

ELLORA'S CAVE REON



*Madison
Hayes*

Made For *Two*
Champions

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Made For Two Champions

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MADE FOR TWO CHAMPIONS

Madison Hayes

Dedication

For brilliant author and partner in crime, Rhyannon Byrd.

Chapter One

"I've just received word that the queen is on her way here," Saxon rumbled as he slid into a chair and pulled it beneath him. An expectant gleam brightened the eYonan's green eyes as he propped his elbows on the rectangular wooden table in the great hall at the Iron Palace in Judipeao. Crowded with leather-clad eYonan warriors and Spaceforce officers in regulation green and gray, the huge room had been converted into a temporary canteen for the military units stationed there.

On the other side of the table, Danger cursed softly, his chin jerking upward, his black hair spilling over his brilliant blue eyes. His fork slipped from his fingers and hit his plate with a sharp crack as he stared at his best friend and barked, "The queen!"

Sitting in the chair next to Saxon, Match broke off his conversation with his commanding officer, Graham Hamm, and turned his questioning smile on Danger. As always, Match found it hard to believe that such an intense warrior had once played in a rock band with Saxon and three other musical renegades.

An Earther who'd emigrated to eYona when he was a teenager, Danger had distinguished himself during the eYonan civil war and earned his title of Iron Duke when his predecessor, Au'Banner, was called to the royal court at Iverannon. Recently, the planet of eYona had been invited to join the Alliance after rendering them critical aid that had enabled Spaceforce to destroy the Grundian High Command. And because Danger was an Earther—as were many of the Force's officers—the queen had chosen him to host the Alliance's troops at the Iron Palace.

Matchstick Maloney and Graham Hamm, as well as the other two members of their flight wing, Jed Castille and Jason Orlov, were part of an advance unit of Spaceforce military advisors sent to help defend eYona from any of the scattered Grundian military personnel who might be looking for revenge. And now that Inter-Gal had lifted the ban on intergalactic exchange of weapons, the Force's expanded mission was to train a select group of warriors to fly Hexapod gunships.

Eight more battlespace pilots had just that week joined the advance unit to which Matchstick belonged. The twelve pilots and sixteen support personnel were sleeping two to a room on the upper floors of Danger's palace, the eYonan barracks being full to capacity.

"Her people have decided her palace at Iverannon isn't secure enough," Saxon explained, his golden hair turning platinum in the white neon light that shone from vertical strips on the walls. "It's been decided that the Iron Palace, with its recently added fighter wings, will be safer. They feel it's the perfect venue for her—big enough to house her in comfort while small enough to be overlooked as a major target should

the Grundians try to revenge themselves on the queen—and well enough armed to protect her in any case.”

Danjer muttered an old Earth obscenity under his breath.

“Sorry if I ruined your breakfast,” Saxon growled defensively, his expression revealing that he didn’t understand the reason for Danjer’s foul mood. “She’s not very happy about being displaced. Even more upset that she’s being forced to play it safe. You know that’s not her style. You know how proud she is. But I’m sure it won’t be any trouble to have her here.”

“I’m sure it *will*,” Danjer gritted from behind his tightly clenched teeth. His newest scars, picked up during the Tauran ambush a month earlier, ripped across the network of old wounds that striped his powerful arms.

Saxon set his jaw and gave his friend a stern look. After Danjer’s recent scrape with death, a stern look was about all Saxon could scrape up in the way of criticism.

As though imploring the gods for patience, Danjer lifted his eyes to the vaulted ceilings of his great hall. A few thin rays of morning light slanted down from the small gothic windows set high on the stone walls. The ethereal atmosphere created by the faint beams of light seemed appropriate for communing with higher powers. Eventually Danjer narrowed his gaze on the big blond. “Do you happen to know how old the queen is?” he demanded.

Saxon opened his mouth to answer then halted, his parted lips frozen as though some new idea had entered his head.

“And do you know when her next birthday is?”

Saxon’s eyes filled with concern.

“It’s this month,” Danjer growled. “The queen turns twenty-four this month.”

“Ah...shit,” Saxon finally said, nodding his head in understanding.

“Twenty-four!” Gray exclaimed from the end of the table. “Your queen is only twenty-four?”

“She *will* be twenty-four,” Danjer ground out. “Soon.”

“Jeezis Skies,” Gray murmured, running one of his big hands back through his stiff brush of black hair. “Pretty young queen.”

Matchstick lifted his chin in agreement. Flicking his gaze at the Iron Duke and wondering why he was so pissed about the queen’s visit, he asked, “So we have to throw her a birthday party. Why is that a problem?”

Danjer snorted. “I wish it were that simple.”

Match just tilted his head, his eyebrows pulling together as he sent a searching look first at Saxon then back at Danjer.

Saxon sighed. “When the queen of eYona turns twenty-four, she takes her first champion.”

"First champion?" Match asked, lifting his cup of steaming char to his lips and taking a cautious sip.

"That's right," Saxon said. "The queen never takes a husband. Instead, every year beginning on her twenty-fourth birthday, she hosts a competition. A contest is held and the best man—the strongest champion—wins the right to sleep at her side for a year."

"A year?" Gray asked, his brow furrowing above eyes the color of steel as he tugged on his olive drab tie. "Only a year?"

"That's right," Saxon answered. "At the end of the year, another contest is held and the winner fights the queen's champion—assuming her champion wishes to retain the title. He can walk away if he chooses to do so."

"Walk away!" Gray exclaimed.

"If he's tired of his role as the queen's lover and protector," Danjer explained.

"Give up the throne?" Gray questioned on a cynical snort. "How often does that happen?"

"More often than you'd think," Saxon grunted. "It's not *his* throne. It's the queen's throne. As her champion, he's not a king or even a consort, though he fathers the queen's children and advises her in council."

"What if the queen doesn't want to change champions?" Match asked as several strands of hair fell down onto his brow. Reaching up with one hand, he swept the flame-colored mass behind his ear while reminding himself he was due for a haircut.

"She doesn't have much choice, at least not until she's raised an heir. After that happens, she can put her daughter on the throne and retire. That is what Yarionna's mother did five years ago. After holding his position for twenty-seven years, Braille was getting too old to dominate in the arena. The queen abdicated in favor of her daughter so she could spend the rest of her years with her champion."

"How old was he when he retired?" Match asked.

"Fifty-five," replied Saxon.

"Fifty-five!" Match barked. "He was still winning at fifty-five? The guy must have been a monster."

Saxon cocked his head to one side and gave a slight shrug. "There were fewer contenders in later years—as you might expect—partly due to the queen's advanced age and partly out of respect for her and her champion, Braille. When eYonans are happy, they're generally loyal to their queen. In fact, contenders have been known to step aside for the queen's sake if they know she favors another."

Matchstick took another sip of char as he thought this through. "So your present queen has been on the throne since she was nineteen?"

"Eighteen and a half," Saxon corrected him.

Match made a face. "Seems a young age to have so much responsibility heaped on your shoulders."

From behind him came the cold slide of a man's deep voice. "eYonan women are not unaccustomed to the yoke of responsibility. Queen Yarıonna is an incredibly strong young lady. She has broad shoulders."

Match hooked his arm over the back of his chair and gazed up at the leather-clad eYonan warrior who'd horned in on their conversation. His lip curled into a faint sneer when he saw who it was. Camp. Once a musician like Saxon and Danjer, though never quite as successful, the brown-haired warrior was known around the Iron Palace as the man with no life.

Camp spent his every off-hour working out in the training arena. As a result, he was quite possibly the strongest man Match had ever seen. His muscles were like bundled lumps of solid iron. His neck looked as though it could support Delta Base Twenty. The guy squeaked when he walked, for Skies' Sake. As far as Match was concerned, the eYonan was a loser and then some. While Match often took three women to his room at night, Camp stretched out alone on his bunk in the men's barracks. Obviously, the guy was in love with himself and his body, which was probably just as well for every female on the planet. Who'd want to get naked with a self-absorbed egomaniac like that?

With an indolent stretch, Match shot his long legs out beneath the table and sent the newcomer a sardonic smile. "You make your queen sound like an ox."

In an instant, Camp had his sword out of its sheath, the hall's neon light gleaming along the blade's silvery length as the tip pricked beneath Matchstick's jaw.

Match had never seen a man move so fast. He hadn't even had time to think. But he damn sure took the time to react. Furious that he'd allowed the eYonan to get the drop on him, a curse hissed past his lips as he snatched his dress dagger from the waistband of his regulation gray knee pants. A second later, it was ripping upward through the thick placket on the front of the eYonan's black leather pants.

"Enough!" Danjer shouted as he leapt to his feet, his arm chopping through the air while Gray yelled at Match to sheathe his knife.

A moment of frigid animosity followed where neither man gave an inch. Then Match caught a glimpse of Gray's expression and decided that maybe he could afford to back down. He had, after all, inflicted the most damage. Without removing his sharp gaze from the warrior's face, Match slowly returned his dagger to his waistband while Danjer glared Camp's sword back into its scabbard.

Camp dipped his chin stiffly to his commander, a bright slash of color painting his broad cheekbones as he stood there with a long ragged tear parting the first layer of leather that covered his groin. Like most eYonan men, he wore a cockstone riveted into the base of his fly. In Camp's case it was a flat, round piece of lapis shot with silver. Currently, it hung from his crotch by a tattered black thread. Reaching down with one hand, Camp fisted the blue stud and tore it loose.

Annoyingly enough, half the women in the room gasped.

"I apologize, Danjer," Camp said, his tone formal but sincere. Then he pivoted on his heel and stalked toward the arch that led out to the tiled entry, his cleated boots leaving temporary wounds on the pliant styrowood floors.

"Most eYonans are loyal to their queen," Saxon offered quietly, his expression sympathetic as he watched Camp's retreating back. "Especially those from the north."

Gray pinned Matchstick with his stormy gaze. "Which means you'll avoid baiting her warriors if you're smart."

Point taken. Match acknowledged his commanding officer and friend of eight years with a casual salute.

"Anyhow," Saxon said, returning to their earlier topic of conversation. "The queen turns twenty-four this month and must take her first champion, which means..." His voiced trailed away as he lifted his tawny brows and gazed at Danjer.

"Which means," Danjer finished for him, "she'll be hosting the contest here at Judipeao."

Match rocked his chair onto its back legs and locked his hands behind his head. "Sounds like a good way to break the monotony to me."

Danjer shared a dark look with Matchstick's commanding officer, who cleared his throat with a menacing rumble. "If you're bored, Lieutenant Maloney, we can sort that out for you pretty damn quickly."

A creeping wash of heat curled around the back of Match's ears and spread across the high arc of his cheekbones. He hadn't meant to insult his eYonan hosts. In truth, he loved it there on eYona. Loved the space. Loved the violent evening storms and the still, quiet mornings. He couldn't have asked for a better posting. But babysitting a bunch of recruits in space all day wasn't exactly his idea of high adventure. The Hexapod gunships were pretty user-friendly and, until the warriors worked their way up to the more advanced maneuvers, the days were going to drag.

"My apologies to Danjer," Match murmured, swiftly returning his chair to an upright position. "I didn't mean to suggest I was bored here on eYona. That's not the case. I love this planet. If it weren't for my career with the Force, I could easily see myself settling down in a place like this..." He let his voice trail away while sending a contrite look in Gray's direction.

But Gray ignored him, probably still pissed off. Since his recent promotion from wing leader to lieutenant commander, Gray's sense of humor wasn't what it used to be. In fact, his sense of humor sucked. "So what sorts of competitions are involved in this contest?" Gray asked.

"The first challenge is hand-to-hand fighting," Saxon explained, his expression animated as he leaned forward in his seat. Clearly, the contest was a popular event on the planet of eYona. "After two rounds of hand fighting, the number of entries will be halved then halved again. Only the winners go on to the next level."

"No...double elimination for the contestants?" Gray inquired, lifting a dark eyebrow.

Saxon shook his head. "You lose, you're out. There are no second chances—the logic being that when defending the queen's life, there are no second chances. The queen's champion has to win every time."

"Hand-to-hand?" Match cut in. "Do you mean boxing? Or wrestling? What about karate?"

"I mean hand-to-hand. Anything goes. The matches are won by whatever means a contestant can disable his opponent without the use of a weapon."

"Disable?" Gray queried. "What do you mean by disable?"

"The winner must pin his opponent for ten seconds. Either that or force him from the fighting circle."

Match shared an interested look with Gray before asking, "Doesn't anyone ever get knocked out?"

"Sure," Saxon replied. "That counts for a win too."

"How big is the circle?"

"Twenty feet across," Saxon answered.

"What happens after the hand fighting?" Match asked, beginning to look forward to watching the contests, despite the fact that he thought it was a damn cold way to select a mate for a young woman who was given no choice in the matter.

"After the hand-to-hand rounds, the winners progress to the fencing rounds. The first swordsman to touch his sword to his opponent's heart wins the fight. At the beginning of the fencing rounds there are generally about a hundred competitors. The contests continue every day for a week until two men are left. The last two men compete on the day of the queen's birthday. At the end of the final fencing match, she takes the winner to bed."

"And a year later, it happens all over again," Gray stated.

"That's right. With the exception that the queen's champion only has to fight the final winner of the competition."

"Well," Gray allowed as he rolled his shoulders beneath his short, military green jacket. "It should be interesting."

Match held his tongue. He was already feeling sorry for the eYonan queen who might be required to change lovers every year regardless of whether she had grown attached to the man who'd recently shared her bed and regardless of whether she loathed the man who'd supplanted him. Of course, he wasn't about to say anything that would insult his hosts again. But even if the eYonan queen *were* built like an ox with a face to match her broad shoulders, he didn't envy her prospects.

Chapter Two

“You going down to the hall?” Jed asked as he stuck his head inside the door to Matchstick’s room. “Word is that Danjer’s going to introduce the troops to the queen and bring us up to date on protocol.”

Match closed his workpad and lifted his chin to smile at the eYonan Spaceforce lieutenant he’d roomed with since his days at the academy. After Jed and Gray had married Velvet Meadows, Match had briefly shared a room with Jason Orlov here at the Iron Palace. But that arrangement hadn’t lasted long before Jason and Junkie had married Velvet’s sister, Lacey.

His friends were dropping like flies.

Since Jason had married and moved down the hall, Match had been sharing a room with a quiet young man named Jake, an eYonan warrior and personal friend of Danjer’s. Although Jake had apparently been instrumental in helping Saxon and Danjer to capture the leader of the Southern army and end the civil war on eYona, his social skills were nil. Fiercely devoted to Danjer, Jake was occasionally given to acts of physical recklessness. It was almost as though the young man was desperate to prove himself. Or trying to absolve himself of some crime. But Jake was seldom in the room except to sleep, so Match had no complaints.

Ironically enough, Jake had chosen a Spaceforce officer, Bellamy Anders, as the object of his affection. It was only ironic because Bellamy was known to be one of the toughest officers in the Force...as well as the most available. Seemingly, she’d never met a man she didn’t like. Match had no doubt Bellamy would eventually work her way around to seducing Jake, though a more unlikely pair would be hard to imagine. Bellamy liked it a little rough as Match knew from firsthand experience. But currently, she was focusing all of her efforts on Blair, a close friend of Camp’s. And while Bellamy was a girl who couldn’t say no, apparently Blair *could* and had already done so several times. Evidently Blair wasn’t keen on Earthers in general and Spaceforce officers in particular.

“The queen’s here already?” Match questioned. “That was fast. Saxon only mentioned her travel plans this morning.”

“She’s here,” Jed confirmed, his somnolent gaze a narrow line of pale green light. “You coming down?”

“I think I’ll pass,” Matchstick answered, grimacing. “I’ve heard all about the queen and her broad shoulders.”

Jed’s eyes widened the barest fraction but looked no less sleepy than they normally did. “You don’t think she’ll be attractive?”

“Considering her bloodlines, I think she’ll look like Attila the Hun.”

When Jed laughed, Match couldn’t help the warm surge of affection he felt for his former roommate. At least Jed had a sense of humor, which was more than could be said for his countryman, Camp. “Why do you need protocol training?” he asked. “You’re a native.”

“I’ve been away for ten years,” Jed reminded him as he took a step into the room and flicked his wavy brown hair off his brow.

“Have you ever seen her?” Match asked, thinking Jed might be able to confirm his suspicions about the queen’s looks.

“Not since she was a girl,” Jed admitted. “I was sixteen. That would have made the princess about ten.”

“What did she look like?”

“A ten-year-old girl,” Jed answered, shrugging. “Kinda chunky, I guess. I don’t remember. But her brother isn’t what you’d consider ugly.”

“Junkie?”

“Yeah.”

Match hesitated for the brief span of three seconds while trying to picture Junkie’s lean, rugged face on a woman’s body. It didn’t work worth a damn. “Well, don’t take it the wrong way, Jed, but I think it’s fucking barbaric – mating your queen to the biggest, strongest male so that she’ll have the biggest, strongest children, as though she were a prize heifer.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to break with tradition,” Jed allowed. “But the reasoning behind the champion competition is to ensure the queen has an able guard always at her side, day and night. And if that man has bedded the queen...” Jed shrugged. “He’ll be more likely to feel protective toward her.”

“Whatever,” Match answered, impatiently rolling his shoulders. “All I know is that, after generations of championship breeding, I’m not holding out much hope for the queen’s looks. Did you see how defensive Camp got down there in the great hall when I suggested she might be something less than beautiful? There was something fishy about the way he flew off the handle.”

“I wasn’t there,” Jed reminded him. “But maybe Camp’s in love with the queen.”

“Love doesn’t smell fishy, Jed. Beached whales smell fishy. Trout smell fishy. I think the guy was embarrassed and maybe even ashamed of his queen with her broad shoulders.” Match shuddered at the idea of a broad-shouldered woman.

Jed drew a finger down his long, straight nose and gave Match a look from beneath the shadow of his eyelashes. “When he used that term, I think he might have been speaking...figuratively.”

“Yeah, well, I figure her figure leaves a lot to be desired,” Match stated stubbornly. “In fact, I figure she looks like a trout.”

“Suit yourself,” Jed told him. “She’ll be around for a while, I reckon.”

“And she’ll probably be hard to miss,” Match snorted as Jed reached for the door to leave.

* * * * *

On his way down to dinner later that evening, Match caught sight of Jed in the corridor up ahead. Lengthening his stride, he caught up with the sun-darkened eYonan before he reached the end of the carpet. A deep royal blue with an intricate gold border, the carpet must have been a gift from a foreign power since eYonans were completely color-blind. Most of the palace furnishings were white, black, gray and natural earth tones, ranging from pale off-whites to dark browns, though even the richest brown would be perceived as gray through the eyes of an eYonan.

The same trend continued into the clothing worn by the people of eYona. When not wearing black leather, they dressed mostly in white and off-white, grays, beiges, tans and browns. Since they couldn’t see colors they didn’t wear them. Instead, they added interest to their attire with patterns or textures stamped into the fabric of their garments. In addition, the men almost invariably wore a cockstone. Although this piece of jewelry was often a large flashy gem, polished pieces of patterned agate were also very popular.

“So, was I right about the queen?” Match asked as they descended the winding staircase, the heels of their boots clicking on the stone steps.

Jed ducked his chin, hiding what looked like a sly grin. “When were you ever wrong, Match?”

While he eyed Jed suspiciously, they entered the great hall together and filed through the buffet line. After filling their plates, they made their way toward the table where Gray and Velvet sat together. Jed’s expression softened the moment he set eyes on the lovely blonde he shared with Gray.

Match snorted, the sound betraying his impatience. He wasn’t happy with the way his two close friends had surrendered their independence. Gray and Jed were absolutely besotted with their new wife and, though it hadn’t affected their ability to perform their jobs, Match still felt sorry for the two men who’d dedicated themselves to one woman and one pussy for the rest of their lives. Why on earth would a man do that?

Again he snorted, certain that he’d never fall beneath the spell of one woman. Not when there were so many lovely young things ready and willing to share his bed. For a moment, he caught Velvet’s amethyst gaze. Her lips curled into a friendly smile that was so stunning it almost knocked him back a step. The exotic Adept, with her long sheet of pale blonde hair, was like cold fire and just one of the most exciting women he’d ever met.

Okay. So he might have made an exception for Velvet if Gray and Jed hadn’t beaten him to the punch. Or even her redheaded sister Lacey, who was a sexy bundle of mischief. Both were members of the Adept race, which meant they could adapt to

changes in their environment. Over time, Velvet could grow claws if she felt threatened or even shrink an arm if her wrist was shackled. But that wasn't the most interesting change that could be made by an Adept. On a personal level, an Adept could adjust to accommodate the size of her lover's cock. Her vagina would expand to take a big man and contract to hug a smaller man. And evidently, Lacey could make all of those changes more swiftly than her older sister. But Lacey had recently married Jason and Junkie in a private ceremony in Iverannon.

And now that the good ones were all taken, that left Match to make do with whatever he could find. Of course, he couldn't complain. The pickings were good on eYona. With Gray, Jed and Jason all out of action—not to mention Junkie, Danjer and Saxon—somebody had to pick up the baton and keep the ladies satisfied. It was a dirty job but somebody had to do it, though it often meant entertaining three women a night.

Match had never had any trouble finding a woman to warm his bed, either back on Earth or while on assignment offworld. Bellamy Anders had once described him as the most beautiful redhead she'd ever met and insisted that included all the women she knew. But Bellamy claimed it was his voice that reeled women in and made them want to suck his cock. Low and gravelly—even harsh—were the words she used to describe his voice. She said he always sounded like he was in the middle of sex. Good sex. Hard, gritty, grinding sex. Even when he was doing something as mundane as ordering supplies.

But his romantic career had really taken off after he'd arrived on the planet of eYona. For some reason, he was hugely popular with the pretty eYonan soldiers stationed at the Iron Palace. Privately, he suspected it had something to do with his so-called resemblance to Danjer, whom he guessed most of the women had been in love with before he and Saxon had married Pink. More than one of his eYonan bed partners had asked if he was related to the Iron Duke, which was fucking comical when you considered the difference in their hair color. Personally, Match couldn't see the resemblance though their eyes *were* the same brilliant shade of blue. But if eYonans couldn't see the difference in their hair color, how could they see the similarity in the color of their eyes?

Match dropped into a chair beside Jed and tucked into his meal. He closed his eyes on the first delicious bite. Right from the start, he'd fallen in love with eYonan cuisine. And tonight, Danjer's legion of chefs had prepared his favorite dish—huge chunks of savory white meat in a light lemonale sauce that just defied description. His taste buds were in heaven.

When he'd asked Jed several weeks earlier what ingredients went into his favorite meal, Jed had reeled off a long list of foreign-sounding ingredients before mentioning tick meat. At the time, Match assumed Jed was just pulling his leg. But he'd never asked anyone else, just in case. He didn't want to ruin a good thing. If he *were* eating the meat of a giant insect, he'd rather not have it confirmed.

As he opened his eyes again, a graceful swish of cream-colored crepe snagged his attention and his head automatically turned to follow the long, sweeping flow of fabric.

Most of the eYonan women based at the palace dressed in the same black leathers as their male counterparts. And the female airmen who belonged to his unit all wore green jackets and gray knee pants just like his. So, a woman in a dress was a fairly rare event in Judipeao.

The woman who was wearing it, however, was a damn sight more rare than that. Far more rare. Slowly, automatically, without even realizing it, Matchstick moved to his feet, his gaze fixed on the young woman who'd just entered the hall. As he stared at the exquisite dark-haired beauty, a small wanting groan sneaked past his lips – not exactly a smooth move, considering he was the only man standing in the hall and therefore liable to be the center of attention. The helpless male sound pretty much announced his interest to anyone within earshot.

From the chair beside Match, Jed tugged his sleeve and hissed, "Sit down, you ass."

With a jerk of his wrist, Match shook him off, totally absorbed and entirely enthralled by the woman who glided across the hall, her long gown of textured crepe belted at the waist and sweeping her satin-slippered toes as she moved toward the table Danger shared with Saxon and Pink.

Match had seen a lot of beautiful women in his time. He'd worked with a lot of beautiful women. He'd gotten hot and sweaty and naked with a lot of beautiful women. Hell, he'd fucked a lot of beautiful women. But never in his lifetime had a woman so captured his interest.

She was perfect as far as women went, tall enough to ensure that her legs would be long enough to wrap around his hips as he captured her against the wall. Her svelte frame was lusciously round in every place that counted, yet gracefully slender in every place between – her waist narrow, her breasts delicious mounds, her ass just the most elegant piece of backside he'd ever seen.

Watching her as she floated across the room, Match could tell she had the sort of body that would bow beautifully when she climaxed. Not surprisingly, he found his cock stiffening at the idea of witnessing just such an event. After all, he had no reason to think he'd have any trouble getting the eYonan beauty beneath him, based on his history with the women on that planet.

Slowly, he moved his avid gaze up her sumptuous body to take a closer look at her elegant features.

Her long slender neck supported a delicately molded face with high cheekbones and expressive black eyes. Her soft smile was full-lipped, her pouty mouth just the juiciest shade of deep crimson he'd ever seen. He found it ironic that a woman with lips the color of sex incarnate should be born on a planet where men could see no colors, in a world where there was not a single man to appreciate the deep carnal blush of her mouth.

Just above the right edge of her slight smile sat a provocatively inviting little mole. He wanted to brush his lips across the small velvety bump and feel its soft texture beneath his mouth. He wanted to flatten his tongue over it and pay it the homage and

attention it deserved. He wanted to claim it with the blunt edge of his teeth. His lips tingled with a disturbing burst of awareness and he sucked them between his teeth, trying to halt the uncomfortable sensation that called for action, that demanded he taste the sexy beauty mark and crush those sex-colored lips beneath his own.

Her hair hung down to the middle of her back in a long black braid twined with flat ribbons of hammered gold. From the heavy, rebellious strands that had escaped the loosely bound braid, it appeared as though her hair would be a rich riot of dark waves once it was set free. Again, a soft, telling grunt broke past his lips as he clenched his fists against an overwhelming urge to untie her hair, plunge his hands into the heavy weight of silk and experience its sleek texture against his skin as he combed it with his fingers and tumbled it over her shoulders in a wild rush of exotic midnight.

Despite how swiftly his friends had recently fallen in love—Jed and Gray with Velvet, and Jason with Lacey—Match didn't believe in love at first sight. As far as he was concerned, that was an unrealistically romantic concept that was better off left to the opposite sex. But despite his healthy male cynicism, he was beginning to think there might be such a thing as knock-me-down and out-for-the-count *lust* at first sight.

Again, Jed tugged his sleeve. "Sit down!" he hissed. "No one stands in the queen's presence. Not without her permission."

The queen! It took a full three seconds for the significance of Jed's words to reach his brain. "The queen..." he whispered, shaking his head as he gazed at the vision that was the eYonan queen. He couldn't believe it. She was a complete contradiction to everything he'd expected, everything he'd imagined. Well, except for his prediction that she'd be hard to miss. "Holy Mother of God."

"Sit down!" Jed insisted, cutting across his softly whispered curse.

But the queen's gaze had already settled on Match. Her guileless smile slowly changed into a cool look of disapproval.

Gray slid from his chair onto one knee, speaking rapidly. "I apologize for my officer's behavior, My Queen. Lieutenant Maloney is unfamiliar with the ways of your people. If he'd been here earlier," he grated, scorching Matchstick with an accusatory look, "he'd have learned some of the protocol we discussed this afternoon."

Still, Match remained on his feet, bowing slightly at the waist without letting his gaze stray one bare centimeter from the queen's face. "I'm sorry, Your Highness. Or Your Majesty," he said clumsily, not at all sure what he was supposed to call her. "As Lieutenant Commander Hamm just explained, I *am* unfamiliar with your customs. Please forgive me but where *I* come from, a man rises when a beautiful woman enters the room."

He watched her face carefully, wondering how she'd handle the compliment as well as the sexual innuendo. He hadn't been exaggerating about rising. When he'd stood for the queen, his cock had been way ahead of him. Since his short, military green jacket didn't cover the front of his gray knee pants, his erection would be pretty much evident to anyone who cared to drop their glance south. Not that he was troubled by

the prospect. Match had nothing to be ashamed of. And most of the women in the hall were well aware of that fact.

The queen blushed the most adorable shade of pink, the color doing wonders for her pale, translucent skin. Uncertain whether his flattery accounted for her change in color or if she was embarrassed by his double entendre, Matchstick was nonetheless charmed by the effect.

"Please," she said quietly, her gaze skittering away across the golden styrowood floor, her voice so smooth and melodic it sounded as though it had been dipped in honey. "Please be seated, Lieutenant Maloney."

Sinking down into his seat, Match savored the sound of his name on her lips while his gaze followed her across the room toward Danjer's table. Only then did he notice the two guards who trailed her by a few paces, their fawn-colored jackets and close-fitting long pants conspicuous amid all the black leather, broken only occasionally by the Force's green and gray.

"My Queen," Jed rumbled at him in a growl. "You're supposed to call her My Queen."

Match didn't even turn his head to acknowledge Jed, his gaze still firmly attached to the dark-haired beauty moving toward the other side of the room. When she reached her destination, she turned and, in her low, melodic voice, she invited everyone to go about their business. Immediately, the muffled sound of chairs dragging against styrowood filled the great hall as airmen and warriors rose from their seats. "What's her name again?" Match murmured without surrendering his view of the queen. "Yarionna?"

Jed snorted. "What?"

"The queen's name. What is it?"

When Jed didn't answer, Match finally tore his eyes away from the queen to find him sharing a look with Gray.

"You. My room. Now," Gray barked as he pushed back in his chair. After rising to his feet, Matchstick's commanding officer stalked across the floor of the great hall and through the wide archway, leaving Jed to follow at a sauntering pace.

Squaring his shoulders, Match stood and rounded the end of the table to follow Jed and Gray. As he made his way through the press of eYonan warriors, one of them put a wide shoulder in his chest. Gritting his teeth, he held his ground and gave the eYonan a matching shove. The tall soldier snickered, mimicking Match as he brushed past. "Where I come from, a man rises for a beautiful woman."

Match set his mouth, turned his shoulders and pushed his way through the throng of warriors, only to be stopped again as he reached the entry. Camp stood in the arch, blocking his way long enough to mutter in a gritty undertone, "For your information, where *we* come from, a man rises when a beautiful woman enters the room too. But if it's the queen, he remains seated."

“Good to know something gets you up,” Match growled while shooting him a get-out-of-my-way glare.

“What do you mean by that?” Camp gritted, his brown gaze turning narrow and sharp.

“Only that your reputation precedes you. And women are complaining that you can’t—”

The next thing Match knew, he was crushed up against the wall in the entry, Camp’s fist knotted in his olive drab shirt. Jeezis Skies! What was it with this guy? Most of the eYonans he knew were pretty easygoing. Most of them had a sense of humor!

“You were saying?” Camp snarled, his gaze fierce, his nose a scant two inches from Matchstick’s.

“Women are complaining that you never make yourself available,” Match said, wisely resorting to the truth.

“You, on the other hand, have made yourself available to just about every female on the planet.”

Match gave him a slow smile. “Someone has to pick up the slack.”

“Well, forgive me for being particular about who I fuck.”

“Very particular,” Match pointed out. “I’ve never seen a man so particular. Now, are you going to let me go or are you ready to lose another pair of leather pants?”

Shoving away from him, Camp hissed, “Fuck anyone you like. Just stay away from the queen. She’s a virgin until the day of her birthday.”

“Virgin. Right,” Match muttered, it taking a few seconds for the information to sink in.

The eYonan was only stating the obvious, yet it took a few more seconds for Match to come to terms with the idea. His reaction to the news was immediate. It sharpened something deep inside him. Something that he barely recognized. Some primal, feral force that all but howled at the prospect of being the first man to take her. Something that was determined to have her. But Match could deal with those primal instincts. It was the other strong reaction that troubled him. That deep, visceral part of his soul that wanted to keep her.

Matchstick tugged down on the hem of his jacket as he tracked the angry eYonan’s departure across the entry and through the high palace doors. Right. That was one irate male out of the way. That just left Gray to deal with. With a defiant growl rumbling in his chest, Match headed up the stairs and down the wide corridor to his commanding officer’s room.

“You know,” Gray drawled as Match stepped through the door, “for a guy who claims to love it here on eYona, you’re making yourself pretty damn unwelcome.”

Gray’s drawl didn’t fool Match for one second. His commanding officer was pissed. A dangerous storm crowded at the back of his narrowed gray eyes as he sat bunched

behind his desk. "I'm just...having a bad day," Match growled. "I'll...make up for it tonight."

"I just bet you will," Gray rumbled then leaned forward over his desk, his voice turning harsh. "In the meantime, let me bring you up to date on some of the royal protocol you missed when you failed to attend the meeting earlier today. You can't stand in the queen's presence unless she invites you to stand. You don't speak to her unless she speaks to you. When she *does* speak to you, you call her My Queen. You got that, Maloney?"

Match winced at the sound of his last name. It had been years since Gray had referred to him by his surname. He was pissed all right. But Match refused to be intimidated by Gray, even if he *was* his commanding officer. "What about those two guys who followed her into the hall?" he challenged Gray. "They were standing."

"Those men belong to her personal guard. She gives them permission to stand when they first report to her. Anyone else who finds himself in the queen's presence, either grabs a chair or drops to one knee."

"Drops to one knee?" Match exclaimed, disgusted at the idea. "We have to kneel for her?"

"Yes."

"Everyone?"

"Yes, everyone except the queen's champion."

Match shook his head, his lip curling. "That's fucking bullshit," he snarled.

"That's customary on this planet," Gray shot back.

Jed, slouched in an overstuffed chair in the corner of the room, cleared his throat. "The idea behind the gesture is that the queen of eYona is so beautiful she causes all men to go to their knees."

"Okay," Match allowed grudgingly. "I'm not going to argue with the truth of that. Just the wisdom. If everyone's on their knees, how can they protect her?"

"That's the job of her champion," Gray pointed out in a voice like sleet.

"Well, she doesn't have a champion yet. And if the Grundians get here," Match argued stubbornly, "she's going to need more than one."

"Well, until the Grundians get here, you'll adhere to the customs of this planet!" Gray roared.

"Okay. But it's a damn stupid custom and the first one I'll be changing when I'm the queen's champion."

"Queen's champion!" Jed choked. "You?"

"Why not?" Match demanded hotly, his mind swiftly generating plans and devices and means to ends. He meant to get close to the queen but he refused to be subservient to her. The idea just rankled every male fiber in his being. If the queen's guard could stand in her presence – as could her champion – he needed to get assigned to her guard until he could win the competition, though he doubted he'd do much standing after he

won, unless it was up against the wall with Yarionna captured beneath him. "Why not?" he repeated.

Jed gave him a long steady look. "Because you don't stand a chance," he stated.

"The hand-to-hand contests won't be an issue," Match argued. "My martial arts skills are as good as anyone else's in the Force. They ought to stand up to anything the eYonans can throw at me."

"What about fencing?" Jed challenged him.

"I'll need fencing lessons," he admitted, his growl surly.

"Lessons!" Jed snorted, lifting his hand in an impatient gesture. "Match, there's no way you can learn in a few days what these men have been doing all their lives."

"A few days?"

"Sign-up is tomorrow. The competition starts the day after. After two days of hand fighting, the fencing rounds begin."

"And you're refusing to help." Match drilled him with a hard look.

Jed returned a long, measured stare.

"What? I'm not good enough for your eYonan queen?" he demanded, annoyance stiffening his spine.

Jed made a rude sound at the back of his throat. "Don't be ridiculous."

"What does that mean?"

Jed turned his palms outward and sighed. "That means I'll try to help."

Match nodded. "Good," he said. "When can we start?"

Jed exchanged a look with Gray and shook his head resignedly. "The training arena is open twenty-four hours a day."

"Well, what the fuck are we standing here for? Let's go."

* * * * *

"How am I doing?" Match asked the next morning after his second grueling session with Jed in the training arena. As he wiped his wrist over his damp brow he couldn't help noticing that Jed hadn't broken a sweat.

Jed shook his head. "The queen could disarm you."

"The queen fences?" he asked, his shoulders sagging.

"Everyone on eYona fences, Match. Everyone! From the smallest boy to the oldest grandmother. It's...part of our culture."

Match propped his shoulder against the battered wooden sideboards that ringed the arena, his face grim as he panted, "I don't stand a chance, do I?"

Jed shook his head. "None whatsoever."

He glanced at the time, the red numbers glowing at the top of the stadium, and figured he had about thirty minutes to get cleaned up and get over to the launch field

before his recruits showed up for their flight instruction. "Any advice?" he asked as he unfastened the fencing grip that wrapped his sword hand. The thin piece of leather looped over his middle finger and spread over his palm then fastened behind his wrist, improving his grip on his sword.

"Yeah. Get out now before you make a fool of yourself."

The gears churned inside his head as he gave Jed a solemn nod. "I need to get my hands on a rule book," he finally grunted.

Chapter Three

In the ambassadorial apartment Danjer had set aside for her, Yarionna wrung her hands as she paced. From the corner of her eye, she slipped a glance at Saxon, who was draped like a huge cat across the wide, upholstered chair in front of her tallwood desk. A longtime friend, whose family had supported hers for several generations, as well as a lord and heir to many properties along the coast, Saxon the Outlander had long ago left his father's estates to pursue a music career with his friend, Danjer of Earth. More recently, the two men had fought side by side in the civil war. The friends were inseparable, which was one of the reasons they'd ended up married to the same woman. Not that multi-relationships were unusual on eYona. They were relatively common. In fact, Saxon's uncle had two wives.

She turned and paced a few more times past a small loveseat upholstered in the same leafy pattern as the chair Saxon sprawled in. She eyed the blond warrior again while searching for the words that might help her phrase her question. "Do you think...I mean...are you sure there'll be any contenders? What if nobody wants to...?"

"That won't be a problem," Saxon reassured her, his smile kind.

"How can you be so sure?" she pressed him as she turned and perched on the end of the big bed, its white satin comforter piled high with embroidered pillows.

"The men are already placing bets," he said, his eyes crinkling at the corners as his smile broadened. "And they wouldn't let their gold leave their hands unless they were sure there was going to be a contest."

She dipped her head in a distracted nod as she watched the toe of her satin slipper rub a shallow dent into the styrowood floor. "And who are they betting on?" she asked in a small voice.

"Yarionna?"

She lifted her chin. She hated to admit, even to herself, that she was frightened. A queen was supposed to be fearless and brave, cool under fire. During her reign, she'd dealt with situations far more serious than the matter of which man would share her bed for a year. The civil war was a good example. And the future presented no shortage of dangerous scenarios that might threaten the safety and well-being of her people.

Yet, at that precise moment in time, the prospect of a Grundian invasion was preferable to the predicament in which she found herself. In a little over a week she'd be in bed with a man she didn't know. A man she hadn't chosen. A man she didn't yet love and might never learn to love. Someone old or ugly or even worse, a big, simple brute. "Do you have any idea who I might end up with? Which man might prevail to become my champion?"

Saxon drew his lips together into a thoughtful knot. "Probably one of Danjer's men. Some of the best warriors are in his cavalry. Camp the Islander, perhaps. Or maybe Blair the Stormrider," he added, a little less certainly.

She nodded several times but didn't feel any less anxious. Her stomach was an uneasy coil of tension.

"Would you like to meet some of them?"

"Oh!" she exclaimed quietly as she gazed at Saxon, her fingers fluttering at her throat. Torn, she couldn't decide how to respond. Did she want to meet these men? Did she want to know them? What if they were horrible and dull? If that were the case, she'd be terrified that they might win. What if they were handsome and interesting? Then she'd be sick if they were to lose.

Saxon stretched in the comfortable chair and crossed his legs at the ankles. "Blair is no older than I," he told her encouragingly. "Camp even a few years younger."

Her gaze flitted to his face and she smiled gratefully.

He looked around and rubbed a hand over his angular jaw as though searching for something else to say. "Both were musicians before the war. Like Danjer and me. They opened for us in Geveena and partied with us afterward. I could point them out to you sometime," he suggested. "In fact, why don't we grab Pink and tour the new launch field right now? You can see the facility, watch the Hexapods launch into space and maybe get a look at some of eYona's finest warriors training to be battlespace pilots."

Yarionna twisted her hands together. Musicians. That sounded hopeful. In fact, that sounded intelligent and artistic. And as musicians, there was even a chance that they might be nice looking. Pushing her hair behind her ear, she gave him a quiet smile and said, "Thank you, Saxon. I'd like that."

* * * * *

As it turned out, "nice looking" was an understatement. With a dreamy smile curving her lips, Yarionna stretched her arms over her head and fell backward onto the satin comforter that cushioned her bed. At the Spaceforce launch field, Saxon had pointed out two of the men more likely to win the tournament. While both were certainly easy on the eyes, it was Camp who had drawn her attention over and over again while Saxon and Pink had escorted her on her tour of the new facility.

Camp the Islander. Such a strong name. Such a rugged, well-defined jawline. Such a firm, masculine, no-nonsense mouth. But it was his eyes that had made her melt. So warm and...interested. So dark and expressive, his lashes so thick they would have done honor to a woman. Her gaze had collided with his more than once during the tour and every time he'd regarded her as though she were the most captivating creature on earth.

Unfortunately, she'd locked gazes with the flight instructor as well. Lieutenant Maloney—or Match as he was called by his peers. His eyes were strangely cold and

brilliant. Like an arctic storm. Feral and hungry. He reminded her of *Danjer*, the wild, unpredictable Earther who was her host there at the Iron Palace. She'd never felt comfortable around *Danjer*, though she knew he was probably the best soldier on the planet and certainly the most accomplished tracker. As an Earther, *Danjer* saw things that eYonans couldn't see. Colors. It was that strange ability to see color, so hard for eYonans to grasp and understand, that made him such a skillful tracker.

Danjer carried with him a passionate, violent energy that touched everyone who stood within ten feet of him. Lieutenant Maloney exuded a similar fierce presence, vibrant and elemental and very unsettling. His rough, graveled voice sounded as though he was always suggesting something. Something that was somehow both delicious and dirty at the same time. His keen, strafing gaze cut to her very soul and left her feeling strangely vulnerable, with the uncomfortable notion that she'd have no secrets from him.

She would never be at ease with a man like that.

No, she was looking for a kind, warm, strong man. A man like her father. A man who would phrase his words carefully and support her decisions. A man who would work tirelessly to build her confidence every day, who'd make her feel sure of herself and of his love. A man who would reaffirm his love for her year after year by fighting to keep his place at her side.

That was the kind of champion she needed. Not a man who stripped her naked with a look and flayed her raw with his brash, frank opinions. Not a man who opened her up and laid bare all her secrets for the entire world to see. And certainly not a man who had the power to expose her darkest, sinful yearnings. A man like that would seize everything he could get his hands on then walk away at the end of a year. He'd leave her an empty shell. Aching for the touch of his lips, the feel of his skin. Longing for the man who'd taken everything from her bed and her body, from her heart and her soul.

Thank goodness Lieutenant Maloney was an offworlder and wouldn't be competing in the tournament.

As Yarıonna hugged herself, she felt certain she knew which kind of man her heart would be safe with. A man like Camp. And Saxon seemed fairly confident that Camp would win the competition, though he admitted he hadn't seen the contenders from the other cities. In the meantime, she had a little over a week to learn more about him. What she needed was an opportunity to get a little closer to the tall, rugged warrior.

Naturally, the first thing that came to mind was dancing.

* * * * *

Match leaned back in his chair, his legs stretched beneath his desk, his hands locked behind his head as he gazed at the tall, narrow window in his room. Before him on the desk sat a very small, very thin booklet which he had picked up that afternoon in the armory after he'd returned from his training mission and signed the competition roster. He'd carefully scanned the book's entire contents in less than five minutes. Essentially,

there were no rules governing the champion competition. The booklet covered the queen's responsibility in selecting the arbiters, dealt with the requirements of posting the rosters, explained what constituted a win in the two different events, and finally made clear the queen's duty to accept the winner as her champion. And that was about it!

He gazed at the window without seeing it. No rules. That opened the door to a whole slew of possibilities. As his eyes finally focused on the world outside the narrow strip of glass, he noticed a dark bank of clouds piling up on the eastern horizon. Suddenly, he realized the hour. The kitchen would be closing soon. Leaving the booklet on his desk, he loped down the stairs and into the great hall. When he got there, he found a small party clearing the dining tables off to the sides of the room. Surprised to find Jason there, he made a slight detour.

"You guys still here?" he asked as Jason caught hold of a table and waited for Junkie to grab the other end. "I thought you'd been ordered back to Earth Base Ten."

"Junkie got the reassignment pushed back two weeks," Jason explained. "So that he could be here for the champion competition."

Match turned his stunned gaze on the queen's lanky, dark-haired brother.

Junkie shrugged. "Yarionna wanted me to be here. She pulled the strings. Not me."

"So we got a two-week reprieve," Jason explained, his pleased tone betraying the fact that he was *not* looking forward to the trip back home. Match couldn't help but sympathize with his blond wing companion. Compared to Earth, with its crowded cities, the planet of eYona was a friggin' paradise.

"If you're looking for something to eat," Junkie remarked as he sauntered across the room, "the kitchen's open. They're serving up an Earther dish. Spattaghi or some damn thing."

"Spaghetti," Match corrected him, sharing a grin with Jason.

"Whatever," Junkie drawled. "I'm not eating it. It looks like a bunch of anemic worms buried in mud."

"If it was worms in mud, I wouldn't eat it either," Match returned agreeably. "But it's just pasta in tomato sauce."

"Hey. It's none of my business what Earthers eat," Junkie argued mildly. "I wouldn't know pasta from nutgrubber turds. But I'm in no position to turn up my nose at other people's eating habits when my favorite dish is giant tick smothered in lemonale sauce."

"I didn't hear that," Match said, making a face as he backed toward the kitchen. "So why is the dining room closed?"

"Dancing," Jason threw over his shoulder as he and Junkie hefted the table across the wide, vaulted room.

"Dancing?" he asked, his ears pricking up at the word.

Junkie nodded. "There'll be dancing in the great hall tonight."

“Really?” Match shot the two men a look of surprise. “Is Hard and Fast playing?” he asked, referring to the band Junkie played in, along with Saxon and Danjer.

Junkie snorted. “Not likely. Yarionna’s taste in music runs a little more traditional than that.”

“The queen’s gonna be here?” he asked, stopping dead in his tracks.

“It was her idea,” Junkie offered as the two men set the table down. Together, he and Jason headed for the chairs, each man scooping up two in each hand. “She’d better be here. Otherwise I’ll paddle her ass for making us move all these tables.”

As the queen’s oldest brother, Junkie was probably in a position to back up his threat. As an Earther who recognized no power as being greater than his own, Match found it refreshing to hear someone speak about her so casually and so fondly. It made the queen seem so much more human than the pretty little tyrant who required grown men to kneel in her presence. “Well, if you need help with the paddling, don’t hesitate to call on me.”

When Junkie sent a glowering look over his shoulder, Match realized he’d overstepped his bounds. Evidently it was okay for Junkie to talk about the queen in an impertinent manner. Clearly, he didn’t appreciate others doing the same. Inwardly, Match groaned. Apparently, even the irreverent musician-turned-warrior had her up on a pedestal. And if Junkie had protective leanings toward his sister, it would pay to be careful in his presence. Known to have a wicked sense of humor, Junkie could be deadly when it came to protecting those he loved. It was a commonly held opinion by those who knew him that Junkie rarely got angry...and always got even.

“So...uh, who else will be here?” Match asked.

Junkie dropped the chairs on the other side of the room while giving him a suspicious once-over. “Anybody who wants to be here,” he grunted.

“Does that mean Spaceforce is invited?”

“That means everyone’s invited. Why are you asking?” Junkie questioned him sharply. “You can’t...dance, can you?” The way his lip curled suggested it would be a mistake to admit to anything of the sort.

“Well. Uh...”

Jason hitched his butt on the corner of a table and winked at Match before saying, “He’s a virtual fucking ballroom champion.”

Junkie’s brow pulled into a tight grimace. “You’re not serious.”

Jason shook his head, his tangle of blond hair sweeping the collar of his military green jacket. They’d all gotten lazy about cutting their hair since arriving on eYona where shoulder-length hair was the norm. “Four years of lessons will do that to a guy. Fucking tragic if you ask me.”

Match just laughed at their ignorance. “Can you think of a better way to meet women when you’re sixteen?”

Jason rubbed a finger over the deep scar that ripped down the left side of his face. "You started when you were fourteen."

"Can you think of a better way to meet women when you're fourteen?" Match shot back with another laugh.

Junkie growled as he cut across the room to the next table. "Get out of here before I start to get jealous."

"Wear your dress uniform," Jason called out as Match turned back toward the kitchen. "Gray wants us in green and gold."

Chapter Four

“Green and gold,” Match murmured as he stood in front of the mirror in his room and ran his hands back through his hair. Despite his attempt to bring his rowdy locks under control, several strands insisted on falling back onto his forehead. Ignoring that problem for the time being, he straightened his tie and tugged down on the coat of his dress uniform. The cut was smart, with broad shoulders and tapering tails. In his opinion, the gold buttons and epaulettes were a little over the top, but who was he to question the taste of his superiors? As a redhead with blue eyes, he couldn’t have asked for a better color—dark bottle green. His white twill knee pants were pressed and spotless, tucked into his shiny black leather boots.

A flash of lightning whitened the room. As Match flinched, a heavy crash of thunder announced the beginning of the nightly electrical storm. Except for an obvious case of nervous anticipation, he was ready to go.

Reaching for his copper communicator on the credenza against the wall, he threaded it onto the shell of his ear and headed out the door. Moments later, he stepped from the entry into the great hall where he slowed his gait long enough to let his eyes adjust to the shadowed room. The neon lighting had been muted for the event and it shed a soft white light over the dancers in the center of the floor. As Match looked around for his friends, Jed stood up on the other side of the hall and waved him over to a couple of tables that had been pushed together. Skirting the edge of the dance floor, Matchstick headed across the room, his gaze scouting ahead to see who Jed was sitting with.

Jason and Junkie sat with their wife, Lacey, behind one of the tables. While Jason leaned close to the sexy redhead, his lips moving against her ear, Junkie slouched in his seat on her other side, his long arm stretched out behind them on the backs of their chairs. The casual embrace gave the impression that both officers were under his care and protection.

Gray shared the end of the table with Jed and Velvet. In typical Gray fashion, he was hogging their slender blonde wife. He had her perched on his knee, his large hand spread out on her thigh. One of *her* hands however, was in Jed’s broad fist beneath the table. Match didn’t know exactly what was going on underneath the table but, if the look on Jed’s face meant anything, he wasn’t letting any grass grow under his feet.

Danjer was out on the dance floor with Pink while Saxon straddled his chair, his arms folded on the chair’s wide back, a look of pure devotion softening his rugged features as he followed the pair with his green gaze.

The second table was made up mostly of leather-clad eYonan warriors, the fair-haired Olan seated next to Junkie with Blair, Camp, and Matchstick's new roommate, Jake, filling out the rest of the table.

Match grabbed the chair by Gray and turned it to face the dance floor as he scanned the vaulted room for any sign of the queen. He was so focused on finding her that it took a while for the music to make its way past his jittery nerves to his brain. Junkie had suggested the music might not be up to date, but Match was nonetheless surprised when he realized what the small orchestra was playing. Stunned, he glanced back at the dark-haired eYonan. "That's a waltz!"

Junkie rolled his eyes. "Yarionna loves this stuff," he said as though apologizing for his sister's taste in music.

"This stuff isn't so bad," Match argued immediately, uncertain if he was defending the music or the queen as he turned back toward the room and resumed his search.

"Just to remind you," Gray growled as he tilted toward him. "You can't speak to the queen unless she speaks to you first."

"Yeah. Sure. Fine," he answered, leaning away from Gray, trying to find Yarionna among the dancers and finally catching a glimpse of her in the arms of an older man at the back of the hall. She swept toward him with her partner and Match followed her with his gaze, her long gown of sculpted white velvet a stunning contrast to her black hair.

As she whisked past in the arms of her dance partner, the husky sound of her amusement lifted across the room. And if she was beautiful when she was proud and haughty, it was nothing compared to when she laughed. Her hair was loose, hanging in thick, dark waves threaded with silvery bells. The musical tinkling of the tiny bells made a wonderful sound of joy that accompanied her golden laughter, throaty and low. It wrapped around his ears and shot straight down his spine then spread from there in a sudden jolt that melted through his loins like burning lava, thickening his cock with a surging flow of hot blood.

Jeezis Skies! The things she did to him! It was unnatural. Of course the things he wanted to do to her weren't exactly natural either. And they weren't exactly nice. No, far from nice, especially considering she was a virgin. But he dreamed of taking her in every way a man could take a woman, dreamed of penetrating her body in places that would fight his entry, in ways that would violate her fine cultured sensibility and give her an entirely new insight into what it meant to be possessed by a man. His cock throbbed and pulsed at the dark, erotic images that invaded his thoughts.

Gray cleared his throat. "That means you can't ask her to dance."

Match jerked his head around to stare at Gray. "What?"

"You heard me," he warned in a rumble, his gray eyes like flint. "You have to wait until she asks you."

"Asks me to dance?"

"You got it."

Match turned his head again to the dance floor. "Fucking hell," he muttered as he glowered at the people swinging by in pairs.

He spent the next half of the evening in a state of suspended agony, trying to catch the queen's eye and failing utterly. Even when she floated across the room toward their tables and asked first Camp then Blair to dance—neither of whom had any sense of rhythm—he failed to catch her notice. And during that entire time he didn't dare ask anyone else to take a spin lest he miss a chance with the queen.

When the orchestra took a break two hours later, he watched helplessly while she stood on the other side of the room chatting with a group of older women. Her skin was flushed, her black eyes sparkling, one of her dainty slippered toes tapping against the styrowood floor to the rhythm of the most recent waltz.

Angry and frustrated, Match focused on her toe.

He figured he knew what that tapping foot meant. The queen loved to dance. As he watched, he saw her gaze travel to the musicians gathered at the bar which had been set up on the long, black marble table that usually served as a buffet counter. He figured she was already wondering how long a break the musicians would take and when they'd start playing again. Following her gaze to the bar, Match reckoned it would take at least twenty minutes for the guy who played strings to finish those two pints of lemonale he had lined up. "Save my seat," he threw behind him as he rose swiftly and strode from the room.

He was back in less than two minutes, his workpad under his arm. Flipping it open, he accessed a music file and turned the volume to maximum then watched Yarıonna's face as the music of Johann Strauss filled the great hall. The look of wonder and interest that fell across the queen's face took his breath away and was well worth the quick trip he'd made upstairs.

With a smile parting her sex-hued lips, she looked across the room, obviously searching for the source of the music while Match prepared to meet her gaze. Unfortunately, her smile faltered a little when she realized the new music was coming from the workpad on the table behind him. Still. It was a start.

"Hammer," he muttered, reverting to Gray's nickname. "Get out there and dance."

"What?" Gray asked, his hand roving Velvet's thigh in a slow circular caress.

"Please," he groaned, feeling desperate. He didn't have time to explain. "Jason. Jed. Get out there on the floor and dance."

"Great idea," Jed agreed cheerfully, pulling Velvet from the Hammer's lap before he could react. As the pair moved out into the middle of the room, Gray's startled expression suggested that he was wondering how he'd let his wife get away from him. While he was trying to figure it out, Jason followed out onto the dance floor with Lacey.

"Right," Match gritted as he watched his friends twirl away. "Damned if I'm gonna wait for a woman to ask *me* to dance." Standing, he resettled the tails of his dark green coat then set off across the floor toward the queen.

“Would you like to dance, Yarıonna?” he asked when he arrived at her side, giving her his most charming smile and extending his hand toward her as he made the invitation.

As she turned her head, her look of delight bled away to one of stunned annoyance. She was quite clearly amazed that a man would ignore protocol and ask her to dance. She gave him a cool, glancing appraisal. “I’d love to,” she answered then swept by him and moved gracefully across the floor to the other side of the room, where she asked Camp to be her partner.

Again!

Matchstick’s arm fell to his side as he buried an obscene curse behind his teeth. As he watched Camp guide her onto the floor, he rolled his lips inward and bit down hard, while his cheeks flared with heat. It was one thing to take a man down a few pegs in private. She needn’t have humiliated him in front of all his friends and the entire eYonan army.

The little bitch.

Turning away, he stalked toward the exit then swerved abruptly just before reaching it, heading for the bar instead. He’d been so focused on trying to get the queen’s attention all night that he hadn’t had anything to drink and, at that point, he was damn thirsty. The first pint of beer went down in a long swallow. The second one he nursed sulkily, ignoring the snickers coming from the eYonan warriors who stood alongside him at the bar, none of whom knew their left foot from a fucking hole in the ground.

Just as disconcerting was Gray’s dark glare, which cut across the room like a deadly particle beam. Gray could have ordered Match back to his room but probably had decided that the queen’s humiliating public refusal was punishment enough. If so, he was right. Match couldn’t remember when he’d been more embarrassed. The queen had gone out of her way to make him look like an ass.

While he was brooding in a dark cloud of his own making, a woman came up beside him and placed an order. He barely noticed her, he was so fixed on that impudent, dark-haired, evil little witch who was now over at his table animatedly discussing *his* music with Gray and the others.

“Match?”

With a will of effort, he jerked his attention to the beautiful blonde beside him. “Farra,” he choked, almost dropping his drink. “I’m sorry. I didn’t recognize you with your...with that...”

She dropped her gaze demurely. “You didn’t recognize me with my clothes on?”

Match smiled at the petite golden-haired beauty who’d shared his bed more than once during the first few weeks of his stay on eYona. Since then, she’d gotten serious about one of the eYonan warriors. But she looked spectacular tonight, dressed in a long off-the-shoulder gown of black lace. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. I just didn’t recognize you out of uniform. You look wonderful,” he added sincerely.

"Thanks, Match," she answered shyly.

"I hear you're getting married."

"Yes. Brixton. He has guard duty tonight."

"It's a shame he couldn't be here," he said, his gaze drifting back to the queen who stood clapping her hands as the first bars of "The Blue Danube" started up.

"Yes, it *is* a shame because...I have no partner," Farra pointed out, her voice so hopeful that Match finally came to his senses and realized she wanted to dance.

He left his drink on the bar and bowed slightly. "May I have the honor of this dance?" he asked, offering her his arm.

As the last strains of "The Blue Danube" faded away, the orchestra started up again. After escorting Farra back to her table, Match closed his workpad then worked his way around the room, dancing with just about every unattached woman in attendance. By the time the band announced the last dance of the evening, those eYonan boys had quit snickering at him. Because women might like tall men or men with dark hair or blond men with broad shoulders. But there wasn't a woman alive who didn't worship a man who could dance.

Despite her determination to ignore the arrogant Earther, Yarionna found her gaze snagging on his lithe form as he glided across the dance floor. By the Princess, the man could dance. She'd never seen a man who could move like that. He had the physique of an Adonis, his shoulders a wide straight line, his hips slender, his legs beautifully sculpted with lean strength. Yarionna might be the queen of eYona but Lieutenant Maloney was nothing less than a god on the dance floor.

As Saxon escorted her back to her table at the end of a waltz and the orchestra announced the last dance of the evening, Yarionna had never felt more confused in her life. Her heart warmed every time she set eyes on Camp and downright melted when she danced with him. He was everything a woman could possibly desire in a man—all broad shoulders and long, powerful legs. She loved the way he held her. She loved being close to him, one of her hands wrapped up in his big, strong hold, her other spread out on his steel-hard biceps. He was so wonderfully polite, his conduct toward her so considerate and attentive. In comparison, Lieutenant Maloney wasn't polite or considerate. He was self-centered, daring and rash. Everything he did surprised and excited her. And, like Camp, the lieutenant affected her heart as well. She just wasn't sure palpitations were a good thing. She found herself holding her breath in his presence, waiting for his next act, terrified of what he might do but craving the very behavior she found so shocking.

How dare he ask her to dance? How *dare* he?

Yet, how thrilling to come across a man with the audacity to ignore the rules of conduct, throw caution to the wind, step outside safe boundaries and do what no other man in the room had the nerve to do. His determination and sheer bald impudence fascinated her. And, despite herself, a part of her wanted to be like him, to match his moxie. To let loose and do the things that all young people craved.

But, as the queen, she didn't have that option. She couldn't afford frivolity and spontaneity. She could only admire it.

She should have been furious with the lieutenant for his lapse in manners. Instead, she just wanted to dance with him. She wanted to hear a few more words uttered in that rough, sexy accent. Protocol dictated she should ignore him for the rest of the evening and probably the rest of her life. But damned if she wasn't going to share the last dance with him.

Gathering her composure around her like a regal shield, she crossed the floor toward the bar where Lieutenant Maloney had recently caught up with his drink. Leaning back against the black marble table with his hand wrapped around a heavy pint of beer, his gaze followed her as intently as a mountain lion might regard a fawn that had stumbled into its path. When she asked him to dance, he lifted his drink to his sensually curving lips without breaking his stare. Under his brilliantly harsh gaze, it suddenly occurred to Yarionna that she might have made a mistake in asking him to dance. In doing so, she'd opened herself to rejection. She'd already learned that her title couldn't protect her from this man's insolence but she hadn't thought that he would dare to turn her down, despite the fact that she'd done exactly that to him. And a man's ego was no less fragile than a queen's. Suddenly Yarionna understood how he'd felt when she'd rejected him. Suddenly she felt exposed and vulnerable to humiliation as she stood in the silent spotlight of his gaze.

"I'm sorry," he drawled, his eyes glinting with a mocking light as he set his empty mug down on the marble bar. His gaze roved down her body then slowly up again, lingering insolently on her chest. "I've about worn myself out, dancing tonight. Too bad you didn't catch me earlier, when I was fresh. I guess you'll have to try someone else." Turning toward the arch, he sauntered away while muttering loud enough for her to hear, "Be sure to pick someone fairly tall, otherwise he'll be tripping all over that pedestal of yours."

Stunned, she nevertheless managed to react quickly. Her voice followed him, ringing out like a bell across the hall. "Or I could just find a man with a big enough ego that my pedestal won't be an issue."

He stopped and turned, his mouth flattening into a thin line, his icy eyes narrowing for a fight.

"Unfortunately for me, there's only one man here with an ego that big."

He tilted his head just the slightest, his starkly chiseled features taking on a dark, threatening cast.

"You."

With a growl rumbling from deep in his chest, he took a step forward, crowding her so closely that she had to tilt her head back to meet his gaze. "Okay. Last chance, Yari. Do you want to dance or not?"

"If you will do me the honor," she gritted, setting her chin at a stubborn angle.

He shook his head while fiercely holding her gaze. "I'm asking *you*. Do. You. Want. To. Dance?"

An obstinate fire flared up inside her. "I would like to dance with you, Lieutenant."

"Is that a yes?" he snarled, obviously determined to claim the upper hand. The look in his eyes told her he would walk out before he gave in.

By the Princess! Why did she open herself up for this sort of treatment? She should have said no. She should have told him where to go! Instead, her voice faltering, she said, "Yes."

As he glowered down at her, his arm shot out and yanked her into the hard heat of his frame. Commandeering her body, he swept her out into the middle of the floor. "That's more like it," he grunted.

"Do you have to hold me so tightly?" she complained breathlessly the first chance she got, hoping to give him the impression that she was already regretting her decision though nothing could have been further from the truth.

"This is the way we do it back on Earth," he said, a fierce shadow of a smile on his lips. "If you're up for it, I could show you some more of our customs." When she squirmed in his arms, he firmed his grip and crushed her into his chest. "And all of them involve holding you this tightly," he informed her with a dominant growl.

As he looked over her shoulder and steered her through the other couples on the dance floor, a glint of rough humor warmed his otherwise frigid eyes. In his strong, possessive embrace Yarionna experienced a wild sense of exhilaration. In his arms, she felt free from her title and responsibilities, free to let loose and acknowledge her frivolous cravings, even the ones that set off a flurry of excitement in her trembling limbs and deep between her legs, if only for the length of time it took to complete one dance.

As lightning flickered in the tiny windows perched high above the hall and thunder rumbled across the eYonan landscape outside the palace walls, Camp watched the queen sweep past in the arms of the irritating Earther. Holding Yarionna and guiding her across the room, he looked just like Prince Fucking Charming. Somehow, without surrendering an ounce of masculinity, the guy oozed sophistication and charm. Watching him, Camp wished he could have described the Spaceforce officer as effeminate. But though he wasn't as big as Camp, there was nothing about Lieutenant Maloney that wasn't masculine. He was lean and hard, as lithe as a whip, and just the most graceful man Camp had ever seen. And, as the most advanced swordsman in his unit, Camp understood the value of grace.

The guy was smooth, all right, not to mention carelessly handsome, with finely chiseled features, as opposed to Camp's rough-hewn looks. As he steered the lovely young queen around the great hall, a rapacious smile parting his lips, the hall's neon light glinted in his hair like the sun on strands of loosely bundled copper wire.

Yeah, the handsome bastard had a lot going for him. On the dance floor, he put Camp's entire unit to shame. In space he put Camp's entire *race* to shame. While Camp

was clunking along at a scale of one:ten, Maloney flew like he had been born in a Hexapod. His skills and elegance probably seemed exotic and exciting to a simple backworld girl like Yarionna, especially compared to a guy like Camp who was just another eYonan warrior not unlike every other man she knew.

A man like Lieutenant Maloney could turn a young woman's head and charm the pants right off her. The idea didn't exactly sit well with him. And it didn't help Camp's mood to know the brash Earther would be competing in the upcoming tournament. Camp shook his head, hardly able to believe the man's gall. If he hadn't heard the news directly from Blair, he wouldn't have believed it. But, while Camp had mustered out early to get his name on the roster, Blair had signed up later in the day. He'd reported getting there just in time to see Maloney add his name to the list.

Already, there were some rumblings of dissent. There were plenty of eYonan warriors who didn't want the queen's champion and main political advisor to be an offworlder. But most of the grumbling was subdued since nobody expected him to get very far in the competition.

No. Lieutenant Maloney might be able to dance like a Nefarian cage girl and fly like tick spawn but, fortunately for eYona, Lieutenant Maloney didn't know his sword from the back end of a nutgrubber. And that was going to be his downfall. Camp had waited too long for this tournament. He wasn't going to lose Yarionna to some slick offworlder with a fast ship and a pair of shiny, black leather boots.

Camp blew out a sigh and leaned forward in his chair, resting his forearms on his spread knees. He'd been in love with Yarionna since back when he was playing reeds for Pumping Iron. The band had performed a small gig at the Copper Palace and he'd seen her in the yard the next morning. A guest of the Copper Duke's before he died, she had arrived with a small entourage just as the band prepared to leave on their magnabikes. He'd caught no more than a glimpse of her but that short sighting had been enough to enslave his heart for the next six years.

After that day, he had pursued every scrap of news he could find that involved the queen. The things he'd learned about her had made him no less devoted an admirer. The young queen was capable and brave as well as beautiful. Then there was her sex appeal, which Camp reckoned was off the scale. He couldn't think about her without getting hard. Of course, that didn't stop him from thinking about her.

But from then on, when Camp wrote music, he wrote it for Yarionna. Although he hid his infatuation from his friends, all of his lyrics belonged to her. Every melody was inspired by her. And when the civil war broke out, he joined the army with Danjer and Saxon and Blair and fought for *her*. He wasn't fighting for the north. He was fighting for Yarionna of Iverannon. It was personal.

And since the civil war, he had devoted every spare minute of his time to the training arena—working out, lifting weights, honing his body, building muscle, sharpening his skills for this moment, when he could fight to be her champion. After six years of waiting and working, he was *not* going to let a glinty-haired latecomer horn in and take his woman from him.

With a growl rumbling in his chest, he lifted his lemonale to his lips and took a deep swig, his glowering gaze fixed on Maloney's long fingers spread out low on the queen's back. Again, he growled as he muttered a dark obscenity. While he wanted to tear Maloney apart for the crime of touching his woman, Camp knew he had only himself to blame. Because, while he had been honing his skills and focusing all efforts on becoming the ultimate fighting machine, he'd neglected to get dancing lessons.

Chapter Five

After checking the rosters early on the morning after the dance, Match learned that his first fight was one of eight contests scheduled to take place in the training arena at the end of the day. With an hour to go before he had to report for flight training, Match headed back to the palace and up the stairs. It was time to start moving his auxiliary plan forward – the plan in which he became a member of the queen’s guard.

Upon reaching Gray’s door, Match hesitated for several moments. While he stood in the corridor and silently assembled his arguments, Velvet opened the door. Startled, he blinked at her.

“I got tired of waiting for you to knock,” she explained, gifting him with one of her stunning smiles.

“How did you know –”

“I could hear you breathing,” she explained, flipping her long, straight hair behind her shoulder.

Feeling a little foolish, he rubbed the back of his neck and squinted at the exquisite beauty. “I forgot about your enhanced hearing.”

“You were probably thinking about something else,” she offered graciously.

“Probably,” he agreed.

“You looked pretty sharp out on the dance floor last night,” she voiced in her straightforward way.

“Did you think so?” he asked, warmed by her compliment.

“Uh-huh. I think you should take me for a spin next time the queen decides to arrange a dance.”

He sent her a wink. “I’ll do that if I can ever pry you away from your two husbands.”

“Are you here to see Gray? Or Jed? Because Jed’s on a training mission right now.”

“I’m here to see Gray, if he isn’t too busy.”

“I’ll leave you two alone,” she stated as she ushered him through the door then closed it behind her.

Thrown slightly off balance by the unexpected exchange with Velvet, Match took a deep breath then strode forward, into the room. Gray was seated at his desk, his back to the narrow window behind him. Without a word of greeting, he sent Match a suspicious look from beneath his ink-black lashes. His stony silence made the situation awkward.

Feigning an exaggerated air of nonchalance, Match dropped into a chair facing him. "You know what I think?" he asked when Gray failed to ask the purpose of his visit.

"Go on," Gray growled while eyeing him closely.

"I think we need to integrate our forces with the eYonans."

Gray made a soft, snorting sound. "You can't sleep in the women's barracks, Matchstick."

Match snickered. "That's not what I had in mind, though it's a genius idea, Gray."

"Don't patronize me," he rumbled. "And get to the point."

Match cleared his throat. "I think Spaceforce should be allowed to share the honor of guarding the queen. It would be a bold public relations move and it would increase security for the queen since, as an Earther, I can carry a blastuka."

Gray leaned back in his chair and gave him a keen look. "You want to guard the queen?"

"Well," he hedged smoothly. "It was my idea so it's only fair that my name go to the top of the list."

"Why do you want to guard the queen?" he demanded flatly.

"Why do you think?" Match threw back at him, Gray's attitude really starting to chafe.

"She's a very important young woman, Match. I don't want you to fuck up the Alliance's interplanetary relations because of some casual interest you have in what just happens to be the highest-ranked individual on the planet."

"It's not casual," Match mumbled in a knee-jerk reaction. Though he hadn't thought much beyond getting Yari spread out beneath him, the words sounded startlingly like the truth, even to *his* cynical ears. But truth or lie, he was confessing to feelings he hadn't yet explored.

"She's a virgin," Gray informed him bluntly. "And she needs to remain a virgin until the day she takes her first champion."

"Not a problem," Match returned just as bluntly.

Gray gave him a hard stare. "Do I have your word on that?"

"You have my word."

"You won't have sex with her?"

Match shifted in his seat. "I didn't say that, exactly."

"Jeezis," Gray cursed, rolling his eyes impatiently. "What are you saying, exactly?"

"I won't fuck her," he promised.

"Go to hell!" Gray barked.

"What's up with you, Hammer?" he snapped. "Ever since your promotion, you've been acting like you have a stick up your ass."

"I'm sorry if you don't approve of my leadership, Lieutenant Maloney, but I'm responsible for the Force's department on this planet."

"And I just made you a promise. My promise is as good now as it was eight years ago, back when it meant something to you."

As Match watched, a muscle ticced at the back of Gray's jaw. "I swear, Matchstick, if you let me down on this—"

"I won't let you down," Match growled, while privately bristling at Gray's lack of trust. "I wouldn't have come in here and asked for this unless it was important to me, Gray."

Gray gave him a long, cutting stare before finally saying, "I'll present your proposal to Danjer. He's in charge of the queen's security during her stay here at the Iron Palace."

"Will you talk to him today?" Match pressed him.

Gray gave him a final warning glare, a frown biting deep between his brows. "Don't push your luck, Maloney."

Match shoved to his feet and started to turn toward the door.

"Good luck with your fight this afternoon," Gray grunted before he could get away.

"Thanks," he replied, his annoyance evaporating at Gray's encouraging words. "You've been down to take a look at the rosters?"

"They were posted last night at seven," Gray explained. "Jed dragged us over there after the dance. He wanted to see who was matched against who."

Match gave him a cursory nod.

"He said you should be able to take the guy you're pitted against."

"Thanks again, Hammer." He sent Gray a casual salute as he backed toward the door.

* * * * *

Match reported to the training arena after flight instruction. His contest was one of eight fights taking place in the arena at the same time. He won, but only just. Needless to say, it was somewhat of a rude awakening. He'd expected his Spaceforce training to be far superior to anything the eYonans knew about martial arts but his match had disabused him of that notion pretty damn quickly. If he'd thought he was going to get off easy in the hand fighting, he was wrong. The competition was going to be an uphill battle, right from the starting bell.

As his opponent strode away looking none too happy about his loss, athletic trainers were already rolling equipment out from the rooms beneath the stands. The training arena at Judipeao was a large, round structure covered with a domed roof. Four wide, arched entrances were spaced equidistant around the perimeter and stadium seating descended from the entrances down to the sand-covered arena that

was excavated deep into the earth. Beneath the stands, rows of slashstalls were wedged between windowless storerooms packed with training equipment.

As Match reached down to dust off his knees, he gave the weightlifting machines a wry look. Clearly, the trainers were expecting a brisk business to round out the day. No doubt Camp would be one of the first warriors to check in. Match found it annoying that a full-time jock who could find nothing better to do than work out all day was, by pure luck, in a position to sweep the entire tournament. It didn't seem fair. Camp probably didn't even know what to do with a woman. Vaguely, Match wondered how the eYonan's first fight had gone. He had to assume the warrior had won his round but he'd know for certain at seven o'clock when the next day's roster was posted.

With his jacket wadded in his fist, Match climbed the stairs through the sparsely populated stands, preferring to take a slash in his room rather than use the facilities beneath the stands. There weren't a whole lot of spectators turning out for the first round of fights, though he'd been assured the arena would be filled to capacity on the day of the final contest. He was a little disappointed that Terra and Aleya hadn't shown up to cheer him on, though he supposed they might be annoyed with him after last night, when he'd turned them away at his bedroom door. Those two had spent many a night in his bed since he'd arrived on the planet, so they probably hadn't seen it coming. Hell. He hadn't even seen it coming. And he hadn't known how to inform the girls that he had just suddenly and completely lost interest. So he told them he was working on a special project that was going to keep him busy for a week or so.

Terra had pouted prettily.

Aleya, with her brutally cropped hair, wasn't the pouting sort. She'd teased him mercilessly about his project and had advised him not to come running back to them when the champion competition was over.

He'd told them they were nice girls and probably deserved better than him.

They'd agreed without argument. With their arms around each other's waists, they'd sashayed down the corridor while discussing possibilities for his replacement. Those girls weren't the sort to let the grass grow under their feet.

As Match entered the west archway that led out to the palace yard, a figure separated itself from the shadows crowding the stone walls. "Hey," he said quietly, recognizing Jed.

"Caught your fight," Jed said, his tone holding a mild note of censure.

"I underestimated my opponent," Matchstick returned, rolling his shoulders in a defensive shrug.

"Why would you do that?" Jed exclaimed softly. "Match, these guys aren't amateurs. They're professional warriors and, unlike you, they haven't had either stunners or blastukas to make their lives easy for them. They're hard, seasoned professionals."

"Point taken," he muttered. "I'll do better next time."

“Hold up,” Jed murmured, blocking Matchstick’s exit and keeping his voice low. “Did you hear what happened today?”

“I won my match,” he tossed off with another shrug. “What more do I need to know?”

“One of the competitors got his back broken.”

“Ouch,” Match responded. “What happened?”

“Millston happened.”

“Millston?”

Jed lifted his chin and Match followed his gaze back into the arena. Standing in the shadowed arch, they watched as a huge mountain of a man lumbered across the arena floor and sat down at one of the weightlifting stations. “Are you sure he’s real?” Match muttered from the side of his mouth. “And not some kinda secret weapon packed into an oversized ‘droid?”

“He’s real,” Jed answered in barely more than a whisper. “I talked to some of the competitors from the South, guys who grew up with him. Evidently, he’s been pounding guys into the dirt for as long as they can remember. They say he’s as dumb as a plank but he’s so strong it almost doesn’t matter. He’s unbeatable.”

Match made a face while Jed shook his head. “Unless you get lucky and get disqualified, you’re going to have to fight him.”

Match just stared at the giant as he lifted every weight stacked on the machine.

“And when you do, he’s gonna kill you.”

“Not if someone else beats him first,” Match pointed out.

Jed took another long look at the giant. “What are the chances of that?”

Match rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Not good,” he admitted. He was pretty damn sure *he* wouldn’t stand a chance against the walking mountain. At least, not in a fair fight. But Match kept his thoughts to himself for the time being. He hadn’t yet decided how far he was willing to go in order to win.

Chapter Six

A decent crowd showed up for the second round of hand fighting the next day. At least there were quite a few people in the stands when Match reported to the arena shortly after noon. This time there were only four other fights taking place at the same time.

“Aw, shit,” he muttered when he got an eyeful of his opponent. The guy who squared off across from him was built like Delta Base Twenty and stacked almost as high. Still, it could have been worse. It could have been Millston. And Match had fought bigger men before. Maybe the eYonan would be slow. Unfortunately, he didn’t look slow. He just looked strong. With a grimacing smile for his opponent, Match hooked his fingers together, stretched his arms in front of his chest and cracked his knuckles. The dull crunching sound reverberated high in the stands.

A sudden murmuring filled the stadium and the spectators melted down into their seats while their heads turned to the top of the arena. At the head of the stairs stood the queen. With her trademark grace, she glided down the steps to her seat behind the arbiters’ box in the middle of the stadium.

Well, hell. Now he couldn’t lose. Not that he’d planned to lose, anyhow. But there was no way he’d let Yarıonna watch him get beaten. Determined to catch her attention, he glanced around at the other competitors stretching or pacing in preparation for their fights. Then, with slow deliberation, he started to unbutton his shirt. As he tossed it over the sideboards, the muscles in his shoulders and arms coiled and flexed in the stark neon light that flared down from the domed roof. He kept his gaze on the queen and when she finally caught his eye, he winked. Though half of the arena separated them, he heard her loud gasp.

Chuckling, he rolled his shoulders and shook his hands out at his sides. While waiting for the signal to begin his fight, a flurry of activity drew his attention back to the arbiters’ box. The queen was on her feet, leaning over the back of the box and challenging the officials in a tense undertone. For some reason, she appeared to be dissatisfied with something. As Match watched with growing interest, one of the arbiters shook his gray head while lifting his hands in a helpless gesture. “I’m sorry, My Queen, but there’s no protocol to deal with the situation.”

“What do you mean, no protocol?” she snapped, her fists forming tight white balls at her sides.

Curious as to what had upset the queen, Match watched the commotion unfold. Damned if she wasn’t cute as hell when she was angry. She was such a feisty handful. She looked so adorably attractive with that flush of color on her cheeks. He decided, then and there, that when he finally got her into bed he was going to keep her that

way—either angry or embarrassed—for the rest of her life. And he had some pretty good ideas of how to go about it. Thankfully, she didn't wear the black lipstick that so many eYonan women plastered across their mouths. It would be a crime to cover that blushing color with anything other than a light, gleaming coat of cum. His cum.

Up in the arbiters' box, the argument was getting louder. "There's no rule that says an Earther can't compete," insisted the ancient relic.

Match blinked and stared. They were talking about him! Yarionna was trying to get him removed from the competition. A breathless, shocked silence descended around him, the background noise blurring into an insubstantial hum as he tried to deal with the idea that Yarionna disliked him that much.

The queen kept her voice low but not low enough that every word wasn't like a knife in his heart. "That's because we didn't know about Earthers three centuries ago when the rules were first put down to paper!"

"That's correct, My Queen. But inasmuch as there are no rules to exclude those of other planets, I'm afraid we'll have to allow him to compete."

Match ground his teeth, his gaze focused on the toe of his boot. If he didn't focus on something, he was going to explode. Rage rose within him like an evil entity. Turning stiffly from the sight of the queen, he raked his hands back through his hair, so angry he was ready to say fuck it and walk out of there. In the dim recesses of his brain he heard a bell chime but, in his distracted state of mind, he didn't register the significance of the sound. The next thing he knew, someone hit him. Hard. Pain exploded along his jawline as he stumbled backward and tilted toward the ground, only stopping his fall with one hand scrabbling at the sandy soil. Pushing off with his hand, he rolled then regained his feet and swiftly dodged the next blow. Angry enough to kill somebody, he started to fight back.

Two minutes later, the field arbiters were dragging him away from a man on the ground. As he flicked his damp hair from his eyes, he was stunned to find himself looking down on the inert form of his opponent, Mr. Delta Base Twenty—unconscious. Only then did he realize that the bell he'd heard earlier had signaled the start of his contest. His opponent had gotten in the first blow while he'd been lost in a dark cloud of brooding. Outraged by what he took to be unprovoked attack, Match had gone into automatic survival mode.

As he gazed at his unconscious opponent, it looked as though Match had won the fight...and then some. With a threatening growl, he shook off the two brawny field arbiters who had him by the arms then retrieved his shirt and jacket. With his clothes clenched in his fist, he shot a dark glare at the queen as he stalked from the floor of the arena.

* * * * *

Match was halfway through his second beer when the alehouse door opened and Jed stepped into the dimly lit room. Almost immediately, he caught Matchstick's eye

and cut across the wood-planked floor toward him. He waved the 'droid barman away as he rested both arms on the wrought iron bar, a long, black piece of art depicting an ocean scene. A ridge formed between Jed's brows as he said, "Saw your fight with Edjir today."

"Edjir," Match grunted. "Is he okay?"

"He'll live," Jed allowed. "It's just too bad you weren't fighting Millston."

"It would have been nice to remove him from the roster," Match agreed without smiling.

"So, what are you going to do about the first fencing round tomorrow?"

Match pressed his lips together and stared down into his beer for several seconds. "There aren't any rules," he finally remarked.

"So?"

"So," he stated with quiet determination. "Just imagine what would happen if I stepped into the arena with a huge electromagnetic charge on my sword."

Jed's eyes narrowed to green slits and he shook his head as though he didn't understand.

"My opponent's sword would be attracted to mine. While our blades were stuck together and he was trying to figure out what was going on, I could touch his chest with my sword tip."

Jed's eyes widened the slightest fraction. "Match, that's cheating."

Match drained his mug and wiped the back of his wrist over his mouth. The fact was, he was ready to do worse in order to get what he wanted. Yarionna. Spread for his pleasure. Subject to his coarse passion. Trapped beneath his body as he held her chin and forced his tongue between her carnal-colored lips. So what if it was cheating? He wasn't about to let honor and dignity or even self-respect get in the way. In fact, he wasn't even going to let the fact that she obviously loathed him get in the way. If anything, it just made him more determined to possess her. "Ask me if I give a fuck," he gritted as he pushed away from the bar and headed for the alehouse door.

Chapter Seven

When Match got back to his room, there were new orders waiting for him on his workpad. His mouth compressed into a hard line as he read Gray's message. Lieutenant Matchstick Maloney was the newest member of the queen's guard. He was to report to Gray at the earliest opportunity.

He ripped his hands back through his hair, wanting to kick himself for requesting the posting. Although he hadn't given up his ambition to become the queen's champion, he no longer wanted to be a member of her guard. To begin with, he would be hard pressed for time if he was going design and build the devices that would help him win the contests. In addition, he had no wish to subject himself to Yarionna's scorn on a daily basis.

But there was nothing for it at that point. He could hardly tell his commanding officer that he'd changed his mind. It was just too fucking late. Match pushed out a harsh sigh as he stripped and headed across the room. As he stepped through the slashroom door, his cock swung away from his body, long and heavy, in a constant state of frustrated arousal since the day he'd first laid eyes on the haughty little royal bitch. And, unfortunately, no amount of whacking off seemed to help.

He faced the mirror that filled the wall above the marble sink and hefted the weight of his low-slung sac in his hand. Not surprisingly, his shaft responded with a lengthening surge. The mere thought of the queen made him horny. The thought of bending her over the slashroom counter and kicking her legs apart then driving to the back of her cunt while he leaned over her, his hands planted on the counter beside her...

Well, that just made him hard as a fucking rock.

He was pissed at her and even more pissed at himself for wanting her, especially after what she'd done to him that afternoon in the arena, or had tried to do to him. Roughly, he fisted his cock, the taut skin pulled so tight that it was shiny as he yanked brutally at his flesh and finally pumped out into the shallow sink. Pulling in a harsh gasp, he stared at his face in the mirror.

Fuck. He slapped his hands down on the cool marble counter, his head hanging between his shoulders as he glowered at his reflection, his eyes glinting with a cold, bleak light. The dark length of his cock looked bruised and beaten and finished but, inside, it wasn't finished. It still wanted Yarionna. Inside, *he* still wanted Yarionna.

"Fuck," he growled as he cleaned up the mess he'd made.

After a quick slash and a change of clothes, he headed down the hallway to knock on Gray's door. He found Gray alone in the room, behind his desk, scowling at his

workpad. He glanced at Match and said, "Report to the armory. The captain of the queen's personal guard will get you a uniform. You're on duty tonight at nine."

"Tonight!" he echoed.

"Yeah, tonight," Gray growled. "You have guard duty tonight, outside the queen's room from nine p.m. until five in the morning."

What the fuck? The night shift wasn't what he'd had in mind when he'd signed on. He had his first fencing round tomorrow. What kind of shape would he be in after standing guard all night? "But I was assuming I'd get a day assignment."

Gray's dark eyebrows winged upward. "I figured you'd want night duty."

"Why would you think that?" Match asked, holding his hands out at his sides.

"Because of the competition you're currently involved in. If you were assigned to guard the queen during the day, you wouldn't be able to make your contests."

Fuck. Why had that never occurred to him? "I don't suppose they reschedule the fights for...good reason?"

"They don't reschedule for any reason, Matchstick. They don't reschedule for illness, deaths in the family or missing limbs! If you don't show up for your fight, you forfeit the round. Period."

"Fuck," he muttered. This was turning into a mess.

Gray drilled him with a sharp look. "You know, for a guy who was so anxious to join the queen's guard, you don't look very fucking happy."

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. "Thank you, Gray." It wasn't Gray's fault that he'd fucked himself over. In fact, his longtime friend and commanding officer had gone out of his way to make this happen – as a favor to him. Silently, Match started to reorganize his strategy. The first fencing round would be rough after a sleepless night spent on his feet. But maybe he could nap during the day.

"I'll expect you to be in your Hexapod six hours a day," Gray remarked.

Jeezis. He'd forgotten about flight training. His mind was off in the next quadrant, dealing with the logistics of standing guard all night, getting to his contests on time and somehow creating the devices that he'd need to win. He'd need several since he didn't dare use the same device twice. Unfortunately, no matter how he reorganized his schedule, it just didn't leave any time for sleep. Maybe he could catch a few Zs in his Hexapod during flight training.

"You can draw up your own training schedule," Gray offered gruffly.

"Right," he answered. "Thanks, Gray. I'll check out a blastuka from supply and report to the palace armory."

"That won't be necessary. Danjer doesn't want you armed with a blastuka before *his* men are permitted to carry them."

Match nodded. The Inter-Gal ban on intergalactic trade of weapons had been lifted but eYona's warriors had to be trained before they could be armed with blastukas.

"The captain of the guard will provide you with a sword if you need one."

"I have something I can use," he answered distractedly. "Something Jed gave me."

"For your information," Gray volunteered as he pushed back in his chair and locked his hands behind his head, "Danjer wasn't keen on the idea of you joining the guard."

Surprised, his chin jerked upward. What the hell did Danjer have against him? "He wasn't?"

Gray shook his head. "He suspects you lack...discipline."

Oh, for fuck's sake. As far as Match was concerned, the value of discipline was highly overrated. There was only one response to a remark like that. "Where would he get that idea?"

Gray's mouth flattened into a grim line as he sent Match a severe look.

Match rolled his shoulders in a casual attempt to shrug the issue off. "I've been known to bend the rules in the past. But then, so have you."

"There's a time and a place, Match. I assured Danjer you knew the difference."

"I know the difference," he said solemnly. "Thanks for going to bat for me, Hammer."

"Just don't let me down. Because if you fuck that pretty, little virgin queen, I'll skip the court-martial and go straight to the firing squad."

Match chuckled. "That would be kind compared to what her brother would do to me."

"Fucking hell. Junkie would cut off your balls."

Match nodded. "And that would be the best part. What happened after that would be ugly."

Chapter Eight

Deep in thought, Yarionna made her way down the corridor toward her rooms. After a long working dinner with three of her ministers from Iverannon, her mind was finally free to turn to the events that had unfolded in the arena earlier that day. Uppermost in her mind was Lieutenant Maloney's performance. He'd fought so viciously, flooring his opponent with three rapidly executed blows. She had watched, staggered by his passion and fire. It was hard to believe that a man who could dance so gracefully could be such a deadly force in battle. The black look he'd shot her way as he'd stalked from the arena had only served to send a perverse thrill up her spine. Not a sensible or reasonable reaction considering the violence with which he'd destroyed his opponent. Nonetheless, she couldn't help imagining how fiercely he might protect her. But could a woman trust a man like that? What if he turned his passion against her?

As she approached her rooms, lost in her private musings, she hardly noticed the two men outside her door, waiting to replace the guards who trailed her. But as she got closer, her gaze snagged on a set of strong, clean limbs packed handsomely into a pair of long pants. Yarionna frowned, surprised that she'd noticed her guard's legs. What was with her lately? Did a woman suddenly become acutely aware of the opposite sex at the age of twenty-three years and eleven months? All her guards were fit but there was just something about the way this man filled out his uniform—

"You!" she spat, pulling up so suddenly that she briefly lost her balance. She rocked from her heels to her toes, about two inches from falling into the arms of Lieutenant Maloney. She stared at the offensive Earther who was inexplicably garbed in the uniform of her personal guard—complete with soft kid boots and crisp white linen scarf. "What are you doing here?"

"Part of your new interplanetary security team," he snapped off, his voice as cold as his frigid gaze, which was focused straight ahead. He bent his knee then rose again before it touched the ground. As gestures of respect went, it was the shortest acknowledgement she'd ever received.

"Interplanetary security!" she exclaimed while waving the other guard up to his feet. "I don't need interplanetary security. I have a personal guard."

"And now I'm part of it, ma'am."

"This can't be happening," she gritted, so upset to find him in the uniform of her guard that she'd barely registered his continuing lack of protocol when he'd called her ma'am instead of My Queen.

"Hey. Standing outside your room all night isn't exactly my idea of a good time, either," he growled, his eyes mocking her. "But orders are orders. If you have a complaint, take it up with my superior."

“You can be certain I will,” she said frostily as she flounced through the door to her room and left the four men to the formalities of the guard change.

Once safely behind the closed door of her apartment, Yarıonna began to shake, though she wasn't sure it was fury that had her as ruffled as a cavalry banner snapping in the wind. It wasn't fair what that man did to her, the reactions he pulled from her body. She was the queen. Poise and decorum were her middle names. At least they had been up until the moment she met him. She wanted to slap his face for his impertinence but that sort of conduct was hardly in keeping with her station in life.

She was the queen!

Yarıonna sighed as she dropped her gaze to her chest where her nipples had tightened into wanton little spikes. Not much poise and decorum going on there. She shook her head. The things the man did to her body. He really did deserve a good, hard smack but, for the sake of dignity, it would probably be better to go through the proper channels...and have him beheaded. If that didn't work, she could always hire an assassin.

With those sorts of ungenerous ideas crowding her head, she pulled a white satin robe from her closet and draped it over a chair before starting to undress for bed. Standing before the full-length mirror mounted on the wall, she unfastened her belt and let her gown slither to the floor. It pooled around her feet in a deep wash of dark silk. After sliding her shorts down her legs, she regarded her nude body in the mirror for several moments. Then she buckled the wide belt low on her hips and struck a provocative pose, hooking her thumbs in the belt as she angled her hips to one side. Exposed to the cool air, her nipples puckered up a little more, making tight, dark kisses against her pale skin. Not entirely satisfied with what she saw, Yarıonna plucked at the bottom of her braid and shook out her hair. As the dark mass cascaded over her shoulders and down her back, she regarded her reflection anew. Except for the small mole just above her mouth, she supposed she was fairly attractive.

Would her champion find her pleasing? Would he even care whether she was pleasing or not? After all, there was a good chance that the man who won the tournament would be more interested in the power associated with being the queen's champion than he would be in her body. Yarıonna sighed at the pure bleak irony of the situation. Although she was the singular ruler of eYona and the most powerful being on the planet in matters of state, she was utterly powerless in the matter of who she shared her body with.

That point had been driven home earlier in the day when she'd contested Lieutenant Maloney's right to compete in the tournament. It had been a shock to learn that she held no sway over the arbiters, even when the circumstances were quite clearly out of the ordinary. But though she'd been frustrated almost to tears over her inability to influence the outcome of an event so profoundly personal, and though she did *not* want to end up in bed with Lieutenant Maloney, her disappointment on that score was nothing compared to the revulsion she'd experienced when she'd watched another contest later in the day. That fight she'd witnessed with absolute dread as it became

clear how badly things could turn out for her. Even if the lieutenant grated on her nerves, at least he was bright, handsome and polished. Millston of Southbarg was none of those things.

She crossed her arms over her chest and hugged herself as tiny chill bumps spread over her skin. Millston didn't belong to her military, she'd learned after making inquiries. Although he'd applied to join her army five years earlier, he'd been deemed mentally unsuitable for a place in her forces. Generally, when an applicant was considered unsuitable, it meant he was either violent or simple or both. Not surprisingly, that hadn't stopped the Southern army from scooping him up to fight against her troops in the civil war. But the foot soldiers of the Southern army had been granted amnesty and were as eligible to compete in the tournament as any other man on the planet.

As she'd watched from her seat behind the arbiters' box, he'd lumbered into the arena from his waiting place beneath the stands, the neon light harsh across his broad, hairy back. Without sparing her a glance, he'd paced the arena's sandy floor like some bestial aberration while waiting for the signal to start his fight. As he paced, he'd stabbed his finger at his opponent and taunted the young warrior with threats so vilely obscene they'd turned her stomach. And after swiftly defeating his foe, he'd lifted his boot and ground his heel into the fallen warrior's face as the field arbiters raced to drag him away from the downed man. It had taken six brawny men to subdue him. Then he'd wiped his nose on his hairy arm while giving her a long stare that had made her legs weak with horror.

Yarionna shuddered and her chin fell, fear fluttering in her chest. Tormented by images of Millston's big, meaty hands on her body, she watched the mirror from beneath the delicate ridge of her brow as cold, clammy terror claimed her spine.

With her shoulders sagging under the weight of her grim imaginings, she loosened the belt from her hips and tossed it at the bed. Then she took a step toward the chair over which her robe was draped and tripped on the mass of fine fabric piled around her feet. With a soft scream, she lurched sideways and fell slanting toward her heavy desk. In an attempt to halt her fall, she grabbed at the desk but only succeeded in knocking several items to the floor. A heavy piece of sand art toppled down beside her along with a crystal paperweight and a small arrangement of desert floss as her head met the desk's edge with a sharp thud. Stars swam at the top of her vision as she sat slumped on the floor, her legs folded at her side, her arms bearing her weight while she fought down a rising wave of nausea. As she squeezed her eyes shut and waited for the room to stop spinning, she felt a pair of strong arms lifting her.

"Yari," a rough male voice whispered in an Earther accent. Strong arms wrapped her in something cool then pulled her close. "Are you all right? What happened?"

"I tripped," she said stupidly, feeling disoriented yet secure in the lieutenant's arms as he lowered himself to the edge of her bed. "Hit my head."

"I'll say. It sounded like an explosion. I'll send Stane to bring someone from Medops," he offered, referring to the Force's Advance Medical Unit which had been set up shortly after their arrival on the planet.

"No. I'm fine," she hurried to tell him. "I knocked a few things off my desk. Just give me a minute. I don't want everyone rushing in here."

She felt his hands carefully exploring her head, his fingers rubbing gently against her skull. "Ouch," he murmured when he found the tender knot just above her ear.

"Ouch," she agreed as she turned her face into his shoulder and drew in a deep breath of his warm, masculine scent. With her hands clasped beneath her chin, she surrendered to the comfortable sensation of being held in a man's arms for the first time. She found the experience soothing. Strange, when she considered she didn't like the Earther.

"You're bleeding," he said suddenly, a strange note of panic in his gravelly voice.

She lifted her hand in a weak wave then squeezed her fist to stop the flow of blood from her palm. "I whacked my hand on the crystal paperweight. I'll survive."

"We'll see about that," he muttered. Swiftly, he carried her to the slashroom and lifted her to the white marble counter. When he touched the flat round pad on the wall, the bright wash of light hurt her eyes.

She leaned forward and rested her forehead on his shoulder. "Match," she mumbled. "I feel sick."

"Take a breath," he coached her gently. "You're not going to be sick." Holding her hand over the basin, he activated the cleansers that slashed like a curtain through the air. Then he pressed his thumb over the small, deep wound and wrapped it with his scarf.

Shocked, Yarıonna watched his face from behind the shield of her lashes. Okay. She'd hit her head and she was a mite disoriented, but she was nonetheless stunned to see this side of Lieutenant Maloney. After watching his fight in the arena earlier that day, she wouldn't have thought the fierce competitor had a gentle side. Yet the care with which he handled her wound and the tender concern that marked his features, along with his softly spoken words, had her reeling. Groggily, she shook her head and plucked at the white robe that kept slipping off her shoulders. "You covered me," she murmured, frowning at the white satin fabric that kept sliding down her arms to her elbows.

"You called me Match," he countered softly as he made a tear in the end of the scarf. "Must be a full moon."

"Full moon?" she questioned him.

"Back on Earth, it's generally agreed that strange things happen when the moon is full."

"What's so strange about covering up a naked woman?"

His low chuckle was muted as he tied the ragged ends of the scarf together and knotted them tightly over her wound. "It wasn't my first instinct," he answered.

"Well, thank you," she mumbled, reaching up with her bandaged hand to finger the knot on the side of her head and wondering, strangely enough, if he had liked what he'd seen. Not because she was particularly concerned with the lieutenant's opinion, per se. Just that she would have liked a man's take on whether she had much going for her.

"My pleasure," he said, his voice taking on an earthy rasp. "It's nice to know what I have to look forward to."

Not at all certain what he was getting at, she questioned him with a blank look.

"It's nice to know what I have to look forward to on your birthday," he explained, his gaze turning smoky and warm. "When I become your first champion."

"Oh," she answered with a giddy little laugh. Did that mean he found her attractive? She wished he wouldn't be so fuzzy. Why did everything seem so fuzzy tonight? She must have hit her head really hard.

He caught her chin with his long fingers and forced her to meet his hard stare. "I am going to be your champion," he stated.

"How are you going to beat Millston?" she asked, feeling very dull and glum, her head pounding like the surf at Onstan's Head.

"Same way I beat Edjir," he answered, his expression losing its warmth and turning to pure stony determination.

Yarionna sighed and gave him a sad look. "Do men really mean those ugly things they say to each other or is it all bluster? I mean, Millston wouldn't really want to do those things to another *man*, would he?"

The lieutenant's face tightened into a cold mask, the lean cut of his jaw like something hewn from rock, the curving line of his lips hard and ruthlessly sensual. Thankfully, he didn't ask her what Millston had said to his opponent while waiting for his fight to begin because she really didn't want to repeat the brute's obscene threats. "Not generally," he replied. "Although Millston might be an exception to the rule."

She gazed up at him, captivated by his expression and wondering why she would find such cold rage attractive. No doubt it was because his fury was directed at Millston. "I think I feel better now," she whispered, wrapping her hand around his thick wrist as she eased off the counter and onto her feet.

"No, I can walk," she argued dizzily as he reached to steady her. She tried a step and lurched sideways. His arm snaked around her waist and pulled her into his side as he helped her out of the slashroom.

"So, what are the odds on Millston?" she asked.

"Don't worry," he soothed, his fingers spreading over her hip and heating her skin like five long brands. "There are lots of men between Millston and you. He doesn't stand a chance."

“What are the odds?” she persisted with a cynical snort.

When they reached the bed, he took her hips in both hands and turned her. As though responding to his unspoken command, she sat on the edge of the thick mattress. His voice was low and guttural when he finally answered her question. “Currently he’s favored ten to one.”

She watched quietly as he cleaned up the mess on the floor and returned the fallen items to her desk. Her next observation was probably better left to private rumination. Yet, in her muddled state, she couldn’t help sharing her point of view with the lieutenant. “Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad,” she muttered philosophically if somewhat wearily. “Once you got past the first kiss.”

A little surprised at the things she was saying aloud, she gazed up into the lieutenant’s startled expression just as a terrible tremor shook her frame. The thought of Millston’s big, wet, brutal mouth covering hers just shook her to her roots. And kissing would be the *best* thing that she could expect from Millston, should he win. After that, things would just get worse. Much worse. Dropping her gaze, Yarionna covered her face with her hands and tried to rid her mind of the obscene, grotesque images that both sickened and terrified her.

Dropping to one knee in front of her, Match pulled her fingers gently from her face. He lifted her hair out of her eyes and tucked it behind her ear then stroked his fingers back through the heavy mass. “I won’t let that happen,” he insisted fiercely.

“How are you going to stop him?”

“I’ll ambush him in a dark alley if I have to.”

“But he’s—”

“With a blastuka,” he added darkly.

She gave a sad little chuckle. “You can’t murder the queen’s champion. By tradition and protocol, I am required—”

“Fuck tradition,” he snarled, his eyes glittering with passion. “And fuck protocol. I refuse to acknowledge a tradition that forces a perfect feminine creation to mate with a monster like that.”

As Yarionna gazed into his intense expression, she was moved on two separate counts. First, she was amazed that he had called her a perfect feminine creation—high praise from a man who’d clearly been angry and insulted by her behavior at the arena earlier in the day. Second, she was surprised to have discovered a sympathetic ear in Lieutenant Maloney. It hadn’t occurred to her that, as an Earther, he might be one of the few men on the planet who would question an institution that no eYonan would ever dream of challenging.

“If anything, you should be matched with the smartest man, not the biggest brute,” he ground out angrily.

Tears started spilling from her eyes though she couldn’t say why. One moment she felt absolutely isolated and alone in her sorrow. The next moment, she didn’t. For some

reason, his kindness and sympathy broke her. It stripped away the aloof reserve she'd banded around herself to give her courage. It was as if he'd opened the door to her unhappiness and it all came rushing out in the form of tears. In a way, it would have been better if he had been cold and detached. Then she could have railed silently about the unfairness of it all. "I'm sorry," she sobbed. "I don't know what's come over me."

"It's the shock," he murmured, holding her tightly and stroking her hair, his rough voice gentle with concern. "You hit your head pretty hard."

She shook her head as the tears continued to pour. "It's Millston. I just hate to think that he might be the only thing I ever know. I didn't expect to get lucky enough to love the man who became my champion," she babbled, "but I never expected anything like...like that!"

"Shhh," he whispered. "Shhh. He won't be the only thing you ever know. I can fix that. I can fix that right now."

"What do you mean?" she sniffed, pulling her face away from his shoulder and searching his eyes.

"He won't be the only thing you ever know," he whispered. "Because the first thing you'll know is this."

He took her face more gently than she'd ever have thought possible, as though holding a delicate sand star, his gaze roving her features as if trying to memorize her, his palms cupping her jaw as his fingers threaded back into her hair. With his thumbs, he brushed away the tears beneath her eyes before hesitating a moment, his breath washing sensuously across her lips as she waited for him, her heart thudding dully. Finally, his lips met hers in a soft touch of rough silk that made her heart stand still while a wild longing built deep inside her and she trembled under the rush of emotion. As he pulled in a long, rough breath, he leaned away long enough to give her a hungry look, his pale gaze eating into her soul. Again, he smoothed his thumbs across her cheekbones again then angled his mouth across hers and touched her lips once more.

A helpless murmur of need and want bubbled feverishly on her lips as he moved his mouth over hers in a slow, carnal tasting, his tongue surprising her with its silken slide along her bottom lip. A wickedly delicious sense of chaos built inside her, her murmur turning into a quiet whimper. She parted her lips and moaned when he gave her more tongue. As if in response to the broken sound, he tightened his hand in her hair and tilted her head back then opened her mouth with his, his kiss turning restless and hungry, dominant and demanding. She opened her mouth and let him show her the way, her body responding with a fierce desire for more as his tongue moved deeper.

The hot, fevered press of his mouth turned increasingly savage until eventually he groaned and dragged his lips from hers, his mouth burning a wet line across her cheek to her ear, his rough jaw shocking her senses as it rasped at the delicate underside of her chin. She knew Earther males grew hair on their faces but she'd never have guessed it would be so abrasive. She didn't find it unpleasant, however. In fact, the ruthless scrape of his beard was strangely arousing. There was something about the rough contact, so

aggressively male, that felt like an act of ownership. She liked the harsh feel of him and the sound of the raw, gusting breaths he fed over her ear in ragged bursts before he finally pulled his face from hers. With the calloused pad of his thumb, he gently stroked the corner of her mouth.

"I'd better go," he whispered, tugging the collar of her robe up to her shoulders then watching transfixed as it slid down her arms again, this time baring her right nipple. "Fuck," he breathed as he gazed down on her dark areola.

At his roughly spoken curse, a deep ache pulled up from between her legs, unfurling beneath her belly and building like a steady pulsing drip that stung her most sensitive intimate parts. She took in a deep, sharp breath—sharp because she'd been holding it for longer than she realized. His piercing gaze flicked to her face and checked her eyes before drifting down to her mouth. His pale irises had almost disappeared, a thin icy rim around the width of his dark pupils. He shook his head as his gaze moved from her lips back to the gentle swell of her breast. "Oh fuck," he whispered. "Your nipples are such a wonderful shade of red. Just like your mouth."

"Red?" she murmured hazily, vaguely wondering if red was good but mostly wondering if he would kiss her again and fill her once more with that terribly wonderful feeling of want.

When he dipped his head to her breast, a staggering rush of tenderness welled up inside her at the sight of his head bowed to her chest. She stroked her hands into his hair and let the glittering strands sift through her fingers, enchanted by its silky warmth, captivated by the way it gleamed with an unearthly light. As his tongue curled around her painfully taut nipple, she gasped, her body shocked with a bright flash of pleasure. With a deep, masculine growl of satisfaction, he tugged and pulled at the sensitive nub, closing his lips around it, sucking gently at first then with strong rhythmic pulls that resonated with the hectic waves of need rolling through her lower body.

Finally, he gentled his worrying hold on the excited pebbled crest that jutted against his lips. Taking a steadying breath, he painted it with his rough tongue then pulled back to look at her wet areola. Her nipple was swollen and dark, shining with his saliva as he pursed his lips and sent a long, warm breath washing over it. The touch of his breath on her wet nipple pulled from her body a reaction that was like a kind of madness. Yarionna turned to jelly from the waist down, shivering as she melted in his arms.

For the first time in her life, Yarionna understood want. Desire. And need. Her life thus far had provided her with everything she required. In return, she focused on duty and obligation. But now she knew only a bleak, eating need that transcended duty and obligation, that could never be served by the nation's wealth. A need that could only be served by a man. This man. The responsibilities of her title were all but forgotten. All that existed was an overwhelmingly selfish hunger. All of her focus centered on herself and the ferocious need that thrummed deep between her legs.

"I'd better go," he repeated in a graveled voice as he leaned his forehead against hers, his lips whispering across her cheek as he spoke.

A hesitant rap sounded against the door and they shared a guilty look. "I think that's just the other guard," she said breathlessly.

"Yeah," he murmured, his lips moving against the corner of her mouth. "You're probably right."

Then he did something that simply undid her. He rubbed his mouth gently over the tiny mole above her lip. At first she thought that his mouth had gravitated there by chance. Several seconds passed before she realized he'd actually targeted the small flaw for his attention. For some reason, the tender treatment he gave to what she considered a blemish set off a new wave of hunger deep in her womb, a troubling, aching pulse of want.

Again he brushed his mouth across the small mark, a groan whispering on his lips. Then he stamped a final hard kiss across her trembling mouth. As she sat, breathless, on the edge of the bed, he rose to his feet and walked stiffly to the door where he shared a few reassuring words with the guard outside.

"If you're okay," he rumbled, his hand on the door's lever as he faced her again. "I'll be outside. Call me if you need anything."

"I will," she answered softly, tugging at the wide lapels of her robe while trying to pull herself together emotionally. By the Princess. What had he done to her? Under his influence, she'd lost her firm, solid center that guided her through all of life's unsettling events.

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Yarionna stared at the door as it closed, her heart rate soaring as though she'd just fallen off a cliff. She'd never been close to a man before. She'd never experienced a man's strength and heat, pressed up against her, primal and hard and so powerfully male. She'd never have guessed that someone so ragingly masculine and brutally savage could have a tender side that would cause him to pluck her from the floor and carry her like a child to tend her wound—an emotionally vulnerable side that would prompt him to lavish his affection on a small beauty mark.

She pulled in a deep breath and pushed it out in a shivering sigh. Whatever she thought about Lieutenant Maloney, she'd done him a grave injustice when she'd contested his right to fight in the competition.

Chapter Nine

After closing the door quietly behind him, Match stepped into the corridor, his heart throbbing achingly in his chest, his cock pulsing to the same painful cadence. The cold anger he'd felt toward Yarionna when he'd reported for duty had evaporated at that first heavy crash he'd heard behind the door to her room. Leaving the other guard to stand sentry in the corridor, he'd almost ripped the door off its hinges in his haste to reach her. Then his heart had gotten a bad jolt when he'd seen her slumped on the floor, her head hanging between her shoulders as she struggled to rise.

The sight of Yari injured and helpless had ripped his anger away and left him vulnerable to the emotions he'd been fighting so hard to keep at arm's length. It was an unsettling sensation to say the least. He didn't mind anger or happiness and was perfectly comfortable with lust. It was all those other emotions that messed with his equilibrium. One thing was certain, though. Understanding Yarionna's terror of Millston, he was determined to make sure the contender from Southbarg never got the opportunity to touch her.

"What happened?" asked Stane, concern creasing his brow. "Is the queen safe?"

"She's okay," he answered, his mind still back with Yari, his cock too, for that matter. With one hand, he reached down and palmed his shaft, which didn't help in the least. "She just tripped and fell."

"You were in there a while," Stane pointed out, a trailing note of suspicion in his voice.

"She's fine," he repeated then filled his lungs with a deep breath of air. "She just wanted to talk."

"What did she want to talk about?" Stane asked.

Match gave him a sharp look. The young guard's questions were a mite intrusive, in his opinion. And Match wasn't inclined to share the queen's concerns with just anybody. But what he saw in Stane's eyes encouraged him to speak. "I think she's worried about the champion competition."

"Millston," Stane grunted, a dark look falling over his features.

"Millston," Match echoed blackly, experiencing a sudden strong feeling of kinship with the young guard. Whatever differences there might be between Earther and eYonan, they were united in their unshakable loathing for Millston. As he gave Stane a curt nod, a soft creak behind him had him turning swiftly. He watched, holding his breath, as the door cracked open. He caught a narrow view of dark eyes and sex-colored lips then the queen's voice floated tremulously on the air. "Lieutenant Maloney?"

"I won't be long," he told Stane.

"I'll give you fifteen minutes," Stane informed him flatly.

Match sent him a wry smile, impressed by both his starch and his determination to protect the queen. As he slipped through the narrow opening in the door, the queen retreated a few steps before him. "What is it?" he asked as he closed the door behind him.

"I need to apologize," she insisted, her voice quavering as she twisted her hands together in a tight knot. "For today. For trying to have you removed from the competition."

She was shaking like a leaf and he suspected she'd called him into her room for more than an apology. If he hadn't known better, he'd have thought she was aroused. Very aroused. Maybe even as aroused as he was. It was an awkward situation. He knew he shouldn't be there. The smoldering attraction he felt for her had the potential to burn down the palace. The queen was expected to be a virgin on the night of her birthday. In addition, there was his promise to Gray. But even knowing the risk of being close to her, he reached for her, unable to react in any other way. Pulling her close, he smoothed his hands down the satin that covered her arms. "I shouldn't be here," he whispered.

She didn't say anything. She just buried her face against his shoulder while he gently stroked her. As he tucked his chin against his chest and looked down on her, he fought the primal, eating urge to tighten his fist in her long spill of hair, pull her head back and open his mouth on the tender column of her throat. Instead, he lifted her chin with his fist, which turned out to be just as big a mistake. Immediately, he was trapped in the dark, liquid depths of her wide-eyed gaze. "Yari," he said softly. Without his realizing it, his other hand dropped and his palm rubbed circles into the smooth fabric that covered the sensuous curve of her thigh.

As though wired to his touch, she arched suddenly, her spine stiffening, her chest pushing into his, her satin-draped nipples grazing his jacket while a strong shudder shook her delicate frame.

Holding his breath, he curved his hand behind her and pulled her lower body into his. The soft cushion of her ass felt so good beneath the wide spread of his fingers, her firm belly so goddamn perfect as it cradled his erection. Her eyes were closed, her lashes no more than dark smudges on her cheeks in the unlit room, her kiss-swollen lips parted, her breath sighing gently. Slowly, he lowered his lips to her mouth. She trembled again as their lips joined, her body stiffening in his arms.

He took her mouth in a carefully subdued kiss—a slow, damp slide of lips. His tongue swiped along the full pout of her bottom lip then opened her mouth and delved inside. His fingers glided through her hair and cradled her head, holding her in place while his hand tightened on her bottom and pulled her firmly into his groin. He rolled his hips and groaned at the delicious friction and sexy warmth that heated his shaft. Backing her slowly toward the wall, he rubbed his lips over hers and continued his cautious kiss.

But as they moved across the room, his control started to slip, deteriorating into something edgy and sharp. With a rough sound of craving rumbling in his chest, he rushed the last few inches and she hit the wall a little harder than he'd planned. Though he hadn't meant to be that aggressive, the sudden surrender to savagery started something unraveling inside him. Something that was better left wound up and safely stowed.

He shoved up tight against her and worked his knee between her legs as he crushed her mouth beneath his in a demanding bid for possession. With a groan that was ripped from the roots of his soul, he ravaged her mouth with a long, branding kiss broken only by the harsh breaths and rasping gasps that tore from his throat as he positioned and repositioned his lips over hers. And as he forced his primitive passion on her, she yielded beneath him, soft and warm and giving, even...offering, he realized dimly as his heart hammered brutally against hers.

Oh god. He was going to hell for this. But he had to feel her. He had to at least touch her where she creamed. He had to feel her heat sliding from her slit and wetting his fingers.

He slipped one side of her robe from her shoulder. The white satin slid down her arm to her elbow and lay there in soft folds. Then his fingers slid beneath the other side of her robe and sent it down her arm. He cupped the outer swell of her breast in one rough palm and savored the delicious small weight in his hand. When he brushed his thumb over the crest of her nipple, she shuddered from head to toe. He swallowed a murmur of excitement, a sharp feeling of anticipation arcing through his sex as he tested her nipple again and the nubbin lifted high beneath his thumb. Finding her so responsive to his touch, arousal built heavily in his groin.

With her warm, soft body crushed beneath his, he gave her pebbled crest a rough parting caress then trailed his hand down onto her narrow waist, over the generous curve of her hip and finally in toward her belly. Hoping to reach his goal before she might come to her senses and decide to stop him, he pushed swiftly lower and cupped his hand over her mound and held all of her precious, sexy heat in his palm. When she moaned, he tore his lips from the clinging moist heat of her mouth, aware that he couldn't go too far and cursing the promise he'd made to Gray.

"I won't hurt you," he murmured between roughly sawing breaths while his fingers plucked at the satin stuff of her robe, working it upward. "I swear I won't hurt you, Yarionna."

Taking in deep, sharp gulps of air, he groaned again as his fingers made first contact with the warm skin of her thigh. Though it just about killed him, he went slowly, letting her get used to his touch. This had never happened to her before. A man had never touched her like this and she was still trembling at intervals, her body tightening sporadically in helpless spasms. He fingered his way carefully through the small patch of soft curls that topped her mons then teased the top of her full, pouting lips, right where they parted, humid and slightly damp.

“I won’t hurt you,” he rasped, dipping between her swollen lips, which closed around his calloused fingertip like a soft kiss. Again he groaned, this time because he realized how rough his touch would feel on that most fragile of flesh. Swiftly, he removed his hand. Lifting his fingers to his mouth, he licked them then returned them between her pussy lips, his fingers sliding this time as they moved into her warmth.

A small, frayed sound of longing whispered across her lips as he moved lower. With his heart beating heavily in his throat, he stopped and backtracked, making circles in her delicate flesh until he found the telltale kernel that stiffened beneath his touch. He brushed it lightly several times as her body finally relaxed, the tension leaving her stiff frame as he played with her clit and she fell under the spell of sensual arousal.

He wanted to talk to her, to growl rough, gritty words against her ear. Tell her what he was doing to her and how fucking perfect it felt. But he was afraid of breaking the quiet spell under which she’d fallen. And even more afraid that she’d stop him if she were to realize exactly what she was doing.

And who she was doing it with.

After all, she’d asked him into her room, ostensibly to apologize. Trembling with emotion after a bad fall that had probably disoriented her, she’d accepted his soothing caresses. That might be all she had really planned to do when she’d called him back into her room. At the end of the night, she might not be ready to accept the fact that she’d done anything more.

He was treading on dangerous ground. He needed to go carefully and make sure that he didn’t take anything more than she truly wanted to give. But Jeezis Skies, he wanted it. He wanted it all. More than he’d ever wanted anything.

He knew his way around a woman’s body. Knew how and where to touch her to make her wet and needy. In the past, when he’d put his hand between a woman’s legs, it was generally to prepare her for his entry. To get her wet and slippery. He’d done it for himself, so that *he* could get fucked, rather than for her pleasure, though he knew he delivered pleasure enough, both before and after his penetration.

But he’d never made a woman come this way, preferring to watch her orgasm on his cock after he’d buried himself deep inside her. Unfortunately, he couldn’t penetrate Yarıonna. He didn’t dare, no matter how badly he ached to do exactly that. He could only touch her. But if she’d let him, he was damn sure going to make certain she would remember his touch and long for it with the same fierce fire that was stripping him to the bone.

Gathering himself, he dipped his hand lower, toward her lush opening, where his fingers skidded on her silky, wet flesh. As he rimmed her entrance, her bottom lip quivered and he leaned in to calm her with the light touch of his mouth.

For some reason, the taste and feel of her vulnerably shivering mouth took him another step into new territory. Suddenly the visceral urges that had been driving him for the past several days were replaced by an overwhelming need to pleasure her. The things he’d wanted to do to her from the moment he’d first seen her made way for a

new imperative—the things he wanted to do *for* her. The need to feel her tremble and shatter beneath his hand, the need to feel her come, the burning desire to feel her feminine release wetting his fingers. Those things transcended his earlier dark needs to a degree that absolutely floored him.

Silently, he cursed his calloused fingers, wishing he could put his mouth against her parted sex, knowing that she'd find his lips far gentler on that delicate part of her body. But he hardly dared to move in case he broke the spell and she changed her mind about what he was doing to her. Although he couldn't use his lips or tongue, he *could* offer her something less rough and harsh, though it might drive him right out of his ever-loving mind.

Match took a deep breath. He pulled his hand from the clinging warmth of her pussy and opened his soft, chamois pants then guided his cock out from beneath his cock pocket. Each of his breaths was a tortured gasp as he looked down between their bodies, his hand wrapped around his thick shank. Carefully, he guided his dick downward, bending his knees so that he could reach her slit with the cushioned tip of his broad cock head. Flexing his knees again, he rubbed the fat crown through the top of her warm slit. With a groan rippling on his lips, he stopped to collect himself, one hand flat against the wall as a surge of pre-cum wet his cock head and the dark bulb slid around her clit on the slippery wash of his moisture.

She whimpered, the helpless feminine sound arousing him to the point of agony as he regarded the tip of his dark flesh buried just inside her puffy pussy lips, his hand guiding the wide crown over her clit. The sight as well as the feel of his hot skin touching her fragile, wet sex pulled him closer to the edge of an unraveling hunger that was painful and maddening while deliciously carnal at the same time. Slowly, he circled her clit then rubbed his bruise-colored cock head over the burning nub. "It's okay, Yarionna. Let go. Let go, love."

Her head tipped back against the wall and her mouth worked soundlessly while he painted her clit with the moisture that oozed from his shaft. Then her head tossed and her dark hair flew around her face in a wonderful riot of thick black waves.

She was coming.

Swiftly, he loosened his grip on his shaft and slid two fingers through her hot, wet slit. With his fingertips spreading her entrance wide and her clit caught between the tight clamp of his knuckles, he rubbed his hand into her parted sex.

He groaned at the first fluttering clench that tugged at the tips of his fingers then he tightened his hold on the whole length of her sex, crushing her clit between the rolling clamp of his thick knuckles. Captured beneath his body, she bucked and shuddered as her climax broke over her, soft catching sobs shivering on her lips.

He growled with satisfaction and a deep-rooted sense of pleasure. "I've got you, sugar. I've got you. Keep coming, Yari."

He kept the length of his fingers crushed against her clit while the pleasure rolled through her in long shuddering spasms, only loosening his hold when her opening had

stopped tugging on his fingers, which were now tucked joint-deep inside her. His damp cock was pressed against her belly and he closed his eyes, agonizingly close to release. As he leaned into her, panting with need, she dipped her chin and hid her eyes against his shoulder.

"Hey," he murmured, his heart going out to her in a sudden surge of tenderness. "What's that about?"

Instead of answering, she just burrowed her face deeper.

"Yari. Don't look away. You didn't do anything wrong. Don't feel ashamed. Don't ever feel ashamed about something like this. You were beautiful. You were beautiful as you came, your precious cunt tugging at my fingers. Watching you climax was the most perfect thing I've ever seen."

When she peeked up at him, her winsome gaze about knocked him to his knees. A crippling rush of emotion rose inside him like a wave on which his heart rode. It made him want to keep this thing forever. To cling to it. To fight for it. To never let it get away. Then he felt the light brush of her fingers on his cock and his focus swiftly returned to his appalling need as he smothered a rough shout of anguish.

"It's so hard," she murmured wonderingly as her fingers trailed up the taut skin stretched around his shaft then moved on up over the cushioned flesh that rimmed his crown. "Yet so soft."

"God help me," he croaked, tilting his head back and blinking at the corniced ceiling as she rubbed her thumb into his excited flesh.

"Match?" she said in a small, hesitant voice.

"I'm about to come," he warned her in a husky rasp, returning his gaze to her face.

She gave him an uncertain look.

He shook his head and looked down at his painfully engorged cock. "You've never done anything like this before, have you?"

"No," she answered.

"You've never seen a man come," he stated roughly as his cock pulsed, one huge aching mass of agony. Afraid that he'd spill out over her belly, he didn't dare move. Unfortunately, he was equally concerned that he *wouldn't* come. He was going into tomorrow's fight with enough deficits. He didn't need a bad case of blue balls on top of everything else. On the other hand, Yarianna had no sexual experiences. And for some reason, this didn't seem like a good one to start with.

The kiss they'd shared had been relatively harmless. The fuckless orgasm he'd guided her through, perhaps a little less so. But coming all over her belly seemed a bit like tossing her into the deep end. At the same time, he was finding it difficult to curb a very prevalent and very basic male impulse to do exactly that, to mark her as his own. The thought of his cum coating her belly was pretty damn appealing. "Another time," he croaked.

"Match?"

He rubbed his lips into her smooth temple and closed his eyes. "I'm going to move away from you. Just...don't touch me again and everything will be okay."

"Can I kiss you?" she asked softly.

"What?" he choked, staring down at her as his cock jerked and spat.

"Can I kiss your...cock?"

"Fuck," he scraped out of a dry throat. What man in his right mind could turn down a request like that? He didn't want to throw her in the deep end but there wasn't much he could do if she climbed on the diving board and jumped in. She might as well know now what happened when a woman asked a man a question like that. She might as well know what happened when a woman kissed a man's dick. "If you don't," he told her on a hoarse mutter, "I'll never forgive you."

As she slid down to her knees, he knotted his damp fingers in her hair and watched her lips form a perfect rose-colored kiss before she leaned forward and pressed her mouth against his burning flesh.

A rough sob broke from his chest as he surged. Forcefully, he dragged her lips down over his fevered flesh and rubbed her kiss into his skin long enough to spike him over the edge. As he came, he shielded her face with his hand and let his cum splash into his curled palm. No more than a small drop reached the corner of her mouth. Watching from slitted eyes, he saw the tip of her tongue flick out to taste the sexy daub. At that point, it was all he could do not to force his way inside her mouth and punch to the back of her throat. A snarl hissed through his clenched teeth while he continued to fill his hand with the hot wash of cum.

Eventually, the sharp spiral of pleasure gave way to a perfect sense of sated euphoria. A growl vibrated at the back of his throat as he shook his head and looked down on her. Her minxish smile made him want to start all over again. But he tucked his sex back inside his cock pocket and closed his pants, knowing he had to get out of there before he gave in to the next round of arousal and the nagging need to bury his shaft deep between her legs. Then there was Stane. He had to leave before the other guard's promised interruption.

Swiftly, he swept her into his arms and carried her to her bed. Automatically, her arms settled gracefully around his neck. After he leaned over and lowered her to the thick, satin comforter, he brushed his mouth across her forehead and touched his lips to her nose before straightening. Looking around as he backed away from her bed, he noticed her clothing lying in a pile on the floor. He snatched up her shorts, wiped his hands on the black silk and pocketed the precious piece of underwear before turning toward the door.

This time, when he stepped out into the corridor, he was more determined than ever to become her champion. And now he was prepared to use whatever means necessary. He needed more of what had just happened in her room. He needed more of Yari. More of her hesitant touches. More of her painfully sweet kisses. More of that tender virgin pussy.

It wouldn't be hard to come up with some subtle tricks to help him in the fencing rounds. If he was careful, his opponents wouldn't even realize what was going on. But it was clear that it would take something special to help him defeat Millston. Something big. Something on a level with an act of god. Either that or a miracle. Since he wasn't in particularly good standing with God, Match decided he'd just have to make a miracle.

He decided he'd better start working right away on an anti-Millston device. Although the odds of being paired with Millston were currently over a hundred to one, those odds were halved every day and three days from now they'd be down around sixteen to one. Not so great. He needed to act quickly and get something put together fast.

Chapter Ten

Camp's muscles bulged, straining the seams of his sleeveless white wrap as he finished his fifty lifts and returned the heavily weighted bar to its stand. As he looked up at Blair, who was spotting for him, he wondered what name an Earther would give to the color of his best friend's hair. Blair the Stormrider was fair. His skin, hair and eyes were all lighter than Camp's. Even his frame was lighter. He didn't carry quite as much weight as Camp. But he was bigger than the Spaceforce officer who had beaten him that morning.

They were three days into the fencing rounds and Blair had lost his match that day to Lieutenant Maloney, which meant he was out of the competition. He had been favored to win against the arrogant Earther. Unfortunately, Lieutenant Maloney was proving to be a tenacious competitor and somehow beating the odds every day. It was getting to the point where men were reluctant to wager against him.

"He's beaten three eYonans in the fencing rounds," Camp said thoughtfully as he rolled up into a sitting position and straddled the long padded bench. "How is that possible?"

Blair shook his head without asking who Camp was talking about. He knew damn good and well. "It sure as shit isn't skill. I mean he's graceful. The guy has potential. But he lacks about ten years of training."

"If he lacks ten years of training, how did he beat you?"

"He shouldn't have," Blair answered blandly, as though reporting the weather. "I had him in full retreat under my advance. But I must have hit his sword at a bad angle. My arm suddenly went numb, as though I'd hit my funny bone, only worse. All the nerves in my hand and fingers were gone. When I dropped my sword, he touched my heart with his sword tip. Game over."

Camp pulled his hand down over his face then gave Blair a second look. "You don't seem all that upset about it."

"I never really expected to win the tournament. I figured you wouldn't let me. Or anyone else," he added, his crooked smile suggesting he knew exactly how Camp felt about the queen. "But it was damn embarrassing to go down so early and to lose to an Earther."

Camp nodded, feeling a little self-conscious and wondering at what point he'd tipped his hand and revealed his attraction to Yarionna. At any rate, it was clear that Blair had no personal investment in the matter. But that didn't surprise him. Blair had never shown any particular interest in Yarionna beyond the attention he'd pay to any other beautiful woman. Crossing his arms over his chest, Camp deliberated for a moment before saying, "Do you think he might have sabotaged your sword?"

"I don't know how he could have gotten to it," Blair answered, drawing his sword and peering down its length. "It's never out of my sight."

"He's some sort of systems expert with the Force."

"Systems expert? What the fuck is that?"

"Damned if I know. But I think he knows a lot about electromechanics."

"He broke Bram the Berserker's sword," Blair pointed out, gazing off into the middle distance as though pondering how such a thing was possible. "That sword was made by Danjer's father."

Camp inclined his chin as the men shared a long searching stare. Sixteen competitors remained in the tournament with three days of contests left before the final match on the queen's birthday. It was hard to believe the Earther could win his next three fights. It was just as hard to believe he'd won the last three. "Let's go find him and have a word with him," Camp suggested as he grabbed his black leather jacket and slung it over his shoulder.

As they made their way through the training equipment set up on the floor of the arena, they ignored Millston of Southbarg. Parked at the first weight station they passed, he strained and grunted, sweating like a giant, slimy slug and taunting them for quitting so early. "Prick," Camp muttered as they lengthened their strides and left Millston behind.

"Prick," Blair agreed, folding his arm at the elbow and flipping him off over his shoulder.

As they climbed the steps out of the stadium, Camp nodded at a small group of Spaceforce officers sitting in the stands. One of them, an attractive woman with long shining hair, watched Blair with a bold, speculative interest that was pretty hard to ignore.

But somehow Blair pulled it off.

"Are you still giving that Spaceforce officer the brush-off?" Camp asked while watching Blair from the corner of his eye and trying to keep the smile from his face.

Blair flicked his gaze back at the uniformed officers. "You mean Bellamy Anders, the human piranha?"

"Is that what our guys are calling her?"

Blair reached up and slicked his shoulder-length hair tight against his skull. Usually he tied it back, but today it was loose. "No, that's what *their* guys are calling her."

Camp chuckled, glancing sideways at his friend as he continued up the stairs. "You don't like the idea of a woman nibbling on your dick?"

Blair snickered. "It's not that. It's just that she's an Earther."

"What do you mean by that?" Camp asked, genuinely surprised by his friend's negative attitude toward their offworld guests.

"She needs a lesson in manners," he explained wryly.

"So why don't you give her one?" Camp suggested.

"I might just do that," he answered on a low, rumbling note of humor. "But I thought I'd give Jake a chance at her first. Have you seen the way he looks at her?"

Camp mulled this over. He'd noticed Jake's interest in the Earther officer. But, knowing Jake, it was doubtful that he'd ever act on his attraction. "Well, if you're going to wait for Jake to take a chance, it could take a while."

"I know what you're saying," Blair remarked. "But Jake's okay. He just needs something to build his confidence."

"Something? Or someone?"

"Something," Blair answered, his eyes glittering with amusement. "Something like a human piranha."

They reached the top of the stadium, ready to start their search for Lieutenant Maloney, only to discover that somebody had beaten them to him. A low grunt and soft scuffle of sound detoured their steps toward the north entrance, which was seldom used to access the arena, though it was a popular spot for couples looking for a quick, private fuck. The rough noises coming from the archway, however, sounded more like fighting than fucking so they checked it out.

In the dark shadows that cloaked the long archway, they discovered the lieutenant and five others. By the looks of things, the Earther had put up a good fight. Two leather-clad warriors lay moaning on the ground. The warrior who had the lieutenant pinioned from behind was almost blind, his eyelids swollen shut. The soldier who was throwing punches at Maloney had a broken nose, his mouth and chin covered with blood. A fifth man stood waiting for his turn at the fiery Earther.

Stunned to recognize all five of the men, Camp let out a roar of outrage. Blair was right beside him as they plunged into the fray. Together, they tore the men apart and sent the attackers reeling to the other side of the tunnel.

As the lieutenant slumped back against the wall and touched his fist to a bruise below his eye, Camp turned to face the men from his unit. "Bram! What the fuck!"

The dark-haired soldier bristled with animosity while pressing his wrist beneath his streaming nose. "The bastard broke my sword!"

"That's no reason to attack him five against one!"

"He's a fucking cheat! He couldn't win otherwise. My ten-year-old brother fences better than he does. He's a fucking joke and a disgrace. And he broke my sword!"

Unsure at that point who he was angrier with—the Earther or the eYonan—Camp scraped his hands back through his hair. "You guys get the fuck out of here."

"He's fucking cheating," Bram roared, throwing his fist at the wall, his fierce temper getting the best of him.

"If he is, I'll deal with him," Camp growled then watched stonily as the three men pulled their companions to their feet and all five of them staggered away toward the gray light at the end of the archway.

When they were out of earshot, Camp turned back to the lieutenant who was regarding him with a strange, wary silence that neither acknowledged nor welcomed his help. On some level, Camp couldn't help but admire the guy. He had the poise and quiet confidence of a born predator. As he rolled his shoulders and shot his cuffs, you'd have thought he was disappointed the fight had been interrupted.

"What were you doing hanging around the north arch?" Camp asked.

"A gentleman never tells," Maloney answered, his voice thick with sarcasm.

"Well, I don't see any women here," Blair snorted, his lip curling. "Does that mean you're protecting a man? Or did you come here to watch Millston and jack off?"

"Don't make me ill," he growled while sending Camp a sharp look that questioned the company he kept. "God, he's an ugly fucker, isn't he?"

"Are you talking about Millston?"

"Well, I ain't talking about your pretty friend here," he answered on a rough snort.

"He is an ugly fucker," Camp affirmed quietly.

"Anyhow, you got it half right," he offered in a sardonic drawl. "I was watching Millston. Not that it's any of your fucking business."

"Why were you watching Millston?" Camp asked.

He lifted his shoulders in an insolent shrug. "Just looking for an angle, an edge. Something I can use against him, if I have to fight him. If you guys are through saving me, I'll be on my way."

But Camp had some questions he wanted answered. "Bram's sword was made by Morgen of Earth, Danjer's father."

Maloney's expression never flickered as he pressed his fist against the raw scrape on his cheekbone. "If you have a gripe, eYonan, spit it out."

"Morgen's swords don't break, Earther. You're cheating."

The lieutenant pulled a thin book from his breast pocket and tossed it at Camp. "Show me which rule I've broken."

Camp caught the booklet as it fluttered through the air and flung it back at him. "That book deals with the process of the competition. There are virtually no regulations governing the actual fights."

"Then I haven't broken any rules, have I?" he answered in an infuriating drawl.

"Maybe not in fact. But in spirit—"

"In spirit, it's cheating," Blair cut in.

"It's winning," Maloney fired back at him. "Something that Earthers are good at. Where I come from, we do whatever it takes to win."

"Yeah?" Blair snarled. "Well, why don't you just do us all a favor and go the fuck back to where you come from?"

Matchstick's voice was a rough whisper, his spine stiff. "Because we're here to protect your planet. By whatever means it takes. Including cheating, you ungrateful bastard. The only reason we're here is to help eYona!"

"Ungrateful!" Blair roared, as pissed off as Camp had ever seen him. "I might feel some sort of gratitude except for the fact that you're the ones who landed us in this shit. If the Alliance hadn't asked for safe harbor for one of your spacecraft—the battleship that took out their High Command—the Grundians wouldn't be trying to kill us right now."

"And you think they'd have just swept through the Epsilon quadrant and ignored eYona? If you think that, you're not even as bright as you look. And that ain't saying much. We didn't force you! Spaceforce requested eYona's help and your government—your queen—agreed to the operation."

Camp crossed his arms over his chest and glowered. Though some of the merchant class considered Yarıonna's decision to help the Alliance a reckless move, her unfaltering courage was a matter of pride to every eYonan warrior. He wasn't about to criticize his queen. On the other hand, he didn't want to give in to the lieutenant, either. "The queen is young. And she doesn't always get the best advice."

"And you think that's gonna change when you're her champion?" Maloney challenged with a sneer.

"That's right," he gritted, fighting the impulse to plant his fist in the Earther's annoyingly handsome face.

"Well, think again, eYonan. Because after I win the competition, *I'll* be the one advising her and I'll be the one telling her she did the right thing when she joined forces with the Alliance."

"And clearly, *you* don't give a fuck *how* you win," Camp snarled.

The lieutenant's lip curled into a look of utter scorn. "Don't give me that bullshit. This competition is a contest to discover which man can best protect the queen. Are you telling me you wouldn't cheat to protect your queen? Are you telling me you wouldn't lie, steal or kill? Are you telling me you wouldn't do anything within your power to secure Yarı's safety?"

Camp glared at the obnoxious Earther. It bugged him to hear the lieutenant refer so casually to the woman Camp regarded as nothing less than a goddess as well as the ruler of his world.

"Are you telling me you wouldn't cheat to keep *Millston* from winning?"

Involuntarily, Camp's chin jerked upward as he stared into the Earther's frigid, clear gaze. The lieutenant's question gave him pause. He'd never before in his life considered the idea of behaving other than honestly. He'd never questioned the limits of his integrity. He'd never considered the prospect that he might be *forced* to cheat at some point in his life. If not for himself, for someone else.

"She's terrified of him," Maloney stated in a quiet rasp.

Camp pivoted on his heel and turned away, his stomach churning at the idea of Millston with Yarionna. The lieutenant was right. He wouldn't let Millston win. He'd do anything to stop him. *Anything*.

"The Grundians don't play by the rules," Maloney argued in a cold, flat voice. "Neither do the Taurans. And neither do I. That's what makes me the best man to protect Yarionna."

Camp turned on him in a heated flash of anger and frustration. "Hey. That's fucking great. If the Grundians or the Taurans ever get here, you might finally make yourself useful. But in the meantime, you'll be putting Yarionna at risk by alienating her people."

"What the hell are you talking about?" he demanded.

"I'm talking about Bram," Camp shouted. "How did you break his sword?"

The lieutenant rolled his shoulders in a guilty shrug. "I changed the molecular structure of the steel with my sword. Each time his blade clashed with mine, his blade got more brittle."

A cold streak traveled Camp's spine as he pulled his hand down over his face. He gave the lieutenant a long look. "Let me try to explain to you what you've done. First, you've insulted the finest swordsmith on this planet by making his product—his art, *his life's work*—appear faulty. So you've injured and insulted the Iron Duke's father. But that's nothing compared to the harm you've done to Bram." He shook his head and exchanged a look with Blair.

Blair tried to explain it to the thickheaded Earther. "I understand a lot of people on your planet keep animals as...pets. Dogs for instance."

"That's right," Match mumbled, his cocky expression faltering, his arrogance bleeding away as he finally got an inkling of how badly he'd fucked up.

"Well, eYonans don't keep pets," Blair sniped, a strong note of acid in his voice. "They keep swords. It's as if you just killed Bram's dog. One of the finest, bravest, most respected hunting dogs in the country."

For several moments Maloney stared down at the stones that paved the arched walkway. Eventually he lifted his gaze and shared a serious look with Camp. There was no belligerence in his expression as he sighed and said, "I'm sorry. I'll commission Danjer's father to replace the weapon." Finally, he pushed away from the wall and started limping toward the mouth of the alley.

"Do you need help?" Camp offered gruffly as Maloney moved slowly away.

"Nah. I'm good. I just banged up my ankle a bit," he grunted, waving Camp off. "Thanks for the rescue," he added, stopping when he reached the yard and glancing at the gray sky where clouds were beginning to pile up on the eastern horizon. His smile was a bit lopsided but his tone was sincere as he offered Camp his hand.

Camp grasped his outstretched hand and the men shook, according to Earth custom. As they parted ways, he found the lieutenant's change in attitude so sudden

and so complete that it gave him reason to think there was hope for the man after all. The problem was, he didn't particularly *want* to like the Earther.

Chapter Eleven

After leaving Camp and Blair, Match made his way over to Medops where they slapped a temporary brace on his foot. Conforming to the shape of his fractured ankle, the brace was as thin as plastic wrap. It made his limp less noticeable and checked the swelling but his ankle could no longer take his full weight, at least not comfortably.

Match attributed his success in the competition thus far to sheer determination and the electronic gadgetry he'd brought into the arena. But lack of sleep was wearing him down and his injured ankle would be a definite liability in the upcoming contests.

In the meantime, only sixteen competitors remained in the tournament with three days of contests to go before the final fight between two men on the queen's birthday. With so few contests left, they were no longer scheduling the rounds concurrently. Only one fight was taking place in the arena at any given time. Match returned to his room and started mixing the ingredients for his anti-Millston device while waiting for the evening's rosters to be posted.

Although determined to sweep the competition, he'd begun to realize he had work to do if he didn't want to fuck up in his role as queen's champion and advisor. He'd made mistakes, had stepped on eYonan toes and would probably step on some more before all was said and done. So far, ninety percent of his thinking had been driven by his dick while the other ten percent seemed to be coming from his heart, neither of which organs could be trusted to make clearheaded decisions. And he was beginning to understand that there was more to being the queen's champion than making love to Yaronna. He couldn't be constantly insulting her people. He needed to be able to help her make decisions that affected their well-being. And he basically knew fuck-all about them.

If he was going to be the man who Yari turned to for advice, he needed to get up to speed on both the planet and the people of eYona. Unfortunately, he didn't have the time right now. It was all he could do to keep up with his Spaceforce training runs, his scheduled guard duty and still have time to crank out the devices that were saving his ass in the arena. After all of that, there was rarely time for even a quick nap.

So, until he had time to learn more about eYona, he needed to go carefully because he sure as hell wasn't making any friends, though Aleya and Terra *had* shown up for his last two fights, bless their hearts. They were probably his only supporters on the planet.

Match blew out a long, rough sigh then glanced at the time in the bottom corner of his open workpad. Seven-thirty. By now, the rosters listing tomorrow's fights would have been posted but he was almost too tired to make the trip to the armory to find out who he was fighting next. Peeling himself out of his chair, he rocked up onto his feet

and stretched. Then he limped across the room and opened the door. Much to his surprise, he found Aleya and Terra standing just outside, smiling at him.

Damn. He was so exhausted, he wasn't sure he had the energy to fight them off if they decided to try to wrestle him to the bed. But the girls let him off the hook halfway through his long, awkward, rambling excuse.

"Oh, Match," Terra giggled. "We were only teasing. We knew you wouldn't be up for us tonight. But we couldn't resist. It's just so much fun to see you in love. It reinforces our faith in mankind."

In love? He scratched the back of his head and squinted at them. "Thanks. I think."

"We just came up to save you a trip to the armory. We've seen the rosters and you're fighting Warren tomorrow."

"Warren," he echoed dully, too weary to be anything but relieved. The name meant nothing to him other than he'd dodged the bullet again. He wasn't fighting Millston. Every day he managed to avoid the giant was another day the man from Southbarg might be defeated by someone else.

"You can take him," Aleya said encouragingly, giving him a tiny punch in the arm that sent him staggering backward.

He nodded as he absently rubbed his arm. He had a little trick prepared that would give him an edge in tomorrow's swordfight. As the girls turned away and started down the hallway, he gathered his wits together long enough to call out, "Who's matched against Millston?"

Aleya turned. "Camp," she called as she backed away down the corridor. "Camp the Islander."

Camp. Camp was scheduled to fight the man-mountain tomorrow.

As Match closed the door and returned to work on the concoction he hoped would blow Millston out of the water, he tried to decide who he'd rather see win. Camp or Millston. It took longer than it should have. He'd seen the look of outrage that had marked the queen's lovely face when she'd learned Match was competing to be her champion. The fire in her gaze was almost as arousing as it was infuriating. But that was rage and pride. That wasn't terror. She might have been angry at the prospect of Match as her champion but she was terrified of Millston.

And who could blame her? Absently, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the black silk shorts he'd taken from Yarionna's room. As he rubbed the smooth fabric across his lips, he drew into his chest the scent of his cum mingled with the sultry fragrance of her skin.

Match didn't like to think of Yarionna afraid. It made him...unhappy, for lack of a better word. It wasn't only that he was determined to see Millston eventually defeated. It was more than that. He didn't want Yari to live another day under the shadow of that fear.

After returning Yari's shorts to his pocket, he emptied the gray paste he'd made out of the mixing bowl and onto the table. As he kneaded it into a smooth, heavy dough, he wondered where he stood in her regard. He knew Yari hadn't liked him right off. And though he hoped she might have changed her mind about him since their erotic interlude in her room, she'd given him no sign that was the case. In the two nights he'd stood guard since then, she'd treated him no differently than she'd treated Stane. Although he'd hoped she might ask him again into her room, the invitation hadn't materialized. He just hoped he hadn't fucked up and taken things too far.

"In love," he grumbled as he rolled the dough out and cut it into strips. "Who said I was in love?"

* * * * *

Jeers of derision greeted Match as he stepped into the men's barracks thirty minutes later. Two warriors immediately informed him that he was in the wrong place. Another tried to give him detailed directions to the women's barracks, which were attached to the building in which he stood. Clearly, the idiots thought they were hilarious. When he finally got through to them that he was looking for Camp, they quit giving him a hard time and shared suspicious looks. After that, the men turned silent.

Fuming, Match stalked from the barracks. You could lead a horse to water but you couldn't make it drink, even when that drink was gonna help the useless nag defeat Millston. He was beginning to think eYonan warriors were all a bunch of horses' asses. He had to report outside Yari's door in an hour and they were wasting his time, jerking him around.

Standing in the middle of the yard with his arms crossed over his chest, he glared at the blocky stone walls of the Iron Palace while trying to decide what to do. The evening storm began to crack across the sky, the wind lifting the sandy soil like a twisting veil of soft-colored smoke that drifted toward the recharge slots where black magnabikes were parked in long rows. As he brushed his wind-ruffled hair from his face, a flicker of movement caught his eye and he realized he was looking at Junkie, framed in a narrow window on the upper floor of the building. The dark-haired eYonan was standing with his back to the window, having surrendered his bunk in the barracks to share a room with Jason and Lacey in the palace after his marriage.

Maybe Junkie could help him locate Camp. After all, Match was on good terms with the queen's brother. In fact, it wasn't so long ago they'd discussed the possibility of going into business together, producing mechanical pussies for 'droid barmaids. Hiding his limp, Match made his way across the yard and through the palace doors then upstairs to the second floor.

Standing in the corridor outside the room just a few doors down from his, Match gave a light rap to the door and tucked his latest invention behind his back. The door opened a crack and Junkie gave him a swift look before his gaze darted down the

corridor as though checking for the presence of others. "What do you want?" he asked bluntly.

Puzzled by the lukewarm reception, Match forced a smile to his lips. "I'm looking for Camp."

"What do you want with him?"

"I...have something for him," he answered. Junkie was acting pretty suspicious and Match was beginning to think his behavior might have something to do with the very man he was looking for.

Junkie gave him a steady look then opened the door wide enough for him to slip through. Once inside, Match was amazed at the number of men crowded into the bedroom. It looked like an eYonan war council.

"What are you doing here?" Camp asked, eyeing him distrustfully from the other side of the room.

Match hesitated as he scanned the closed expressions of Blair, Olan, Jake, Junkie and even Jed. Aw, fuck, he decided. In for a penny, in for a pound. With a shrug of his shoulders, he pulled the paper-wrapped strips from behind his back and offered them to the broad-shouldered eYonan.

"What is it?" Camp asked gruffly, meeting him halfway across the room while the others moved closer to have a look.

"Chewing gum."

"Chewing gum?"

"It's loaded with density-generating nanochips," he explained. "You chew it and load your mouth with nanochips then you spit on Millston's boots."

"And?"

"It works kinda like the seat belt in the Hexapod. The faster he tries to move, the more it slows him down."

"You're not serious."

Match just grinned.

"Why would you want to help me?" Camp demanded.

He rolled his shoulders in a casual shrug. "If you don't beat Millston, I'll have to face him."

"You're not sure you can beat him," Camp snorted.

"Oh, I can beat him," Match drawled. "And he can probably break my back afterward...maybe in some dark archway like the arena's north entrance, maybe with four of his friends."

The dark-haired eYonan flushed. "That wouldn't have happened if you'd fought fairly."

"Oh fuck," he cursed wearily, "We've been through this before. If you were defending the queen, would you worry about fighting fair?"

Camp was silent.

"My point exactly," Match muttered.

"How do I know this isn't some sort of trick?" Camp growled. "To get me out of the competition."

"Try it out," Match offered. "There are three pieces of gum in there. You only need one for your fight tomorrow."

Camp looked at the stick of gum then back at him. "Why are you doing this?"

Aw, hell. He'd been hoping to avoid that question. "I don't know how to explain it but, as repulsive as I find the idea of you winning, the idea of Millston winning just..." He thought of Yari with that big, brutal *dumb* monster and shook his head.

"Thanks," Camp said finally.

A sharp rap at the door drew everyone's gaze in that direction as Junkie strode through the crowd like a knife. After a few gruffly mumbled words, Junkie pulled the door wide to allow Saxon and Danjer inside. The Iron Duke's eyes narrowed in suspicion as he took in the sight of the men. "What's going on here?" he asked sternly.

"We're just here to offer Camp a little moral support," Junkie told him, his grin wicked, his black eyes glittering with humor. It was obvious that the tall, lanky eYonan wasn't intimidated by his commanding officer. But then Junkie belonged to the royal family, not to mention the same band Danjer played in. He jerked his chin upward. "What's that behind your back?"

"This?" Danjer pulled a leather vest from behind his back. "It's...just something I put together for Camp." He cleared his throat self-consciously. "To wear during the fight tomorrow."

"For good luck," Saxon added swiftly.

"Yeah?" Match drawled. "How's it work?"

Grinning, Danjer sat down beside him and started to explain how the innocent-looking vest would not only slow down each of Millston's blows but would also tire his arm.

"Damn," Match said, feeling as though he'd finally met his equal. "Damn, Danjer. That's fucking brilliant."

For the next twenty minutes, they discussed first Danjer's vest then Matchstick's chewing gum while the rest of the crowd listened in. During that time, Blair leaned against the door and stood guard. "Can anyone think of anything else?" Saxon asked as they finished up, his tone serious.

Match stretched and yawned. "I have to get to the east wing for guard duty but I could ask Aleya and Terra to...uh...drop in on Millston and keep him up all night. Tire him out a little."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Junkie murmured, his black eyes, so much like his sister's, glittering again.

Match narrowed his gaze on the queen's brother. He was beginning to understand that when Junkie's eyes lit up like that, somebody was going to be on the receiving end of his sense of humor. And wicked didn't begin to describe Junkie's sense of humor. "Why not?" Match asked.

"Because I've already arranged for him to spend the night in the slashroom."

A sharp bark of laughter escaped Danjer's normally serious lips. "You slipped him a laxative?"

"It was either that or murder," Junkie grunted, one of his brows arching upward.

Danjer ignored the gruff burst of laughter that filled the crowded room and sent the wily warrior a stern look. Millston wouldn't be the first man Junkie had eliminated in a wicked manner befitting his crime. When he'd found the Tauran who'd scarred Jason, he'd sent him into the desert to be raped by ticks. God only knew what he'd resort to in order to stop a man he didn't like from bedding his sister.

Junkie's grin turned hard. "I'll not have that beast matched with my little sister," he voiced, his eyes glinting with dark emotion. "Yari's terrified of him."

At the sound of the queen's name, a deep-seated ache rocked Matchstick's heart. To hear her brother speak of her fear was starkly sobering. Without thinking, his gaze moved to Camp's face. Together they shared a significant look. The sooner they removed Millston from the equation, the better it would be for Yarıonna. And at that precise moment in time, Match wasn't worried about beating Camp or winning the competition. He wasn't concerned about which of them would become the queen's champion, just as long as they were able to stop Millston.

* * * * *

Matchstick won his swordfight the next day then watched Camp's round. It was a close thing but he eventually managed to defeat Millston after a long, bruising duel. The competition was down to eight men. Buoyed by a wild sense of victory not entirely attributable to his own success, Match headed to the alehouse with a pack of his friends, including Jed, Gray, Jason, Velvet and Lacey. Shortly after they ordered their first round of drinks, Camp crowded in through the doors with Junkie, Olan, Blair and Saxon.

Match and his fellow officers were strung out along the full length of the bar. As Camp's party halted just inside the door and regarded the Earthers who had overtaken their alehouse, Match caught sight of them. Leaving his beer, he strode swiftly across the planked wooden floors to meet the eYonans. His step didn't falter as he swept Camp into a rough embrace. Then he dragged him back to join his friends, shouting at them to make room.

Several pints of beer later, Match was standing at the bar, elbow to elbow with Camp the Islander. Match lifted his glass. "Welcome to the dark side," he said with a grin.

"Who'd have thought we'd end up working together?" Camp asked on a deep chuckle.

"Not me," Match answered, laughing. "In fact, considering the way I've badmouthed you in the past, I probably owe you an apology."

"You probably owe me more than one," Camp grunted. "But go ahead and get started."

Again, Match laughed. "I'm sorry I told most of the women around here you were an egomaniac."

"Most of them?"

"Probably all of them," Match admitted.

"I wondered who had ruined my reputation," Camp snorted. "Are you gonna set them straight now that you've changed your mind about me?"

"Not a chance," Match informed him, a grin lifting his lips.

"Egomaniac?" Blair snorted, seeming a little less inclined to forgive Match. "And how exactly did you get to that?"

Match shrugged. "Guys who spend all their time working out are usually in love with themselves."

Camp's smile fell and he looked away suddenly.

"What?" Match queried, lifting his pint glass and draining away half of its contents.

Camp's gaze was fixed on the bar's countertop, his mouth curled into a solemn smile. "I've not always worked that hard. In fact, I only started training about six years ago." He turned his head and gave Match a steady look. "Yarionna was eighteen at the time."

Matchstick's mood turned suddenly sober as he reached back and rubbed a hand over his neck. Again, he had misjudged an eYonan. While he'd been traveling the universe and getting fucked whenever the opportunity presented itself, Camp had dedicated his entire adult life to the pursuit of one woman. He wasn't conceited or self-absorbed. He was just a very determined, very focused competitor who knew exactly what he wanted from life.

Now that he understood what Yari meant to Camp, Match couldn't help but feel sorry for him. Not because of the way Camp had spent his life but because of the way it would all end. Because Match had no intention of losing Yarionna to him, even though the dedicated warrior probably deserved to win the title of queen's champion.

"Are we going to fly today?" Olan asked pointedly, the question breaking into Matchstick's thoughts like the cutting dart of a particle beam.

"Fucking O!" Match shouted as he glimpsed the square timepiece in Olan's palm. "Let's go." He downed the rest of his beer in one swallow and slammed his pint glass on the counter. Then he was racing for the door, Blair, Olan and Camp trailing him as they veered off toward the launch field for flight training.

Chapter Twelve

Yarionna took her seat beside Saxon in the packed stadium. Leaning forward, she shared a few words with Pink, who was wedged between her two husbands. It hadn't taken long after her arrival at Judipeao for Yarionna to discover that she liked the friendly fair-haired imp to whom both Saxon and Danjer were utterly devoted.

"Are you here to watch Camp win again today?" Pink asked her cheerfully.

"Yes, I'm here to watch Camp," she answered, smiling, swiftly deciding there was no need to mention anyone else.

She watched him stride purposefully from beneath the stands to mid-field where his opponent waited for him. Camp. The man who had yesterday defeated Millston. The man who had *saved* her from Millston! She was annoyed that she'd missed yesterday's matches. It would have been nice to witness Millston's defeat. But Danjer had gotten wind of a possible Grundian attack and had confined her to her rooms under heavy guard. As it turned out, Danjer's concerns were not unfounded. The Grundians had indeed attempted an attack but their ships were intercepted before they reached the planet. Amazingly, it was a handful of recruits and their instructor who'd repelled the renegade Grundians. Yarionna couldn't have been more proud, especially since Camp was one of the novice pilots involved.

Down in the arena, the starting bell chimed and Camp set to, his blade flashing in an attack that looked effortless on his part. The tall warrior was a thing of beauty with a sword in his hand, his form perfect. He was as graceful on the mat as the lieutenant was on the dance floor. Yet, after the tall, broad-shouldered eYonan had won his match, Yarionna remained in her seat to observe the remaining contests. But she wasn't equally interested in all three of the remaining contests, she admitted silently, as Lieutenant Maloney made his way out onto the field.

She was a mess. Though normally decisive, she was confused where these two men were concerned. When she thought about Camp, she imagined him holding her in his powerful arms. Loving her. Laughing with her. Protecting her. When she thought about Lieutenant Maloney, her thoughts were far less chaste. She imagined him crushing her against the wall, one hand cupping her jaw and holding her face in place for his panting kisses, the other hand scrabbling at the skirt of her dress, trying to get it out of his way. Unfortunately, those images didn't repulse her.

The problem was that she wanted both those traits in a man. Stability and strength along with spontaneity and excitement. If she hadn't been born a queen, she might have been able to have both men.

Surprised at where her meandering thoughts had taken her, Yarionna shook her head impatiently and wished that her parents were there. Not that they could do

anything to halt the inexorable march of destiny but it would have been nice to talk things over with her mother. Unfortunately, her parents were offworld. Acting as her ambassadors to the Balagoe, they wouldn't be back until the day of the final contest by which time her fate would be pretty much sealed.

Down on the circular floor of the arena, the starting bell chimed and her attention was pulled from her parents back to the situation at hand. The lieutenant's sword ripped through the air in a high arc as he struck the first blow against his opponent, the longtime captain of her guard. Who could blame her for hoping the lieutenant would win? It would be strange and uncomfortable to go to bed with Merton, a man almost old enough to be her father. But Merton was a sharp soldier and a brilliant swordsman, as was proven by the fact that he'd gotten that far in the competition.

"The Earther's limping," she said, barely moving her lips as she tilted her head toward Saxon. "Was he injured in the last match?"

Saxon grimaced. "He got into a scuffle two days ago."

Something in his tone told her that he was hiding something—something she wouldn't like. Yari turned her head, forgetting for the moment the fight, which the lieutenant seemed to have well in hand. Strangely enough, Merton's sword seemed to rebound violently whenever his blade touched the lieutenant's. "With whom?" she demanded.

Saxon lifted one shoulder. "I'm sorry, My Queen. I was hoping you wouldn't learn of it. But some of your warriors felt the Earther's methods were less than honorable. They waylaid him in the stadium's north arch."

Yari gasped, her cheeks heating in outrage. "My soldiers ambushed him?"

"They tried to," Saxon muttered. "But Camp and Blair happened by and broke up the fight before the lieutenant was seriously injured."

Yarionna bowed her head and focused her gaze on her hands folded in her lap. While upset with the men who'd attacked the fierce competitor, she couldn't help the upwelling of warm pride she felt at the thought of Camp racing to Maloney's assistance. Everything about her eYonan hero was so noble. "I don't imagine the lieutenant will enjoy being beholden to one of our warriors," she suggested wryly.

Saxon cleared his throat. "Not a problem," he grunted.

"What do you mean?" she asked, returning her gaze to the competition.

"Maloney got a chance to return the favor and then some, when he saved Camp yesterday during the Grundian attack."

"You're kidding!" She'd known the attack had been successfully repelled without any injuries but she hadn't known...

The big warrior chuckled. "You're surprised Lieutenant Maloney rescued his biggest rival in this competition when he could have glanced in the other direction and let him fry?"

"Yes," she said slowly. "I think I am."

Saxon nodded thoughtfully. "I think the lieutenant was too. In fact, the only men who didn't seem to be surprised were Lieutenant Commander Hamm and my cousin Slash. I mean Jed," he amended, using his cousin's Spaceforce name.

Yarionna turned her gaze again to the beautiful lieutenant, her heart stuttering at the sight of him. Why did she react to him that way? Surely it was only because he'd saved Camp's life. Of course, that wasn't a very good argument when she considered how long he'd been giving her palpitations.

Damn him! Why did he have to mess things up by behaving honorably? Why couldn't he just be a complete and utter ass beyond redemption? It would make everything so much easier. Yari filled her lungs and let the breath out slowly, reminding herself that she had no control over which man would win the competition. In two days' time, she would be required to accept the winner in her bed. It would make no difference if Camp were the perfect choice. It would make no difference how annoying the attractive Earther was. She would take to bed the man who won.

Down on the arena's floor, Match touched his sword to his opponent's chest and she surged to her feet without thinking, clapping her hands and sharing a joyful smile with Saxon. As she did so, she caught Danjer's gaze. The Iron Duke appeared to be watching her closely, his expression troubled. She never felt at ease with Danjer, but now, under that frigid gaze, she felt particularly unsettled. His eyes, so much like Match's, looked as though they could see clear to her soul and she had the uncomfortable sensation that he knew exactly how she felt about the beautiful Earther.

As her party filed from the stands, the rest of the spectators remaining in their seats and waiting for her to pass, Danjer came alongside her. "My Queen," he said as they climbed the stairs together. "I was hoping to have a word with you."

"Danjer?" she said, inviting him to proceed.

"I hardly know how to begin. I'm the last man on the planet who should try to give you advice of this sort."

"What sort is that?" she asked.

"Advice on...matters of the heart."

Fearing what he might say next, Yarionna's pulse picked up. Although she didn't relish what was sure to be an awkward conversation, she hid her uneasiness behind a regal smile. "And why do you feel unqualified to speak on the matter?"

"Because I've followed my heart, My Queen. And if I had my way, I would advise you to do the same. To spend your life with someone you love."

"But?" she prompted him, as though only mildly interested.

"As an Earther, I'm probably the only man who can make this statement without offending anyone," he said as they reached the top of the stands and strolled through the archway into the yard. He squinted against the sun's rays as they headed toward the palace. "My Queen, your people wouldn't be happy if the Spaceforce lieutenant won the tournament."

"I have no control over who wins," she pointed out stiffly, wondering what Danjer expected from her. She couldn't affect the outcome.

"To some degree that's true. Although competitors have been known to step aside when the queen shows favor to another."

The words were out of her mouth quicker than a thought. "Lieutenant Maloney isn't one of those men."

Danjer dipped his head, a few strands of his night-dark hair slipping across his brilliant gaze. "I'm sorry if I've upset you, My Queen. I just thought you should know."

"Do you dislike the lieutenant?" she asked sharply, surprised at her irritation on Maloney's account. Her back had gone up at Danjer's first word of criticism.

"No. Not at all," he murmured then hesitated a moment. "In fact, if it weren't that he's a career Spaceforce officer, I feel he would be the best man to lead eYona into the future."

"Why is that?" she asked, her annoyance bleeding away. It was clear Danjer had her best interests in mind.

"Because of his knowledge about the very concerns that threaten our existence."

"But he knows nothing of our people," she pointed out objectively.

"It's a hard choice," he admitted. "Camp has been a close friend for years and I have nothing but respect for him. Lieutenant Maloney lacks discipline," he pointed out thoughtfully, as though to himself. "But discipline isn't everything."

"There are two other contestants," she reminded him.

"I believe the competition will come down to Camp and Lieutenant Maloney," he answered without emotion.

"And you advise me to favor Camp, against your instincts."

"Yes, I do, even though my instincts tell me outside forces are the biggest threat right now and the lieutenant would make the best champion if he were willing to set aside his career."

"But you don't think he would set aside his career."

"He's an Earther. They need their own careers. He wouldn't be content to be only your champion. It's not just pride or even the fact that he must have his own income. It's the work. An Earther needs his own work."

"If that's true, then why has he entered the competition?"

Danjer shrugged. "His assignment here on eYona will expire after the flight training is completed."

It was clear Danjer thought Lieutenant Maloney was only in it for the short run and Yaronna had to agree it was unlikely a Spaceforce officer would set aside his career, not for any longer than a year, at any rate. And her people didn't want an offworlder sitting at her side and advising her in matters of state. It was the deciding factor she needed to help her make up her mind. Camp would make the better champion and the sooner

Lieutenant Maloney realized it, the more likely he would step aside. And the better for everyone.

“Thank you for your honesty,” she told Danjer as she climbed the wide, low steps into the palace. As she swept through the tall, copper-banded doors, her long, pale gown sweeping the tiles that paved the entry, she was determined to come up with a plan that would make her preference clear to Lieutenant Maloney.

She might have felt bad about her decision if she’d thought it would affect him emotionally but she didn’t believe for one moment that Match was in it for the long run. She’d made her choice and was convinced it was the right one. She was determined to be happy. After all, Camp had saved her from Millston. Maybe he didn’t have the lieutenant’s dash and style but those qualities were often indications of a shallow, restless, unreliable nature. Camp was tall, handsome and sexy—the quintessential strong, silent type—and she found him every bit as attractive as the brash Earther.

She decided she would invite Camp to dinner and afterward take him back to her rooms. By that time, it would be relatively late at night and hopefully Match would get the message. But if he didn’t take the hint tonight, he was sure to catch on tomorrow when Camp wore her favor into the arena.

* * * * *

For a long time after Yari and Camp had strolled through the door to her room, Match stood enveloped in a red mist of rage. Furious didn’t begin to describe his reaction to the sight of Yari with Camp, her hand tucked beneath his arm. The little hussy. But he’d rather be angry than unhappy any day so he concentrated on his rage.

The worst part was the way she’d looked at Camp. She’d never looked at *him* that way. Fuck, she’d never looked at *Camp* that way before Millston. It was pretty damn obvious she considered him her savior.

Match blinked several times and turned his head slightly, his rage eventually falling victim to the black misery that ached through him. He stared down the corridor, which blurred into a soupy tunnel. He couldn’t have done a better job of screwing himself. When he’d helped Camp beat Millston, he’d only wanted to remove the brute from the competition so that Yari could stop being afraid. He’d never considered the consequences. It hadn’t occurred to him that naturally she’d be grateful to the man who had saved her from a fate worse than death.

Faced with the realization that she’d never know of his role in her rescue, Match could hardly breathe. He could never tell her how he’d helped Camp win without revealing the fact that he’d cheated in all of his own contests. And Camp sure as hell wasn’t going to mention his help. He couldn’t do that without making them both look bad.

Match took a deep, ragged breath, his heart clogging his throat as he swallowed hard. He’d never been more messed up over a woman. He knew part of his reaction could be put down to fatigue but, even so, it felt as though someone had ripped his

fucking heart out. It was the way she'd done it, bringing Camp to her rooms at night while he was on guard duty and shoving it in his face. Evidently the little bitch was trying to clear the field for the man of her choice. But if she thought he was going step aside for Camp and make life easy for the two of them, she was mistaken.

He decided to give them thirty minutes. After that he was going in. He'd tell Stane that he'd heard something suspicious from behind her door. With any luck, he'd interrupt Camp and Yari before they could get too far. He didn't want Yari going too far with him. The idea clawed at his gut and ripped something in his chest to shreds.

And once Match was through her door, he planned to make it abundantly clear to both Yari and Camp that he wasn't out of the running.

Chapter Thirteen

Behind the door to her room, Yarionna sat with her slippared feet tucked beneath her on the cozy loveseat she shared with Camp the Islander. He'd shed his leather jacket upon entering the room. As he lifted his arm to the back of the small loveseat, his bulky musculature rippled beneath the close-fitting white wrap that crossed his chest. He was a delicious hunk of man. All hard and all male. Her mouth watered at the sight of the heavy veins riding over the corded strength in his rugged forearms. Even the dark fan of hair beneath his arm she found appealing.

His wide, handsome jaw was no less appealing, his mouth a wide, firm line. But it was always his eyes, more than anything else, that drew her to him. Thickly lashed and velvety-dark, they were warm and intelligent and above all, caring.

"You saved me from Millston and for that alone, I'll be forever grateful," she said, sending him a flirty smile. "No other man could have done what you did."

He rolled his shoulders as though uncomfortable with her praise. "That's not true," he murmured.

"It is too!" she declared on a happy laugh. "Name one other man who could have taken him."

"The Earther," he finally said. "Lieutenant Maloney could have beaten him."

"No way!" she shouted. "Millston's twice his size. That ugly brute would have cleaned the floor with Lieutenant Maloney."

"Maloney would have found a way," Camp insisted quietly.

"Camp," she cried, pushing out a pout. "You're ruining my celebration."

"I'm sorry," he said, forcing a smile to his lips again.

"Are you always so noble?"

He looked at her as though the idea surprised him. "Noble?" he echoed as he pushed his hand back through the ruffled silk of his hair, the dark curls snagging at his thick fingers.

"A less noble man might have kissed me by now," she pointed out. She knew she was being ridiculously obvious but she wanted to move the strong, silent man to something more than quiet strength. She wanted to know if he could do to her what the lieutenant could. If he could make that heavy ache unfold inside her. If he could turn her soft and wet and burning for a man's attention on the most delicate and private place in her body.

"Oh?" he said, watching her seriously.

"Don't you want to kiss me?" she asked falteringly. She couldn't help but compare him to Match who would have been all over her about thirty seconds after he had entered the room.

He looked at her from beneath the heavy fringe of his dark lashes. "I would," he said simply, "If I thought I could stop at a kiss. I know I couldn't."

She stared at him, her lips parted, wondering if he meant what she thought he meant.

He held her gaze as his hand drifted into his lap. As he fingered the lapis cockstone riveted into the base of his fly, he said, "There's no way I could kiss you without wanting more, without taking more, Yarıonna."

When she turned away from his stark gaze, he caught her chin with his fist and forced her to look at him. "Do you know what I mean, Yarıonna?" When she didn't answer, he went on. "Although you're almost twenty-four, you aren't as experienced as most women your age. You might not know that there are times when a man can't hold back. Even a well-intentioned man. Even a *noble* man," he said with a deprecating snort.

She shook her head in answer. "I don't know what you mean," she confessed. And she didn't. After all, Lieutenant Maloney had stopped short of taking her virginity. If a firebrand like him could hold off...

"There's no way I could kiss you without rolling you beneath my body, working my way between your legs and shoving deep inside you."

Yarıonna gasped as she stared into his smoldering gaze. Well, that took care of any doubts she had about Camp the Islander. His bluntly expressed desires sent a hot spark of lust zinging like an arrow straight to her sex.

"I'm sorry," he said as he took in what must have been her stunned expression. "I shouldn't talk like that. But it's been a long wait, for me—for the day you'd turn twenty-four. I'm afraid, at this point, I don't have much self-restraint left. I shouldn't tell you about the things I want to do to you. There'll be time enough for that on the night of your birthday, when I take you to bed."

Though she would have liked to hear exactly what he planned to do to her when they were finally free to explore their feelings for each other, she skirted the issue for the time being. "Are you...so certain you'll win?"

"Yes."

"Can none of the three remaining contestants come close to matching you?"

He opened his mouth to answer then hesitated.

"What about the Earther?" she asked him.

"I'll not let him have you," he answered fiercely as he locked his gaze on her eyes.

Although he considered himself honest, Camp had never thought of himself as noble. Of course, since joining Lieutenant Maloney's "dark side", he wasn't even honest anymore. But Yari would probably never know about that. He wished there was a way to let her know how Maloney had helped him but couldn't see how to do that without

ruining both their reputations. If he were to tell Yarionna how he'd worked with the lieutenant to cheat Millston of his win, she'd just be disgusted with both of them.

He was glad to have caught her notice and garnered her favor. He'd been walking on air ever since he'd received her invitation to dinner. And there wasn't a happier man alive as they'd strolled together up the staircase and down the corridor, nor a hornier one. His cock had thickened with every step they they'd taken toward the quiet privacy of her rooms. But when he'd caught the expression on Maloney's face as he stood guard outside her door, he'd somehow felt as though he'd betrayed his new ally. It wasn't just that the lieutenant looked shocked and angry. That was easy enough to deal with. It was the flash of pain that flared in the Earther's normally frigid gaze. And Camp understood only too well the source of his injury. Although Maloney had helped to defeat Millston, he would never receive a single word of thanks from the queen, let alone the outpouring of affection that Camp was currently enjoying.

A heavy burden of guilt was ruining what should have been a perfect moment for Camp, alone with the woman who held his heart. Yet, despite his reluctance to hurt Match, and though there were times when he wished there was a way for all three of them to be happy, he had no intention of letting Match win the competition and take Yarionna away from him.

"There's only one way the Earther could win. If you ask me to let him win," he said, trying to keep his tone casual, though his voice rang with strain. He watched her face carefully, hoping to gauge her feelings for the lieutenant, almost afraid of what she might reveal with her answer. Although he wanted to win the gift of Yarionna's love, there were times when he caught her looking at Match. At those times, his confidence took a beating. In fact, at those times, his confidence was shaken right off its foundations.

"I...wouldn't ask you to do that," she answered, her beautiful eyes serious. "I wouldn't usurp the authority of the tradition."

"No?" he questioned, watching her keenly. "Is that the only reason?"

She lowered her long-lashed gaze to her lap. "No. That's not the only reason. I think it would be best if you won."

"Does that mean you want me to win?" he asked, praying for some reason to hope.

"Yes," she answered solemnly. "Yes, that means I want you to win. In fact I want you to wear my favor in the arena, Camp. If the Earther sees it and he has any sense at all..."

If Match had any sense at all, he'd put in a token performance during their contest and allow Camp to win. But from what Camp had seen, Match didn't have that kind of sense. However, the prospect didn't dampen Camp's spirits. Yarionna's confession of love, if that's what it was, had revived his confidence in a big way. In fact, if somebody didn't chain him down, he was liable to float away. "I'll be honored to wear your favor," he responded gruffly.

"Thank you. Will you do something else for me?"

He laughed softly as he gazed into the luminous depths of her wide eyes. "Anything."

"Will you...tell me what you'd like to do to me, on the night of my birthday?"

Stunned breathless, he swallowed a silent groan and stared at her a long moment, his cock thickening inside his heavy leathers. Her daring request surprised him. After all, she'd led a pretty sheltered life. On the other hand, it had probably been a long twenty-four years for *her*. At any rate, her request was probably an indication of a promising future together. "Maybe I should just show you," he finally answered on a husky rumble.

Her dark eyes went as round as saucers and he was forced to smother the rough sounds of his amusement.

"I thought you...couldn't do that," she murmured. "Not without..."

"Not without fucking you?" he asked on a deep chuckle. "I couldn't. Not unless I take the edge off my need."

"Take the edge off your need?" she echoed.

He gave her a sympathetic look and stroked the back of his fingers down her cheek. She probably didn't even know what he was talking about but if he was going to give her a taste of what it would be like to share his bed, he needed to release before he attempted it. Because, if he tried to pleasure her in his present state, she was going to end up shafted, twisting on the end of his dick. "I'd like you to give me a few minutes alone," he stated firmly, making certain it didn't sound like a request. "Why don't you get changed in your dressing room?"

"Get changed?" she asked as though dazed. Then she smiled slightly as if she thought she understood. "Into something a little more comfortable?"

"I was thinking something a little less concealing," he answered, his smile probably a bit crooked but she was just so fucking charming it blew him away.

"Oh!" she exclaimed breathily, her mouth forming a provocative little circle that had his cock all but growling with hunger. Nodding, she rose swiftly from the loveseat and crossed the room to a fine old aluminum chest of drawers embossed with unfurling vines of flowering castle creeper. There, she pulled from a drawer a medium-shade silk nightgown with a plunging neckline that was loosely closed with thin laces. With the skinny shoulder straps hooked over the fingers of her delicately boned hand, she held it up for his approval. "How's this?"

He tilted his head and frowned. "I think it could use a little improving," he rumbled softly as he got to his feet and crossed the room. Wadding the rich fabric in his fist, he drew his sword and slashed away most of the long skirt which he tossed on the bed. Only a tiny scrap of bodice remained dangling from her fingers.

"Oh," she said in a weak voice, quite clearly thrilled to bits, her fingers fluttering at her throat. "Yes. That's much better."

Widening his stance, he sheathed his sword and smiled at her as she went through the dressing room door. For a few seconds after she crossed the threshold, he stood still as a statue. Then he sagged against the wall behind him. She wanted him to win. It was a fucking dream come true.

Pulling himself together, he took a few staggering steps away from the wall, edgy and horny and exhausted from fighting his desire for her. He'd wanted to grab her and hold her, to kiss her and eat his way into her soul, to learn her and know every inch of her body with his fingers, to touch her intimate places and taste her as she spread her legs for him. He wanted to bury his dick at the back of her cunt and force so much pleasure inside her that she screamed his name as she bucked beneath him and came around him. He wanted her wet, liquid heat milking his cock.

Unfortunately, that wasn't going to happen—not tonight. Tonight he could only give her a rough taste of what was in store for her. But first things first.

His long stride took him to her bed—the place where she slept, where she stretched out on the crisp white sheets, where she quite possibly spread her legs and rubbed her fingers into her mound, pleasuring herself while her delicate cunt spilled her fragrant cream and the mouth of her vagina sucked on her slender fingers. What he wouldn't give to see that sweetly erotic sight.

Camp groaned as he pulled in an uneven lungful of breath, his cock uncomfortably full and hard. He watched his reflection in the mirror as he stripped off his tight jersey wrap and let it fall to the floor. Carefully, he parted his fly and skimmed his black silk jockstrap over his dark, heated flesh. He stared at his dick in the mirror, heavy and rigid and ridiculously thick. He stretched as he watched, his leather pants clinging stubbornly to his ass, his cock lifting high and stiff. Then he reached for the long silken remnant of Yarıonna's nightgown, lying on the bed. He rubbed the fine fabric over his lips then smoothed it over his jaw as he pulled in a deep breath. It smelled of Yarıonna—sweet and sinful.

With his eyes cast downward, he lowered his hand to his cock and slid the tattered length of silk over his sensitive skin. He shuddered as the pleasure rolled up from the soles of his feet and settled in his balls like a heavy explosion about to happen. Bending his knees, he rested his weight on the edge of the bed and used both hands to wrap the dainty stuff around his shaft. Then he jerked his hips and fed his cock through his hands in punching thrusts, fucking the fabric trapped in the cage of his big hands, his hips powering forward until his head came down and his body stiffened, his hands gripping his rod tightly as he emptied out and covered the fine silk with his hot spill of cum.

A murmur of sound drew his attention to the dressing room where Yarıonna stood barefoot, watching him from the open doorway. Her lips were parted and her breaths came in shallow gusts, her lovely wide eyes fixed on the thick length of flesh he gripped in his hands.

"I'm sorry," he grunted, the corner of his mouth twitching in a guilty smile. "I didn't mean for you to see that."

She met his gaze, her expression openly fascinated as she told him, “Well, I’d have been disappointed if I’d missed it.”

Again he was charmed by both her innocence and her lack of inhibition. Although she’d never been fucked, she had the sensual appeal of a much more experienced woman. “Come here,” he told her, hunger roughening the edges of his words.

She took a tentative step toward him, the ragged chemise he’d made from her nightgown barely covering her breasts. The scrap of silk pulled tightly across her chest, the outline of both areola and nipple standing out in exquisite detail while her cleavage was showcased provocatively in the gap between the straining laces. And below the tattered hem of the chemise, her nude body was on display – the elegant round curve of her hips, her long shapely legs and that wonderful womanly place nestled beneath her navel, a luscious mound softened with a dark puff of curling hair. Camp’s mouth watered at the sight of her. He had intended to give her a taste of what was to come but in fact he planned to do most of the tasting.

He tucked his spent cock inside his pants and closed his fly enough to keep the thick flesh under wraps. Then he stepped toward her and scooped her up in his arms. Moments later, he was kneeling on the floor with Yarıonna spread out on the bed, his mouth buried between her silken thighs as he searched out all of her feminine secrets with his tongue. He went at her gently at first, carefully kissing her delicate folds and thinking she might be shy about what was happening to her. But as he nuzzled his mouth against the full pout of her sex, and tested with his tongue the tiny opening that was crowded almost closed by her virgin’s knot, she responded more swiftly than he’d dared to hope. Her lush pussy turned soft and wet beneath his lips as she voiced her pleasure with small murmurs.

While his mouth nudged against her delicious slit, it was easy to slip one of her legs over his shoulder. Her other leg, he grasped by her slim ankle. Bending her knee, he tucked the heel of her foot close to her bottom then pushed her leg outward until it lay flat on the bed. A rugged sound of appreciation vibrated in his chest as he gazed at her sex so prettily exposed in all its breathtaking beauty for his eyes and lips and tongue. Her puffy outer lips were parted, her layered folds moist, her swollen clit as full as a berry, ripe for the nip of his teeth and the plundering rake of his tongue. Her slit was a long, wet line of paradise pointing the way to her precious cunt which trembled like a little mouth, her cream slipping from her opening to mix with the saliva he’d painted across her sex.

The heady fragrance that hung heavy and humid between her legs was a banquet to his senses but a monumental test for his control—the pure carnal taste of her pussy driving him rapidly out of his mind. He was getting hard again already and knew he needed to act quickly before he gave in to the demand of his resurgent needs.

Restraining the growing urges that threatened to roughen his actions, he gave her a long lick from her dark wet entrance up through her thickening folds and smiled when she whimpered. He would have liked to take his time and torture her with the slow

slide of his tongue and the soft press of his lips but his cock was stiffening inside his loosely closed pants and he wanted to get her there before her needs fell victim to his.

With his fingers, he parted her pussy lips and blew a hot breath across her slit. He stroked her once with two fingers skidding down through the seam of her sex and watched with breath-held fascination as her back bowed, her bottom lifted off the bed and she sobbed in anguish. The helpless feminine sound set him to growling and had him reaching for his cock. Giving his pulsing shaft a hard squeeze, he flattened his tongue over her clit and rocked his mouth over her sinfully sweet sex.

That's what he was doing when Lieutenant Maloney walked through the door about three minutes later. Yarionna was stretched out on the bed, one of her legs folded flat beside her, the other draped over Camp's shoulder as his mouth moved on her open pussy. At the sight of Match, Camp grunted with surprise but he didn't exactly stop. If he could help it, he didn't want Yarionna to know Match had burst in on them. Not while she was spread on the bed like that, her legs open wide, her body stiffening with each lick he placed along the seam of her sex, her muff rolling against his mouth. He didn't want her to feel either ashamed or embarrassed.

Hoping to keep her attention focused on what was happening between her legs, he gave Yarionna's clit another rough lick then lashed it gently with his tongue. As Yarionna twisted on the bed and spilled more of her decadent flavor onto his tongue, he glowered at Match, warning him off. Although he hardly knew what to expect from the impetuous Earther, he assumed the lieutenant would back off once he realized what was going on. He just hoped Maloney hadn't come looking for a fight. He'd give him a fight if he wanted one but it would be damn awkward for Yarionna.

As he glared at Match, he gave Yarionna another long lick right up through her slit. She responded with such a wonderfully carnal sound of pleasure that it pulled another hard, pounding wave of arousal from deep inside him. He palmed his cock roughly as the ache for release grew taut, to the point of snapping.

Glancing at Yarionna, he found her eyes still closed. As yet she was unaware of the lieutenant's presence. Camp kept his gaze pinned on Match as he growled and closed his lips around her clit, sucking the swollen kernel of flesh and making his claim on Yarionna just as damn clear as he could. Making it known that he wasn't giving this up—none of it—not even for the few minutes it would take to back Maloney from the room.

At that point, Match should have yielded.

He didn't.

Instead he strode toward the bed, leaned swiftly over Yarionna and covered her mouth with his. She let out a stunned cry of surprise, her eyes fluttering open to blink at the man who'd claimed her mouth, her back arching as he slid one long-fingered hand beneath the ragged chemise and cupped her breast. When he gave her nipple a light pinch, Yarionna shouted into his mouth, her hips lifting as her wet pussy slid wildly across Camp's face.

With another growl aimed at Match, Camp grasped her thighs, his fingers biting into her supple flesh as he held her in place and slid his tongue down to her soft, dark opening where he fucked her with his tongue while rubbing his upper lip ruthlessly into her clit. When Yarionna screamed, Camp groaned, opening his lips wider and pressing his mouth closer, scraping his teeth over the nub of her clitoris while thrusting his tongue deep inside her.

This time, when Match pinched her nipple she came, bucking and writhing, her cunt squeezing the tip of Camp's tongue while spilling her cream like a delicate feast right into his mouth.

From there, what had started out as one man's desire to pleasure Yarionna turned into an out-and-out fight between two men, both determined to possess her. As hard as it was to believe that the Earther had intruded in the first place, he *would not* back down.

As Camp lapped at her pussy, Match snarled, obviously jealous. It probably didn't help when Camp gave him a slow, mocking smile but he just couldn't help it. In his considered opinion, Match was way the hell out of line.

But his taunting didn't go unanswered. The next thing Camp knew, Match was fumbling his fly open. With one hand, the lieutenant opened his pants and freed his dick from his black silk cock pocket. Resting his hip on the bed, he turned Yarionna's face and brushed the swollen head over her lips. When she responded with a murmur, her gaze on Match's cock head as she pursed her lips and rubbed them into the brutally dark flesh, it was Camp's turn to snarl. Incensed that she'd pay Match that honor, Camp nipped at the fragile folds that sheltered her clitoris.

For a brief instant, he regained her attention as she stiffened and dipped her gaze to his face. Flattening his tongue over her clit, he sent her a warning glare.

But he didn't hold her attention for long. Match distracted her with a grunt and pressed his broad tip against the seam of her mouth. As her lips parted, he swabbed the fat cock head inside. Camp groaned at the sight of Yarionna's mouth on Match's cock. It fucking drove him right out of his mind. After that, the situation rapidly degenerated. Things got really dirty.

The men eyed each other belligerently, Match's grip tightening on Yarionna's chin as he rubbed his dick into her kiss then turned his hips and shoved inside her mouth.

With a smothered roar, Camp got to his feet and pulled out his cock. A threat rumbled in his chest as he pressed its heavy weight downward and dragged the blunt tip through her slit then drove it up over her mound again so Match could see it, wet with her cream.

Both men stopped a moment, their eyes burning with a hard edge of lust as Yarionna undulated on the bed, her back arching, her hips rolling, her breasts thrusting sharply toward the ceiling with each need-driven jerk of her frame. Then, while insolently holding Camp's gaze, Match slid his length from her mouth and rubbed the wet tip over her cheek.

Incensed, Camp took her hand and wrapped it around his shaft, making her pump him until the top of his dick glistened with pre-cum. When it was streaming over his cock head like a shining veil, he angled his shaft toward her and smeared his moisture into the damp curls on her mound.

With a feral growl, Match grabbed her other hand, wrapped it around his root then dragged it up his length, stroking his cock out. As Camp watched, a drop of moisture rolled from the slit and touched her mouth.

But Match didn't stop there. With Yarionna's hand inside his fist, he shoved his hips at her face, forcing his cock past her lips and deep inside her mouth. Her lips closed over his crown and he stroked her hand down his shaft, defiantly holding Camp's gaze as his cock surged. Camp saw a dribble of cum leak from the corner of Yarionna's mouth as Match released inside with a snarling grunt.

Outraged by the sight of Match coming in her mouth, Camp dragged his cock head through her slit again. He knew he couldn't penetrate her but he'd be damned before he yielded to the Earther. With his fist wrapped around her dainty hand, he jerked his cock roughly, a raw, guttural sound scraping on his lips as he spurted. His cum burned up his length and shot from his shaft in a long, pearly rush that arced through the air and splattered on her bare midriff with a wet smack. As he came in uneven volleys, he kept running her hand down his shaft while his cum poured onto her skin and made a ragged line from the bottom of her chemise to the small dent of her navel.

Camp gazed down at Yarionna, whimpering as she twisted on the bed, his cum splattered over her pale skin. Finally shaken by the way the situation had so swiftly gotten out of hand, his shoulders sagged above the deep rise and fall of his chest. As he shook his head to clear the damp ends of his hair from his eyes, he was aware of Match curling her hand into his and kissing her fingers. The Earther's expression was tender, his spent cock lolling on her breast and leaving a wet trail on the silken scrap of her nightgown as he gazed first at her face then at Camp. "You'd better finish her off," he said quietly.

Strangely, Camp felt no irritation at the softly spoken command. His anger was spent, bleeding away from him with his release. He felt only a nagging sense of shame that Yarionna had been left hanging while he and Match had fought for a dominance neither could truly claim to have won. In the meantime, Yarionna was rocking on the bed and moaning, lost in sexual limbo. His gaze softened with sympathy as he watched her. He breathed out a rough sigh and trailed his fingers through his cum, coating them thoroughly with the thick liquid before sweeping his hand down over her mound and between her thighs. Then he carefully fucked her with the tips of two fingers while Match lowered his mouth to her neck and put his mark on the side of her throat.

She came in a thrashing explosion of arms and legs and together they held her down, forcing her to the bed, Match pinning her wrists while Camp did the best he could with her ankles. As she bucked against them, Camp caught Match's intense gaze for a brief instant. And for that short blink of time there was no animosity between

them. Only a shared appreciation for the lovely creature writhing on the bed, subject to the pleasure they'd forced upon her.

When she was finished, Camp knelt between her legs again. Like Match, he gave her a small love bite, but he put his on the inside of her thigh. Before he'd finished the small hickey, Match was asleep, his fingers anchored tightly in the silk at Yarionna's breast, as though even in sleep he would not surrender his claim to her. As Camp looked on, his lips resting in the warm cleft that parted Yarionna's mound, she gently worked the scrap of fabric from Match's tightly curled fingers. When she slipped away from him, Camp collected her into the curve of his arm. Together they watched him, sprawled on the bed, asleep.

"Look at him," she whispered. "He's exhausted. I don't know how he expects to win his match against Craight tomorrow."

"He'll find a way," Camp murmured.

Yarionna turned her startled gaze on him. "Camp! If I didn't know better, I'd think you admire the Earther."

Camp gazed quietly down on the sleeping man. "I *do* admire him," he admitted on a heavy sigh. "More than any other man I know."

As she nodded without speaking, it occurred to Camp that she probably admired the lieutenant too. How could she not? With that scrape across his left cheekbone and the bruise around his eye, he looked like the consummate hero. His other injuries just firmed up his position of gritty competitor. In comparison, Camp didn't have a scratch on his body. And, though he silently argued that meant he was the better warrior, he felt inadequate. Somehow, he felt as though he hadn't sacrificed enough for Yarionna's love. And sometimes he felt as though, no matter how hard he fought, he would never be able to catch up with Maloney.

He rubbed his palm gently into the small of Yarionna's back, intensely aware of the incredibly fine texture of her skin as he herded her toward the slashroom. Together they took a quick turn in the slashstall, Camp treasuring those precious moments when he finally had her to himself. As he slid his hands over her sleek, wet curves and pulled her against his body so that he could feel her skin rubbing against his, he was no less determined to make certain he won the championship contest.

Chapter Fourteen

As Yarıonna stood pressed up against Camp's big hard frame beneath the rapid slash of shimmering cleansers, she had to admit her plan had backfired. She'd meant to make it clear to Matchstick that she wanted Camp to win the competition and become her champion. But Earthers were so hard to predict. Instead of taking the hint, he'd taken the ball, had run with it and had even scored. And instead of ending up alone in her room with Camp, she'd become involved in what you might call an erotic compromise.

When Match had appeared out of nowhere and lowered his mouth onto hers, she'd been so close to climax it hadn't occurred to her to question or reject his presence. It had just stunned her. His unexpected kiss and rough fingers plucking at her nipple had shocked her into a breathless orgasm before she could even think to object. And after that first climax, she hadn't had much say in what had followed. The men had just commandeered her body as though it was some sort of prize to be plundered of orgasms. They had ransacked her body to heaven and back, leaving her hanging at the agonized edge of climax for what seemed like hours before finally allowing her release while, in the meantime, they'd bathed her mouth and skin with the heavy flow of their cum.

Not that she regretted it.

There had been something so magnificently male about the way they had fought to claim her and mark her that she couldn't bring herself to repent a moment of the intensely carnal experience. The sight of Camp's muscles rippling beneath his burnished skin, his thick cock spewing on her belly as he snarled at Match was a memory she wouldn't trade for anything in the world. And to think she had thought he lacked passion and spontaneity. The noble warrior was just a big, sexy fraud. Or perhaps the lieutenant brought out the worst in Camp, though Yarıonna preferred to think of it as the best in him.

Matchstick Maloney. The taste of his cum was still sharp on her tongue as she rubbed her lips together at the provocative memory of him taking her mouth and emptying there as though he owned her. But it wasn't the memory of his hot flesh sliding along the crease of her tongue that was so arousing, though it was arousing enough. It was the look on his face as he'd fed his shaft between her lips. His expression had been such a mixture of fierce longing and tender emotion, the shove of his hips brutal, his grip on her chin firm. Yet the touch of his thumb feathering across her mole as though it was the most exquisite part of her body had excited her as much as anything else. It was obvious that the lieutenant wanted her – badly – if only for a year.

And as the two men had worked her over and tortured her with pleasure, pulling from her body every scandalously delicious feeling a woman could experience, a heavy burning ache of greed had flamed at her core. It scorched deep inside her at a place that wanted to be touched and filled and pounded into the sort of satisfaction she was certain she'd never know until the night of her birthday when she finally took her champion to bed and he laid to rest the scouring need that consumed her.

As she stepped from the slashstall with Camp, one of his thickly muscled arms caging her loosely but possessively, his veins standing out strongly beneath his taut skin, Yarionna felt a warm sense of security. Camp made her feel safe. And, no matter how exciting she found the lieutenant, she knew that stability and strength were the traits she most needed in her champion.

Camp grabbed one of the soft terrycloth towels without surrendering his hold on her. Falling to his knees, he rubbed her skin to a healthy glow while placing soft, warm kisses first on both of her sensitive nipples, then in the warm crease beneath each breast, then on her bellybutton, then lower. He lifted her to the counter, pushed her legs apart and kissed the warm, wet place between her thighs. "You smell like hot summer, sunny sex," he murmured, gazing up at her, his lips gleaming with her juices.

"You make it sound very appealing," she answered, reaching down to cradle his face in her hands, her damp hair falling forward over her shoulders in a shining tangle. "But I'd rather smell like you."

"That can be arranged," he told her, his voice taking on a smoky rasp.

Before she could ask him what he meant, he'd regained his feet and disappeared through the slashroom door. When he returned, his hand was fisted around the long length of fabric he'd cut from the bottom of her nightgown. With one wrenching pull, he tore the fabric down the seam and shook out the long stretch of silk marked with his cum. Then he twisted it while his gaze roved appreciatively over her body. When he had the fine fabric twisted into a long, thick rope, he lifted her from the counter and turned her to face the mirror. As she watched his reflection, he looped the rope around her waist and knotted it at the small of her back.

"Turn around and spread your legs," he murmured, his husky words sending a thrill up her spine as she faced him and moved her legs apart for him. He reached between her legs and grabbed the end of the silky rope. "Wider," he growled.

Breathlessly, she did as she was told. As she stood in front of him with her legs spread, he tugged the long length of silk until it settled firmly between the cheeks of her ass. Another cinching tug anchored the fabric against her opening and buried it between the lips of her pussy. She gasped a little at the sensation of the fabric rasping between her folds. But Camp wasn't finished. Again he tightened the corded silk until the thick twist crushed her clit and excited the taut bundle of nerves with a hard, disturbing twinge. She watched as his big hands tied the silk off in front, leaving about six inches hanging down like a wide drawstring. He gave the drawstring another tug and she gasped at the sharp response from her clit.

“There,” he grunted as he pulled her close and dragged his open mouth down her neck and across her collarbone. “Now you’ll not be able to sit down without thinking of me. And when your pussy creams onto the silk, it will heat my cum and you’ll smell us together.”

“You want me to wear this?” she panted, unbearably aroused. “All day?”

“I want you to wear it for the next *two* days—until the night of your birthday. When I take it off I want to see this silk wet with your juices. I want to see your clit thick and swollen, sensitive to the slightest touch. I want your cunt ready to fuck, Yarionna. I want you ready for me. Because I’ll not be holding back when I’m finally your champion.”

Thrilled to discover this dark, sexy side of her warrior, she raised her arms and draped them around his neck. His lips found her mouth and he lifted her with his hands beneath her thighs. She wrapped her legs around his waist as the silk rope settled more deeply between her cheeks and cut more sharply, the sensation pure, decadent eroticism. As his tongue forged strongly between her lips, his hands roved across her bottom and stroked her skin so gently that it was a shocking contrast when his fist wrapped around the silk strap behind her and gave it a hard yank.

A wrenching sound fought its way up the column of her throat as she threw back her head and stiffened in his arms. He banded his strength around her more tightly and held her more firmly, tugging on the silk strap between her legs in heavy, rhythmic pulls until she jerked in his arms, her body fighting his powerful hold as she came, soaking the tight stretch of fabric between her thighs and filling the slashroom with her feminine scent, blended with his sexy male musk.

Camp groaned as she shuddered against him, burying his face against her neck and squeezing her so tightly he almost cracked her spine. Then he eased her down his rock-hard body to her feet, though he had to help her stand, her body boneless with pleasure, her legs gloriously weak.

“I’d better get out of here,” he grunted, eyeing his growing erection as the corner of his mouth twitched. “Or we’ll end up needing another turn in the slashstall.”

Tugging on the drawstring that hung down in front of her, he led Yarionna through the slashroom door while she yelped at the jolt of arousal that screamed at the point of her clit. Yarionna couldn’t take a step without the thick cord shifting between her pussy lips, crushing her clitoris and sending painfully delicious pulses of desire cascading through her sex. When he released his hold on the drawstring, she wisely decided not to move. Silent and still, she watched him settle his heavy cock inside his black silk jockstrap then pull his leathers up his long, muscle-clad legs. He sent her a sexy grin before working his tight, white wrap down over the bulking swell of his shoulders and washboard abs.

After he’d dressed and grabbed up his jacket, the weight of his cock thickening the front of his leather pants, he stepped over to the bed and gave the lieutenant’s shoulder

a rough shake. Clearly, Camp had no intention of leaving Match in the room after he had gone for the night.

Match rolled onto his feet and staggered a little as he closed his cock inside his soft, chamois pants. He froze when he saw the twisted silk Yarionna wore tied around her hips and threaded through her pussy. Tilting his head, he frowned at the thick rope then stepped toward her and gave the hanging end a light tug. When she drew in a sharp breath, his eyes narrowed as he frowned again then turned for the bed.

He returned with the tattered chemise she'd left there earlier. When she lifted her arms for him, he slipped it over her head and onto her shoulders. After it had settled over her breasts, he drew his sword and cut away two small circles which he fitted over her cresting nipples. Then he lowered his head and dampened the frayed edges of the fabric with his tongue. The wet silk rasped against her sensitive nipples and they swelled as they poked through the ragged holes. "As long as you're wearing this for him," Match growled, giving the drawstring a hard tug that made her cry out, "you'll wear this for me. Do you understand?"

"I understand," she answered as the raw edge of the fabric scraped her nipples and she winced at the sting of arousal that danced along her nerve endings. She would be a mess in two days' time, when her companion finally freed her. With the tattered chemise teasing her nipples and the silk rope chafing her clit, rubbing the moist mouth of her sex and tugging disturbingly at the kiss of her ass, she would be out of her mind with need.

Match grunted his approval as he rubbed his thumb over the dark stain his cum had made on the frail bodice. Finally, he took a step backward.

Standing in place, hardly daring to breathe, let alone move, Yarionna watched the two men leave together. After they closed the door behind them, she fell backward on the bed, her arms stretched over her head, her clit throbbing violently at the pull of the tight roll of fabric threaded deep between the lips of her pussy. She had never felt so sexy before in her life, nor so desired—hardly surprising considering her sexual history—but the erotic trappings they'd made for her that were meant to keep her at a peak of arousal made her feel like a woman very much hungered for.

Softly, she smiled. She would never have guessed that sex could be such a wildly carnal adventure or so...varied. True, she was inexperienced but she'd thought that a man just laid a woman out, climbed on top of her and forced his cock inside. And with the right man on top of her, Yarionna had found that prospect exciting enough. Now that she knew there was more involved, she wondered what else she might expect on the night of her birthday.

At the thought of her birthday, Yarionna's smile faltered. A quiet emptiness crept up on her like a shadow and lapped at the edges of her soul. One thing was certain—it wouldn't be the same. It couldn't possibly be the same since Match wouldn't be there. Because, despite the fact that she wasn't sorry he'd intruded into what was supposed to have been a preview of her first night with her champion, she was still committed to her decision to favor Camp. Her heart might be torn on the matter—it was hard to tell

because right now it felt as though her heart had tumbled into a deep, dark hole—but her head was firmly settled on her countryman.

Chapter Fifteen

Waiting alone in Gray's room, Match slouched in a chair, his chin in his fist. His commanding officer had ordered him to report there after his morning fight with Craight, which he'd won.

Using the same flash technology that transported travelers from the planet up to the orbiting spaceport, he'd installed on his belt a small device that flashed him three feet distant when he touched the compass control pad he'd incorporated into his fencing grip. To anyone watching, it would just appear that he'd dodged very suddenly and swiftly. To anyone who was trying to touch their sword to his heart, they'd always be off by three feet.

In his opinion, it was the best device he'd come up with, except perhaps for the chewing gum he'd made to bring down Millston. And he'd planned to save it for his final fight. But he was so worn down and his ankle was giving him so much trouble, he decided if he didn't use it against Craight he might not *get* to the final fight. He had one more trick up his sleeve and, though it wasn't his best, it would have to do for tomorrow. Unfortunately, he'd be using it against eYona's finest warrior, Camp, who had also won his contest that day.

As Match had expected all along, the competition was down to the two of them.

He dragged his hand down his face and resettled his chin in his palm. Although he was glad to have made it to the final round, he felt a heavy sense of defeat weighing on his heart. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to edge out the memory of Camp wearing Yarionna's favor, a white scarf emblazoned with the black and silver royal crest, knotted around his thick biceps.

It was bad enough when she'd invited Camp into her room last night for an erotic tryst. Although that had hurt, Match had fought back and hadn't let the warrior get far without him. Watching Yarionna's carnal-colored lips close around his cock had been pure bliss. Emptying inside the sexy, warm envelope of her mouth had taken him to a sated state of euphoria so complete that he'd fallen asleep wrapped in a warm cloak of hope. He'd left the room last night thinking he'd gained some ground.

Then Camp had shown up for his swordfight this morning wearing her favor. She couldn't have stated more plainly that she didn't want Match to win. Clearly, she didn't want him in her bed or in her life. And fuck, it hurt—more than he would have thought possible. He was half inclined to wear her black shorts into the arena tomorrow, torn into a long strip and tied around his arm. Embarrass the little chit and infuriate Camp.

Fortunately for him, Gray strode into the room and interrupted his thoughts before he could get any more maudlin than he already was. "You look like something the cat

dragged in and left for dead," the Hammer said as he dropped into his chair behind the desk.

Match covered a yawn with his hand. "After I wrap up this competition, I'm gonna sleep for a week."

"If that's the case," Gray snorted, "I don't know how you'll be any good to the queen. You do understand you're supposed to help her produce an heir, don't you?"

"She might have to wait a few days for the help," Match grunted, though he had no intention of missing the heir-making part of his duties. "Did you send for me just so you could insult me or did you have an ulterior motive?"

Gray leaned back in his chair. "Medops has reported a piece of equipment missing. You wouldn't know anything about it would you?"

"What sort of equipment?" he countered noncommittally.

Gray gave him a long, steady look then finally sighed. "A handheld nerve mapping unit."

"I imagine it will turn up eventually," Match offered on another wide yawn.

"How long do you imagine it will take?" he pushed, his expression sour.

"I'll get it back to them this afternoon," Match answered, too tired to smile.

"Good. Is that what you used to beat Blair the Stormrider?" he growled with enough animosity to draw a second look from Match. Now that he looked more closely, the Hammer did not look pleased. In fact he looked as though he was winding up for a fight.

"I just shocked the nerves in his hands for an instant. No damage was done."

"Maybe none that *you* could see."

Match snorted. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you're not making any friends here on eYona, Match."

"Oh shit," he complained, yawning again as he stood. "If that's it, I'll be on my way."

"Sit down, Maloney. We're not done."

Match sighed as he dropped wearily back down into the chair.

"Camp is wearing the queen's favor."

"Yeah, I noticed," he growled, narrowing his eyes against the sudden sting of tears. He might be exhausted but he was *not* going to fucking cry.

"Since you appear to be having trouble reading the signs, let me explain to you what that means. That means she wants Camp to win. She wants him to be her champion."

"No kidding," he replied sullenly. "She's made that pretty clear right from the start. Well, just between me and you, she's gonna be disappointed."

Surprisingly, Gray's expression turned somber. "Match. Let it go. Let Camp win. The people here will be incensed if you win. They don't want you. You've made too

many mistakes and insulted too many people. On top of that, you're an offworlder. It isn't worth upsetting an entire race just so you can fuck the queen for a year."

Match clenched his teeth while fighting a rising tide of fury. Eventually giving in to the black coil of emotion, he leaned forward in his chair, his response coming out in a hot hiss. "I plan to fuck her for a whole lot longer than a year."

"Well, if that's your plan, you'll have a bitter fight on your hands every damn year for as long as you last."

"Then I'll fight!" Match shouted, slamming his fist down on Gray's desk with enough force to reboot his workpad. "For as long as I last."

Gray just stared at him as though he'd grown a second head. "What the hell's wrong with you, Maloney?"

"Nothing!" Match threw back at him.

"Well, if I didn't know better, I'd think you were in love." He hesitated a moment while holding Matchstick's gaze then started to laugh. "No. Not Matchstick Maloney. You're not...you're not in love."

Maybe he was just tired and stressed and at the end of his rope, both mentally and physically, but Gray's mirth just hit him the wrong way. He wasn't ready to admit to love. But he'd thought Gray would know what it was like to want a woman so badly that nothing else mattered.

He shoved back in his chair, cold with rage, spitting words like poison. "Hey. Glad I could amuse you, Gray. I'd thought maybe you'd have some idea what I'm going through, considering the way you feel about Velvet. Obviously, I misjudged you. I'll tell you what," he said, his voice shaking, his eyes burning as he slapped his hands down on the desk and leaned over Gray. "Why don't you just go fucking straight to hell? Because I'm not losing the competition. I can't and I won't."

He knew they were fighting words and a fight was what he expected. Maybe he was even hoping for one. An out-and-out brawl with Gray would probably relieve a lot of the tension clawing his insides to shreds...if he survived it. Lord knew he was wound up tighter than a gigamite bomb. But Gray didn't explode out of his chair, didn't grab him by the throat and didn't bang him against the wall. Instead, he stood swiftly and strode around the desk. When he reached Match, he swept him into a fierce hug. "Matchstick. I'm sorry, man. I know how it is. I know exactly how it is. I wouldn't quit either, if it were Velvet. I'd never quit. The well-being of the entire universe wouldn't stop me, let alone the interests of one piddling little planet in the Epsilon quadrant."

Oh fuck. He hadn't expected sympathy. Sympathy wasn't good. A fight would have been a whole lot better. Match squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed them into his friend's broad shoulder. "Thanks, Gray," he choked out on a hoarse breath, getting out of the room as quickly as he could. He didn't want Gray to see him wiping his eyes as he strode down the hall. Favoring his injured foot, he picked up the pace. He had six

hours of flight training to get in before he reported for guard duty outside Yari's door later that night.

Chapter Sixteen

On her way to her rooms after dinner, Yarıonna was thinking about Lieutenant Maloney. She was alone this time, except for her guard. She couldn't bring herself to throw Camp in his face again. Even if she were to try, he'd probably find a way to turn it around and make it work in his favor as he had done last night.

A brilliant flash bathed the corridor in stark white light. A boom of thunder followed, rolling across the sky as the floor beneath her feet vibrated to the harsh music of the nightly electrical storm. Long accustomed to the violent evening storms, Yarıonna didn't even blink. She continued down the corridor, the long skirt of her pale crepe gown lapping at her feet.

He was the most persistent, most determined man she'd ever encountered during her lifetime. Earthers! They were such a wild, passionate breed. So hotheaded. So sexy. So...

She sneaked a glance at him as she approached her door. He looked so pale, dark smudges hovering beneath his eyes while tight lines of tension bracketed his mouth. He looked like death in boots. Her heart went out to the beautiful warrior as she hesitated outside her rooms and wondered when she'd started thinking of him as one of her warriors. "Lieutenant Maloney," she commanded before he had a chance to kneel. "Please step inside my room."

His limp was more pronounced, she noticed as she moved behind her desk. "Please," she said, waving at the deep upholstered chair that faced her. "Take a seat."

He cut a brief glance at the chair and opened his mouth stubbornly.

"That's an order," she murmured fiercely as she dropped into her chair a little too suddenly. The twist of silk buried between her pussy lips tightened along the seam of her sex and a soft moan escaped her lips.

With a tight roll of his shoulders he slumped into the chair and gave her a knowing look. "So, what can I do for you?" he asked insolently.

"Nothing," she snapped as she shifted in the chair and tried to find a way to sit without exciting her clit. Of course it didn't help that she was looking at one of the most beautiful men on the planet.

"Nothing?"

"That's right, Lieutenant Maloney. I just want you to sit there while I go over this paperwork."

His eyes narrowed into tired slits as he watched her. "Is this some kind of eYonan torture?" he murmured.

Surprised, she lifted her gaze and looked at him. "Why would you think that?" she asked softly.

His eyes narrowed further until they were almost closed. "I don't appreciate your fucking games, Yari."

"Games?" she asked, stunned.

"Yeah, games," he grunted. "You give Camp your favor to wear for everyone to see, making me feel like I'm not worth shit. Then you call me into your room so I can sit here and look at what I can't have."

"Then why don't you close your eyes?" she suggested, realizing he was tired and hoping to avoid an argument which would only keep him awake.

His head dropped onto the back of the chair and his eyes closed. "I just thought that after last night..."

"What about last night?" she asked gently.

"Nothing," he growled on a grim breath of laughter. "I guess it was just nothing."

She put down the report she was trying to read and leaned back in her chair. "It wasn't nothing, Match. It was the first time in my life that I felt like a woman rather than a queen. And the first time I felt as though I belonged to someone other than my people. It was very liberating." When he didn't respond, she went on. "You're pretty amazing men," she said, letting her voice trail away and hoping he would fall asleep. "You and Camp make a good team."

"You don't know the half of it," he muttered faintly.

She didn't know what he meant by that but she let it pass, hoping he'd fall asleep. As she gazed at him, she wanted nothing more than to join him on the chair, to press her lips to the hard, sensual line of his mouth, to spread her legs and straddle him, to untie the silk caught between her pussy lips, nestle down onto his lap and feel his cock full and thick against her burning sex.

As she looked at him, she wondered if it was possible for a woman to be in love with two men. The answer should have been obvious. Pink clearly loved both Saxon and Danjer while Lacey doted on her two husbands, apparently quite equally. As Junkie's devoted sister, Yarionna would have noticed if Lacey had ever shown any preference to either of her husbands.

It was all so unfair! Why couldn't she have both Camp and Matchstick? But Match was a career officer. He wasn't in it for the long run.

As she had done so many times during the past few days, Yarionna wished her mother were there for a little heart-to-heart. But her parents' ship wouldn't dock until the morning. They'd be lucky if they got down to the stadium before the final competition started.

"Well," he said, just when she thought he'd finally dozed off. "I still don't think it's fair, dragging me in here."

As much as she enjoyed the fatigue-roughened sound of his voice, she wished he would just stop talking and go to sleep. "Your ankle isn't getting any better," she pointed out in what was meant to be a quiet hint.

"It's not getting any worse," he murmured.

"Why isn't it getting better?" she asked, trying to keep the concern from her voice.

"The doc says I need to keep my weight off it."

She nodded. At least he'd get a chance to rest his ankle after tomorrow's competition.

"It won't stop me from winning tomorrow," he voiced, as though reading her mind.

"I don't imagine it will," she remarked gravely, wishing that he'd just shut up and rest.

"I don't know about the spots though."

"Spots?" she echoed, narrowing her eyes on him. "What do you mean, spots?"

He made a soft snorting sound. "While I was standing out in the corridor, I started seeing spots. One minute they were floating on the wall, the next minute..." His eyes opened suddenly as he lifted his head and stared at her.

"Lieutenant Maloney? Are you all right?"

He rubbed his eyes and then leaned forward with his fist beneath his chin. Eventually he shook his head. "I'm probably going crazy," he muttered, fingering the copper communicator that rimmed the shell of his ear.

Privately, she shared his opinion but she didn't say so.

"Ring Gray," he murmured to his communicator then covered his mouth as he spoke to the lieutenant commander. "Gray. Match here. I'm seeing spots. Yeah. Like round shadows on the wall. In the corridor outside the queen's rooms." He glanced around. "I don't see any in here. No, I don't think we should try to move her to a more secure location because she'll be exposed on the way there. Let's just get the jamming equipment and set it up in the corridor outside her door. I'll keep close by and shield her if I have to."

He rubbed a hand over his eyes again and gave her a concerned look as he talked to his commanding officer. "No, I'm not exactly in top form what with the ankle and lack of sleep," he admitted, though obviously reluctant. "Well, if you're going to send someone in, send Camp. Yeah, you heard me right. The eYonan."

"Match," she demanded the minute he'd signed off. "What's going on?"

"Homers."

She shook her head while narrowing her eyes. The word meant nothing to her.

"It's Grundian technology. They're small track-and-attack homing missiles that float about four feet off the ground. They're programmed to hunt down their victim's DNA. When they find a strong enough source, they attack. They're cloaked—not

invisible—but electronically camouflaged to continually change and blend with their surroundings. We call them Homers.”

“If they’re camouflaged, how did you see them?”

“I didn’t. I saw their shadows on the wall. They were outside your rooms, Yari. In the corridor.”

“In the corridor,” she echoed. She sent a cautious glance around the room but saw none of the shadows he’d described. Hopefully they’d stay out in the corridor. “How did they get here to Judipeao and into the palace?”

Match shook his head. “There is any number of ways the Grundians could have transported them here to the palace. They could have come in with a shipment of rice on a Tauran freighter. Once set loose from their packing crate, they’d start their search and eventually gravitate toward the palace and your rooms.”

“You said they were small. Are they...relatively harmless?”

“No,” he informed her, the cut of his mouth grim. “They’re relatively deadly. The projectiles have telescoping spines that slowly expand after they’ve punctured their target.”

“What makes you think it’s me they’re after?”

“Well, they were hovering outside your door. If they wanted either me or Stane, they could have had us.”

“So, what’s the next step?” she asked more calmly than she felt.

“Gray’s going to collect Danjer and bring him up to date. They’ll put together a team and equipment to jam the missiles’ internal engines. Anything nearby will just fall out of the air. Then the Homers can be gathered up and destroyed.” He gave the room another uneasy look then got to his feet. His long stride carried him to the windows, which he checked before changing direction again. After crossing the room, he closed both the slashroom and dressing room doors.

“If there were any of them in here, in my rooms, wouldn’t they have attacked by now?” she asked.

“Not necessarily. They’re programmed to make multiple verifications, to make sure they’ve homed in on a strong source of the DNA they’re tracking. They wouldn’t want to give their existence away by attacking your bed, for instance, or even another person who’d been in close contact with you.”

“Why Camp?” she asked after a lengthy silence. It seemed amazing to her that Match would turn to his biggest rival for help.

“It’s a bit of a risk, opening the door, but Gray wanted to send in another man to help protect you. I’m not exactly at my best right now,” he explained unhappily, glancing down at his ankle.

“Yes, but why Camp?”

He leveled his gaze on her. “Because he’s the only man besides myself that I trust to protect you.”

Chapter Seventeen

As it turned out, Match's concern that a Homer might slip through the door when Camp entered the room wasn't an issue. Because Camp didn't open the door. He flashed through it! Yari had never seen such a thing. Flash technology was an extremely advanced science and reserved for point-to-point travel.

Match stared – first at the leather fencing grip on Camp's hand then at the extra belt he wore. "How the hell did you get that?"

Camp arched a dark eyebrow and gave him a cool look. "I asked for it."

"You asked for it? Who on earth did you ask?"

"After I described what I was looking for, your lieutenant commander sent Jed to search your room."

"How'd you even *know* about it?" Match asked incredulously.

"I'm not blind," he rumbled, glaring at the Earther as though insulted. "I saw your last fight. I assume it uses the same technology that transports travelers to the spaceport orbiting eYona?"

A sour look fell over Match's features while Camp's expression turned positively smug. "Well, as long as you've brought it along," Match grumbled. "Let's put it on Yari."

"What is it?" Yari asked while she watched Camp unwind the belt that wrapped his lean hips. As she looked from one man to the other, neither said a word. Match, in particular, seemed to have been struck dumb.

"It's some of Match's magic," Camp eventually offered.

"Magic?" she queried.

"That's right. This one is just a minor little trick he used today in the arena. The magic he made for me to use against Millston was considerably more impressive."

Yarionna's chin dropped as she stared first at Camp then Match. "You cheated? Both of you?"

"It's not Camp's fault. I corrupted him," Match spoke up as he settled the belt around her hips, his eyes glittering above the smile he was obviously fighting.

"I can't believe you guys cheated!"

"Nothing too good for our girl," Match murmured. "Right, Camp?"

"That's right," he answered in a warm, gruff rumble. "Nothing too good for our girl."

Yarionna stared, her heart going all soft and squishy. When they put it that way, how could she help but feel honored? She'd already thanked Camp for saving her from

Millston. Now she leaned impulsively forward and placed a swift kiss on Match's cheek as he stooped to fasten the belt. He cut a surprised look at her and Yarionna's heart about turned over at the vulnerable look of hope that flashed briefly in his eyes.

Quickly, he buried the reaction. As he buckled the belt, he grilled Camp, "Did Gray tell you about the Homers?"

"Briefly, before he sent me through the door."

Match's hands smoothed over her hips as he waited for Camp to remove the fencing grip from his hand. Yarionna should have been too nervous to be excited by his caress but she wasn't. Or perhaps she was just so wound up she was more sensitive to his touch. That silk strap crushing her clit and plucking provocatively at her ass didn't give her a moment's respite. She was in a constant state of thrumming arousal. Match's presence didn't help. Camp's presence helped even less. And somehow their presence together had her at the edge of a swoon. Match's hand drifted down over the curve of her bottom where he gave her cheek a gentle squeeze before letting his arm fall away.

"Did he mention that they were made of metal, rather than plastech?" Match asked, returning to business.

"No. Why is that significant?" Camp asked as he helped Yarionna with the fencing grip. She threaded her middle finger through the loop in the top of the leather palm protector then let Camp secure it around her wrist. Swiftly, he demonstrated the compass control pad that activated the flash device.

Match drew his sword. "Because, if you reach up with your thumb and press the guard on my sword, it will put an electromagnetic charge on the blade. It will suck those motherfuckers right out of the air."

Camp took the blade in his broad fist and turned it in his hand. "You were going to use this against me tomorrow," he said, a soft note of awe in his voice.

Match dipped his chin in a curt nod. "But now I'm thinking it can help us protect Yari tonight. I'll shield her while you sweep the room with the sword. Now, the problem is, you're not gonna be able to see the Homers—"

"Yes, I can," Camp interrupted in a voice as flat as death.

The lieutenant didn't question him. He just followed Camp's gaze to Yarionna's bed. "What do you mean?" he murmured as he took a step to the side and put himself between her and the bed.

"I don't know," Camp answered in a rough whisper, never shifting his gaze. "I can see them—not well—but I can see them."

"I can't see a thing. Yari? Can you see anything?"

Balancing on her toes, she peeked over Match's broad shoulder and squinted at the bed. "Maybe. I think so. Four small blurry things floating in the air?"

"Four!" Match exclaimed, clearly alarmed. "And you can see them? How is that possible? I can't see a thing."

“Well, I doubt I’d have seen them if I wasn’t looking for them,” she told him honestly.

“Do the Grundians see in color?” Camp asked without moving his lips.

“Yes,” Match answered as he cut a swift gaze at Camp.

“Maybe the camouflaging doesn’t work so well on eYonans,” Camp stated, which by now was obvious to everyone in the room. “They’re headed this way,” he grunted, engaging the electromagnetic charge, the sword humming with energy. “Cover the queen.”

Match reached back with one hand and tucked Yarionna more firmly behind his body as she watched the four small blurs drift slowly toward them.

Camp stepped forward to meet the malevolent spheres, the sword balanced lightly in his hand. As though disturbed by his forward movement, the Homers split to either side of his tall frame. “They’re getting past me,” Camp warned then slashed out to his right. Two heavy metallic thunks made Yarionna jump as Camp sucked two of the Homers onto his sword. Without further warning, the two remaining missiles darted toward her.

“Where are they?” Match shouted as he spread his arms and backed her behind him toward the wall. “I can’t see them!”

But Yarionna could see them. They were zinging like vicious hummingbirds straight at her. And she had about one second to react before they smacked into Match’s chest. She pressed her finger to the pad on the leather fencing grip and activated the flash device, making sure to keep a hand on the lieutenant. As she tightened her hold on Match and jabbed the pad again, Camp spun around, his sword flashing through the air and pulling in another Homer. The missile hit his sword with a heavy crack.

With the tenacity of a tiny bulldog, the final Homer cut a circle in the air and attacked again. By the time Camp was able to get close enough to scoop the damn thing out of the air, Yarionna had dragged Match halfway around the room. Eventually he threw her to the floor, cursing a blue streak as he covered her with his body. “Damn it, woman, I’m supposed to be shielding you!” he bellowed.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, at that point almost limp with relief, so glad they’d managed to evade all four of the deadly missiles without anyone getting hurt. “I didn’t mean to do you out of a job.”

“See any more?” he yelled at Camp as he cradled her head and pulled her face against his chest.

Camp paced the room, his gaze probing every corner and shadow. After sweeping the magnetically charged sword beneath her bed, he slowly shook his head.

“How the hell did they get in here?” Match shouted, a savage look of fury etched into his features.

"Maybe they were in the room before I got here," Camp threw back over his shoulder. "Maybe they came in with you." His gaze roved the room warily, the tip of his sword making small circles in the air.

"Why don't you sweep the slashroom and dressing room while I check in with Gray and Danjer," Match commanded.

"Good idea," Camp grunted as he carefully backed toward the dressing room door, opened it and disappeared inside.

After his commanding officer had brought him up to speed, Match waited for Camp to finish his sweep of the slashroom then passed the news along. Apparently the equipment was set up outside Yarionna's door but they were having some issues and it sounded as though it was going to be a while before the problems were resolved. Although they'd called in Jed to adjust the hardware and Jason to fine-tune the software, it would be several hours before the equipment was functional. They'd discussed sending Match's sword out to round up the Homers but Danjer had thought it best to keep the sword as well as the flash device near the queen. In the meantime, Stane was keeping his eye on the Homers in the corridor. They didn't want to do anything that might disturb the floating missiles. If the Homers were to disperse, they'd either have to try to hunt them down or wait for them to congregate again.

After he signed off, Match relaxed slightly.

"So, I'm safe?" she asked. "You can get off me now?"

The corner of his mouth kicked up into a lopsided smile. "I think I'd better keep you covered up, just in case. A man can never be too careful."

Yarionna snorted softly at his pants-covered cock surging against her belly. Evidently a man couldn't be too horny, either.

"I'd better help," Camp said, his dark eyes glittering with humor. After unbuckling his sword belt from his hips, he tossed both belt and blade on the bed. Then he laid Match's magnetically charged sword within reach on the floor and stretched out beside them. To Yarionna's complete surprise, Match rolled to one side and surrendered the left half of her body to his rival.

"Comfortable?" Match enquired, his lips rubbing gently behind her ear as he reached across her body and cupped her breast with his hand. Camp laid his arm out over Match's and covered her other breast.

"No," she answered with a soft giggle. "You guys are as hard as rocks."

"Sorry," Match grunted, "but we're not made for comfort."

"No?" she questioned him happily.

"Nope," he told her. "We're made for sex."

As Yarionna lay between the two men, her heart dancing with excitement, Match trailed his fingers slowly down over her abdomen. But she knew where that wicked hand was headed and her clit started throbbing with every jagged, pulsing beat of her heart. Sure enough, when he reached her mound, he started pulling on the long skirt of

her gown. He worked it up to her waist, Camp helping him. When her pale crepe skirt lay in folds across her midriff, he rubbed his hand into her skin and made his way across her belly to the drawstring. Her heart pounded and her upper lip beaded with moisture, just thinking about what would come next.

"You're not wearing shorts or panties," he murmured.

"I...didn't think I needed them," she answered, distracted by the warm glide of his hand on her skin.

"Do you like the rope Camp made for you?" he asked.

Something in his tone made her cautious. "I'm still wearing the chemise you asked me to wear."

"The chemise I *told* you to wear," he corrected her silkily.

"I'm still wearing it," she told him softly.

"Good," he grunted.

When he reached the drawstring, he wrapped it slowly around his fist while she waited on pins and needles. Then, without warning, he gave it a sharp tug. She shouted as the pressure through her slit increased in a crushing burst. She shouted as he tugged again, so close to coming she thought one feathering touch would send her over the edge into the long, delicious slide of orgasm. But she didn't get a feathering touch. Instead, she got a series of strong, hard pulls which threw her from reasoning sanity into the black, senseless abyss of convulsing pleasure. While Camp held her hard against the floor, Match yanked and yanked and yanked again while she cried and sobbed and reeled through an endlessly long climax.

She was still sobbing as Match untied the heavy twist of silk and freed her clit. Swiftly, he reversed his position beside her so that he could lean over her and put his face close to her pussy. "Fuck," he muttered. "We got her good."

"Yeah?" Camp murmured, caressing her cheek with the light touch of his fingers.

"Yeah. This piece of silk is drenched. She poured out all over it. And her clit. Fuck."

Camp just looked into her eyes, his gaze smoky.

"It's so fat and puffy and swollen. I've never seen anything more kissable."

Yarionna whimpered as his breath touched her sensitive flesh.

"Do you think she'd like a kiss?" he rasped, his lips feathering across her folds and shocking her senses. With a scream, she arched on the floor and again Camp forced her spine back down to the floor.

"I'm sure she would," Camp answered on a dark chuckle, his wide, hard mouth curling into a sinful smile as he angled upward on one elbow and watched Match go to work between her legs. Camp's cock pressed against her side and she felt it throb in heavy pulses as he gazed at Match. Clearly, he was aroused by the view.

"Fuck," Match muttered. "You didn't tell me about this, Camp."

"About what?" he asked, his voice rough with lust as he rubbed his cock into her thigh.

"You didn't mention that she tastes like Nefarian brandy."

"I told you before, I'm not stupid," he rumbled while scratching a thick fingernail over the crepe that covered her nipple.

"Yeah? Then how come it's me with my head between her legs, sucking her cream down my throat?"

"Because I want to make sure Yarionna is safe before I join you."

"Join me?"

"Yeah. Join you. Roll her onto her side, Maloney, and get ready to share."

As Match rolled off Yarionna and pulled her with him onto her side, Camp took a careful look around. Evidently satisfied that the room was secure from danger, he turned on her. With his thick fingers clutching the tender skin of her inner thigh, he lifted her leg upward so that he could reach her opening from behind while Match laved the front of her pussy. When he folded her leg at the knee, the side of her foot rested against his shoulder.

Match kissed the top of her cleft while Camp touched his tongue to her opening. Then they both went to work, Camp's tongue lapping at her tender entrance then surging inside in a slow, sensual tongue fuck, Match's fingers pulling her slit open, his lips working over the sensitive flesh inside, sucking and swirling and finally concentrating on the hungry nub of her clitoris. Both men had their faces between her legs, one behind her, the other in front. When her body arched in pleasure, Camp's tongue slipped from her cunt. She felt his thick fingers bite again into the flesh of her thigh as he dragged her back to his mouth. Then his tongue was back inside her, his breathing harsh as he scraped at the delicate flesh that rimmed her opening.

Match slid his tongue through Yari's wet sex toward her entrance and growled when he ran into Camp's tongue. Camp answered him with a feral snarl and forged more deeply inside the tiny opening he refused to surrender. Match wanted her cunt. After all, he was there first. He lifted his head and glared at Camp, who glowered back at him, his brown eyes holding a dark warning. Slowly, Match returned his mouth to her pussy while watching Camp like a wary predator. Their mouths were open as their lips slid over her sex, ran into each other and stopped to the sound of harsh panting.

"Fuck," Match growled as he recoiled from the fleeting contact, his stubble-roughened chin scraping at Yarionna's plump pussy lips as she squirmed and bucked.

"Fuck," Camp rasped without giving up the treasure of her cunt.

When Match bared his teeth, Camp gave his bottom lip a warning nip. Then their tongues slid past each other as they both threaded their way back and forth through her sex, waging a war for the feminine territory between her legs.

"Boys. Boys," she moaned. "Don't fight."

"We're not fighting," Match snarled as he watched Camp lap at the juices streaming from her cunt. Swiftly, he dove for the prize, scraping his tongue over Camp's and robbing him of her flavor. Camp blinked, looked stunned for a moment, then gave him a blistering stare.

But before the conflict had a chance to grow, Yarionna intervened, distracting both men pretty damn efficiently. The determined little sprite had managed to twist her upper body and plant her shoulder blades against the floor. Match felt her fingers working his fly open and he stilled a little, mouthing her wet pussy flesh as he burned with anticipation. A quick glance down between their bodies showed that she was working at Camp's fly at the same time. But Match's cock was easier for her to reach and came into her hand more quickly. He closed his eyes as her slender fingers wrapped around his fevered, hot flesh and started pulling. He grunted as his hips moved instinctually, shoving his cock into the tight grip of her slight hand and sharing a wild, lust-filled stare with Camp. "I'm gonna come in about three more pulls," he groaned.

"Yarionna," Camp rasped. "Let me catch up."

Match closed his eyes, his cock throbbing painfully in Yari's small fist as she stopped working him and concentrated on bringing Camp up to speed. "Okay," Camp eventually grunted after she'd stroked him out to his full, dark length.

Match reached down and fisted his hand over hers, pumping his jutting cock as he turned his mouth on her pussy. He drove his tongue downward toward her cunt and sucked hard, the corner of his mouth sliding against Camp's as she spilled onto their tongues. At the same time his hips jerked in hard pulls as he erupted violently and his cum shot out onto the shoulder of her gown. "Fuck," he gritted as all three of them came together, his body vibrating hard against Yarionna's while she shivered alongside Camp's juddering frame.

"Jeezis Skies," he groaned, working his mouth gently over Yarionna's swollen folds as the burn of pleasure bled away, leaving his cock, if not defeated, at least waving a flag of truce. It wasn't like getting fucked but it was better than nothing and his dick was at least partially sated. He looked at Camp, who was drowsily kissing the hickey he'd given her the night before. Feeling the heavy pull of exhaustion, Match settled his body beside hers and gave in to sleep.

Chapter Eighteen

Match woke with a start, Gray's deep voice crackling on the communicator attached to his ear. Disoriented, he lifted his head from a lushly soft pillow and found himself floating on the satin comforter that topped Yari's big bed. As he threw his legs over the edge of the bed and his soft kid boots hit the styrowood floor with a muted thud, Yari's husky laughter came from the open slashroom door. Camp's low rumble of amusement followed. The realization that Camp must have lifted him from the floor to the bed made him growl a bit...and made him smile a bit. He rubbed a wrist over his eyes and answered his commanding officer with a gruff, "Here."

The sight of late-morning light spearing into the room through the long, narrow windows had his heart in his throat until he interrupted Gray's rapid-fire questions to ask for the time. A heartfelt breath of relief left his lungs in a long hiss when Gray assured him they hadn't overslept. He and Camp had an hour to get to the arena before the bell started the final contest. He grinned at Yari and Camp as they stepped into the room, Camp naked, Yari wearing only her ragged chemise and her silk "rope", both of which were wet but clean.

Match rearranged his sex inside his cock pocket, closed his pants and listened to Gray's report while Camp and Yari dressed. As Match watched the long fawn skirt of Yari's chamois gown fall to the floor, Gray reported they were finally ready to turn the jamming unit on. He reminded them to listen for falling Homers after he'd given them the signal. "Sounds good," Match signed off. "We'll wait for your signal."

"I'm not going to have to stay here during the final competition," Yarianna insisted as she straightened the skirt of her gown. Her cheeks glowed with the color of a woman well satisfied.

"Nah," Match answered as Camp handed him his sword and he swiftly sheathed it. "We can put the jamming equipment on a hovercart and send it with you until the threat is cleared."

"Are you going to take that sword into the arena with you?" Camp asked as they stood in a close, intimate triangle beside Yari's bed and waited for Gray's signal.

Match rolled his shoulders and gave a wry smile. "Not much sense in it now that you know about it."

Camp nodded solemnly and extended his hand. "Well, then. May the best man win."

Match gave Camp's hand a strong shake. "Don't worry, I will. But it's nice to know you're pulling for me."

It was a rough attempt at humor and nobody laughed. Match lowered his gaze to the floor and pulled his bottom lip against his teeth with his tongue. He hardly knew what to say to Yari. Camp still wore her favor on his arm. Match had nothing from her and nothing to go forward with except for his determination and a slightly bruised sense of humor.

He lifted his gaze and saw a tear slide down her face. Ah, fuck. He didn't want her to be sad. He forced a smile. "If you change your mind about me, wear something red, even if it's only lipstick. You could slap that on at the last minute," he pointed out, trying for a light tone.

He grinned at Camp, to let him know he wasn't serious, though it was probably obvious since Yari wouldn't be able to tell red from blue even if she *did* want to change her mind. Then he sent Yarionna a wink. But Yarionna wasn't looking at him. As he watched her, her eyes widened slightly, her gaze fixed on a point just above his shoulder, between him and the open slashroom door. Instinctively, before waiting to understand the threat, he lunged at her. The momentum of his dive carried them both to the bed, but not before a heavy weight slammed into the thick muscle of his right shoulder.

"Ring Gray!" he shouted at his communicator as he tucked Yari beneath him and covered her head with his arms. "Gray, turn the jamming unit on *now*! The queen is under attack."

He heard his sword rasping as Camp tore it from its sheath. "Is Yarionna all right?" he roared as he spun to face the room with Matchstick's sword in his fist. Bracing his legs wide, he swept the air with the blade while scanning the room for more Homers.

"Are you okay?" Match rasped, his hands skimming her body as he checked her for injury.

Her face was pale as she stared at his shoulder, her cheeks still wet with tears. "The missile. It's in your arm."

"Are you okay?" he repeated breathlessly, his eyes searching her body.

"I'm fine, Lieutenant. Let me up. We need to get you help."

"Just hold on a minute. There may be more of them."

"Don't move!" Camp ordered in a rough blast of words. "Either of you. Wait for the jamming signal."

"How did they get in?" he yelled at Camp.

Camp shook his head then stilled as though somebody had turned a stunner on him. A hard, jagged sound jerked from his throat as he stared at the open slashroom door. "The plumbing," he croaked in a hoarse whisper.

"All clear," Gray said in Match's ear. Seconds later, Gray reported collecting five Homers from the floor in the corridor. They'd heard nothing fall in the room but, in any case, they were probably safe with the equipment operating on the other side of the wall. Still, it wasn't easy for Match to peel himself away from Yari. He'd been lulled

earlier into a false sense of security and look what that had gotten him! A Homer in his shoulder and Yari almost killed. At that point, he wasn't inclined to be trustful. Slowly, he eased into a sitting position on the bed while the pain in his shoulder exploded.

"We're coming in," Gray told him via the communicator just before the door crashed open and a dozen men burst into the room.

"Match needs medical attention," Camp shouted as he sprinted for the door.

"Where are you going?" demanded Danjer.

"To the roof," he yelled over his shoulder.

"What the hell happened?" Gray shouted, dropping to his knees beside the bed. He yanked Matchstick's scarf from his throat, wadded it in one hand and pressed it to his shoulder.

"Homer," Match rasped, then sucked in a gasp as Gray put pressure on the wound.

"I thought you guys cleared the rooms!"

Match moved his chin the slightest fraction and held his breath against the pain. "Camp swept the rooms earlier. At that time, they were clear."

"Well, he must have missed one," Gray snarled. "In the slashroom, maybe. Or the dressing room."

Doggedly, Match shook his head. "No. Not Camp. He's too thorough. That Homer got in here after he swept the rooms."

"But how is that possible?" Danjer asked as his gaze shot around the room, taking in the closed windows and the door that led out to the corridor.

"Plumbing vents," he rasped as another vicious wave of pain took him.

"Plumbing vents?" Yarıonna murmured, her expression deeply concerned as she sat beside him and watched his face, her forgotten tears still damp on her face.

"There are vents on the roof that allow the sinks to drain. A lot of the older buildings on Earth are still plumbed that way. That Homer came out of the sink."

Pointing out four men, Danjer sent them to help Camp.

"Okay," Gray growled. "We need to get you to Medops. Now!"

"No way," he answered, moving swiftly if unsteadily to his feet. "My fight is in half an hour."

"Yeah, and you could be dead in half an hour," Gray argued fiercely. "Have those spines started expanding yet?"

"No," he lied.

Yarıonna spoke up, her voice tight but imperious. "Lieutenant Maloney, I order you to report to your Medops facility immediately."

"It's nine-thirty," he reminded her, smiling gently. "I'm not under your command anymore." He turned to Gray and peered at him through a blanketing fog of pain. "Help me get to the arena, Hammer. I haven't come this far and worked this hard only to forfeit the final contest."

Gray turned away from him and scraped his big hands back through his thick brush of hair before propping them on his hips. His stance said no way—no *fucking* way.

Match turned a demanding look on Yari but her expression was as fierce as Gray's body language. He squinted against the pull of darkness that blurred the edges of his vision, his gaze drawn to her shoulder where his blood stained her fawn-colored gown bright scarlet. With a wry sense of sadness he noted that she'd be wearing his favor into the arena even if he weren't wearing hers. Fittingly, it would be red.

"Gray," he croaked, gripping the back of a chair as his skin turned clammy under a sickening wave of nausea. "I don't have much time to get to the arena." He pasted a look of bravado on his face. "I can beat that pansy eYonan and get to Medops before the spines do too much damage."

Gray turned and gave him a severe look. "You promise?" he growled while watching him carefully, clearly reluctant to give in.

"I cross my heart," he rumbled with a grimacing smile.

"Well, let's just hope you don't fucking die," Gray muttered, stepping close to Match and lifting his arm behind his neck, gingerly taking his weight on his shoulder.

Chapter Nineteen

Camp stood in the middle of the training arena, his sword drawn. As he faced the determined Earther, he prayed silently for some sort of divine intervention. A violent morning storm. A meteorite shower. A Grundian attack! Anything that would stop the contest and save him. Ten feet away, Match swayed slightly, white to the lips, a bloom of black blood staining the front of his guardsman's jacket, his icy-pale eyes narrowed in concentration as he waited for the starting bell. Nearby, leaning against the sideboards, his commanding officer stood eyeing his friend worriedly.

Camp searched for help in the faces that ringed the arena. "He can't fight like this," he announced loudly to the arbiters. "He's in no condition to compete."

"Just touch him on the heart and be done with it," Blair shouted from his place in the stands.

"He just saved the queen!" Camp yelled back, fierce with frustration. He pivoted on his heel and located Danjer, who was seated close to Yarionna behind the arbiters' box. "How can I fight the man who sacrificed himself to save the queen?"

"I've got Medops on emergency standby," Gray answered him grimly. "The sooner you end the competition, the sooner we can get him over there."

He wanted to howl. Fuck, he wanted to cry. By the time he'd climbed up to the roof, whoever had been there had gotten away. The Earthers said they could scan for traces of DNA around the vent stack and, if they found a large enough sample, might be able to identify the culprit.

That was a lot of ifs. Camp wanted to kill someone. Now.

But not Match.

As far as he was concerned, it was his fault the lieutenant was injured. Having lived in Judipeao for over two years, Camp was familiar with the palace and its construction. He should have recognized the plumbing as a possible avenue of attack. As if that wasn't bad enough, he was the one who'd left the slashroom door open after he'd swept it for Homers and again after he'd taken a slash with Yarionna. It should have been closed again, even if they *had* thought they'd rounded up all the missiles.

Fuck, it could have gotten her while they were in the slashroom! He might not have seen it in time to shield her. The idea turned his spine to ice.

He slipped a quick glance at Yarionna, seated between her recently arrived parents. Her mother's handsome face was lined with concern as she held her daughter's hand in a tight, white-knuckled grip. Her father looked no less troubled, his arm draped protectively around her shoulders, his head tilted toward Danjer, who was trying to bring him up to speed on the rapidly unfolding events that had preceded the contest.

Yarionna's face was as white as the lieutenant's. When their eyes connected, Camp searched her expression, almost afraid of what he'd find there. But, as Yarionna's gaze locked on his, it revealed only a painful outpouring sympathy. She was quite likely the only person in the stadium who understood what he was going through.

What would she think of him if he were to win this way? How would he live with himself? He wasn't what he considered a noble man yet here was a line he could not cross. He had thought he'd do anything for the right to claim Yarionna but here was something he could not do.

The bell sounded to signal the contest's start and Camp groaned. He'd run out of time. As he watched, Match took a staggering step toward him. Camp's hand tightened on the hilt of his sword. Slowly, as though under a great weight, the tip of the blade moved up an inch. Then Camp threw himself at Matchstick and caught him in his arms as the Earther buckled at the knees and went down. He didn't think about what he was doing, his reaction an automatic response to the sight of a fallen comrade. Camp scooped him up and shouted at Hamm, "Clear the way for me. I'm taking him to Medops."

Camp's cleated boots dug into the sandy floor of the arena and carried him toward the opening in the sideboards. With Hamm clearing the way up through the crowded stands and Camp holding Match close to his chest, they raced from the arena and across the yard to the building that housed the Spaceforce medical unit. Camp glanced down at Match's bloodless face then broke into a run, his heart pounding as heavily as if it were the queen who had been struck down. When they burst through the front doors, they found four medical officers waiting for them. Organized pandemonium ensued as the doctors hurried Match away on a hovering gurney. Camp followed with Hamm into the medical emergency room then stepped along the wall as Matchstick's friends started slipping in behind them.

He kept one eye on the pale man on the bed and one eye on the door, waiting for Yarionna, knowing she'd come as soon as Danjer could safely escort her with the hovercart. When she finally stepped into the room, she was breathless, as though she'd hurried there. Yet she obviously dreaded taking that last step across the threshold, terrified of what she'd find. Afraid that she might faint, Camp moved quickly to her side and took her hand in his.

"Is he all right?" she asked, her voice faint.

"He should have come straight here," growled the young medical officer, "to have that damn thing removed. The missile has needle-sharp spines and they're growing longer with every minute that passes. I need to get it out of his shoulder before one of them gets long enough to puncture something vital."

"But he's going to be all right," Yarionna insisted.

"He will be once I get that thing out, inject him with some reparative cell-building DNA and close the wound with a dusting of LNG. I just need a little elbow room," he snapped, glaring at the crowd of people that filled the room.

She looked so fragile and frightened, his queen. "He'll be okay," Camp promised her, pulling her into his side as he led the way out of the room. Match's friends followed them into the brightly lit corridor as Camp delivered the queen into the arms of her waiting parents.

* * * * *

Match opened his eyes and waited for them to focus in the dark room. Immediately, he looked for Yarionna. He knew it was a fucking long shot that she'd be there but it made his heart hurt when he didn't find her. Somehow it felt worse than the dull ache in his shoulder. As his eyes adjusted, he found Gray sitting in the chair beside his bed. He watched Match closely, the shadows draping him like a dark web.

"How long have I been out?" Match asked.

"About thirty-six hours."

"Is the queen...okay?"

"She and Camp left a few hours ago," Gray told him. "Danjer insisted they get some sleep. Neither of them wanted to go." He hesitated before he went on. "You three seem to have formed a pretty tight bond."

"So, did I win?" he asked dryly, ignoring most of Gray's report.

"No." Gray shook his head solemnly. "The arbiters decreed Camp the champion of the tournament."

"I thought they might...delay the final competition."

"I'm sorry," he said, giving him a sympathetic smile. "On the upside, you can have your pick of any other female on the planet. You're a fucking hero, Match."

Matchstick turned his head on the pillow. He didn't point out that he'd always had his pick of the other females on the planet. "Oh," he said to the wall.

"The results are back from the DNA scan we did on the roof. Do you want to know who was stuffing Homers down the vent stack?"

"Not really," he answered, feeling utterly exhausted.

"Millston. Evidently, he was working for the queen's old enemy, that Southern baroness who was responsible for the civil war. She put him in touch with the Grundians who dropped the Homers in the desert for him to pick up on his magnabike. It's a good thing you guys stopped him from winning the tournament. He was supposed to free the Homers in the queen's rooms after he became her champion. All ten of them. At once. Match, are you listening?"

"Yeah," he answered dully.

"After he lost his fight with Camp, he loosed five Homers here on the grounds. When they didn't get to the queen right away, he climbed up on the roof and sent the rest of them through the plumbing. Unfortunately, the bastard gave us the slip. I imagine he's racing south as we speak. But he left a Grundian talkpad behind, the

dumb fuck. It contained his correspondence with both the baroness and his Grundian contact.”

Match nodded so the Hammer couldn't accuse him of not listening. After that he was silent a long time, staring at the wall.

Finally, Gray sighed. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

Match shook his head then changed his mind. “Did you destroy all the Homers?”

“Yeah.”

He turned his head and narrowed his gaze on Gray. “What about the one they dug out of my shoulder?”

“I haven't gotten around to that one yet,” he admitted.

“Can you round it up and bring it here along with a sample of Millston's DNA?”

Gray's eyes gleamed, a look of relief softening his stern features. “You bet I can.”

* * * * *

When Camp walked into the Medops room eight hours later, Match had the Homer pulled apart and scattered across his sheets. “What are you doing here?” Match asked without looking at him.

“I came to thank you for saving the queen's life.”

“I didn't do it for you,” he muttered while carefully fitting two small pieces together.

“Right.” Camp dropped into the chair beside his bed. “I should be happy, shouldn't I?”

“Well, you're the queen's champion. You're a damn fool if you're not.”

“I think I would be happy, except for one thing. I think Yaronna's in love with you.”

“Of course she's in love with me,” he shouted, blinking rapidly as he reached for his hot pen and made a quick connection.

“Shut up, you ignorant offworlder! For once in your life, shut up and listen.”

“I'm all fucking ears,” Match snarled, again without looking at him.

“The thing is,” Camp started with gruff hesitancy. “There are times when I feel that you might do a better job of guiding the queen, considering the threats we're facing. The future well-being of this planet depends on the queen's decisions. I know nothing of the stars, the planets, space vehicles, space weapons. She needs a champion who can help advise her of those things.”

“You should have thought about that before you touched your sword to my chest,” Match growled as he blew on the connection.

Camp nodded. “The thing is...I didn't.”

“What?” Match's gaze snapped to his face.

"I never touched you with my sword. When you fainted, I threw it aside so I could catch you."

"Catch me? You caught me?" Match stared at him.

"Match, that fucking vicious thing was burrowing into your shoulder. You'd just saved the queen."

But Match was stuck several sentences behind him. "I can't believe you caught me."

"You'd have done the same for me," Camp offered quietly.

"I'm touched that you think so," he answered with a cynical snort.

"Anyhow," Camp muttered. "Since I never got around to touching you, technically...I didn't win."

"But...the arbiters named you the champion. Gray told me."

"My victory is under review."

"Under review? Who challenged the decision?" A sudden spark of hope swelled in his chest, making him dizzy. "Yarionna?"

Camp shook his head and looked at his hands. "I did."

"You challenged your own victory?" Match started to laugh, despite the fact that it hurt like fucking hell. "Are you mad?"

"Maybe," he mumbled. "But you didn't see her face."

"What do you mean?" he wheezed, pressing his hand to his shoulder and trying to hold the painful laughter inside.

"Yarionna. You didn't see her face," he rasped, dragging a hand down over his eyes. "When you went down. She turned as white as the Agrarian Snowfields. I was afraid she was going to blink out like a light. I've asked for a rematch."

"Jeezis Skies," he said quietly. "You really love Yari, don't you?"

Camp pressed his lips between his teeth and looked away. His eyes were shiny when he nodded. "Yes. By the Princess, yes. More than anything."

Match sighed. "I have the same problem." He stared at the dark-haired warrior. It was all so hard to understand. If Yarionna had any feelings for Match whatsoever, why had she never given him a sign? "Why?" he asked, his voice cracking. "Why did she give you her token?"

"I've asked her about that," he said softly. "Match, she never thought you wanted her. Not for anything more than a year."

He lifted his hands in a gesture of appeal. "What gave her that idea?"

"You're Spaceforce. An officer like you isn't likely to give up his commission. Your career is with the Force."

"Oh fuck," he cursed dismissively. "I can get another career. There are a lot of things I could do to make a living here. This planet is an entrepreneur's heaven!"

Camp gazed at the bits of metal spread out around him on the sheets. "What are you making there?"

"Revenge," he intoned ominously.

The tall warrior snorted softly. "You're gonna send that thing after Millston?"

"I'm gonna send it right up his ass," Match grunted.

Camp winced, a stunned look in his brown eyes. "Can you do that?"

Match sent him a grim nod.

"Remind me never to get on your bad side," he murmured. "No matter what happens."

"No matter what happens?"

"Well," he said awkwardly while watching his booted feet. "I just want you to know that I'll not stand in the way, if it's you she wants."

"Aw, shit," Match exploded quietly. "Do you have to be so fucking noble? It's unnatural!"

"I'm not noble," Camp growled belligerently.

Match pinned him with a look. "You know she's in love with you too."

Camp nodded then hesitated. "Do you think so?"

"I know she is," he answered, reaching out and grabbing his hand.

It was hard not to like the guy. Hell, it was hard not to love the guy. As Match squeezed Camp's big, rough hand, several opposing emotions shaded across the warrior's hard features. He seemed to be struggling for words and made several halting starts before finally gaining some headway.

"Match? I don't know how to explain. Or how to ask. But do you think we could...?"

Match narrowed his eyes on the warrior. "Camp? What are you suggesting?"

Camp held his gaze steadily. "A...compromise."

Chapter Twenty

Four days after Camp had carried him to Medops with the Homer in his shoulder, Match was back in the arena preparing for his final contest. With his back propped comfortably against the arena's scarred wooden sideboards, he discussed the upcoming fight with Camp while keeping his eye on the west entrance where he expected Yaronna to appear.

The Homer he'd reconfigured was winging its way south under the power of a self-charging battery Danjer had helped him with. His wound was sealed, his muscle rebuilt, his arm and shoulder virtually as good as new. Knotted around his biceps, he wore a white scarf emblazoned with the queen's black and silver crest. It was identical to the one Camp wore tied around his arm.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Camp murmured in a rough undertone.

"I'm good," Match told him for the tenth time that morning.

"Your shoulder isn't bothering you?"

"Not at all," Match answered patiently.

The two men had spent a lot of time together during the past two days, Yari joining them in the Medops hospital room whenever she could break away from her duties. They'd discussed Camp's compromise with her while Match worked on what he hoped was the last anti-Millston he'd ever have to make. She'd been surprised by their proposal but, being a sensible young woman, she'd agreed it was the only reasonable alternative. Then she'd cried her eyes out. After that, she'd apologized for being such a ninny, as she had put it.

Match smiled softly at the memory.

A rumble of interest sounded among the stands, announcing the queen's arrival. Wearing a heavy gown of stiff white brocade that bared her shoulders and the thin straps of the chemise she wore beneath, Yaronna appeared between her parents, at the top of the stadium. Pink, Velvet and Lacey followed along with Saxon, Danjer, Gray, Jed, Jason and Junkie. As she made her way down the stairs, her entourage wearing wide smiles, the Earthers in the stands started to whisper among themselves. When their quiet exclamations drew the attention of their eYonan neighbors, the officers of the Force tried to explain to their hosts that the queen wore red lipstick on her lower lip, black on her upper.

Match grinned. He'd forgotten about asking her to wear red for him. Velvet and Lacey must have helped her find an appropriate tube of lipstick. As Match watched Yaronna take her seat behind the arbiters' box, he couldn't help but feel honored. Camp wouldn't know the difference between the black lipstick and the red, which

meant Yarrison had entrusted his heart to Match. She was counting on him to make sure Camp got the message. He looked at Camp, who was frowning at the quiet commotion in the stands. "What's going on?" he murmured.

"They're talking about the queen's lipstick."

"Is she...wearing red?" Camp asked as though stunned, his shoulders sagging slightly as he fixed his gaze on Match.

"Yes," Match answered. He paused before adding, "She's also wearing black."

Camp glanced quickly back into the stands. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, she wants both of us."

Camp looked relieved. Nonetheless, he asked, "You're not lying to me?"

"Jeezis Skies! Why would I do that?"

"You'd tell me if she was wearing only red?"

"I'd touch my sword to your heart if she was wearing only red."

Finally, Camp grinned and drew his sword. Simultaneously, Match drew his. While waiting for the starting bell, he mused. He wouldn't have thought he was cut out for a ménage à trois. His ego was just too big. It helped that Gray and Jed, Jason and Junkie had blazed the trail ahead of him. Because he figured if a guy like Gray could share the woman he loved with another man, what the hell. It couldn't be that hard. "She wants both of us," he stated quietly, knowing the answer to his question before he asked it. "Can you live with that? Can you live with me?"

Camp rose to the occasion, a twitch of laughter hovering at the corner of his mouth. "Yes, if it's the only way I can live with her. But, I'm telling ya, it ain't gonna be easy."

"On the count of three then," Match proposed, lifting his sword tip. "One. Two. Three." The grinning men reached out and touched each other at the same time with their sword tips. Then, after sheathing their blades, they grabbed for each other and shared a powerful embrace.

A weighty silence fell over the arena as every head in the stadium turned toward the arbiters to hear their decision. But Yari wasn't waiting for any damn official decision. Rising to her feet, she proclaimed in a clear voice that rang like a bell throughout the arena, "I accept *both* men as my champions.

"These are strange and difficult times in which we find ourselves. As we move forward into a new era fraught with danger, it's necessary to recognize the need for help from offworld. At the same time, traditional issues must never be overlooked. With those concerns in mind, I accept both champions. One to sit on my left and advise me on international affairs. The other to stand on my right and advise me on interplanetary matters. Both to protect me."

As she finished her speech, one of the arbiters got to his feet, his hand lifted uncertainly. Match recognized him as the same old relic who Yari had gone head-to-head with before. But Yari cut him off before he had a chance to express any doubts on the matter. "Is there any rule that says I can't take two champions?" she snapped. "No?"

Then inasmuch as there's no rule against it, I'm afraid you'll just have to accept my decision."

As the stadium erupted in a joyful surge of cheers, the men vaulted the sideboards and climbed into the stands to join her. Although Match's first instinct was to turn Yarıonna into his chest and kiss her, he held off for a few seconds, trying to do the right thing for possibly the first time in his life. He assumed Yarı's people would prefer to see their eYonan champion claim the first kiss. While Match hesitated, Camp plucked Yarı into his arms and pressed her against Match's chest. Together they shared the first kiss, each claiming a corner of her mouth.

"So what was that business about me standing at your right?" Match murmured privately as Camp returned her to her feet. "I can sit when I get tired, can't I?"

"Lieutenant Maloney," she answered primly while waving happily to her people, "you fought for the right to stand in my presence and you earned it. Next time, I suggest you be careful what you wish for."

* * * * *

"Camp and I have discussed this," Match told her. They crossed the yard as swiftly as they could without outpacing the hovercart that followed them with Yarı's two guards. "We talked about it while I was stuck at Medops. We think if you try to split the nights between us, it will just result in one long train of jealousies. We've agreed that the only way to get around it is to share your bed together."

"Oh," she murmured, her fingers fluttering at her throat as she regarded them from beneath the dark veil of her eyelashes. "If you think that would be best," she demurred happily.

Match had his dress jacket off before they had finished climbing the long curving stone steps that led to the upper floors of the Iron Palace. He ripped away his tie as they hurried down the corridor. His shirt was unbuttoned to the navel as he led the way through the door to her rooms. Then he had her plastered against the nearest wall, the thick mass of his erection grinding into her belly. As wildly as he shoved against her, it was amazing the restraint with which he held her face. His fingers threaded into the hair above her nape, his thumbs tilting her head upward for his kiss. She wanted to tell him to wait for Camp but her senses left her as his mouth descended on hers.

As it turned out, Camp could take care of himself. While Match stood pressed against her, mostly clothed, his mouth bruising her lips as it moved ruthlessly over hers, Camp was stripping off his leathers. When Yarıonna's eyes fluttered briefly open, she caught sight of him in the corner of her vision—his broad, bare shoulders rippling with strength, his tight, ridged abdomen, the sexy patch of hair that darkened the thick root of his cock, his shaft vein-rich and swollen, its heavy weight dragging the fat head downward.

"Get your clothes off," he told Match as he slid his arm along the wall and moved behind her, his front to her back, his spine against the wall.

Match took a step away from her, his pale eyes blazing with hunger as his gaze moved restlessly over her body. Keeping an eye on him, Yarionna turned her face so she could nuzzle her lips against Camp's jaw. Her eYonan warrior worked with an unhurried sensuality, unbuckling her belt with his thick fingers and letting it drop to the floor. At the same leisurely pace, he started working at the heavy fabric of her gown, drawing it slowly up her legs while Match tore off his shirt and watched her skirt rise like a theater curtain. He licked his lower lip in a subconscious gesture of hunger as Camp revealed first her knees, then her thighs and finally the dark puff of hair on her mound, split by the thick cord of silk that twisted between her legs.

While Yarionna lifted her arms and let Camp work her gown over her head, Match ripped at his fly and sent his white knee pants down to his feet. Bending over, all hard-toned muscle and taut, burnished flesh, he got rid of his pants and boots then put his hand inside his black cock pocket and stroked himself out. The broad tip of his cock poked wildly from the sexy underwear which couldn't contain his full erection.

"Fuck," Match growled, his hot gaze going out to her like a touch and scorching her skin.

Camp's hands slipped beneath her ragged chemise. He lifted her breasts into his palms, the rough pads of his thumbs brushing across her sensitive nipples and sending a bright spark of arousal up her spine.

"Fuck, you're beautiful," Match rasped, stroking his thick shaft as Camp worked her nipples beneath the thin bodice.

"You need help with that cock pocket?" Camp taunted him in a rough burr.

Match sent him a sharp look. Then, holding Camp's gaze, he fisted his hand in the black silk and tore it away from his crotch. When he opened his fingers, the ragged piece of silk fell to the floor, the long line of his rigid cock rising powerfully from a bright, glinting nest of curls.

"I guess not," Camp murmured on a dark chuckle.

"You need help with that chemise?" Match countered silkily while nailing Camp with a belligerent stare. Without waiting for a response, he took a step forward and bunched his fists in the tiny top that barely covered Yarionna's breasts. Showing little patience for the tattered scrap of silk, Match threw his elbows outward. The fine fabric parted with a faint tearing sound.

For several moments he stood panting heavily, his sharp gaze fixed on her breasts, which rose in jagged bursts beneath the stroke and sweep of Camp's big, rough palms. At the same time, he tore blindly at the knot just above her navel, his long fingers shaking with impatience as he worked at the silk. Finally, he freed her from the twisted strap that had been rubbing through her slit for the last several days, keeping her at an absolute peak of arousal. As his rough fingers slid through the delicate seam of her sex, Yarionna shrieked softly.

"Easy," Camp warned him on a panted growl.

“Are you ready, sugar?” Match demanded roughly. “Are you ready to have this precious little cunt stuffed full of cock?”

Camp hissed out a dark curse. “Would it kill you to be fucking gentle for once in your life?”

“Oh yeah,” Match fired back. “Like you don’t want to bang her up against the wall and ream her ass.”

“Of course I do,” Camp answered in a tortured groan. “But we’re damn well going to do it slow and gentle. And we’re going to make sure she’s ready before we fuck her, even if it kills us.”

Knowing that Match had a hot, wild streak flowing in his Earther blood, Camp was afraid of what might happen should the lieutenant give in to the demand of his dark urges. Fuck, he wasn’t too sure about his own ability to hold off and hold back. It wasn’t as if he were immune to the dark spill of lust. When close to Yarionna, he was constantly at risk of losing his control, his need no less appalling than Match’s. Right now, that ferocious, driving need was eating him alive. Her seductive, feminine fragrance was trapped there behind her ear. He rubbed his nose against her skin and let her arousing scent drive him crazy for a few seconds, while pressure built in his sac and his skin stretched tight over his erection.

Match had claimed one of her breasts, his mouth moving aggressively over her tit, his rough chin scraping the knuckles of Camp’s hand. As he watched Match, Camp knew he’d have to be the one to make sure things didn’t get out of hand. He also knew that he would have to be the glue that held the threesome together. Doubtless there would be times when Match would flash to anger and Yarionna would retreat to pride. Camp knew he would have to make sure they continued to communicate when that happened. That meant he had to assert himself right up front.

But it wouldn’t be easy and he knew it. Match was unquestionably more aggressive than he.

Leaving Yarionna’s breast to Match’s care, he dropped his hand and palmed the sweet curve of her ass. He cupped her rounded cheek, his long fingers spreading over the firm mound and reaching between her thighs where her soft, velvety flesh waited for him like a piece of lush fruit. With the tips of his fingers, he stroked across her tender opening and dipped inside to collect some of her moisture then tugged at the base of her vulva. When he felt Match’s fingers slide alongside his, he decided it was as good a time as any to assert himself. “You take her clit,” he told Match on a deep rumbling growl.

Fortunately, Match was too hot to question the order. His fingers slid away, leaving Camp the deep, warm prize of her cunt. As Match worked her center of pleasure, Yarionna swiftly responded. Her cunt softened and began to stream. Camp collected the silky liquid running over his fingers then rubbed it over his thumb and prepared to take the next step. With two lovers, Yarionna might as well know right up front how it was going to be, though he was determined to break her in gently.

Slowly, with his wet fingers, he stroked away from her vulva toward the kiss of her ass, each short, light caress taking him closer to his destination. When he carefully stroked the skin that puckered around her anus, she stiffened, her muscles tightening there where his fingers rested. He gave her a calming stroke, counting on Match to distract her before she could grow uncomfortable. As he let her get used to his touch at that place on her body, her tight frame gradually eased again and her breathy sighs turned into soft murmurs. As he reached deep between her thighs again and brought more moisture up into the crease of her ass, Match spoke, his guttural voice raw and gritty. "She's wet, Camp."

"I know," he murmured. "My fingers are coated with her cream."

"Are you ready to get fucked, Yari?"

"Not yet," Camp said. "Take her leg. Lift it to your side."

Again, Match didn't hesitate, apparently liking the idea.

As Match folded her knee upward, Yarionna's cheeks spread open and Camp had a lot more room to work. He reached deep again, this time stooping so that he could rub his wet fingers over Match's. Together they worked her clit for a few seconds while he let Match get a taste of the control he planned to exert over his two charges. He smiled wryly as a thick bolt of lust weighted his groin at that simple, brief act of dominance. Eventually, he gathered more of her sweet wetness on his fingers and returned to her ass where he pressed his juice-coated fingers against the tight ring of muscle that closed her anus.

Again, Yarionna stilled as though she couldn't quite believe what he was doing. He gave her the space of a few heartbeats to get used to the idea then prodded at the tight noose of her ass and eased the first joint of his middle finger inside. She squirmed slightly, as though she wasn't too happy about the way things were unfolding and he banded his arm around her, trying to calm her with his strength while reinforcing his claim at the same time.

She squirmed again, her round bottom rubbing across his erection and exciting the holy living hell out of him.

"What's he doing to you?" Match murmured, his voice husky with lust.

Yarionna made a soft cry of surprise as Camp eased a second finger alongside the first.

"Has he got his fingers in your ass?" Match demanded on a roughly panted breath.

She moaned in answer, shifting uneasily, trying to find a comfortable way to take the penetration of his thick fingers.

"Am I hurting you?" Camp demanded quietly.

"No," she whimpered. "Not exactly."

"Tell me if I hurt you," he whispered roughly as he slid his fingers out the slightest fraction then forged inside again.

"Oh!" she gasped on his entering stroke, her breathy cry turning into a low moan as she buried her teeth into the pretty pout of her lower lip.

Slowly, he withdrew his fingers completely and rubbed the tender indentation a few times. "I'm sorry," he chuckled darkly. "But with two men in your bed, you might as well get used to the idea that someone's going to be fucking your ass with something."

"And someone's gonna be fucking your pussy with something else," Match added on a harsh chuckle. "Pretty much all the time."

Clearly aroused by their dark promises, she whimpered. Camp used the opportunity to press his thumb home. It slid through the rim of her ass, which clamped around his knuckle like a cushioned noose. With his thumb tucked inside and stroking gently, he reached with his fingers between her thighs. He grunted when his fingertips came into contact with tightly cushioned flesh. Match's cock head was nestled in the tender skin that rimmed the opening to her cunt. Poised at her entrance, Match was obviously hot to claim her cunt.

"We could take turns," Camp offered softly as he drew his fingers back through her crease. "It would probably be easier on you. Especially this first time."

"No," she responded swiftly. "I want to try it this way, with both of you at once. It's like you said earlier, stuff like that will only cause jealousies. I know you'll both do your best to avoid hurting me."

He shared a smile with Match as he rubbed his lips behind her ear and whispered, "Okay. We'll try. But let us know if it's too much."

"Okay," she agreed smoothly in her queen's voice, using it to cover her nervousness.

"You promise?"

"I promise," she answered bravely, wetting her upper lip with her tongue.

"Put her on your cock," Match rasped, "and we'll show her what it means to belong to two men."

Determined to take the lead and make sure Yarionna wasn't rushed, Camp sent Match a quelling look. Gently but firmly, he lifted Yarionna away from Match and carried her to the bed, where he arranged her on her hands and knees. Standing at the side of the bed, he eased her brocade slippers from her feet then dragged her back against his groin and settled her bottom tight against the long rise of his cock while Match climbed onto the bed from the other side. As Camp watched, Match knelt in front of her, his thick, dark shaft lifting toward her kiss-swollen mouth while Camp rubbed his own cock through the deep crease between her cheeks.

Yarionna's hair tumbled around her face in a wild wash of midnight and he leaned over her, pulling the heavy mass gently from the right side of her face while Match collected the thick tresses that spilled around the left side. Camp twisted the silken swath around his hand several times then tugged sharply backward, pulling her spine into a provocative curve.

“Get the rest of her hair,” he commanded, then watched as Match took his share of her long black hair and wrapped it around his cock. With a careless sensuality that wasn’t lost on Camp, Match slid his fist over his shaft and rubbed Yarionna’s hair into his flesh. His cock leaked a thin thread of pre-cum that wicked into her hair and Camp’s cock surged in violent jolts as he witnessed the erotic act.

Match caught his gaze, a dark smile playing over his lips. “Did you bring some lubesticks?”

“Of course,” he rasped as he spooled out some of Yarionna’s hair and parted her cheeks with his thumbs. He gazed down at the tiny kiss and made a soft tsking sound when he saw how tightly it was puckered against his entry.

“What’s up?” Match questioned on a rough breath.

“It’s gonna be a tight fit,” Camp answered, hunger thickening his voice.

“That’s what the lubesticks are for,” Match grunted.

“Why don’t you get them for me?” he demanded quietly while Yarionna trembled beneath his hands. “They’re in the pocket of my jacket.”

Match’s chin jerked upward in a brilliantly intense stare. For several moments the two men measured each other, Match’s cock head touching the corner of Yarionna’s mouth while Camp held her cheeks open, his broad crown resting against the dark puckered knot of her tiny asshole.

Chapter Twenty-One

Match figured he knew what was behind Camp's behavior. With a naked woman captured between them, both men were driven by nature to aggressive acts of domination. But greater than nature was Camp's desire to protect Yari.

Although Match refused to be submissive, he was willing to defer to Camp's judgment and let him take on the role of the dominant male. Match was confident the eYonan warrior would always have his and Yarionna's best interests in mind. For that reason, he didn't challenge Camp. He was pretty sure that, if he played his cards right, he'd get what he wanted—Yarionna's virgin cunt. He was determined to be the one to break her open, bathe in her tight, wet heat and feel her first orgasm crushing along his length. So he did himself a favor and asked for a favor, thereby acknowledging Camp's authority. "Can I fuck her mouth?" he asked, as though it was a prize that was entirely Camp's to give.

The words had no sooner passed his lips than Camp's cock jerked. Clearly, the eYonan was aroused by his act of deference. Match couldn't help giving in to what must have been a puckish grin. He knew he was going to have a good time pushing Camp's buttons over the next year.

"Get the lubesticks first," Camp answered in a kind growl.

Obediently, Match unwound Yarionna's hair from his shaft and stepped away from the bed. He took his time, making Camp wait for him while he dug in the pockets of the leather jacket and found the paper-wrapped sticks. He stripped one open as he headed back again, his cock bouncing against his belly. He spread his hand on Yarionna's pretty little upturned bottom and watched Camp rub his fat cock head into the velvet flesh that rimmed her scandalously tight hole. "If you'll get off her a minute, I'll send this home for you," he murmured.

Camp pulled his hips back and held her cheeks open so they could both watch her take the lubestick. Match rubbed it against her skin long enough for it to start softening. When he judged it was slippery enough, he pressed the rounded tip against her dark rosebud and watched her take its long, glistening length, the sight so carnally arousing that he had to grasp his root to check the threatening surge of cum. His fingers bit deep, bruising his already aching shaft.

"Fuck," he whispered. "Did you ever see a prettier sight?"

Camp shook his head, scattering a light rain of sweat on Yarionna's skin.

Feeling as if he was ready to explode, Match knelt on the bed and climbed back to Yarionna's face, spreading his knees wide and resting back on his heels. "Hey, sugar," he murmured thickly as he tugged down on her chin and opened her mouth for the dark weight of his cock. He glanced at Camp, waiting for his command.

“Fuck her mouth,” Camp growled.

As Match thrust his cock into her mouth and over the crease in her tongue, he closed his eyes and groaned while wondering how he was going to keep from coming in her mouth. He wanted to save his cum for her pussy. When he opened his eyes, he watched, fascinated, as Camp spread her cheeks with his thumbs then started working his cock at the small opening he’d started. The sight of another man mounting his woman was more arousing than he’d thought it would be.

But this was Camp, the man who could have taken his victory in the arena and kept it all. The way Match saw it, he was lucky to even be there. It was only through Camp’s generosity that he was kneeling at Yarianna’s mouth while her kittenish tongue stroked over his sensitive glans.

Jeezis!

A low snarl escaped his throat as he grabbed his root and forced his cock more deeply between her full lips, where the tip of her tongue couldn’t torment him quite so profoundly. As he rested on his heels, his pulse thundering in his ears, he watched Camp—his sun-darkened skin covered with a sheen of sweat, a ridge forming between his brows as his cock sank slowly, inch by tortuously slow inch, between the cheeks of her ass.

Clearly distracted by what was going on behind her, Yarianna’s tongue stopped moving for several seconds. Match stroked his fingers down her jawline. “Are you okay?” he asked gently as he sent Camp a message with his eyes.

She grunted around the wide flesh that filled her mouth and Camp eased his hips slowly backward, letting his cock slide out two inches and giving her a little pleasure to go with all the discomfort. When Yari’s tongue moved tentatively over his cock again, Match lifted his brows and gave Camp the go-ahead. With maddening caution, Camp pressed forward again, filling her ass once more with the first half of his wickedly thick shaft, the bulkiest part yet to come.

Inside the hot, wet hold of Yari’s mouth, Matchstick’s cock throbbed and pulsed with agonizing pleasure as he waited for Camp to seat himself fully inside the precious woman who was to be theirs for as long as they could hold on to her. A tender upwelling of emotion had Match stroking his thumb against the corner of her mouth where her lips stretched to take him, then over the sexy mole that sat just above her lips. She moaned at the light brushing contact and sucked him deeper, taking him far inside her throat.

The sight of her taking so much—accepting his heavy weight at the back of her throat while enduring Camp’s brutal width deep between the cheeks of her ass—touched him deeply, involving his emotions in a way they’d never been tested before. Before Yarianna, it had just been sex and pleasure, fucking and coming. But this was different—so fucking different it was almost unrecognizable. Now there was something new thrown into that erotic mix, something sharp and raw and so undeniably potent, he knew it could only be love.

If he'd ever, for one moment, guessed that love could feel like this—could lift the sex act to such an intimate, breathless, soul-humbling experience—he certainly wouldn't have fought it so hard all of his life. In fact, he would have gone out looking for it. But then he'd never have gotten to this point. He'd never have reached Yarıonna...and Camp.

Unbearably close to unloading in Yari's sweet, honey-slick mouth, he slid his cock head from her throat and gave her a chance to breathe, holding the pulsing shank and painting her lips with his wet crown while watching Camp ease an inch of his wide length from her ass then forge at her again, this time working steadily forward until his groin touched her gently curving cheeks.

Pressed up firmly against her bottom, Camp groaned and squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them again, they burned out at Match like two glowing brown coals.

"You got her?" Match rasped as he guided the flanged edge of his cock head over the tip of Yarıonna's tongue, the sharp, rough contact driving him precariously close to release.

Camp nodded without speaking.

"How does it feel?" Match murmured as pre-cum dribbled from his dick and he rubbed it into the corner of Yari's pouting mouth.

"Incredible," Camp grunted. "Fucking incredible. So fucking incredible I can't think of the right word to describe it."

"I can think of a word," Match offered. "But I don't know if you're ready for it."

"If you can think of it, I'm ready for it," Camp grunted.

"Well, I'll tell you what it is later. Right now I'm ready to get fucked," Match panted, leaving the door open for Camp to offer up that precious part of Yarıonna's body that Match hungered for with his entire soul.

Camp fell over Yari, his fists balled beside hers on the satin comforter, his chest against her back as he whispered in her ear. "Are you ready for Match to fill your pussy?"

"I'm ready," she answered tremulously.

"You want him to fuck you?" he asked silkily, as though testing her.

"I want him as much as I want you," she answered diplomatically, the corner of her mouth curling into a wry smile.

"You'd better get inside her now," Camp offered quietly.

Match nodded, suddenly breathless with eager, eating anticipation while waiting for Camp to position Yari so he could finally claim her pussy.

Camp angled to his side on the bed then rolled onto his back, taking Yari with him, her sensuous body impaled on his cock. Match looked down on Yarıonna's sweet, juicy sex, spread and split like a piece of ripe fruit, Camp's hands pulling her knees to her shoulders and clamping them tightly against her body.

It was all his. All her sweet, pearly pink sex, glistening with her cream, open for his penetration. Moving down the bed, he straddled Camp's stone-hard thighs with his knees. As he lowered his weight, he cupped his sac in his hand a moment before letting it fall against Camp's scrotum—warm, rough and as hard as brick.

Match pressed his cock head to Yari's drenched opening then gripped her thighs and thrust his hips. A soft grunt rasped across his lips as his hooded crown pressed against her tightly closed entrance. It was excruciating pleasure there just inside the tender well of her pussy lips—hot, wet and just about as goddamn perfect a place as a man could ever wish to possess with his cock.

Potent urgency clawed at him, demanding more, aching for the steamy hot clench of her cunt, and he had to fight the primal instinct to drive his hips forward and plant his cock head against her spine. Instead he prodded carefully at the delicate flesh that protected her vagina. The pressure of the frail barrier fighting his entrance almost made him come—there—barely inside her swollen lips. He trembled under the strain of holding back and the hard weight of emotion that squeezed his heart.

As he gazed down on her, he saw her pearly white teeth buried in her bottom lip, her expressive brows pinched together in concentration as she tried to deal with the sensations being forced on her. The tense, ragged breaths that lifted her chest seemed more from strain than arousal as she watched his cock poised at the mouth of her sex. "Yari," he said softly, drawing her attention. "Are you okay?"

"I'm...I'm fine," she panted, her chin trembling. "I just don't want to let you guys down."

"Oh, sugar," Match murmured, his heart going to particles as Camp turned her face enough to get his lips on part of her mouth. Match leaned in to capture what Camp hadn't already claimed. Gently, he moved his mouth on hers while ignoring the occasional touch of the warrior's lips for her sake. Against his sac, Match felt Camp's pulse of excitement, the unmistakable flicker of arousal, the involuntary tightening of his scrotum. He ignored that too, this time for Camp's sake. "You couldn't possibly let us down. Right, Camp?"

"No way," Camp murmured gruffly, rubbing his fist into the corner of his mouth where Match's beard had roughened his smooth skin.

"We're gonna make this good for you, Yari. I'm not coming before you do."

"And I'm not coming before either of you," Camp promised on a soft snarl.

Match pushed back up to his knees. While he had her attention, he licked his thumb then lowered it to her pussy and rubbed it into her swollen clit. She moaned, the tension on her face easing somewhat while he stroked the little bundle of nerves and her virgin cunt shivered around the first inch of his dick.

But she was frightened and worried and he could hardly blame her, lying there shafted on Camp's massive erection while waiting, spread and vulnerable, for the hard shove of Match's throbbing cock to fill her pussy.

In a slow flash of inspiration, he pulled his copper communicator from the shell of his ear. As Yari's troubled gaze focused on the split tube of copper, he hefted it in his hand. "Ring Home," he murmured, which set the communicator vibrating in his palm. Then, as she watched from lowered eyes, he threaded it onto the flange of flesh inside her pussy. As the communicator vibrated in vigorous pulses, a lost look of arousal transformed her features into a thing of carnal beauty.

"How does that feel?" he asked her in a rough whisper.

"I can feel her cunt shuddering," Camp told him when she didn't answer. "Get in there."

"This might hurt a little," he warned her gently but she didn't appear to hear him as he fell forward onto his outstretched arms. Leaning over her, Match looked down between their bodies and watched as Yari took the first heavy, powering thrust of his cock deep between her legs.

Yarionna cried out as Match's brutal length shot deep inside her and ripped to the back of her cunt, her spine curling as she clawed at his shoulders. The pain of his cock tearing through her hymen was so bright and sharp she had to bite her lip to stop the next cry. She pulled in several short, gusting breaths and concentrated on getting air to her lungs. At least she was past the worst part, with Match seated deep inside her, still as a rock, hard as steel, and pulsing fiercely against the walls of her vagina. She whimpered quietly, overwhelmed by the sinful thickness packing both her ass and pussy while the vibrating length of copper clamped around her clit took her to a soaring, jittery place where her body hovered at the edge of paradise.

"Fuck," Camp swore. "Take it easy on her, will you?"

"I'm. Doing. The. Best. I. Can," Match snarled.

"Camp," she whispered tremulously. "Let him go."

"What?" Camp ripped at her.

"Let him go, Camp. And let yourself go. Let me possess both of you as deeply as you're possessing me."

"Are...you sure, Yari?"

"I'm sure," she whispered. "I've never been more certain of anything in my life."

"Okay," he granted grudgingly. "Okay. But if you hurt her, Match, I swear I'll kill you."

As Match buried his face in the hollow of her throat and started to power his cock into her slit, she turned her head and took a guilty peek at the mirror on the wall, amazed at the strength and beauty that was captured on its surface.

Match's long, lean body moved over hers like a glorious machine, the light gleaming along his shoulders and each hard, bulging curve of strength in his arms, his back, down the long length of his strong, straight legs, the muscles in his buttocks flexing with each driving thrust. He was so beautiful with his finely chiseled features and silky spill of bright hair.

Beneath them, Camp supported them both like some huge, permanent foundation, powerful in his stillness, holding her open for her pleasure and for Match's hunger while putting his own needs temporarily aside. He was so handsome with his blunt, rough-hewn good looks.

And together they were perfect.

Slowly, Camp tilted her on his body and she felt Match penetrate her harder, deeper. The experience of Match's taking, his savage possession of her body under the guiding hand of Camp's strength made her vibrate with pleasure.

Everything was crushing down on her at once—the stinging stretch of her ass forced open around Camp's root, his full, thick possession touching something deep inside that created a disturbing ache of need. And when Match pulled his hips and plowed into her, he touched another wild point of pleasure that raced her toward some sort of breaking point. The copper communicator, shaped like a wide claw and shivering on her clit, was the final arousing element that reached deep inside her pussy and tore the climax from her cunt. It threw her body into an unraveling spiral of indecent pleasure so intense it was unnatural.

She sobbed in anguish, her body racked with savage waves of jolting release, her ass spasming around Camp's brutally wide root while her cunt gripped Match's massive erection in a long series of exquisite contractions. Wildly, she bucked against the two powerfully straining men who held her captured between their steel-hard bodies, her sense of self leaving her in the mind-shattering intensity of the moment. No longer the queen, Yarionna was reduced to nothing more than a female animal bent on the rut, on this most primal act of mating, and on the two men who'd shoved between her legs and claimed the most delicate and intimate parts of her body.

As Match drove relentlessly between her spread thighs, she couldn't deny that she wanted this savage claiming. She wanted it more than anything. A man to possess her pussy. Another to fuck her ass. Two men to take her so completely, to mark her with their male stamp, that hopefully there would be something permanent created in that moment of carnal madness—something that would bind them to her. In return, she strove to give them something so darkly decadent but ultimately desirable that they would never give her up.

As she collapsed mentally and physically into a fuzzy state of sated bliss, she didn't realize at first that neither man had taken his release. Camp's breath was harsh and ragged, pelting her ear as Match moved above her, his cock sliding out then gliding deep inside while Camp held her open. Touched by the way the two men had worked together to fill her with pleasure, her heart ached with tender emotion that sparked a new point of arousal deep inside her. "Can we do that again?" she asked on a wicked little purr.

"You want more?" Camp rumbled.

"I want lots more," she answered tauntingly.

Camp made a sound halfway between a growl and a snarl. "Okay, Match. She's asking for it. Fuck her. Fuck her hard."

She watched Match, eventually breaking in his need, finally deserting all pretense of control as he came to her hot and hard, his shaft driving to the back of her cunt and slamming ruthlessly against her cervix. A rough shout tore past his lips and she felt Camp's fingers bite into the flesh of her thighs, gripping her legs and holding her into the drive and thrust of Match's hips. As he stiffened above her, his jaw working, his mouth forming silent curses, he jetted into her, his thick shaft flexing as he pumped her full of cum. At the same time, Camp moved her on his shaft, the tender rim of her ass burning at the tug and pull of his flesh as he dragged her up his length then shoved her down again. The feel of both men packing her so completely forced her again. She screamed in utter abandoned delight as Match ground against her and Camp emptied violently inside her ass.

They fell together, heaped on the bed in a panting tangle of limbs, her damp skin rubbing against that of her lovers. With a deep groan, Match rolled off her and immediately collected her into his chest, his wet cock lying on her thigh and leaving a thin trail of blood on her skin. Camp rolled to his side and spooned her, his shaft lying quietly inside her.

The gentle sound of their breathing filled the room.

"Was it good for you?" Camp eventually asked Match on a rumbling chuckle.

Match's expression was solemn. "I'd tell you how it felt if I thought you were ready for it," he answered.

Camp snorted. "I'm ready."

"To be blunt," he said, "it felt like love."

"Love," Camp murmured on a rough sigh, his hands moving over the skin of her thigh in a worshipful caress. "Damn. That's the word I was looking for earlier."

"Earlier," Match echoed languidly after a few moments of silence. "Maybe we should tell Yari about that other thing we discussed earlier."

"Maybe we should," he agreed.

"What?" Yarianna asked as she stroked her fingers along Match's damp shoulder.

"There's something else Camp and I talked about while I was at Medops," Match murmured as he stroked his thumb into the corner of her mouth and gazed hopefully into her eyes. "We want you to marry us. I know you're not supposed to and it wouldn't be official. Just something to make our relationship feel more permanent. Gray has volunteered to preside. Nobody else needs to know about it."

"Oh," she cried, her eyes filling with tears.

"Well," Camp pointed out while pulling her hair away from her neck and nuzzling his lips into her nape. "Danjer will want to be there. And Saxon and Pink."

"And the rest of my wing," Match added quietly. "Jed and Jason and the girls—Velvet and Lacey."

"Well," she murmured. "If Lacey's there, Junkie will have to be there too."

"If Junkie's there, Olan will insist on coming," Camp murmured. "That means we'll have to invite Blair."

"But other than that, it will be a complete secret," Match insisted while trying to pull off a solemn grin. He failed completely but it didn't matter. Yarionna had never been happier in her life.

* * * * *

Later that night, Camp woke, his warrior's senses alerting him to a slight motion in Yarionna's room. The lamp on the desk cast a warm glow across Match's naked form as he rose from the bed and stretched like some wild, woodland creature, all long limbs and sleek, hard muscle. Silently, he stepped away from the bed toward the windows. With his arms crossed over his chest, he gazed out at the flickering night sky.

Gently, Camp untangled his legs from Yarionna's and stripped the sheets out of his way. Quietly, he padded across the room to join him. "Are you okay?" he murmured.

"Can't sleep," Match admitted.

"What's wrong?"

Match made a face, apparently reluctant to share whatever it was that troubled him. He turned, a frown wrinkling his brow as his gaze fell on Yarionna, curled up in sleep. "I'm just worried. About next year."

Camp snaked an arm around his shoulders and pulled him close. Match's long cock hung rumped and warm against Camp's thigh. He didn't find the contact unpleasant or unnatural. But this was Match. This was the man who'd saved the life of his beloved Yarionna. "Don't worry," he said quietly. "I'll not let anyone take her away from us."

"You're not worried?"

"Not about that."

"What do you worry about?" Match asked in a low, guttural rumble.

"What we're gonna do if our kids look like you," he joked softly.

Match snorted and shrugged out of his embrace. "You'd better hope they look like me."

After a quiet chuckle, Camp leaned back against Yarionna's desk and grew thoughtful. "All joking aside, how will we know?"

Match's eyes glinted in the lamp's glow as he hitched his butt alongside Camp's. "Well, if the kid has red hair, we'll have a pretty good idea."

"Red hair! Match...you'll tell me if— What color is my hair?"

"Brown."

"You'll tell me if the girl has brown hair?"

"I shouldn't worry about hair color if I were you, not with a nose like that."

“Nose?” Camp reached up and drew forefinger and thumb down the blunt blade. “What’s wrong with my nose?”

“Nothing if you’re a boy. Let’s just hope the girls take after me.”

They shared a few moments of snickering laughter that gradually gave way to a heavy silence. Evidently the same thing had occurred to both men at once. Camp knew Match was thinking about their children. Their family.

Camp put his hand over Match’s on the desk beside him. “Don’t worry,” he murmured in a rough whisper. “We’ll find a way to keep Yari and the children with us. We’ll work together in the arena. You can make the magic and I’ll use it to ensure our victory. In the meantime, we’ll make ourselves so goddamn useful to the people of eYona that nobody will ever want to challenge our title.”

Camp turned his head to look at Match. The moonlight fell across Match’s handsomely chiseled features and slashed across his eyes, exposing his doubts and fears as well as his vulnerabilities. Something stirred deep in Camp’s soul at the sight of the fierce warrior so reduced by emotion.

Again Camp put an arm around him and tugged him close. This time Match tipped his head and rested it against Camp’s shoulder. “Let me worry about it,” Camp murmured softly.

Epilogue

Camp was buried balls-deep in Yarionna's sweetly claspings cunt. Together they faced the full-length mirror mounted on the wall, Yarionna's bare feet planted flat against either side of the long, framed piece of glass, her knees relaxing outward and showing all the delicate details of her sex. His arms were under her legs holding her nude body open while she stroked a finger through the fragile folds coated with her cream. He smiled silkily as he watched that finger with the sort of singular absorption a predator bestows upon its prey. "Wait for Match," he murmured as he felt her walls tremble around his long, throbbing length.

"Where is he?" she complained in a soft moan. "He should have been here by now. It's our three-month anniversary!"

"He'll be here as soon as he can," he reassured her, rubbing his lips into the delicate, curving stretch of her neck. He knew it hadn't been easy for her to arrange her schedule so that they could have a whole afternoon together and he cast about for a topic that might distract her while they waited for Match. "Did you know they used to have monarchies on Earth?"

"No," she answered, her pretty eyes widening as she focused on his reflection in the mirror. "I didn't know that."

"Match was telling me about it this morning. Ascendancy was through the male line, though, rather than the female line."

Yarionna giggled. "Well, that's just silly. You can never be one hundred percent certain who your father is. But you always know who your mother is."

Camp gave her a stern look. "You can be damn good and sure our children will know who their father is."

"That's right," she answered with a giggle. "Either you or Match."

"Damn straight." He paused before asking, "Do you love me, Yarionna?"

She stopped and reached back over her head, stroking his nape with her damp fingertips. "You know I do."

"Will you do something for me?"

"Anything," she answered.

"Will you tell Match...that you love him?"

Her eyes widened again as she stared at his reflection in the mirror. "But I've told him already. At least a thousand times."

"No. You've told *us* that you love us. That you love us together."

She tilted her head, her gaze puzzled as a small crease formed between her brows. "What...difference does it make?"

"I don't know how to explain. I just know that it's important to him. When you first gave me your favor to wear in the arena it made a difference. A difference he's never really gotten over."

"But I've explained to both of you why I decided to give you that favor. It had nothing to do with love. By the time I gave you that scarf to wear, I knew I was in love with both you and Match. I wish I'd told you both back then but I was afraid it would just leave you both dispirited—knowing that I didn't love either of you exclusively. At the time, I assumed I'd have to live for at least a year with a man who was disappointed he didn't have my entire love."

"Do me a favor and tell him anyhow. Tell him sometime when you're alone with him so that he knows—so that he understands—that you love *him* as well as *us*. Do you know he still carries a pair of your silk shorts in his pocket?"

Speechless, she shook her head.

"Tell him you love him."

Her eyes filled with moisture as she watched his reflection in the mirror. "You are an amazing man," she whispered. "It's no wonder I love you, Camp. It's no wonder Match loves you. Of course I'll talk to him."

Her fingertips stroked down his jawline, turning his face so she could kiss him. As their lips met in a delicious explosion of carnal sensation, he ground his hips upward into her tight sheath, his cock expanding in a place that was already filled so snugly there was really no room for more. Her precious cunt squeezed his cock like a greedy fist. But he loved Yarionna when she was greedy. In fact, he just plain loved her all the time.

As he stood there, pulsing hard and deep inside her, the door opened abruptly and Match strode into the room. "Sorry I'm late," he apologized breathlessly, a box clutched at his side. He stopped in his tracks and groaned when he saw them in front of the mirror.

"We've been waiting for you, but it hasn't been easy," Camp grunted as he watched his reflection in the mirror, the perspiration glittering on his skin like a thin coat of oil.

"I've been thinking about you guys too," Match rasped, throwing the box onto the bed. "I'm as hard as a fucking rock." He shrugged his jacket down his shoulders then ripped his tie loose. It fell to the floor as he worked impatiently at the buttons on his shirt and moved toward them. With his shirt following his tie to the floor, he fell to his knees and got in front of Yari.

"Just let me get a taste," he murmured as his bright head of hair hid Camp's view of Yarionna's pussy. He licked up through her plump folds while working his pants open at the same time. In his hunger and impatience, the blunt edge of his tongue scraped over the thick flesh Camp had buried between the stretched lips of her pussy.

Camp gasped at the unexpected rough, wet stroke against his bursting skin. He started a warning growl then almost shouted when Match's rough beard grazed across his sac. "Fuck!" he gritted, knowing that Match was pushing his buttons. "That beard of yours ought to be licensed as a dangerous weapon."

"Either that or an erotic toy," Yarionna suggested on a warm, sultry giggle.

"I'll start working on the prototype," Match told them as he swiped his tongue across her clit.

"Speaking of prototypes, what took you so damn long?" Camp grunted as he squinted against the arousing pressure of Match's rough chin.

"I said I was sorry," Match growled, dragging his beard roughly across Camp's scrotum again, this time probably on purpose. "But I was so close to finishing. I wanted to get it wrapped up before we get called to the royal court at Iverannon."

Camp took a deep, ragged breath. "Touch me with your beard again, Maloney, and I swear I'll get out my sword and shave you from head to heel."

Match grinned up at him as though he'd heard it all before – which he had. "So, are you ready to test my latest invention?"

"If it's a mechanical pussy," Yarionna murmured, rolling the back of her head across Camp's shoulder and smiling down at him, "I think I'll give it a miss. Maybe Camp would be willing."

Match's eyes narrowed into slivers of ice as he nipped her clit.

"Oh!" Yarionna shouted and Camp had to scramble to tighten his hold on her straining body.

"For your information," Match told her, "it's *not* a mechanical pussy."

"No?" she gasped as he took his teeth to her again.

"No," he answered, his chin wet with her liquid. "I'm way beyond juvenile stuff like that."

"Well, that's encouraging," she taunted him recklessly. "Does that mean you've perfected a mechanical penis?"

He gave her a dirty look. "You don't need a mechanical penis."

"I'm sorry!" she screamed as he gave her clit a little more of the rough treatment. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to insult you."

"Or Camp," he reminded her.

"Or Camp!" she squealed as he worked her clit with his teeth. "I didn't mean to insult Camp! And I'm d-dying to try out your invention."

"Never you mind," he growled. "You've lost your chance. I'll try the prototype out on Camp."

"In that case," Camp rumbled warningly, "it had better not be a mechanical penis."

Match rose to his feet and scooped Yari from Camp's arms. "You're in luck," he grunted.

Camp fisted his cock as he watched Match carry Yari across the room toward the bed. For the life of him, he couldn't see what was lucky about having the woman he loved stripped from his cock. "I'm in luck?" he growled.

In the gentle trap of Matchstick's arms, Yarıonna gazed longingly over his shoulder at her handsome warrior's rigid, wet length. "But I thought Camp was going to be your guinea pig," she complained with a petulant pout.

"He is. But he needs a subject." Match put her on her feet then twirled her under his arm and onto the bed. Once she was seated on the thick satin comforter, he promptly pushed her back against the mattress then pulled her legs open.

"What are you doing?" she squealed.

"You'll see," he told her, his mouth twisting into a boyish smile. "Spread 'em, sugar."

When she opened her thighs, he helped her to get them wider. Then he motioned Camp to kneel. Once he had Camp positioned between her legs, he retrieved the box on the bed and opened it. Moments later, he slipped a smart pair of glasses over Camp's eyes.

"Whoa!" Camp shouted.

Yarıonna levered up onto her elbows. "What?"

But Camp was entranced, his nose about four inches from her open pussy. "Is this...color?" he asked without blinking.

"That's color," Match said quietly.

Reaching out slowly, Camp ran his index finger down through the damp seam of her sex and parted her lips, tugging first one way then the other while the cool air touched her sensitive folds like a physical caress. "But there are so many," he murmured. "What are they all called?"

Match's brow creased as though he didn't understand the question. He leaned over and looked at Yari's pussy as Camp fingered her open. "Oh," he murmured. "You're looking at different shades of reds and pinks. Blood red, rose red, candy-apple red, soft pink, pearly pink, shell pink."

"By the Princess," Camp intoned. "They're fucking beautiful. I've never seen anything so beautiful in my entire life." Leaning forward, he placed a long, warm, wet kiss inside Yarıonna's ruffled folds.

Yarıonna fell back onto the bed and moaned while tugging at her hair with both hands.

"Now take a look at her mouth," Match commanded gently.

Camp lifted his head and started. "Fucking O! It's the same color as her pussy." He turned his startled gaze on Match. "No wonder you're always fucking her mouth."

"I do have a soft spot for that mouth," Match admitted.

Yarıonna planted her foot in his chest and gave him a shove. "You don't have a soft spot on your body. And you sure as heck never put anything soft in my mouth!"

"Yarionna, you have to try these out," Camp interrupted her, tearing the glasses off his face and dangling them over her chest.

She moaned. And panted. And twisted on the bed. "Yes," she ground out. "I'd like to try them out but right now, I really need to get fucked. You shouldn't start something unless you plan to finish it."

Match's chest rumbled with a soft laugh as he snagged the glasses. "You go ahead and get inside her. I'll put the glasses on her."

While Camp leaned over and rubbed the fat crown of his cock through her ravenously hungry slit, Match detoured to her aluminum dresser, pulled a lubestick from the top drawer and stripped the paper from it. With the lubricating stick warming in his hand, he climbed on the bed and slipped the glasses over her eyes. His feet disappeared into the luxuriant comforter as he rested on his heels, his cock surging through the opening in his pants while he watched Camp wet her clit with a glistening smear of pre-cum.

"Oh," she murmured, absolutely awed. "Look at you. You are the two most handsome creatures I've ever seen. What am I looking at, Match? What colors am I seeing?"

Match grinned down on her as he curled his fingers and brushed them across her cheek. "Camp's hair and eyes are brown. My hair is...deep red. My eyes are blue."

"Blue," she whispered as she lifted her gaze to his. "But...they're not cold at all. They're bright and warm."

He shook his head. "Everything's relative," he said. "Red is hotter than blue. Show her your cock, Camp."

Camp straightened in front of her and ran his hand down his length in a couple of hard pulls.

"Right now, Camp's cock is dark red," Match said. "Burgundy."

"What color is yours?"

"Right now it's almost purple," he said with a pained laugh, curling his fingers around his shaft and thumbing the broad tip.

While she was eating up the sight of Match's cock, Camp drove deep inside her. She cried out at the sudden force of his wide girth filling her cunt. "It's beautiful," she told Match on a hoarse breath. "Bring it here."

When he stretched out on his hip beside her so he could lay the burning flesh against her cool skin, she turned her face and pressed her lips against a thick dark vein, the color of which she couldn't yet name. "Everyone on eYona will want a pair," she said, tracking the heavy, pulsing vein with her tongue. "This is going to make you rich, Match!"

"Oh Jeezis," Match murmured. "I'm not going to charge your people for the gift of color vision. We'll give the glasses away."

"Then never mind rich," Camp groaned as he pulled her knees up his hips and leaned over her to give her the full, driving thrust of his cock. "This is gonna make you popular!"

"Us," Match corrected him.

"Us? What do you mean, us?"

"It's gonna make *us* popular, Camp. I want you to be my partner."

"I'm already your partner," he pointed out on a warm, raspy chuckle. "Your partner in love. In love with Yarionna."

Match shifted on the bed and worked his body beneath Yarionna's, his fingers feeding the lubestick between the cheeks of her ass before his cock started to move inside and expand the tight rim. "Well," he grunted. "Now you can be my partner in living color."

"On the count of three, then?" Camp suggested as he smiled down on his lovers.

"On the count of three," Match agreed. "One. Two. Three."

About the Author

I slung the heavy battery pack around my hips and cinched it tight – or tried to.

“Damn.” Brian grabbed an awl. Leaning over me, he forged a new hole in the loose belt looped around my waist.

“Any advice?” I asked him as I pulled the belt tight.

“Yeah. Don’t reach for the ore cart until it starts moving, then jump on the back and immediately duck your head. The voltage in the overhead cable won’t just kill you. It’ll blow you apart.”

That was my first day on my first job. Employed as an engineer, I’ve worked in an underground mine that went up – inside a mountain. I’ve swung over the Ohio River in a tiny cage suspended from a crane in the middle of an electrical storm. I’ve hung 30 feet in the air over the Hudson River at midnight in an aluminum boat – suspended from a floating barge at the height of a blizzard, while snowplows on the bridge overhead rained slush and salt down on my shoulders. You can’t do this sort of work without developing a sense of humor, and a sense of adventure.

New to publishing, both my reading and writing habits are subject to mood and I usually have several stories going at once. When I need a really good idea for a story, I clean toilets. Now *there’s* an activity that engenders escapism.

I was surveying when I met my husband. He was my ‘rod man’. While I was trying to get my crosshairs on his stadia rod, he dropped his pants and mooned me. Next thing I know, I’ve got the backside of paradise in my viewfinder. So I grabbed the walkie-talkie. “That’s real nice,” I told him, “but would you please turn around? I’d rather see the other side.”

...it was love at first sight.

Madison welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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