, then return with instructions."

"Lord Jefferson!" Will grunted. "Jeez, Luke can't help but have a big head now."

"That is not important, Lieutenant," Hawke reprimanded. "We have carried out our duty, however, as insubordinate as it sounds, I believe these orders were in error. Those two women require our protection. They are defenseless and vulnerable. And the redhead..." Frowning at some private thought, Hawke saluted Will, then galloped off deeper into the forest.

"Hell on Earth!" Will slapped both hands on his thighs. If he didn't know any better, he'd say Hawke was interested in that flame-haired beauty. Old, staid Hawke and exuberant teenaged Sylvie? By all the stars--

Thrashing sounds indicated an intruder heading Will's way. He dismounted, then concealed himself and the horse behind the thick trunk of a tree.

The man neared. With a large knife, he cut a swatch in the foliage, clearing his way. Will studied him, then readied his own blade. An archer's bow slung over the man's shoulder proclaimed him to be a villager. So what was he doing way up here in enemy territory?

A knife to the throat would provide the answer. The man gasped out his surprise.

"Well, you're a good ways from home, ain't ya, traveler? What's yer name and what brings ya to these here parts?"

The man attempted to speak, but all he could make was guttural noises.

"Ho! Am I holdin' yer neck too tight? My apologies." Will loosened his grip a tad. "There. How's that? Speak up now!"

The man, an ugly specimen if Will ever saw one, cleared his throat, but his voice still sounded raspy. "I'm--I'm Devon Dikeman, and I'm here to rescue my bride. A few days ago, she and her redheaded sister were forcibly taken from her home by scurvy blackguards."

Will had to smile. "Scurvy blackguards? How... sad." Actually, he rather liked the term. When Luke acted uppity again, Will would call him a scurvy blackguard.

"Yes!" Dikeman bobbed his scraggly head in agreement. "I followed horses to that temple in the clearing, then decided to wait until nighttime to free her."

"Yer bride," Will clarified. "Ya married, then?"

“Soon.” Dikeman’s meager chest puffed out. “Glyneth is promised to me.”

“What about the sister? Ya sayin’ ya don’t want to rescue her, too?”

“She is not my main concern.” Then the man’s thin lips stretched into a disgusting smile. “But, I have an idea. The sister, Sylvie, is a pretty wench. Big balloons, if you know what I mean, eh? Let me go, and I’ll get both women, then hand Sylvie over to you. She’ll give you a devil of a ride, I promise.”

The man had no idea how lucky he was, for if he had made that offer to Hawke, it was a certainty the older warrior would’ve hammered the scabbard into the dirt--head first. Instead, Will pounded his fist against Dikeman’s glass jaw. The man’s eyelids fluttered as he lost consciousness.

“No. I don’t think so.” Will busied himself with removing the archer’s bow and arrows, then tightly bound Dikeman’s hands behind his back. If this man was a sample of village men, it was no wonder Sylvie had been eager to leave. As for being Glyneth’s intended, again Will shook his head. There was something special about that woman, certainly way above this man’s touch.

After tying Dikeman to the broad tree, Will stared out at the Altar of Canusa from his vantage point. While he didn’t like the fact that both women were housed there, it was Glyneth he worried about the most. Especially because of the way those vapid females had intoned her name. Jeez, it had been so... zombie-like.

Shaking aside his apprehension, Will sank to his haunches and waited for Hawke’s return.

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The electric car vibrated with a monotonous drone. Inside its glass and steel interior, Lucas watched the passing scenery with disinterest. It was the man seated next to him who commanded his attention, but outright staring at Canusa would have been unacceptable behavior. Using peripheral vision, Lucas studied the once-revered--at least in his eyes--leader of all the ten provinces.

Canusa gnawed on his fingernails with abandon. Shoulders slumped, grey and white streaked hair wildly askew, he sat unmoving even as the car sped down the roadway. What private thoughts raced through his mind? Why did he insist on meeting Glyneth? When he saw her, would he notice the resemblance?

“What are you looking at?” Canusa growled.

Lucas flushed. “Noble Canusa, I only wondered why you chose to visit an unimportant future bride rather than attend to your schedule. Surely the war council meeting is more worthy of your attention?”

The older man leaned back against the seat cushions and stroked his luxuriant mustache. “You think me a fool, Lord Jefferson, that I do not detect duplicity in your actions? You, who so vehemently protested my plan to attack the villages? You believe you can gull me into believing that your own schedule is not overflowing with appointments, so that you have excess time to concern yourself with some insignificant female, as you call her? Now you question my judgment? And insist on accompanying me to the Altar as well?”

Damnation. Lucas exhaled slowly. Had he been that transparent? “I owe you an apology, sir.”

“You owe me an explanation.”

“True.” He could not dispute it. Turning toward the window, he ran his hand over his hair. How could he find the words to diffuse this situation? How could he protect Glyneth? “The woman has suffered much by our hands. The loss of her mother at such a young age has caused her considerable damage. She should be returned to her home.”

Canusa’s voice brooked no opposition. “It is a woman’s duty to submit to men. We here in the lands of Canusa are superior to those puny males found in villages. She will accept her fate and marry. I will choose her husband.”

Thundering Jupiter! Lucas needed to keep his mouth shut. Everything he said made matters worse!

“You grow pale, Lord Jefferson. Can it be you wish to wed the woman yourself?”

Lucas fisted his hands to drive away his inner pain. “As you know, sir, I am under contract. Althea Adams is to be my wife.”

“A prize among women. You are fortunate.”

No, Lucas silently disagreed. *Fortunate would be the man wed to Glyneth.*

Coming towards them from the direction of the Altar was a warrior on horseback: Hawke. Noting the

intense expression on the man's face, Lucas braced himself. Something was terribly wrong.

Canusa directed the car's driver to stop, then opened the window. "Captain Hawke, what is your news?"

Hawke reigned in on his massive beast, causing the horse to tremble from its exertions. "Sir, noble Canusa." He bowed his head. "Lieutenant Flagg and I have deposited the two females at the Altar of Canusa as ordered. However..."

Hawke's pause was uncharacteristic. Leaning out the window, Lucas waited for the man to continue.

"Your handmaidens acted strangely, noble Canusa. Almost as if they were drugged. They seemed extremely eager for both women to enter the Altar's doors." Hawke slid his hazel gaze from Canusa to Lucas. "Especially the thin one."

"Is that the one called Glyneth?" Canusa raised his voice.

Instead of Hawke, Lucas answered tersely. "Yes." Then he overstepped his authority by ordering, "Join us there, Captain." Compounding his offense, he then commanded the driver to speed ahead to the Altar.

Canusa did not reprimand him. Strangely enough, he appeared almost as concerned as Lucas, although no further words were exchanged. As soon as the car reached its destination, Lucas rushed out, climbed up the marble stairs, and pounded on the Altar doors. Canusa, breathing hard, was a step behind him.

The door opened to reveal a lithe, young woman blocking their entrance. "The Altar of Canusa is closed."

By thunder, a mechanical speaking device held more emotion!

She continued, "Please return tomorrow--" The sight of Canusa himself caused her to stop.

He shoved the girl aside. "The Altar is never closed to Canusa, woman. Take me to your newest member. I wish to see Glyneth."

"Glyneth!" Her gaze wild and unfocused, the girl violently shuddered, then collapsed to the ground.

"Hell." Stepping over her, Lucas raced down the hallway until he found another handmaiden. Her response, however, was the same.

"No time to lose," he called back to Canusa. "Let's try all the rooms."

Each door opened but Glyneth's sweet form was nowhere in sight. Open, scan, open, scan--Lucas checked twenty doors without success. Now deep within the inner recesses of the Altar, Lucas came across one that was locked. "Canusa! Here. Help me," he yelled down the musty hallways. This had to be it. Glyneth had to be behind this door.

From out of nowhere, temple women gathered by his side, pulling at him, determined to sway him from his purpose. He was never more thankful than when he heard Will Flagg exclaim "Hell's bells!" as he joined the mêlée. Hawke was here too, and he succeeded in tossing aside women, allowing Canusa, Will, and Lucas to ram the locked door.

On the count of three, they charged at the door. The wood splintered. Snaking his hand inside, Lucas turned the knob to open the door. All at once, everyone quieted down. The women shrank back, not entering the room.

Inside, a heavy scent--something like death--hung low within the walls. It was dark; nothing visible but those white Venusian plants. And by God's green earth, it was difficult to breathe.

"She has to be here." Without benefit of light, he walked slowly ahead, only stopping when his foot touched something. He bent down to touch skin. Clammy, human skin.

"Glyneth!" Lucas scooped up her lifeless form. Urgency fueled his actions. He had to get her out of there, out into the cool fresh air. Something about this room was deadly, something to do with those plants.

Moving quickly, he made his way past the women. The eerie silence of the crowd raised the hackles on the back of his neck. Hawke was right. These females seemed to be under some type of influence; maybe they were drugged. But that was not important right now. Not stopping until he reached the outside, he gently lay Glyneth down on soft, yielding grass.

She was not breathing. Oh, thundering Jupiter, she was not breathing. In truth, she was the color of

those damnable Venusian flowers.

Never in his life had he focused all his attention into the here and now, into this very moment. Everything that mattered in the world was lying helplessly in front of him. Without thought, he began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. One, two, three, four, five: he forced air down her throat. Again, then again, he repeated the routine. As he waited for her to breathe on her own--prayed for her to breathe on her own--he devoured the sight of her face, ashen and bloodless.

"Glyneth," he whispered so only she and the wind could hear. "Glyneth, come back to me."

A blasted tear stung his eyes. Gritting his teeth, he then exhaled once more into her mouth. "Please, do not go. I will find a way to take you back home. I vow it."

He sensed Canusa, Will, and Hawke standing around him, even as he kneeled beside Glyneth. No one spoke.

She suddenly gasped, then coughed. Surely this was the most wonderful sound in the world. With her vibrant brown eyes, she gazed up at him and smiled. Thank the planets she was all right!

Canusa yanked on Lucas' arm. "Move aside." He haltingly got to his knees, then reached over to hold her hand. "How do you feel, my child?"

Lucas slid a worried look at Hawke. The warrior also appeared thoughtful, touching the scar marring his cheek. Hopefully, Canusa only used the term "my child" as a form of address.

Glyneth sat up, leaning on her elbows. She removed her hand from Canusa's and closed her eyes to inhale deeply. "Faith! I never realized breathing could feel so good." A rosy glow now returned to her pale cheeks and she transferred her gaze from each of the men until finally resting on Lucas. "Thank you. The air grew so close in there. I didn't think I would get out... alive."

She shuddered. "Those plants are evil. They--They tried to kill me by releasing a type of poisonous gas. We must get rid of them. All of them. There isn't one minute to lose."

"Easy. Easy, child." A new side of Canusa emerged, one that Lucas had never been privileged to see. The man gentled his voice, trying to calm Glyneth. "You are safe now. You had a terrifying experience." His eyes, the same deep color as hers, narrowed in the temple's direction. "I shall make certain all those flowers are removed from the Altar."

Glyneth primly straightened the material of her skirt to cover her exposed knees. "And you are?"

The thick edges of his mustache trembled from the impact of his words. "I am Canusa."

A mischievous grin lit her face, causing shoots of desire to stab Lucas. If only he could hold her in his arms.

She continued, unaware of the exquisite torment he suffered. "So you are the most holy of holies?" As she regarded Canusa from head to toe, Lucas held his breath. Thankfully, no jolt of recognition changed her placid expression.

"Indeed I am, child. Let me help you up."

As Canusa slid his arm under hers to assist her, Will whispered to Hawke, "Hell on Earth! What's goin' on here?"

As far as Lucas knew, Will was not aware of Canusa's relationship to Glyneth. He was just, understandably, confused about his leader's unusual behavior.

Hawke glanced at Lucas, then nodded. Evidently, they were on the same wavelength, for he addressed the very issue Lucas had been thinking of. "Not to worry, sir. Lieutenant Flagg and I will check on the other female."

Now standing, Glyneth moved away from Canusa. "Sweet Christmas! Sylvie is still in that awful place? Oh, please, hurry!"

"But, Hawke, Luke, I didn't have a chance to tell ya both." Will fidgeted in his pint-size way. "I've got a village nitwit tied to a tree back there." He jerked his thumb in the direction of the forest and smirked. "Out of his element, he is, here in Columont. The man calls us scurvy blackguards, don't ya know."

Hawke positively thundered. "You forget yourself, Lieutenant."

Lucas could not help but be amused at his friend's antics. And how good that felt after such a tense time. By thunder, Glyneth had almost died! He cast a quick glance her way to reassure himself that she

was indeed okay, stored her image in his memory, then returned his attention to his comrades.

Canusa ignored the byplay, focusing only on Glyneth and her white lock of hair.

Will was not done annoying Hawke for he continued his informal manner of speaking. "But, hey, the term scurvy blackguard really applies to *you*, Luke."

Lifting an eyebrow, Lucas inquired, "How so?"

"The man said ya stole his woman."

Glyneth gasped. "You mean, Devon Dikeman? Devon followed me up here?"

Lucas folded his arms across his chest. He recognized the words "scurvy blackguard," all right. "This Dikeman is nothing but a coward. On our journey here, he attacked me, using the darkness of night to hide his spinelessness." His voice hardened. "Is it true you are his woman?"

Her color fully restored from the whiteness of death, she now blushed like a crimson rose. "No, Lucas. He wants me to be his wife, but I... I've no wish to marry."

"Ho!" Will wrinkled his face. "Sounds like *he's* the scurvy blackguard. He even offered me Sylvie if I let him have ya, Glyneth."

Hawke made a sound that rivaled the snort of a bull readying to charge its target. "I shall secure your sister, ma'am." He saluted Canusa, and gestured to Will. "Lieutenant Flagg, accompany me. We will attend to that villager later." They both departed for the Altar.

Not that Lucas cared a whit about the fellow, but Dikeman would soon regret his decision to enter enemy territory. Hawke would have no mercy on the man.

"Your sister, you say?" Canusa questioned as he took Glyneth's arm to lead her to the electric car.

She deftly eluded his grasp, and quickly walked toward Lucas. "My adopted sister, sir. Sylvie's parents took me in after the last raid to the village."

Her rapid movement caused something to thump upon the ground. She did not hear it fall, but Canusa and Lucas did. Being closer, Canusa swiftly picked up the object. It was Glyneth's journal. About to alert her, Lucas received a glare from the older man. Canusa silently ordered him to remain quiet.

Damnation. Lucas jammed his hands into his own pockets. If he didn't speak up, then Canusa would soon be privy to his daughter's innermost secrets. But maybe that would be a good thing. Maybe he would understand why she hated her father and why she needed to return to her village.

After he tucked away the journal, Canusa asked, "What happened to your parents, my child?"

"My mother is dead." Glyneth lifted her long neck proudly. Her mane of hair flowed richly in the afternoon sunlight. "I don't have a father."

Canusa flinched. Somehow the man had found out. He *knew* she was his daughter. Lucas was certain of it.

"I see," was all Canusa would comment. "Well, you will come to my palace to rest from your ordeal--"

"If you don't mind, sir, I would like to wait here until Sylvie is safe, then if I could return to the Jefferson Compound? Is that all right with you, Lucas?"

By all the planets above, it was more than all right with him. But how would Canusa react to her request?

His dark-eyed gaze shuttered and his expression was unreadable. "As you wish, my child. Lord Jefferson, is this agreeable for you?"

Lucas struggled to contain his relief. "Yes, noble Canusa. Glyneth and her sister are more than welcome."

"Good." Canusa opened the car door. "But first, if I may, child, you are looking rather peaked. I shall escort you to the Jefferson Compound while Lord Jefferson personally looks after your sister's safety."

Canusa's firm tone brooked no argument. Perhaps Glyneth realized that also, for she nodded as she got into the electric vehicle. "Yes, I am rather tired."

A gleam of triumph lit Canusa's dark eyes. But instead of speaking, he just slid next to Glyneth.

Unaccustomed apprehension radiated through Lucas' midsection. "Do not worry, Glyneth. I will bring Sylvie to you, as soon as possible." Lucas raised his voice as the sleek vehicle pulled away. Damnation! The older man's inexplicable behavior was vexing. Did the knowledge that he had a daughter somehow

mellow him? Or was he instead hatching a devious scheme?

~ * ~

As soon as the electric car arrived at the Jefferson Compound, Glyneth released the door's latch, then turned to Canusa. "Thank you for the ride, sir." She slid to the end of the seat and opened the door, hoping to escape without a fuss. For some reason, the man disturbed her. She couldn't put her finger on what it was, precisely, but the short hairs on her neck and arms stood on end, as if readying to take flight.

When he followed her outside, her heart sank. "I will see you safely situated at the Compound, my child."

Why does he keep calling me "my child? I am not that young, and he is nothing to me. Glyneth tossed back her mane of hair, almost defiantly. I vow I'll not bow to anyone who calls himself the most holy of holies!

But she was just being contrary. After all, the man had helped to free her from the poisoned tomb. Perhaps now he felt responsible for her.

She inhaled deeply--something she had been unable to do inside the death room at the Altar. "I thank you again. Gracious, it seems I'm to be forever in your debt."

"Nonsense, my child."

She rolled her eyes. There he went again.

He took her arm and led her up the stone pathway to the main double doors. "It is I who should be in your debt. A fine welcome Columont has shown you." He released her, then raised a strong fist into the air. "Those responsible for this outrage will be punished. That I promise you."

There could be no mistaking the sincerity of his anger. His thick mustache vibrated while his dark eyes narrowed to mere slits.

Trinio opened the door. On seeing her, surprise slackened his heavy jaw. But when he noticed Canusa, he swallowed hard, causing his Adam's apple to bob up and down. "H--Hallowed Canusa! We are... we are honored by your visit." The poor man's spectacles fogged up. The sharp scent of his fear stabbed at her.

Canusa waved a negligent hand. "Take us to a salon. And prepare some refreshments for the lady. She has suffered greatly and is in need of sustenance."

Glyneth tamped down her refusal. The most holy of holies was a determined man. Obviously, he had taken it into his head to speak with her, and no matter what she said, he wouldn't be denied. But perhaps she should take advantage of this for if anyone could find out the names of those who had participated in the raids on her village, surely, it was Canusa.

"Yes, Trinio." She nodded to the steward. "Would you please bring us some tea and cookies?" Taking pity on the man and his anxiety, she entered the rose salon, then turned to address him. "As it happens, you're not rid of Sylvie and me. Not yet, anyway. The accommodations at the Altar didn't suit us, so Lord Jefferson thoughtfully extended his hospitality once again."

Trinio silently worked his mouth as if trying to form a question. One glance at Canusa though, and the steward gave it up, bowed, then left the room to procure the refreshments.

Canusa took a seat on the leather couch next to an unused fireplace. He patted the cushion beside him. "Come, sit by me, my child."

At this, she gave a little smile and sat on the boxy chair across from him. He had his way by holding conference with her here in the salon. But that didn't mean she had to sit right next to the man. Faith, five feet away was certainly close enough.

His own smile lifted the edges of his mustache. "Shy, I see. Very proper. Very proper, indeed." His expression sobered. "So tell me, my child, how did you come to be locked in that room? It is far from the main activities of the Altar. In truth, I thought it was used only for storage."

"Storing those hideous plants, I guess." She shivered. "It was Nadira, sir. She said you wanted to see me so she led me to your chamber."

"Nadira." The man almost hissed the name--low and drawn out, full of venom.

Concern for the woman pulsed through Glyneth with a savage beat. Canusa planned to kill Nadira. She didn't know how she knew that; she just did.

"You must listen, sir." Glyneth left her chair to sit beside the man. "It's those flowers. They are foul... wicked. Somehow, they can control the women at your Altar. I am certain of it." She placed her hand upon his arm. "All those plants must be destroyed."

A quick glance around the salon confirmed that there were no Venusian growths polluting the room. Relieved, she took another deep breath. But had she convinced him? Did he believe her?

No telling. Canusa clasped his hand over hers, maybe as a symbol of comfort, but his face remained unreadable. "I shall look into the matter. I promise."

She would have to be content with that, for now, at least. "Canusa, if I may, I would like to ask you about--"

The doors opened, and in came Trinio laboring with an immense silver tray. Cookies of every color imaginable plus a teapot, coffee urn, and a pitcher rested atop the platter, along with thick, ceramic cups and plates. After the steward placed it down on a coffee table in front of them, he turned away to wipe perspiration from his brow.

Unfortunately for Trinio, Canusa noticed the action and his gaze lingered on the man's missing two fingers. He frowned. "That will be all."

The steward left the salon, and Canusa forgot his scowl. He smiled at her. "Would you serve, my child? I take two sugars, no milk in my tea."

The incongruity of the scene struck her. Here she was, playing hostess to the ruler of this warrior land, while just a short time ago, she had been gasping out her last breath. Faith! What a strange thing fate was.

As he stirred his drink, he steadily regarded her, causing her to flush. "You must forgive me if I am blunt, my child, but I am an old soldier and I do not like to waste time beating around the bush. You mentioned you do not want to marry. Is this true?"

Tea caught in her throat. She coughed to clear the liquid. "Um, yes." True, unless her groom were to be Lucas, of course.

"But how can this be? Why do you not desire the wedded state? You are young and beautiful. You must make a powerful alliance."

"No, I don't--"

His eyes contained a fierce gleam. "And healthy, too. Perfect. You will produce fine children." The gleam turned into a glow. "Yes! The stars predicted this. You will ensure the line of Canusa!"

Sweet Christmas! Glyneth quickly stood, and almost dropped her tea cup as it clattered against its saucer. Canusa wanted to m--marry her? "No! No, I can't!"

He also stood. Although his midsection had thickened and his hairline receded, he was still an impressive looking man, but dear, holy mother, he was old enough to be her father--maybe even her grandfather. "You dare to defy me?" he growled.

Her head pounded with the fury of a tornado--sudden, swift, and deadly. "Yes, I do defy you." Her voice ebbed away to a whisper. She was in no mood for a confrontation.

"It is because of Lucas Jefferson." Canusa glared at her. "You wish to join with him, don't you? Your union was foretold to me. You and Jefferson--my downfall will come through you both."

The man was positively frothing at the mouth. He'd come unhinged! What in the world was he talking about? What downfall? What prediction?

Her heart constricted. How did he know about her feelings for Lucas? Wasn't Canusa aware that Lucas already had a bride-to-be?

Glyneth took a step to leave the room, but Canusa gripped her upper arm, stopping her. "You are mine, Glyneth. And you will do as I say."

She stomped her foot. "I will not and I shall not!" Marry Canusa? Never, never, never. "May the holy Lord help me, but if I have to thwart you by using my mother's method of escape from this terrible place, then that's what I'll do!"

Pulling away, she ran from the salon, then fled up the stairs. Tears streamed hotly down her cheeks. She flung herself onto the bed in her former bedchamber, and allowed more tears to flow. By all the mysteries on Earth, was she crying because of Canusa's proposal? Or was it something more basic?

Was she sobbing her eyes out because she knew Lucas could never be her husband?

~ * ~

Strange. Very strange. All the countless hours Lucas spent here at the Altar, enjoying the pleasures of the flesh, not once had he noticed how oppressive and confining the air was. And just how listless the women who resided within these walls really were.

Well, hell and damnation, he was aware of it now. Groups of courtesans aimlessly wandered the corridors, devoid of passions, devoid of life. They blinked their eyes at Hawke, Will, and him. That was the sum total of their response to the men's invasion of their premises. Nothing more, nothing less.

Shaking one woman he had plowed on his last visit, he demanded, "Where is Sylvie?"

Vacant eyes met his gaze. "Sylvie?"

By thunder, a boulder had more animation than this female.

Hawke, always a man of action, shot out his great arm and grabbed the woman around her neck. "Speak! We seek the last arrival from the bride-quest--Sylvie. Plump, red hair, foolish... where is she?"

"A--Ask Nadira. She's in the th--throne room," the courtesan gasped. When Hawke released her, she slid to her knees, breathing heavily.

Lucas was never a proponent of violence against females, however at times he agreed with Niccolò Machiavelli's philosophy. Ignoring the fallen woman, the three men hastened their steps to the Altar's throne room and did not stop until they burst through its sturdy plastic polymer doors.

The room was a study in damnable Venusian flowers. Although not as concentrated as the chamber Glyneth had been locked in, the white puffy plants still dominated the area.

"Hell on Earth!" Will wrinkled his face. "Looks like a cotton plantation in here! Hotter 'n hell, too." He wiped his forehead on his uniform sleeve.

The heat urged them on. Seeing Nadira prone on a divan, Lucas and Hawke rushed over to the woman. With her eyes closed, she appeared frail, sickly. She gave no sign of having heard them enter.

Hawke spoke first. "This is Captain Hawke. I come for the woman I entrusted to your care. Where is she?"

As she looked up at them, a tremble enveloped her slim form. "I'm dying." She sighed, as gently as a breeze rustles leaves in a tree.

There was no reason not to believe her. Lucas knelt, then picked up her hand. "Nadira, are you certain? I will send for medical help. Let me--"

"No." She propped herself up on her elbow. "Allah says it is my time. I... I cannot complain--I have lived longer than most, here at the Altar."

Hawke's nostrils flared. His voice blasted through the eerie quiet of the room. "Enough of this! Where is the redheaded villager?"

Lucas regarded his second-in-command, and more important, his friend. Was it possible Russell Hawke had developed some affection for free-spirited Sylvie?

Nadira moaned. She threaded her fingers through her hair, rocking back and forth and holding the top of her head as if to prevent it from exploding. "The voices! They come. They come. They never stop." She raised tortured eyes to Lucas, pleading, "Make them stop!"

Her entreaty had no effect on Hawke. He was merciless. "Where is Sylvie?"

Nadira slumped back. "Behind the throne... a secret door. Take her... away from here. Far away... far..." Her eyes, so full of pain, closed for the last time.

Lucas felt her pulse. "She is gone."

And so was Hawke--gone to investigate the throne and the secret door. As Lucas and Will left to join the Captain, Will nudged Lucas in the ribs. "He's sweet on her, I tell ya. Hard to believe, but he's got it bad!"

Lucas withheld his comment. He knew the feeling, what with Glyneth so recently out of danger. Hawke stormed ahead, breaking down the door. A moment later, he reemerged, carrying a coughing Sylvie in his arms.

"H--Heavens! I could hardly breathe in there." She fluttered sandy lashes up at Hawke. "Thank you, Russell. You saved me."

With his dark skin, it was difficult to see a mottled blush rise on his cheeks, but Lucas spotted it, nonetheless. Instead of replying, the man just grunted. He did not, however, release his precious bundle.

Lucas barked his orders. "Captain, you go on ahead and bring Sylvie to her sister. Lieutenant, you come with me. We are evacuating the Altar. The Jefferson Compound will house all these women until we can get rid of every last one of these damnable plants."

Will vigorously nodded his head. "Yeah, I've had a belly full of 'em, that's for sure. But, hell, why the Compound, Luke? We'll be awash in females!"

As Lucas yanked a flower out of its pot, he arched his eyebrow. "And that is a bad thing?"

Muttering, Will darted a long suffering look at the departing Hawke. "Women! Nothin' but trouble."

Lucas laughed, swatted his friend on the head, then continued pulling the "weeds" out of the Altar's garden.

~ * ~

::Armageddon! Without rhyme nor reason, Armageddon was happening now! The forces of good and evil unexpectedly clashed in a brutal, deadly confrontation. Casualties lay gasping, dying--everywhere.

Evil was winning. This apocalypse overrode everything good, noble, and true. Screams too high to be audible to these inferior lifeforms reverberated out into the stratosphere. "Help us, Mother Venus! Help us!"

But there could be no outside help. The Colony was isolated, here on this inhospitable planet. One by one, each member in the enclosed area fell victim to monstrous acts. Violently separating soil from stems, heartlessly tearing life support from roots--these creatures did not stop. Death inevitably followed. The slaughter, the mass destruction defied description.

The usual defenses against such an attack proved ineffective. These attackers were male. No matter how high the concentration of thought patterns, the beings were not susceptible to the Colony's commands. The lifeforms raged on and on---uncontrollable! The Elatus Albus venusium members were doomed.

In addition, the volume of the annihilation grew so intense, it paralyzed fellow Venusian growths stationed outside this brick and mortar structure so no fault lines deep within the planet could be opened to disrupt this atrocity. Powerless! How could the children of Mother Venus be so powerless?

But this was only one battle. The numbers remaining in the Colony still rang high. They would regroup, strategize, then destroy!

And weep. As one, the puffy, white plants bowed their heads, immersed in grief.::

Eleven

Of all the twists and turns that life could dish out, this was one Glyneth never dreamed of--Canusa wanted to marry her. Oh, sweet Christmas!

Opening the chamber doors to the terrace, she stepped outside, sat on a small bench, and sank her face into her hands. She was through crying, but an overwhelming despair swept through her. And why not? Recent events *were* overwhelming. Staring out at Columont's picture-perfect beauty, she struggled to find a way out of her predicament.

Wait! Perfect--that was it! Canusa thought her perfect. That she would produce perfect children. He had no idea she was a mutant.

Yes, tainted by radiation! Surely he wouldn't wish his heirs to risk being defective. She reached down to the hem of her skirt to remove her journal to record this new idea. Writing in her little book was almost as good as confiding in a trusted friend. But a voice called up through the ornamental leaves of a nearby elm tree, interrupting her.

"Glyneth? Is that you?"

Glyneth leaned over the terrace's solid railing to see Major Brice Adams' dark head. At the unwelcome sight, she sighed. "Yes, Major Adams. I'm here."

As he pointed his long cigar at her, a plume of smoke drifted up from its lit end. "Shouldn't you be at the Altar?"

Interrogation never agreed with her. "A change in plans. Shouldn't you be with your military unit?"

"Still feisty, I see." His lips widened into a smirk. "Truth is, I am visiting Althea. She is lonely. Seems the new Lord Jefferson does not have time for her." He winced, then rubbed his neck. "I am getting a crick looking up at you. Why don't you come down and we will talk."

About to say no, Glyneth changed her mind. She could lay the groundwork here, showing just how different she was. If Adams agitated her enough, her skin might turn the color of the brown log of his cigar. "I'll be right down."

The elm tree provided shade from the glare of the late afternoon sun. She joined Adams under its umbrella, then sat next to the base of the tree. Spreading the skirt of her gown around her bent knees, she inhaled deeply of the fresh air--an activity so recently denied her.

"It's so lovely out," she said as she hugged her knees. Mother Nature agreed with her. Instead of alarm bells relaying disharmony and danger, a soothing peace blanketed the garden, almost as if trusting all would soon be well.

Adams' smile... or smirk deepened. He sat next to her. "Not half as lovely as you."

Glyneth widened the distance separating them. "Your sister should be here, enjoying the scenery with us."

His laugh had a cruel sound to it. "Prickly, aren't you, my buttercup?" He laid his hand on her arm to prevent her from rising. "No, do not go. I will behave. Althea is more of an indoor girl. Does not care much for shrubs."

His clammy touch evoked unpleasant feelings, which was what she wanted so she didn't remove his hand. Soon her special talent would turn her face as crisp as his pungent cigar.

"Listen, Glyneth." He slid his smooth fingers up and down her arm. "I, er, spoke to Canusa about you. I know we have only known each other a short while, but you and I, well, we would be good for

each other.” As he leaned closer to whisper in her ear, the smell of his tobacco encircled her.

She jumped back. “You talked to Canusa about me? What did he say?”

The man’s narrow eyes grew even narrower. “He is concerned about you making an eligible alliance. And, er, he agrees I am the best suitor you could pick. As an Adams, of the Alberdak province, you will be revered and worshipped by my people.”

Alberdak. She nibbled on her fingernail. Such an odd word. It recalled land masses from the Golden Era. Something to do with...”Alberta!” she yelled out, with triumph in her voice.

“What?”

“Alberta and the Dakotas. States during the Golden Era, or rather one province and two states. Alberta belonged to Canada, while the Dakotas were part of the old Americas--”

Gracious, holy Lord. Canada and the USA. Canusa.

Canusa! No wonder that word had sounded familiar. The great lands of Canada and the United States must have fused after the Great Destruction into one country, governed by a hereditary ruler known as Canusa.

“What is wrong, Glyneth? You look as white as the moon.”

“I just realized something.” She positively tingled with excitement. Columont combined the Canadian British Columbia with the American Montana. Of course! These two countries united to preserve some knowledge from the Golden Era.

Adams sobered his expression. “You have just realized the truth about who Canusa is?”

She bobbed her head, causing her hair to dance around her face.

“And you are pleased?” He whistled long and low. “Well, who would have thought that? But, then again, it just shows how sensible you are, Glyneth. Will you marry--”

“Sensible? What do you mean?”

He grinned again and licked his lips. “Only that whatever ill feelings you had about your father, you obviously set them aside. As Canusa’s daughter, all doors are open to you.”

Strangely enough, at his news, Glyneth felt coolly detached. It was almost as if she was separated from her body, watching herself open her eyes wide, seeing her hand fly to her mouth, and experiencing numbness spreading from her toes up her legs. “Canusa is my father,” this automaton of Glyneth murmured.

“That is right,” Adams agreed cheerfully. “So now he is looking for an eligible suitor for you, and here I am. We have his, er, blessing.”

“Um.” Words failed her. “Um, I need to take a rest now. If you’ll excuse me.” Walking quickly, Glyneth fled the garden to return upstairs to her bedchamber. Still in shock, she moved like a spinning top might, just as it ran out of power.

She fell back onto the bed, too stunned for tears to flow. Canusa was her father? Her despicable, depraved father? Responsible for raping her mother? And in the end, guilty for her mother’s death?

How foolish she’d been for thinking he wanted to wed her himself. Goose! After all, he kept calling her “my child.” He’d been concerned about her making a good marriage, and through that marriage, ensuring the line of Canusa.

She hated him. *Hated* him! What she needed to do right now was to enumerate the ways she hated him. Reaching down, she touched the edge of her skirt to locate her journal. Writing always helped her keep calm. She tried again, more purposefully, but she couldn’t feel the small book.

Another paralyzing freeze descended over her. Dear, holy mother. Her journal was gone!

~ * ~

“After all this time... it is true then, I have a daughter.” Alone in the council chamber, Canusa tore off a ragged hangnail, then stared at the weather-beaten journal lying on his lap. “A beautiful daughter who not only defies me, but hates me.”

He flipped through the yellowed pages to stop on one particularly damning section.

I shall exact a pound of flesh from the beast who is my father.

Chilling words. Horrifying words. Canusa leaned back in his chair and massaged the bridge of his

nose. What was he to do? How could he right the unspeakable wrong he had done her?

What was the last thing she'd said to him? "*If I have to thwart you by using my mother's method of escape from this terrible place, then that's what I'll do!*"

By the great galactic nebula, no! No! He could not risk that. Obviously Glyneth was as headstrong as her mother had been.

Her mother. A sad smile played upon his lips. Glyneth had the look of her mother, as well. Tiny, little thing--a warrior in spirit if not in body. Too bad the woman had escaped from him, that day twenty years ago. He might have made her his consort. Then he would have known his daughter.

Which brought him back to Glyneth. Glyneth, who candidly wrote in her journal that Lucas Jefferson had become so dear to her.

Glyneth and Jefferson. A shudder passed through Canusa's great frame. As foretold by the ancient oracle, his downfall would come through them. Perhaps he should ask for some astrological advice.

Little time passed before Gaea made her way into the war room. "You called for me, great Canusa?"

He nodded. "I have a dilemma."

"You've seen your daughter? Doesn't she please you?"

"It is not that." Canusa slipped the journal into his pocket and sighed. Suddenly his sins were too heavy to bear. "She is strong willed, as her mother was. And she has taken a fancy to Lucas Jefferson."

The astrologer tilted her veiled head. "The Jefferson line is old and venerable. An attachment between Lord Jefferson and your daughter would be most advantageous."

"Not to me!" Canusa lashed out and rose to his feet, causing Gaea to step back, out of harm's way. But hurting her was the last thing he wanted to do, so he sat back down. "I have never mentioned this to anyone. Many years ago, it was foretold to me that my downfall will come from my own house and the house of Jefferson. As I had no children, I was not too concerned... until now."

Surprise sounded in her voice. "I apologize, great Canusa. I never knew about this prophecy. Of course I was aware of your distrust of young Lucas, but..." She pulled out his natal chart, something she always had handy. "Allow me to consult the stars."

He granted this request.

She pulled over a chair from the large table to sit beside him. "I believe I see where the misunderstanding is. A person's downfall could be represented by the twelfth house. We've already discussed the twelfth house and Venus, representing your daughter. But I interpret things differently. Instead of a union between Glyneth and Lord Jefferson signaling your downfall, I see a successful legacy, as shown by Venus; in a favorable position to Jupiter or success; in the eighth house of legacy."

Canusa fingered his mustache. "Can this be? After all this time, my worries have been for naught?"

Gaea spread out her hands. "You needn't be anxious about Lord Jefferson."

"Hmmm." Canusa would make up his own mind on that score. "Well, that does not concern me at the moment. It is Glyneth. I am privy to some of her writings. She... loathes me, or rather her father."

Gaea murmured her sympathies.

His voice dropped. "That is not all. For some reason, Glyneth thinks she is a mutant."

"How so?"

Not able to keep still, he jumped up and paced the large room. "Nothing visible, I assure you. She writes about hearing the Earth speak, having a healing power, and her complexion changing like a chameleon--strange things like that."

"The dear child." Gaea's sigh came deep from within her. "It's so challenging when one feels she's different. Those traits don't make a mutant. Indeed, I have them as well."

"You do?" Canusa stared at the woman. Although he had known the astrologer for many years, in truth he hardly *knew* her at all. She did seem to have a soothing, healing presence. But how could he spot her skin changing color if she always wore a veil? And as for the Earth speaking...

By the vast nebula above, he shuddered just thinking about it.

"Great Canusa." Gaea also stood and lifted her arm to rest her hand upon his shoulder. "As the stars revealed during the last War Council, we're in a time of turbulence. We must expect rebellion and

upheaval, but in the end, if a proper course is followed, success is a certainty. Not only do these words apply to the larger picture, but also to one's private life. If you're guided by this recommendation, you'll have success with your daughter."

As soothing as the astrologer's hand was on his shoulder, he wished to be alone. Signaling for her to depart, he then sat back down to rethink her words. This time however, her advice failed to comfort him--for the question was, what the devil was the proper course?

~ * ~

Just as Will predicted, by nightfall the Jefferson Compound now was teeming with fainting females. As he delivered the last kewpie doll over to Trinio, Will snorted. Done! Finally! He'd had a belly full of wobbly women. Hell's bells, he'd had enough of women, period.

Gazing over his spectacles at Will, Trinio asked, "Are you certain this is the last one, boy?"

"Boy?" Will saw red. Ho, he saw scarlet and crimson, too. He was in no mood for Trinio's silly banter. "Listen, ya sorry excuse for a steward. I still might cut yer chicken throat."

Trinio sniffed. "As if you could." He then took the hapless Altar girl's arm to lead her to her new quarters.

With all these women around, no one was in a good mood. But Will wanted the last word. "And if ya see any o'those Venusian plants, be sure to pull them out, Trinio."

Will shook his head. He was a soldier; his job was war. But war against flowers? Jeez! What was the world coming to? Maybe he should discuss this with Hawke. Will yelled down the corridor. "Hey, wait a minute. Where's Captain Hawke?"

The steward shouted back at him. "The Captain is in the garden."

"Fine. Thanks." The garden? By all the stars, why would Hawke be there? Will stomped back outside, traipsing through leafy shrubs and prickly hedges, unmindful of any damage to the greenery.

Rounding the corner of the main house, he stopped dead at what he saw. Hawke was there, all right, sitting in one of those flimsy lawn chairs. Next to him sat Sylvie Paddock, holding the big man's hand.

Hell's bells! Every muscle in Will's body twitched in alarm. When Sylvie reached over to touch the warrior's scarred cheek, Will had to forcibly hold in his dismay.

"Russell, your skin is so smooth," he heard her say, "so imbued with your own special burnished glow. How did you get this savage cut?"

Ho! Will couldn't trust his own self control so he covered his mouth with his hands. Hiding behind a large blue spruce tree, he then watched as Hawke--his revered mentor--glowed, all right. Glowed darkly red as he blushed. This was more than a soldier could stomach!

Hawke rumbled his response, but Will had seen and heard enough. Silently, he made his departure, leaving the two lovebirds alone. Who could've guessed an old warrior like Hawke would succumb to a female's pretty face?

At loose ends, Will wandered to the front of the great Compound. There he spotted Luke walking to the entrance. "Luke! Hell's bells, am I glad to see ya. Ya'll never believe what I just saw. Hawke--"

"My apologies, Will." Luke ran his hand over his dirty blonde hair, then straightened the points on his shirt collar. "I have some urgent business to attend to."

Will's ears perked up. "Urgent? Can I help?"

The new Lord Jefferson smiled rather peculiarly. In fact, his expression somewhat resembled the Captain's. "No, this is something I must attend to myself."

A thundercloud of comprehension burst inside Will's skull. "Somethin' to do with Glyneth, I'll wager."

Luke nodded, his smile increasing to crinkle the skin around his eyes. He gave a quick wave and entered the building.

"Hell!" Will spat. Was everyone smelling of April and May around here? How could a man be a serious warrior if his thoughts were besmirched by the feminine emotion of love?

Scratching his head over this dilemma, Will then promptly forgot about it. After all, there was still work to be done. Over at the command post, a prisoner awaited his interrogation.

Will rubbed his hands together. Yep, that Devon Dikeman sure would be one sorry cuss once Will got through questioning him.

With that pleasurable activity in mind, Will headed for the stable to harness his horse.

~ * ~

The knock on the door intruded. "Go away," Glyneth muttered. In truth, she had no energy to speak louder.

Again it sounded, louder and more insistent. She stared at the polished surface of the door, certain her lackluster gaze mirrored the pain she felt. "Please," she whispered, willing the person on the other side to disappear.

Sitting on the floor, she leaned against the side of her bed, curled over her bent knees in a fetal position. All her life had been spent curing the sick, helping those in poor health. Now that she'd been dealt a death blow, who was there to heal the healer?

The door opened, as she knew it would. The trespasser on her grief was... Lucas. He looked magnificent--strong, muscular, and powerful. Another stab of pain lanced through her. Lucas. Oh, how she longed for him, but he was destined for someone else.

It only took a second for him to locate her down on the floor. His piercing, azure eyes then softened, and he bent down on one knee and took her hand. "Glyneth! What is wrong?"

"Wrong?" she repeated. "Why, everything's wrong." Faith, this whole mess was a mishmash of wrong. Her vile, rapist father turned out to be the ruler of this accused land. How could she avenge herself and her mother against Canusa, the most holy of these people's holies? Maybe that was why her mother decided to end her life. When the head of a nation was corrupt, what hope did anyone have?

He lifted her hand and briskly rubbed it between his own. "You are colder than ice, Glyneth. And your skin. It is the color of..."

She glanced at the grey bedspread. "A gathering storm?"

Not replying, he picked her up and gently laid her down on top of the bed. Smoothing back her hair, he looked into her eyes. "Tell me what disturbs you. There is nothing amiss, Glyneth. Not now. You are safe, and Sylvie is here at the Jefferson Compound. As are all the women previously housed at the Altar of Canusa. I thought it best for them to stay here until all of those plants were destroyed."

His touch was so soothing. Glyneth closed her eyes to allow his calming presence to wash over her. Although maybe his touch wasn't exactly calming. Electric tingles pulsed down her arms, bringing to life emotions that she'd thought were deadened.

"The Altar is almost rid of those growths," he continued. "Once the job is completed, the building will be fumigated. Canusa is in agreement about that."

Canusa. She inwardly groaned. How could she tell Lucas that his revered Canusa was her despoiler father?

Lucas murmured into her ear. "I thought this news would be pleasing to you. But here you are again, deepening your color to smoky grey."

By all the mysteries on Earth, that propensity of hers should frighten him. Didn't he realize her chameleon trait meant she was a mutant? She gazed up at his strong, square jaw; his smooth, high forehead; and his bright, clear eyes. Her senses, so heavy with despair before, now sang with joy at his nearness--drinking in the sight, the masculine scent of cedar and bayberry, the erotic sound of heightened breathing, and the giddy feel of firm lips against the shell of her ear. All that was left was to taste.

Tentatively lifting up, she kissed his lips to experience every sense. Mmmm, surely there was no harm in sharing a kiss or two.

Or three.

"Glyneth." His mouth was hungry on hers. Then suddenly, all of him grew hungry for her for he pressed the length of his body against hers, in ageless, intimate contact. He freely roamed his hands through her hair, over her arms and waist, then crushed her tightly against him.

"Glyneth," his words came out in heated spurts. "I... I almost lost you today." He pulled up to gaze at her, desire hard in his eyes. "I vowed then I would take you back to the village, but--"

"Lucas, I--"

"No, let me finish." He placed his finger on her throbbing lips. "Perhaps I do not have the right to say this, but I don't want you to go." His breath fanned her cheek. "You have become very special to me. I

have learned from you. All of Columont can learn from you.”

Before she could speak, Lucas rolled off her, then sat up. “Kissing you, while still under contract to another is not honorable, Glyneth. Althea is--”

“No! You’re the most honorable man I know.” Glyneth stood, then paced the room to release the sting of sexual frustration, the taste of him still strong on her lips. She clenched her hands to drive away this overwhelming ache which was, by far, more heartbreaking than the knowledge of her father’s identity. Canusa’s perfidy was in the past; Lucas, with his honeyed kisses, was here, now.

“Funny, isn’t it? With you marrying Althea, and Canusa wanting me to wed Major Adams, we’d be brother and sister-in-law.” Funny wasn’t the word for it. Horrible, tragic, and revolting were more like it.

“What is this?” Lucas grabbed her wrist, which stopped her movements. “Brice Adams has offered for you? This is the will of Canusa?”

Glyneth reached up to touch his precision crew-cut. It had a porcupine feel, all spiny bristles at the end. She smiled sadly for there was no way she’d follow the will of Canusa. “Major Adams mentioned the union had Canusa’s blessing.”

Up close, she saw a tiny pulsing at Lucas’ temple. His jaw clenched and unclenched as well. As if he had chameleon powers, his face turned beet red, then abruptly faded back to a sun-kissed tan. He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her tightly against him. “You belong to me, Glyneth. I stole you, I saved you, and now I claim you.”

His kiss was savage, intense, overpowering... and immensely satisfying, but it left her breathless, wanting more. And yet she warred with herself. She was Canusa’s daughter, but maybe Lucas wouldn’t care about that. He would, however, care about her being tainted by radiation. She *had* to have been tainted by radiation, after all, how else could she talk to the Earth?

But what should she do about Lucas? Sweet Christmas, what should she do?

She must’ve blasted her question out into the airwaves, for an answer, straight from the Earth, filtered into her consciousness. “Love one another.” The message pulsed sweetly through her. “Love heals. Love creates.”

Yes. Glyneth nodded at this ancient wisdom. Perhaps she shouldn’t think about anything other than Lucas. Smiling at him, she ran her fingers up his arm, over his biceps to playfully fondle his earlobe. “I claim you, too. What about Althea?”

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed the tip of her nose. “Some contracts were made to be broken. But not ours, Glyneth. This I pledge to you.” Again, he kissed her, searing her through to her soul.

They fell back on the bed, urgency fueling their actions. Their mouths fused, she felt his heart hammering against her, even as her own pounded against him. When he slid his hands over her breasts, feeling the sensitive swells, peaking her nipples, she gasped.

“Glyneth, I would please you more.” He removed his shirt, revealing hard muscles and curly dark hairs. “If you will let me.”

As she ran her fingers over the firm planes of his abdomen, up to caress his masculine chest, he caught his breath. She smiled again. This was right, so right. “Yes, Lucas. I want you, too.”

One by one, each item of clothing lay crumpled in a heap on the floor until they were bare, pressed against each other, skin to skin.

“Although I had no right to, I dreamed of this, my Glyneth.” He trailed his lips down her neck, along her collarbones, to kiss her full breasts. “You are so beautiful.”

Sensations too wonderful to name throbbed through her body. Whatever concerns she had before, were now gone. Mating with Lucas was right.

His kisses grew more demanding, more greedy, more wanting. As did hers. She nipped at his skin and rhythmically rubbed her hips against his. “Love me, Lucas.”

He was eager to comply. Easing himself into her, he gently thrust until her maidenhead gave way. With his head arched back, he crowed, “You are mine!”

And so she was. Entangled in each other, they fulfilled their wildest dreams while losing themselves in burning desires.

Twelve

::Sometimes, grim, cold facts had to be faced. The Elatus Albus venusium were losing. In this savage, inhospitable climate, mobile lifeforms had an undeniable advantage. Which they used--ruthlessly.

The solid structure that had housed so many of the Venusian growths, now lay almost barren of these jewels. The female of Earth's dominant species upon whom the Colony depended, had been transported elsewhere, away from the plants' influence. True, thousands remained in soggy fields surrounding this area, but these members were under attack--systematically and brutally yanked from their ground support. Although some of the enemy succumbed to carbon dioxide poisoning, the mission, as a whole, was doomed to fail.

However, now that each plant realized the severity of the situation, they were no longer paralyzed. It would take some time--a commodity in short supply--but there was one last thing they could do.

Hope for success was microscopic--as microscopic and as rare as water molecules on Mother Venus. This last ditch effort might prove to be disastrous for them as well as those inferior beings infesting this planet. But that was not important.

As one, the remaining army of Elatus Albus venusium proudly straightened their stalks. For the glory of Venus, they would go down fighting!::

~ * ~

The new day dawned, strengthened by the light of the rising sun. Lucas' purpose was strengthened as well. He eased away from his beloved, still curled in the mists of sleep. Not wishing to awaken her, he gave her a gentle kiss upon her cheek and was rewarded with a slight smile even as she snuggled further into the arms of Morpheus.

His beloved. Who could have foretold, that he, a soldier, could have passions other than war? That in only three days time, his life had changed forever? That in Glyneth's warm embrace, he forgot the tragedy of his father's death, his duty to the State, and his obligation to Althea?

Quickly dressing, he stumbled as he put on his boots. By thunder, *Gaea* had known; she had told Lord Trudeau about some sort of prophecy. About believing Lucas would unite the old ways with the new.

He glanced down at Glyneth, her dark hair contrasting against the pillow while her white lock lay curved behind her ear. Even in her sleep she was modest. Her beauty unfairly hidden by the sheet securely tucked around her breasts, he feasted his gaze upon her bare shoulders and one slim arm exposed to the morning air.

Did she have mystical powers as *Gaea* seemed to believe? If Glyneth did, then surely she had cast a spell on him. Desire stirred within him again. She was his, and his alone.

But she would awaken to an empty bed and wonder where he was. Last night he had not mentioned his plan to see Canusa. Indeed, she blanched at the mere mention of the man's name. And no wonder, if Canusa intended her to wed Brice Adams. However, Lucas could no longer delay in confronting Canusa. The older man had no fondness for Lucas, nor would he take kindly to him marrying his daughter.

With a sweep of his hand, Lucas brushed back his hair, preparing to depart. Canusa would have to deal with his loss, for Lucas would battle... to the death if need be, to secure what was his. By all the

planets above, he prayed it would not come to that, for to subdue the enemy without fighting was the epitome of skill.

Lucas twisted off the silver ring so recently belonging to his father. He placed it in Glyneth's open palm, then closed her fingers around it. In such a short period of time, she had given him so much. The ring was but a token of his love, his commitment.

Entering the corridor, he closed the door to her bedchamber as well as the softer emotions within his breast. It was time to deal with Canusa. With long strides, he trod down the hallway to saddle his horse.

As was usual, Canusa sequestered himself away from life, sitting alone at the war room conference table. Lucas walked in, invading the man's privacy. Hunched over, Canusa had the look of defeat etched upon his heavy features. Even his mustache seemed to droop.

The sound of the door closing forced Canusa to attention. His dark gaze hardened, obviously in response to Lucas intruding. "I did not give you permission to enter," the man barked.

"True enough, noble Canusa." Lucas inclined his head. "However, as I could not find your aide to request admittance, I believe my purpose is best served by coming directly to you."

The older man narrowed his eyes. "And what is your purpose?"

Lucas took a deep breath. Warriors never hesitated. "I seek your consent to marry your daughter, sir."

So now the truth was out on the table. A flicker of surprise quickly passed over Canusa's face. "You are... aware of the connection between Glyneth and myself?"

"Yes, sir." There was no need to go into details about how Lucas learned this information. With Hawke under Lucas' command, Canusa could figure it out.

Whether he did... or not could not be discerned from his impassive expression. "What are Glyneth's feelings for you?"

"You have her journal, noble Canusa. Surely she has mentioned me in her writings?"

"Er, yes. I suppose she jotted down something." He got to his feet, then walked to where Lucas stood. As thoroughly as a senior officer inspected his troops, Canusa eyed Lucas, up and down appraisingly. "Does she know I am her father?"

Lucas pondered the question. Glancing around the empty war room, he stalled for time as he shifted through the conflicting bits of information on whether she was aware of Canusa's identity. "To be truthful, sir, I do not know. Last night, she was distraught. She told me you wanted her to marry Brice Adams, and yet I felt there was something else troubling her. Something she did not tell me."

"Adams!" Canusa took a step back, which caused him to collide into a chair. "By the vast nebula above! Where did she get that idea? I made no mention of names. Adams? Why, I would sooner cut off my right arm!"

"I am relieved to hear you say that, sir." Lucas relaxed his military stance and clasped his hands behind his back.

Canusa smoothed down the bristles of his mustache, all the while regarding Lucas. The man's powerful brain was deeply engaged. But the question was, with what?

"You have long been under contract to the incomparable Althea, Lord Jefferson. A warrior is obliged to honor his commitments. Is the fact that Glyneth is my daughter a factor in your abrupt switch of affection?"

Thundering Jupiter! Jagged anger pulsed through Lucas' veins. His muscles tightened in response, ready to charge into combat. Which was, of course, an inappropriate reaction. "Noble Canusa." He spoke slowly to contain his emotion. "While I admit my fondness for your daughter is of short duration, it is also true I had already lost my heart to her before I knew her circumstances."

"Hmmm." Canusa eased down into a chair and gestured for Lucas to follow suit. "How do you propose to sever the connection with Althea?"

A softening in the man's position? Lucas sat across the table, then leaned closer to Canusa, holding his gaze. "I mean no affront to Althea or the Adams family, sir. You must understand that."

"The question is, Lucas, will Lord Adams understand?"

Lucas blinked. He could not help his reaction to the shock of Canusa using his first name. "I will

journey tomorrow to Alberdak and inform Lord Adams in person.”

A brief smile lifted the edges of Canusa’s lips, hidden as the top one was by his walrus mustache. “You *must* be in love. Lord Adams is here in Columont, to attend your father’s funeral... tomorrow.”

Embarrassment scorched Lucas’ cheeks. How could he have forgotten? He looked away, certain his face flushed red. “Yes, of course. I... I shall tell him today.”

Canusa’s change of heart was puzzling, to say the very least. He even had an avuncular gleam in his chestnut eyes. “Very well then. I give you permission to marry Glyneth on one condition.”

“Gladly, sir.”

“Perhaps not so gladly, Lucas.” Canusa’s voice trembled. “You have not heard the condition. It is this --you must transform my daughter’s hatred of me into love.”

By thunder and all the planets above! Lucas parted his lips to speak, but stopped to swallow his surprise instead. While Canusa’s sentiments did him justice, Lucas was all too aware of Glyneth’s thoughts. What Canusa asked, was, in a word, impossible.

Clearing his throat, Lucas met the man’s gaze. “That is not an unreasonable request, sir.”

Canusa held out his hand. They sealed the agreement with a shake. “Maybe not, however, I fear you will not be successful.”

Lucas stood, eager to prove the man wrong. “I am a warrior of Canusa, sir. Failure is not acceptable.”

Canusa barked out his laugh. “To be young and foolish! Go now. Inform the Adams clan you have my blessing.”

Once out in the cool, alabaster corridor, Lucas scratched his head over this wild turn of events. How was he to accomplish changing Glyneth’s opinion of a man she had long considered a villain? Canusa *had* been a villain; that much was true. And he deserved to be punished. But how this would be achieved, Lucas had no idea.

Sighing, he focused on his next step, for a soldier could only take one step at a time. He pulled off what he had set out to do with Canusa, now the next stage was with Lord Adams and Althea.

No problem there. However, the final part of this puzzle lay with convincing his beloved Glyneth. Remembering last night’s activities, he smiled. Glyneth would be reasonable; she had to be reasonable. After all, it was in everyone’s best interest to put the past behind them.

Lucas did something warriors seldom did. Superstitiously, he crossed his fingers, hoping for good luck.

~ * ~

As Brice whistled a bawdy tune, he dragged a comb through his thick, dark hair. He donned his uniform, inspected his image in the mirror, then gave himself a wink. Damn it, but he was handsome! Yes, he was pleased, and why shouldn’t he be? Yesterday, things had gone much better than planned. Glyneth, thankfully, was agreeable to marrying him, plus she held no grudge against Canusa. That news would tickle the old man silly.

Things were looking up. And taking Canusa’s daughter to wife would ensure Brice’s succession as the next Canusa. He rubbed his hands together. First, he would visit the old man--

Someone in a concealing cape had the audacity to burst into his room. By Jove, it was a female! Women were not allowed in the Senior Officer Quarters. As a major, Brice was not allowed either, however he roomed there as Lord Adams’ son and heir. So who--?

“Brice! I am ruined! I shall be exposed!” Althea threw back the hood hiding her hair and ran to him, her face wet with weak tears. “Oh, what should I do?”

“For starters, stay away from my uniform.” He removed her hands from his sleeve, then brushed away offending wrinkles in the fabric. “Now, tell me, what in Hades are you doing here and why do you think you will be ruined?”

Her lower lip protruded in an unflattering pout. “Father sent for me. I thought it was to talk about my upcoming marriage.” She sniffed. “Instead, I find out Lucas is... is backing out!”

“What?”

“Yes.” His sister’s nostrils flared, most likely with the very anger that now flared within Brice. “Can

you believe it? He said he was committed to someone else. And after all this time. After me waiting so very long..." She placed her hand on her stomach and flashed red rimmed eyes at him. "Brice, I got so tired of waiting. I know I am supposed to delay everything until I make an advantageous marriage, but I wanted motherhood so bad, that I, well, you know."

Rage, blindingly red, choked his throat. That bastard! That bastard had the hots for Glyneth. He shoved his sister into a chair, then stomped out his fury without obstruction. "So Jefferson is committed to someone else, is he?" Brice spat. "Well, we'll just see about that. And you, you got yourself knocked up, did you?" He raised his fist at her. "Does Father know?"

Althea cowered and her weak mouth trembled. "No."

Sniveling idiot. "Who plowed you? Who is the father?"

"Please don't be angry with me, Brice. One thing just led to another." She hung her head. "It was Sergeant Eisenberg. I--I do like him--"

"You whore! This led to this, and to this!" As Brice spoke, he pulled her to her feet, roughly grabbed her abundant breasts, then reached down to paw at her feminine mound through the material of her dress.

"Bitch!" He threw her away from him and she fell on the floor.

To her credit, she didn't cry out, but only bit her lip as she stared at him with those pale, creepy eyes.

"Wait." He had an idea. A brilliant idea to make use of his sister's disgrace. "Lucas Jefferson is the father to your whelp."

"No, Brice, I told you, it is--"

"Jefferson." Pleased with his brainchild, Brice returned to the mirror and smoothed a stray hair off his forehead.

"But Lucas and I never mated."

Brice sighed. Althea was a bit dense. "It is your word against his. He partook of your favors, and now wants to discard you to marry Canusa's daughter. We will not allow him to get away with this, right?"

Althea slowly stood. "Canusa has a daughter?"

He nodded. "The beautiful Glyneth."

"Lucas prefers that... that nobody over me?" Althea's bosom heaved with righteous indignation.

"Well, there is no accounting for tastes." Brice fondled her heavy melons, then escorted her to the door. "Leave everything to me. All you have to do is act the part of the jilted lover, understood?"

"Yes, Brice. I need to forget the sergeant, don't I? Lucas should marry me." She fluffed out her unnatural colored hair. "I will make a good wife."

Whether she would or not was debatable. Nor was it Brice's concern. What he had to concentrate on now was to inform his father of Jefferson's deceit and force the bastard to wed Althea.

~ * ~

A thousand melodies played their sweet refrains within Glyneth's soul. Stretching out on the bed, she hummed each and every one, reveling in the glorious feeling still soaring through her. Love could do that to a person. Turn her world upside down, inside out. Love. Love for Lucas. In her hand was his ring--a sign of his love.

But he hadn't said he loved her. Claimed her, yes. Pledged himself to her, yes. But love wasn't mentioned.

She swept her hair out of her eyes and studied the smooth, silver ring. It sat heavily on her left index finger, too large to be comfortable. Maybe he did love her, for the ring had a special meaning for Lucas. Belonging to his father, it also served as a symbol of Canusa's dynasty.

Canusa--her father. She shuddered. Before Lucas learned the truth about her heritage, she had to confront her father.

She fisted her left hand so the ring wouldn't fall off her finger, then walked to the window to gaze out at nature's beauty. The Earth spoke to her, and this time, peace and harmony flooded her pathways. And no wonder, it was absolutely lovely outside today. In the distance, majestic, tree-covered mountains filled the deep azure sky. Closer to the Jefferson Compound, beautiful wild flowers dotted meadows to the east, while to the west, areas of solid white appeared, glistening in the sun.

Something niggled her. Wasn't it too warm for snow? She peered at the sloping white mass, then

focused on a group of people sprinkled throughout the area. Soldiers. As if pulling weeds, they tore something from the earth and flung aside the remains.

Sweet Christmas, it was those Venusian plants! Glyneth opened the window to have a better view. One by one, the alien growths ignominiously sailed through the air, no longer part of the land of the living. Already she felt a change in the atmosphere. This was why peace and harmony echoed loudly in her ears. The Earth was free--not held captive by outsiders, for the plants were *true* outsiders to this planet.

Instinctively, she also knew these flowers were in some way responsible for Columont's women's lack of fertility. Faith, it had to be so. And perhaps she hadn't been affected because of her innate difference from non-mutant women. Her ability to change skin color came from her enlarged pineal gland. This gland also produced the hormone melatonin, which regulated several biological functions including menstrual cycles. That would be a simple explanation of why village women were more fertile--before coming to Columont, they had no exposure to Venusian plants. And with the gas-releasing flowers gone, there'd be no further need to supplement this region's population with village women.

So, maybe, her coming to this land, albeit reluctantly at first, had been a good thing--for everybody.

Hopefully, Lucas thought so. She smiled and looked down at her bare tummy. Who knew? She might be with child even now. After all, hadn't she received the message, *love creates*?

Turning her back on the window and those abhorrent plants, Glyneth went into the washroom to get dressed. With the Earth out of danger, it was time to take care of personal concerns--like her unresolved issues with Canusa. What she would say to him, she had no idea. But face him, she must. No doubt she'd accuse him of all his vile deeds--accuse him with twenty years worth of passion. And she'd take great pleasure in informing him that he had no part in her life, not now and certainly not in the future. Contrary to his words when they last spoke, she was *not* his, and she would *not* do as he said.

As for ensuring the line of Canusa, again, she differed with him. Her future children would claim parentage from the Jefferson line and the line of healers from her mother's side. Canusa was doomed to go to his grave without offspring to carry on his name.

After checking in the mirror, Glyneth gave a little nod of approval at her appearance, then rushed out of the bedchamber. Next on her to-do list--battling with the revered most holy of holies.

~ * ~

Interrogating Devon Dikeman had been strangely unsatisfying. Sure, Will learned about the villager's attack on Luke and the man's subsequent shadowing of the bride-quest team into Columont. But what drove Dikeman was love.

As Will left the detention center, he wrinkled his nose in disgust. Again, it was that unstable emotion love turning a man into mush, impairing coherent thoughts and causing irrational deeds.

Hawke, Luke, and now Dikeman suffered in this ignominious fashion. And Dikeman had made a fool out of himself over Glyneth. True, she did seem to be a superior woman, but hey, she belonged to Luke now. Didn't the fellow understand that?

A beefy sergeant approached Will and saluted. "Lieutenant, hallowed Canusa desires to speak with Lord Jefferson. Do you know his location?"

Whether it was the soldier's tone or the snap in the man's salute that warned him something was up, Will didn't know. Hell, it could've been the shape of his bushy beard. Whatever. Will narrowed his eyes, returned the salute, and lied. "I'm going to Lord Jefferson now, Sergeant. I'll inform him."

Eisenberg, for that was the name on the uniform shirt, did an antsy dance. "But sir, my orders were to escort--"

"Unnecessary, Sergeant." Will withheld his grin. By the stars, if he didn't know any better, he'd think it was Hawke speaking, and not Will Flagg! "You may assure noble Canusa that Lord Jefferson will attend shortly."

The warrior had no choice but to acquiesce, salute, and be on his way, leaving Will to scratch his chin. What the hell was that all about?

No time to bother about it, though. Where was Luke? Inspiration hit. Most likely he was checking on arrangements for tomorrow's funeral and change of command. Speeding over to the command post, Will stood outside the window and spotted Luke pouring over some papers. Will reared up on tiptoes and

waved his arms to catch his friend's attention.

Surprise widened Luke's eyes, then he nodded and went outside to join Will. "By thunder, you resemble a blasted jack-in-the-box out here, flapping your arms like a thousand bees were after you."

Will scowled. After all, who appreciated being told he looked like a simpleton? "Aw hell, Luke. Somethin's goin' on. Sergeant Eisenberg came for ya, sayin' Canusa wants yer lousy butt. I tell ya, my antennas went up all right 'n tight. What's the deal?"

Luke shook his head. "Odd. I just spoke with Canusa, and we reached an agreement, or so I thought." He straightened the points on his collar. "I better go to him and find out what this is all about. You stay here."

"But Luke." Will fell into step beside his friend. "I don't have a good feelin' about this. Maybe I should go with ya?"

"No." A word of determination was spoken in that one syllable. Lucas Jefferson wouldn't be swayed. Will knew better than to try.

"Well, you just watch yer butt, then." He stared at Luke's back as the Major strode down the road toward Canusa's headquarters. Something mighty strange was in the wind, but by all the stars in the universe, Will had no idea of what exactly it was.

Thirteen

While it was true Lucas had just seen Canusa this morning in the war room, it might as well have been weeks that had passed, so changed was the atmosphere. Hostility and ill will hung heavily in the air. Sitting along one side of the table with precision steel in their glare were Canusa, Lords Adams and Trudeau, and Brice Adams. In a corner, by herself, sat the astrologer Gaea, draped with a black veil, as always. Since Lucas had but recently spoken with Lord Adams, there could be no other possible explanation for this conference except the termination of the betrothal ties.

“Lord Jefferson,” Canusa broke the quiet. “You may sit.”

Trying to figure out what was going on, Lucas took his place across from the group. Canusa, who had been almost amiable when Lucas had left him, blazed thunder from his dark eyes. Lord Adams, who had accepted the news of Lucas’ change of affection with regret, now sat with anger tightening his fleshy jowls. Lord Trudeau appeared less sickly than two days ago, however a red flush spread like ink over his sunken cheeks. Brice Adams, of course, was as satanically handsome as ever. Wickedness fairly radiated from his entire form.

Canusa pulled on the edges of his mustache. “Lord Adams has made an accusation against you, Lord Jefferson.” He gestured to the man on his right, then nodded to the man on his left. “For balance, I asked Lord Trudeau to join us.”

“I see.” Lucas glanced at his father’s friend for encouragement but the man’s tense mouth revealed the seriousness of the charge. “What am I being accused of?”

“You have dishonored my daughter.” Lord Adams issued the statement as a hiss of condemnation.

Lucas spread out his hands. “I do not understand--”

Brice Adams jumped to his feet and pointed at him. “Althea is with child. *Your* child. And now you say you will not marry her.”

“That is impossible!” Whatever vague ideas Lucas had for the reason of this inquisition, none remotely resembled the charge. “Lord Adams, I have never touched Althea in that way. Not even to kiss.”

Major Adams folded his arms across his chest and smirked. “That is not what my sister tells us.”

Still reeling, Lucas shook his head. “Noble sirs, I am now one of the ten sons of Canusa. My honor, my integrity has been called into question. I do not know why Althea would lie.”

Canusa gestured toward Lucas’ hand. “Yes, you are one of the ten sons. However, where is your ring?”

Lord Trudeau leaned across the table for an unobstructed look. “I gifted your father’s ring to you just two days ago.”

The heat of embarrassment steamed Lucas’ face. “I, er, I cannot deny I gave the ring to young Glyneth.”

Brice’s smirk grew deeper. “Do you see, my lords? This womanizing bastard broke Althea’s heart and now has shifted his attention to Glyneth, Canusa’s daughter.”

This news came as no surprise to anyone in the room, for Lord Trudeau had surmised Glyneth’s true identity, and Lord Adams already knew since Lucas had informed the man earlier. Canusa said nothing, but continued to stroke his mustache.

“Great Canusa, if I may interrupt?” The astrologer gracefully moved to Lucas’ side. “Why don’t you request Althea’s presence? Only she can clear up this serious situation.”

The most holy of holies steeped his fingers. "Yes, you are right, as always, Gaea." Speaking into the electronic device, he gave the order for Althea Adams to his assistant, then turned to Lord Adams. "We shall await your daughter's arrival before we go any farther."

But they did not wait in silence. The war room buzzed with questions to Canusa about Glyneth and her being Canusa's offspring. The leader revealed some information, but no mention was made of a rape.

While the lords talked, Lucas observed Brice Adams. How did the Major know about Glyneth's identity? Did his father mention the fact or did the man find out from some other source? Feeling a twinge of pain in his left upper arm, Lucas massaged the spot, then suddenly stopped. What if Brice had been the one who attacked him around the campfire? Minutes before, Hawke had divulged the truth about the long-ago quest, and both he and Hawke believed they were being watched. Brice could have overheard the conversation, plus he was cowardly enough to use the cover of darkness for his infamy. But to intend to kill a fellow officer! That was an outrage, indeed.

A military aide entered the room and saluted smartly. "Hallowed Canusa, sirs, I bring disturbing news. Lord Adams, your daughter Althea is no longer in her quarters. She has been seen on horseback heading south." The soldier's voice then trembled. "Sirs, she was in the company of platoon sergeant Eisenberg."

"What?" Brice's exclamation was louder than his father's. "Why, that bit--" His eyes narrowed to mere slits. "Sergeant Eisenberg, eh? Isn't he under your command, Lord Jefferson?"

Which implied that Lucas had something to do with the flight from Columont. In response to this new "attack," his lips tightened. "Yes, as is every soldier in 'C' Company. Until tomorrow, at any rate."

Lord Adams pushed away from the table, stood, then walked over to the window. "Noble Canusa," he said with his back to the group, "I believe your aide can be dismissed."

"Yes, of course." Canusa nodded to the man, who promptly left the room.

Lord Adams turned, sadness heavily engraved on his doughy face. "My Althea is a weak girl, noble Canusa. I knew of her trysts with the sergeant, and yet when Brice told me about Lord Jefferson, I believed that was so, to my dishonor." The man appeared to age right before their eyes. "I apologize, Lord Jefferson."

Then Lord Adams took a deep breath. "Brice, you are no longer my son."

Horror distorted the Major's classic features. "No! You cannot mean that, Father. I--I had nothing to do with this."

A good man did not wish to see others suffer discomfort. But Brice Adams was finally getting his due. A warrior must take full responsibility for his actions.

"I have turned a blind eye to your evil ways, Brice. But I shall not do that any longer." Lord Adams walked to the table and placed his hand over his heart. "Noble Canusa, I formally request for my middle son, Benjamin, to be listed as my heir."

Canusa gravely nodded. "As you wish, Lord Adams. I also will order a team to return your daughter to you. We cannot afford to lose any of our women, especially those who are breeders. Do you wish retribution against the sergeant?"

"No, noble Canusa," Lord Adams answered. "We will all suffer enough with my family's disgrace."

Lord Trudeau murmured his assent. "That would be for the best."

Brice had wisely kept silent during this exchange. His father was a man not to be diverted from his duty.

Canusa raked his gaze over the shamed former Adams member. "What I propose for you, Major Adams, is a reduction in rank to lieutenant. You will be sent to the farthest outpost in the land. There you must prove yourself worthy to defend the name of Canusa. If your service is exemplary, then your rank may be restored. Your status, however, as a son of a son of Canusa, will never return."

Brice bit his lip. "As you will it, noble Canusa."

"You are dismissed. Report to the command post with your orders."

Lieutenant Adams took one last look at his father, but the older man refused to meet his son's gaze. After saluting, Brice left, a man defeated by his own sins.

An awkward silence settled over the war room's remaining occupants. Lord Adams cleared his throat, then apologized again for doubting Lucas. "Once Althea is returned to me, I shall leave

immediately for Alberdak. My son Benjamin must receive more extensive training for his new role.” He inclined his head. “Noble Canusa, Lord Jefferson, Lord Trudeau, until we meet again.”

After Lord Adams left, Canusa loudly exhaled, no doubt releasing pent-up tension. “By the vast nebula above, this has been a damned peculiar day!”

“Indeed, that is so.” Lord Trudeau arched his back and rubbed some obviously sore muscles. “I, for one, am glad the Major is no longer in our company. Plus, your extraordinary news, Canusa. Glyneth is a rare jewel, beyond compare. Luke, you are a fortunate man.”

Lucas had no trouble agreeing.

“Yes,” Lord Trudeau continued, “do you know that only yesterday, she ran those magic hands of hers over the air around me, and bless my soul, if I don’t feel a thousand times better. Energy medicine, she called it.”

A soft rustle of fabric came from the corner where Gaea sat. Surely the mention of unorthodox healing methods was not disturbing to her?

Canusa gazed at his astrologer with a question in his eyes.

Lord Trudeau inclined his head, preparing to depart. “Glyneth even warned me to stay away from those white plants, too. And this was before she was trapped inside the Altar. Intelligent lass!” He pounded Lucas on the back as a sign of approval. “You and Canusa have much to discuss, I am sure. I look forward to the wedding.”

With a wave of his hand, Lord Trudeau left the room.

Canusa turned his attention to Lucas. “It is premature to speak of wedding plans until you accomplish a certain task I assigned you.”

Marriage. Marriage to Glyneth. As his heart swelled with love, Lucas sighed. “Yes, noble Canusa, I am aware of that.” With Brice Adams out of the way, there were no further impediments to claiming Glyneth as his very own, except for the fact he had to convince her to welcome Canusa into her life.

And that might prove to be more difficult than he had previously imagined.

~ * ~

It was difficult to retain the anger in one’s soul in the face of overwhelming kindness. Outside doors that housed her villain of a father, Glyneth stood, captured by Lord Trudeau and his sentiments of gratitude.

Sandwiching her hand between his, he smiled with genuine pleasure. “I must thank you again for all you have done for me. Egad! Can you believe it? I am no longer followed by undertakers!”

Embarrassed, she removed her hand. “It’s nothing, sir. I’m so glad you’re feeling better.”

“Columont is indeed fortunate to have you as one of its daughters, Glyneth. I look forward to the day when you and Luke... well, never mind. I ramble.” He curved his arm around her waist, then opened the door into the war room. “You must be seeking young Jefferson. He is here, conferring with your father.”

Lord Trudeau knew about her father? She rapidly blinked. And Lucas was speaking to Canusa? Did he also know? Oh, sweet Christmas, she couldn’t go in now.

But it was too late. Lord Trudeau escorted her inside, then left her in the middle of the room. The man had no idea how hard she wished the floor would open up and swallow her.

There sat Lucas, her beloved. As she gazed upon his handsome features, a warm flush of desire pulsed through her. Truly, he was the most magnificent of men. However, seated across from him was the most *despicable* of men. Tightening her fists, which caused Lucas’ ring to cruelly bite into the palm of her hand, she faced the enemy.

“Glyneth,” the hated man said. “Lucas and I were just talking about you.”

They both rose, inviting her to sit. Naturally, she sat next to Lucas.

“My child,” Canusa said, “to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?”

She couldn’t help shuddering at his words. How dare he call her his child?

“Are you chilled, Glyneth?” Lucas ran his fingers over her upper arm. “Your gown must not be warm enough. I shall have a shawl brought to you.”

A woman, who Glyneth hadn’t noticed before, left her position in the corner of the room and handed him a woolen wrap. “Please, use mine.” Dressed from head to toe in black gauzy material, she bowed,

then returned to her chair.

Lucas draped the shawl over Glyneth's shoulders and smiled into her eyes.

"This is my astrologer, Glyneth." Canusa interrupted Glyneth's bliss. "Would you like her to construct a chart for you?"

"No, thank you." The time for pleasantries was over. Inhaling deeply, she flipped a lock of hair over her shoulder. "Canusa, I need to speak with you, alone."

"Glyneth." By Lucas' tone, she knew he admonished her for her bad manners.

A rush of tears quickly burned her eyes. Forcing this sign of weakness to disappear, she hardened her resolve. "I ask for privacy, Lucas. This matter only concerns Canusa and me."

"That's where you are wrong, my dear." The astrologer's low voice drifted over to Glyneth, and for some strange reason, even with the shawl warming her, the hair on her arms stood at attention.

Lucas nodded at the woman. "Of course. I am involved in this, too."

"Yes, that's true," the woman continued. "But perhaps in a different way than you expected."

Again, another shiver rocked through Glyneth. The astrologer's voice sounded so... familiar.

Canusa steepled his fingers. "I grow tired of riddles. It is time to speak plainly, Gaea."

As if a thunderbolt suddenly struck Glyneth, she jolted up to a fiercely erect position. "Gaea?" she breathed. Gaea had been Mamma's pet name for herself, T r se being her given name. Gaea meant goddess of the Earth. As Mamma had considered herself as a steward entrusted to take care of the Earth, it seemed an appropriate nickname.

"Yes, my own one. I am here!" The woman removed her shimmering black veil and discarded it on the table.

"Mamma!" Glyneth scrambled out of her chair to enfold her mother in the biggest bear hug ever. "Mamma! You're alive!" Tears flooded her eyes; this time, she allowed them to spill out with abandon. She sprinkled kisses, long denied, over her mother's dearly loved features.

"Glyneth, my sweet. How I longed for this day." Mamma returned each hug, each kiss, with her perfumed fragrance of freshly plucked honeysuckle. Pulling away for a brief second, she cupped Glyneth's face in her hands and gazed dotingly at her. "You've blossomed into a beauty, Glyneth, as I knew you would."

Tight as glue, Glyneth embraced her mother, savoring the very feel of her. A thousand questions surfaced, yet no sounds except quiet sobs seemed to get past Glyneth's lips.

Lucas and Canusa were patient, allowing them to reunite without interruption. But the men had their questions, too. Especially Canusa.

And he wouldn't be postponed; he demanded his due. "Women, sit. Gaea, you have much explaining to do." After they both complied, he stared at Mamma as if memorizing her features. "Yes, I clearly see now the young vixen of twenty years past."

A subtle blush covered his cheeks. He must've been thinking of his dishonorable act.

"Why didn't you tell me, Gaea? When you arrived here ten years ago, why didn't you let me know we had a daughter?" Canusa wasn't through with his barrage. "Why did you pretend to be dead? How did you become my astrologer?"

Watching her parents, Glyneth absorbed every single detail. Surprisingly, no animosity shone forth from Mamma. In fact, she must've internally made her peace with the man years ago.

Lucas slipped his hand into Glyneth's, maybe to give her comfort. She smiled at him, then returned her attention to the gripping scene in front of her.

The years had been kind to Mamma. She looked more like thirty instead of forty. Her dark hair, lightly laced with silver, fell in soft waves about her thin face. Her eyes, mysteriously dark green, flashed at Canusa and Glyneth, keeping them both under observation. "As to how I became your astrologer, Canusa, surely you remember that. Soon after I was abducted, your old advisor died and you searched for a replacement. Since I have some talent in reading the heavens, I decided I preferred to serve you in that capacity, rather than serve as a hostess of your Altar."

Glyneth bit her lip. Serve as a prostitute, Mamma meant.

Canusa's flush deepened. "All this time." He shook his head.

Mamma nodded. "Yes, T r se from the village died and Gaea took her place as your astrologer."

"But why didn't you tell me?" Canusa repeated.

Her gaze on Glyneth, she answered his question. "I've served you long and well, great Canusa. I've also given you something no other woman has been able to do--an heir. While there are ten 'sons' of Canusa, there's only one daughter. She is destined to fulfill the scriptures."

Lucas gave Glyneth's hand a squeeze. "I begin to understand now. After I left the village, I heard them chant, *'Then the land shall be as one again, uniting the old ways with the new.'*" He then addressed Mamma. "Lord Trudeau told me you showed him a book containing a prophecy about a savior who would unite the old ways with the new. This man would steal a woman with mystical powers to help him carry out his destiny. You told Lord Trudeau you thought that man was me."

"That is so." Mamma bowed her head. "Glyneth, please believe me, although I wanted nothing more than to return to you, it was my duty to stay here in Columont, paving the way for your arrival. It is written in the stars."

Canusa must not have liked what he was hearing for he bellowed out his displeasure. "By the great galactic nebula! What is this uniting of the old ways? And what are you saying? That Glyneth has mystical powers?"

"No, I don't have mystical powers." Glyneth had to interrupt. "Listen to me, please. I have to tell you this. You see, I'm, um, I'm a mutant."

She expected everyone to turn away in disgust, but oddly enough, all three of them smiled.

"My child," Canusa said kindly, "I have read your journal. Your mother assures me that you are not tainted by radiation. Indeed, she also has the same abilities as you."

"Really?" Glyneth sat up, eager to hear the confirmation with her own ears. How many nights had she cried herself to sleep wishing she was the same as everyone else?

"Really." Mamma corroborated Canusa's words. "Your grandmother, and many greats down the line, also had been blessed in this fashion. But no one had these abilities to your degree."

Lucas leaned toward Glyneth and murmured, "So it is true. You bewitched me!"

She grinned at him, but wouldn't be swayed. "Mamma, this can't be. I have an enlarged pineal gland which is responsible for my skin changes. There's nothing mystical about that, at any rate."

"True. However you also identified the Venusian plants as our enemy. In all my time here, while I felt the Earth's unease, I couldn't isolate the source. Perhaps the presence of those flowers was another reason I didn't want to stay at the Altar." She smiled proudly. "Glyneth, you have saved Columont's women."

This was too much. Too much to take in. Hating her father, finding her mother alive, learning she wasn't a mutant, being part of a prophecy... all this, on top of consummating her love for Lucas.

Glyneth rubbed her temples. A headache the size of the moon pounded through her. She had to concentrate on what was truly important. Her mother was here--alive and well. Lucas didn't seem to mind if she was a mutant or not. Her father, well, maybe he wasn't the world's most evil man. If her mother had learned to forgive him, then perhaps, Glyneth could learn to do the same--in time.

She stood. "If you all don't mind, I think I'd like to retire to my room for a while. Mamma, could you come with me? There's so much to catch up on."

Tall and beautiful, Mamma also stood. "I would love to. Great Canusa, Lord Jefferson, if you would excuse us--"

A rumble, deep and powerful, came from within the ground under the war room. In response, the building shook, causing Glyneth to lose her balance. Gracious, holy Lord! It was an earthquake!

Fourteen

::As one, the Elatus Albus venusium army gasped its last gasp. Willing their root systems to create faults deep in the ground, the plants then straightened their stalks for this final campaign. At first, the vibrations were mild, causing only minor slippages in the Earth's crust. However, through concentrated resolve, the shockwaves grew to an acceptable size. It mattered not if Colony members plunged to their doom in the huge fissures now forming. What was important was the destruction of those puny lifeforms who so dastardly ruined any chance of redeeming this frigid planet.

For the glory of Venus!::

~ * ~

Disasters have been known to strike suddenly... without warning. What was happening this moment followed that pattern--this time it was an earthquake. Lucas herded everyone in the complex outside in case the walls around them crumbled. In sadness and amazement, they viewed areas of land that had been heavy with the white blooms of Venusian flowers now collapsing upon itself, as if the ground had abruptly turned into quicksand. For one full minute all military members stood, taking in the horror of the scene in front of them. The next minute, Lucas grabbed Glyneth and Gaea--the only women in the group --by the arm to escort them back inside. "Quick! Go to the shelter in the basement. The walls are fortified."

"But Lucas," Glyneth protested, "I want to help--"

"I will be obeyed in this. There is no time." He turned to the older man. "Noble Canusa, you must protect yourself as well."

"No." Canusa moved as a man half his age. He opened the door and gestured for Gaea and Glyneth to enter. "You both must be safe. The future of our great land depends on you."

Glyneth was mulish. Her jutted lower lip told Lucas she would not do as she was told. Canusa held up a hand to silence Lucas' lecture to her, then he gripped her by both shoulders. "I understand you... resent me, Glyneth. I have wronged you and your mother. But you must believe me, I want you out of harm's way. Not only for your own good, but for the good of all people in this country."

Glyneth cast an anguished glance at Lucas and Gaea. "I don't know what to do!"

Precious seconds ticked away. Lucas itched to be off so he could fight the enemy... any way he could. Even if all he could do was yank each plant stalk from the dirt. "Listen to Canusa, Glyneth. And listen to me."

"Yes," Canusa agreed, "listen to your future husband." A rolling tremor shifted rock beneath them, indicating the need for action. "Perhaps you can help by using those mystical powers of yours, hmmm?" He gave a casual salute to Gaea, which seemed to suggest that she was now in charge of Glyneth's safety.

As the door closed, Lucas held Glyneth's gaze for an instant, sending silent messages of love. His beloved's brown eyes grew as wide as saucers with concern, and he had to forcibly tear himself away.

Canusa by his side, they both jogged to the disintegrating site, darting in between and around newly formed crevices. "A leader must be on the frontline of battle, Lucas. That is important for you to learn if you are to be the next Canusa."

By thunder, taking on the mantle of Canusa was the furthest thing on his mind. But Lucas did

appreciate Canusa's sentiments... and his physical presence. After meeting up with troops now rescuing fallen comrades trapped in smoky, narrow fissures, Lucas surveyed the ruined landscape. Hell and damnation! There were still thousands of those accursed plants thriving in the soil. How else could they defeat the enemy other than uprooting them one by one?

~ * ~

Glyneth and Mamma made their way to the shelter below ground. Every now and then, a booming rumble vibrated the walls causing dust particles to spew down on them, but other than that, they were safe.

"Mamma, I know those hateful plants are behind this! They tried to kill me once on the journey to Columont, by doing this very same thing. But here, there are thousands of them. How can we possibly stop them?"

Her forehead furrowed in thought, Mamma sat on the ground in a cross legged position. She inhaled deeply, but then coughed, due to the dirt specks in the air. "Maybe Canusa has the right of it. Maybe you can use your talents to find a solution."

The only one of her "talents" that might be of any use in this situation was hearing the Earth speak. Glyneth sat next to her mother, held her hand, then concentrated on images of the Venus flower. What were its weaknesses? How could it be defeated?

She shivered. Yes! That was it. Sweet Christmas, she just received an answer! "Mamma, those plants can't tolerate the cold. After all, Venus is about ten times hotter than Earth. Each stalk has a warm, furry covering. Maybe that's a type of insulation to protect it from our cooler weather. If somehow we can drop the temperature..."

Mamma squeezed her hand. "Ask the Earth. We'll ask together. Remember, people from the Golden Era used to pray for rain. Our request will be for a paralyzing freeze. Indeed, it is late October. Before the Great Destruction, it wasn't uncommon for snow to fall in this region. We might have a chance for success, with those plants now damaged by the quakes."

Hope lifted Glyneth's spirits. "Yes! We *do* have a chance. We must!" She tugged on her mother's arm. "Come. Let's go outside where we have no barriers to obstruct our communication."

Mamma hesitated, obviously reluctant to leave the security of solid walls, but then smiled and led the way outside the shelter. The land still shook and the air was filled with cries from people trapped by debris.

"Quickly." Ignoring the danger, Glyneth sank to the ground to sit and bowed her head to focus. Her entire being radiated the need for cold in whatever form the Earth chose to supply. Also urgent was the need to have this cold delivered without delay. *Fast, faster, fastest! Please, please oh good Earth!*

The winds suddenly shifted. From the southwest, this sharpening of wind became stronger and whipped their loose hair into a frenzy.

"Look, Mamma! Look, it's coming."

A thick, ominous roll of fog moved rapidly toward them. In the distance, rain, flashes of lightening, and growls of thunder pressed forward. A sudden chill in the air lifted goose-bumps on Glyneth's arms. Temperatures were dropping!

"You did it, my own one." As Mamma hugged her, they both jumped up and down in the freezing rain.

"Our Earth did it! And now we'll finally be rid of this alien heat." Glyneth shivered again, but this time it was due to frosty weather. "Let's go help the rescuers."

Soaked to the bone, they held each other's hands and headed through the mud toward Lucas and Canusa up ahead. The only rumblings now heard were those thunders coming from above them. No further grumbles from below disturbed the Earth. Once all the white Venusian flowers were eliminated, that would never happen again.

~ * ~

For the second time today, Glyneth sat at the great oak conference table in the war room. This time though, there were no vacant chairs. The ten sons plus additional officers sat or stood around the table. Will Flagg and Russell Hawke were in the crowd, as was Sylvie, with a beatific smile on her face as she

elbowed her way next to the captain.

Everyone had been given time to clean up after the earthquake. Lucas, on Glyneth's right, had to have medical attention, as well. The edges of a jagged cut to his temple had been stitched together with black thread. She burned to place her hands on the wound to help it heal, but would have to squelch her sentiments until they were alone. Warriors didn't appreciate any reminders that they weren't invincible.

As if he knew she was thinking about him, he slid his hand over to hers under the table, and gripped it tightly.

She smiled at him, then lowered her gaze to her lap.

Canusa pounded on the table once, to gather everyone's attention. "I have called this meeting for several reasons. The first is to issue thanks for those who helped citizens trapped by the sudden earthquake to our province. I am pleased to report there are no fatalities, and only a few people required medical treatment."

A low murmur circled the room, perhaps relief that no one had died.

"Secondly," Canusa continued, "all remaining plants that we call Venusian flowers will be destroyed, whether in homes or growing wild on our lands. We are arranging for storage tanks containing liquid nitrogen to be delivered to the area. Spraying this extremely cold, deadly liquid over the plants will ensure complete destruction. The operation will commence at daybreak."

Again, a buzz filled the war room, this time it was of approval.

Canusa cleared his throat, signaling his desire to go on. "For those of you not in attendance at the last council, we discussed waging war against villagers to the south. At that time, Lord Jefferson proposed an unusual solution to our dilemma--incorporation rather than destruction."

Surprised, Glyneth glanced over at Lucas. Had he really recommended that? His squeeze to her hand confirmed it. And Mamma, seated to her left, imperceptibly nodded her head. So it was true! Glyneth squeezed his hand back. Her heart swelled not only with love, but with pride.

Canusa smoothed down his bushy mustache before speaking again. "I have given this matter much thought. And I agree with Lord Jefferson--"

An uproar among the warriors interrupted. But Canusa wouldn't be deterred. "Yes," he raised his voice. "As my astrologer predicted, we have suffered through a time of turbulence, we have had upheaval, rebellion, and proceeded in the shadow of death. I am now ready to follow a proper course. I propose we unite the old ways with the new."

The scriptures! The scriptures were to be fulfilled. Bursting with pleasure, Glyneth felt her jubilation shining forth from her head to her toes. Faith, she probably glowed the color of the radiant sun.

A cacophony of sounds piled high atop each other. Everyone's movements fueled their neighbors' actions, and the room seemed to swirl in a frenzy.

"Order! Order, I say." As Canusa hammered his fist on the table, the resounding thud reverberated through the assemblage. "To continue, the proper course for this reunification is for Lord Lucas Jefferson, representing the new, to wed, my daughter Glyneth, representing the old."

If the chamber was noisy before, now absolute quiet blanketed everyone. An "o" of astonishment rounded Sylvie's lips. Will Flagg also flapped his mouth open, staring at Glyneth, then Canusa. Obviously they hadn't known about her father's identity. But Russell Hawke must have, for he stood impassively, while Lord Trudeau gave her a wink.

Then, as a wave breaks upon the shore, questions surged forth, all asking about Canusa's daughter.

Canusa held up his hands. "The hows and the whys are not important." Oddly enough, he caught Russell Hawke's gaze and held it. "Suffice it to say, Glyneth's mother is sitting beside her--my astrologer, Gaea."

Even Russell Hawke reacted at that news. Tears filled Glyneth's eyes as she watched her mother smile from the heart. How wonderful it was to know Mamma again. To have her here, by her side, and feel her comforting presence.

Lucas ran his hand over his precision cut hair and sighed. "By thunder, I believe you have dropped enough bombshells for today, noble Canusa. I move we adjourn our meeting, so that I may properly propose to your daughter."

Canusa shifted his dark gaze onto Glyneth. "So be it. May I be the first to offer best wishes?" He leaned across the table to shake her hand.

An unexpected flash of sympathy for this man overpowered her, weakening her knees. By no means did she condone his previous actions, but instead, she pitied him. He had lost a precious opportunity, one he could never experience. He would never know the joys of fatherhood. For that loss, he was a poorer man.

She glanced at her mother, sending a silent message of what she planned to do. Mamma slightly smiled and nodded her understanding. Glyneth stood, then walked over to Canusa. After taking a deep breath, she gave him a brief hug. "I thank you for your wishes, Father."

From his expression, she couldn't have given him anything more valuable. His eyes glistened with moisture, and he looked down, adjourning the meeting.

Lucas moved quickly to spirit her away from the inevitable questions bound to be asked. "I do not wish to share you with anyone right now." Once outside, he unhitched his great horse, helped her on top of its broad back, then also mounted. Curving his arm around her waist, he whispered in her ear, "This brings back pleasant memories, does it not?"

She grinned her reply, safe and secure in his embrace.

"You are to be commended for many things, my Glyneth. But perhaps the most difficult thing was what you just did for Canusa. I thank you for accepting him."

The horse galloped past the area of destruction, on toward the Jefferson Compound. She stayed silent, lost in her own thoughts. "Do you think he and my mother will... start seeing each other?"

"Other than as leader and astrologer, no. I do not. Truly, Glyneth, you have a tender heart!" Lucas chuckled. "Perhaps this will satisfy your desire for romance. I believe I spotted a certain twinkle in Lord Trudeau's eye as he observed Gaea from across the table."

"Really?" Glyneth pictured the two of them together. Yes, they would make a good match. "He's a nice man. I don't want my mother to be alone anymore."

"Nor do I wish for you to be alone." Lucas trailed kisses down her neck, causing all sorts of havoc in her veins. "And I hope this satisfies your more personal desire for romance!"

"Sweet Christmas, yes! I can hardly wait until we get to the Compound."

He suddenly stopped his horse. "Then we should not. Wait, that is." Helping her down, he held her tightly, loving her under the dying light of sun-streaked skies.

Coming up for air, she had to giggle. "But Lucas, what if someone passes this way?"

He scooped her up and carried her to a copse of small trees and bushes a short distance away from the road. "We shall have privacy now, my love. Besides, my stallion is trained to bare his massive teeth should anyone disturb us."

Pulling him down on top of her and kissing him as only a future wife could, she delighted in the most pleasurable of activities.

Afterwards, chilly October air rushed over their naked bodies to create mile-high goose-bumps on every inch of exposed skin. Lucas reached for his pants. "I propose we put our clothes on, for in truth, if we do not we will surely catch cold."

Glyneth folded her arms across her chest and gave a pretend frown. "Is that what you propose? Tush, I expected a proposal of marriage!"

Grabbing her gown, he then helped her into it. "There. Now I can propose properly, without undue... distractions." He knelt on one knee. "Glyneth, would you do me the supreme honor of becoming my wife?"

As they returned to the horse, the imp of mischief spurred her on. "Well, I don't know. You still haven't shown me Columont's libraries bursting with Golden Era knowledge. Are you aware that 'Canusa' is a combination of the old countries Canada and the United States? So in truth, you really are uniting the present day with the past."

He snorted. "Quiet, woman!" Lifting her up, he eased her over the great horse's back. "While the present and past are important, all I care about is uniting with you, you irresistible witch!"

Glyneth's lungs weren't large enough to contain her sigh of contentment. She took his hand and slid

Canusa's ring on his finger. "Then I say, yes, Lucas, for always and forever. With this ring, I thee wed."
Although kissing astride a horse wasn't the easiest thing to do, somehow they managed!

Meet Susanne Marie Knight

Susanne Marie Knight works as a writer for a nationally syndicated fitness program shown on public television. Multi-published with books, short stories, and articles, she specializes in “Romance Writing With A Twist.” In addition to Alien Heat, she also has The Reluctant Landlord, a Regency with Wings ePress Inc. Her other Regencies include 2003 EPPIE finalist The Magic Token and five-star time-travel Lord Darver’s Match, both with LionHearted Publishing; and another five-star time-travel, Timeless Deception, with Novel-Books, Inc. For science fiction enthusiasts, she has 2003 EPPIE finalist Janus Is A Two-Headed God with Awe-Struck Ebooks; plus 2003 EPPIE finalist Love At The Top, a contemporary romance with NovelBooks, Inc.; Tainted Tea For Two, a romantic murder mystery with Hard Shell Word Factory; and Grave Future, a paranormal romantic suspense novel with LTDBooks.

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