



Pawn

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: Political intrigue. Forbidden attraction. A deadly conspiracy that threatens two worlds.

For Linnea, newly appointed chancellor of the Cresteks, power comes with a target on her back. When whispers of treachery echo through the corridors of her city, she makes a desperate move—summoning the one Dothvek warrior she can't forget from her brother's wedding.

Zexx never wanted to leave the sacred sands of his homeland for the enemy's gleaming city. But when Linnea calls for his help, something beyond duty compels him to answer. Reluctantly accepting the role of Dothvek ambassador, he finds himself caught between his people's ancient distrust and the undeniable pull he feels toward the strong-willed chancellor.

As Zexx uncovers a sinister plot against Linnea, their political alliance transforms into something far more dangerous—and forbidden. With assassins closing in and tensions between their worlds escalating, they must rely on each other if there's to be any hope for peace between their peoples.

Time is running out. Can love between sworn enemies survive in a world determined to keep them apart?

Total Pages (Source): 53

ChapterOne

Linnea blamed the Dothvek wine for her lightheadedness, but the heady combination of moonlight, music, and him wasn't helping. Every time she turned, Zexx's dark gaze found hers across the celebration, making her skin tingle despite the cool night air.

The clan's head of security seemed to take his job of ensuring her safety very seriously, although she suspected he wasn't pleased he had to protect a Crestek. Why else would he stare at her without smiling, his muscular arms folded across his chest as if waiting for her to prove every horrible thing he assumed about her people to be right?

Linnea tore her gaze away, turning her back on him and instinctively glancing at the ship that had transported her to the oasis village. The Vandar warrior named Corvak had brought her, promising to return her to the Crestek city, but even he had joined in the celebration. She supposed there was no chance she could slink out early. Not when she was in the middle of a vast sea of sand dunes.

Had it been a mistake to come to the oasis village for her brother's wedding? Despite the peace between their peoples, the alliance was fresh and there was still caution on both sides. Caution she'd thrown to the winds when she'd traveled across the sands for the wedding. But she couldn't have missed the chance to see Karv get married, even if his choice of a human bride was unconventional, and his refuge with the sand barbarians something not everyone in the Crestek city understood.

Linnea didn't know if she fully understood, although she had to admit there was something appealing about being so far away from the bustle of the city and the

burden of protocol. Here she didn't need to worry about any of that. At least until she returned to her life and her position as the new Crestek chancellor.

Thinking about the responsibilities awaiting her made Linnea take another swig of her wine. "Not yet. I don't have to go back yet."

The wedding had been a departure from the ceremonies she was accustomed to in the walled city, Dothvek priestesses blessing the union while warriors stood in formation, curved blades gleaming at their hips. It had been filled with traditions that were as foreign to her as most things about the oasis village, but that didn't mean she hadn't been moved by the tender vows or fascinated by the high-pitched wails of approval when Karv and Maya had kissed at the end of the ceremony.

Now the celebration was in full swing. Fires blazed around the village center as warriors and their mates danced to drums that seemed to match her racing pulse. The sweet scent of roasting meat mingled with exotic spices she'd never encountered as the potent barbarian wine unwound the knots that usually resided in her shoulders. She sucked in a breath and let her eyes flutter closed.

"More wine, Chancellor?"

She nearly jumped at the low voice behind her, turning to see the security chief she'd met earlier, the one who hadn't seemed thrilled by her presence. Zexx, wasn't it? Despite the merriment swirling around him, his stern expression remained.

"I've had enough," she said, though she couldn't help admiring how the firelight played across his bare chest, highlighting the tribal marks that she found so intriguing. Cresteks did not typically mark themselves, but she was starting to appreciate the look of inky black etched on gold skin.

He folded his arms across his chest. "Worried what your people would think of their

leader enjoying barbarian hospitality?"

She bristled at his mocking tone and jerked her gaze from him. "I'm not afraid of anything."

"No?" He stepped closer, and she had to tip her head back to maintain eye contact. "Then why do you keep eyeing the dunes? Planning your escape from the barbarians already?"

Had she been glancing at the expanse of sands that stretched around them in all directions? She supposed it was hard not to be drawn to the open sands when all she'd ever known at home was high walls. There was something intriguing about so much vastness and no barriers. What would it be like to walk up and down the mountains of golden sand with so much unending sky stretched above her. Part of her was terrified to imagine it and another part thrilled.

"I doubt I would last long out there." She sighed. "I'm not used to so much open space. I suppose I can't stop marveling at it."

He blinked at her. "You don't miss the walls? You aren't afraid of what might happen if you aren't surrounded by stone?"

She straightened her spine, though it did little to diminish their height difference. "I thought I told you that I'm not afraid of anything."

His eyes darkened and he grunted in response, as if he didn't believe her.

She shouldn't care what some Dothvek thought of her, but a part of her needed him to understand. "We don't have high walls because we're afraid."

His brows climbed higher. "No? You didn't retreat to the rocks and build walls to

protect your people from us?”

“Maybe once,” she admitted. “But those days are gone.”

“Yet the walls remain.”

He was right. The Crestek city continued to be ringed by stone, but now it was more about habit and tradition than fear. She also suspected many of her fellow Cresteks did not have faith in the peace with the Dothveks or the idea of living in harmony with anything that existed beyond their walls. Their people had not developed hunting skills to deal with sand snakes or learned to adapt to sandstorms or even formed treaties with the scavengers who inhabited the farthest regions of the dunes. But she suspected it was not only the Cresteks who rejected change.

She studied the Dothvek’s stiff bearing. “And why do you remain so far from us in the middle of the sands if you aren’t also afraid?”

Instead of snapping back in his defense, Zexx’s scowl relaxed as he swept his gaze around the festivities. “Why would we leave this place?”

Linnea had to admit he had a point. The oasis in the middle of the sweeping dunes was dominated by a crystal blue pond ringed in tall, willowy trees with fronds bursting from the tops. Patches of green hugged the banks of the water, startling amid so much gold sand. Tents surrounded one side of the pond, flickering lights from within making their high peaks glow pale against the night sky. Life on the sands was certainly less complicated than life in the city.

“Maybe you’re right.” She caught a glimpse of her brother swinging his new wife as they danced around the fire. “Karv seems to be happy here.” She shook her head. “But he was always taken by the idea of Dothveks.”

“And you are not?”

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She snapped her attention to the Dothvek staring at her. “No, but it wouldn’t matter if I was. I’m the chancellor of my people now.” Being chancellor meant maintaining control, dignity, distance. The wine must have loosened her tongue because she found herself admitting, “Sometimes I envy you, though. The freedom to choose based on desire rather than duty.”

“You could not choose based on desire, Linnea?”

The way he said her name, rolling it across his tongue like honey, sent shivers down her spine. She forced herself to step back, to remember who she was. What she was.

“It is my desire to lead my people. To forge a better future than my brother Riz's cruelty would have brought.” She lifted her chin. “That's enough for me.”

Zexx's expression hardened. “It sounds like you are trapped by your duty.”

“I'm not trapped. I'm exactly where I need to be.” But even as she said it, she felt the weight of her responsibilities pressing down on her.

A group of warriors called out to Zexx—all deep throaty sounds that hummed through her bones. He responded in kind, though his eyes never left hers.

“Are your fellow Dothveks nervous you’re talking to me? Worried I'll corrupt their leader with my city ways?”

A low laugh rumbled from his chest. “No one in this village worries I will be corrupted by a Crestek.”

Somehow that didn't feel like a compliment. "Because you despise us?"

He grunted, giving his head a quick shake. "Despise would be a strong word. Let us say I am cautious."

The wine made Linnea unafraid to tease him. "You need to be cautious with me? You are twice my size." She gave him a slow wink. "Or is it females that scare you, not Cresteks?"

He grunted again, maybe not sure if he was being teased or not. "You do not scare me, Chancellor."

Linnea shouldn't enjoy poking the beast as much as she did, but she couldn't resist. He seemed to take himself and his defense of his people so seriously. As if she was a danger to any of them.

Linnea held up her hands as if in surrender. "I promise not to start a war between us if you promise to stop looking at me like I'm dangerous."

Before he could respond, Karv approached with Maya. Her new sister-in-law's eyes sparkled with happiness as she hugged Linnea.

"Thank you for the beautiful dress," Maya said. "It was so nice to incorporate Crestek fashion into our wedding day."

"Crestek fashion is known for beautiful fabrics," Linnea said diplomatically, since most Dothvek females either wore the scant leather coverings of their male counterparts or they were priestesses draped in white garments. "I thought you might enjoy something special for your wedding dress."

"I'm glad you brought me one of the more modest dresses," Maya said with a

nervous laugh as she skimmed her fingers down the sheer fabric of the skirt. “I don’t have the courage to dress like most Crestek women.”

Linnea didn’t take the human’s comment as a slight. The females in her city did wear revealing garments under their long cloaks. The draped gown she now wore, even though it dipped low to reveal her cleavage and showed plenty of bare leg, would be considered conservative by Crestek standards.

She avoided glancing at Zexx, although she could feel his heated look on her. “I think you have plenty of courage, especially for marrying my brother.”

Maya laughed as Karv grinned at his sister then his new bride. “Don’t believe a word she says.”

The drums changed rhythm, becoming slower, more primal. Karv dragged Maya into the dance, both of them laughing, clearly drunk on love and perhaps Dothvek wine. When Linnea looked to Zexx, he was gone.

ChapterTwo

Zexx kept to the shadows at the edge of the celebration, his back against a tall, willowy tree trunk as he watched the Crestek chancellor laugh at something one of the priestesses said, the sound high and clear.

He ground his teeth. He shouldn't notice such things about Linnea. She was Crestek, even if she had shed her concealing cloak to reveal gauzy layers that left little to the imagination. The fabric caught the firelight, making her appear to shimmer as she moved. His hands fisted at his sides as he noticed several warriors eyeing her with clear interest.

A low growl escaped him as one of the younger males started in her direction. The

warrior caught his eye, sensed his empathic warning, and quickly changed course. Good. The last thing they needed was some hot-blooded Dothvek making advances on the Crestek leader. Talk about a diplomatic incident.

"You could join the celebration instead of prowling the perimeter like a sand scorpion," Kyrana said as she materialized beside him.

Zexx jerked his head up and clicked his tongue against his teeth. "Someone needs to stay alert with a Crestek in our midst."

The tribe leader's knowing smile made him bristle. "The Crestek is Karv's sister. And our ally now."

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"She's still their chancellor." He watched as Linnea accepted another cup of wine from a passing warrior. "And she's had too much to drink."

"Then perhaps you should do more than glower from the shadows." Kyrana's voice held a hint of amusement. "Unless you enjoy watching other males attend to her."

His growl was fiercer this time, but Kyrana had already glided away, leaving him to his dark thoughts. Why should he care if Linnea drank with his kinsmen? She wasn't his responsibility. He was merely doing his duty as head of security by keeping an eye on her.

He thought about what she'd said to him, her words teasing but carrying a challenge. He did not fear her because she was Crestek, although the fact that he'd spent his life thinking of her people as his sworn enemy was not lost on him. Was he wary of her because she was a female, because she awakened something dark and primal within him?

The night wore on, drums beating a steady rhythm as more and more of his people surrendered to the wild celebration. Usually he would have joined them, but tonight he remained clearheaded and watchful. Each time a warrior approached Linnea, Zexx found himself drifting closer until they caught his eye, sensed his warning, and backed away.

"Some party, huh?" Maya appeared at his elbow, making him jump. He was losing his edge if humans could sneak up on him now. "Good thing you're here to protect my new sister-in-law by staring at her."

He scowled at the bride. "I'm protecting the peace between our peoples."

"Is that what you call scowling at her all night?" Maya's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks an awful lot like—"

"Maya." Karv's gentle admonishment cut off whatever his mate had been about to say as he walked up and threaded his fingers with hers. The Dothvek warrior gave Zexx an apologetic look. "Zexx is only doing his job as security chief."

"We do not want the Dothvek leader to injure herself." Zexx's voice was gruff as he watched Linnea attempt to stand, swaying slightly. He especially did not want the Dothveks to be blamed for any injury. He didn't want the female to have so much as a stubbed toe under his watch.

Maya tugged on Karv's arm. "Come on, mate. I think it's time for bed."

Zexx waited until the newlyweds had disappeared into the maze of tents before crossing to where Linnea stood unsteadily. She blinked at him, her eyes slightly unfocused. "Are you here to stop me from having fun?"

"You should sleep."

She lifted her chin. "I'll be the judge of that, Dothvek."

But as she tried to step around him, her foot caught in her flowing skirts. Zexx moved without thinking, catching her before she could fall. Her legs wobbled as he attempted to right her, so he scooped her up. He held her as if she were a child, her body light in his arms.

"Put me down," she ordered, but her words slurred slightly.

"When we reach your tent." He adjusted his grip, trying to ignore how perfectly she tucked into his chest or the way her sweet scent made his head spin.

She muttered something that sounded like "barbarian" but didn't struggle as he carried her through the village, his feet sinking into the cool, soft sand. He knew his people had prepared a tent for her near Kyrana's, outfitting it with silk cushions and woven carpets since she was an honored guest.

When he ducked through the open flaps and inside the single-poled tent, she stirred. "I can walk now."

A lantern flickered on a low table next to the pile of furs and blankets, sending shadows dancing across the fabric sides.

He set her carefully on her feet, keeping his hands on her waist until he was sure she was steady. "Can you?"

She looked up at him, and his breath caught at her nearness. "Why do you keep watching me?"

"I fear what might happen if I do not." The words escaped before he could stop them.

Her laugh was throaty. "I thought Dothveks didn't fear anything."

"We only fear what we don't know." He forced himself to drop his hands and step back. "But we're not foolish enough to play with fire either."

She swayed toward him. "Are you calling me fire?"

Zexx bit back a groan. "I'm calling you trouble." He backed toward the tent opening. "Sleep well, Chancellor."

Her soft "goodnight, warrior" followed him into the darkness, and he knew sleep would be a long time coming for him.

ChapterThree

Linnea paced her tent like a caged beast, still feeling the heat of Zexx's hands on her waist where he'd steadied her. The thick carpets muffled her restless steps but did nothing to quiet the storm of need raging inside her.

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She might have had a bit too much wine, but being left in the tent by Zexx had sobered her in a heartbeat. Her head brushed the cream-colored fabric that draped from the tall center pole, preventing her from walking far and making her paced circle small as she spun on one heel and headed back in the opposite direction.

What was wrong with her? She was the chancellor of the Cresteks, not some weak-willed female who melted at the touch of a male. Especially not a barbarian who had spent the entire evening judging her.

But gods of old, the way he'd carried her as if she weighed nothing, his hard chest like a wall as she'd sunk into him. A warm wall with velvety skin and primal markings splayed across his flesh. She fanned herself, though the night air filtering through the tent was already cool. The wine was wearing off, but her blood still ran hot.

"This is madness," she muttered, running her hands through her hair and loosening more of the dark curls that had been artfully arranged on top of her head. She had responsibilities, duties. She couldn't afford to be distracted by a warrior who probably despised everything about her kind.

Even if his heated looks suggested otherwise.

Linnea touched a hand to her gauzy dress where it clung to her flushed skin. She'd come all this way for her brother's wedding and had been welcomed warmly by the Dothveks. She'd been able to forget who she was for a bit, who she would be when she returned home after one night on the sands.

One night. One night to forget her responsibilities. One night to throw caution to the wind. Didn't she deserve that? That's all she would allow herself before returning to the city and the weight of her position. No one would know if she gave in to temptation just this once.

Before she could think better of it, she burst from her tent—and slammed straight into a wall of muscled flesh.

"Going somewhere?" Zexx's deep voice rumbled through her as his hands shot out to steady her.

She stumbled back. "What are you doing here?"

"Ensuring your safety and uninterrupted sleep." His eyes glittered in the moonlight. "Though you don't seem to be resting."

"I don't need a guard." But her pulse quickened at the thought of him standing sentinel outside her tent.

"No?" He stepped closer, backing her into the tent. "Then why did you come looking for me?"

Her breath hitched. "You sound very sure of yourself. I could have been coming out for more food or wine."

"I can sense your need."

Linnea almost cursed out loud. She'd forgotten that Dothveks were empathic. So much for hiding anything from the brute. But she'd thought they could primarily sense each other, not Cresteks.

"Then tell me what I want."

His only answer was a velvet growl that sent a shiver skating down her spine.

Her mouth went as dry as the sands, but she held his gaze. "Are you telling me you don't want the same thing?"

"You think I'm a barbarian."

She didn't bother to deny it. "Then for one night, be the barbarian I think you are."

A rumble vibrated through his chest. "You don't know what you're asking. I was raised to despise your kind."

"And I was raised to fear yours." She pressed her hands against his chest as her heart threatened to pound its way out of her body. "But I'm not afraid of you."

"You should be." He ran a hand roughly through her hair, freeing more curls and fisting them between his fingers. "I've spent all night watching males circle you, wanting to tear them apart for daring to look at you."

Her pulse quickened. She didn't doubt his ability to tear anyone apart. "I didn't want them."

"I know."

She would have despised such cockiness in a Crestek, but in him it only fueled her desire. She backed up, beckoning him to follow her with one, crooked finger. "Then show me why I should want you and not them."

His control snapped with a snarl as he followed her back inside her tent, the flaps

falling closed behind him. Large hands tangled in her hair as he claimed her mouth in a bruising kiss that tasted of sin and salvation. She moaned, and his tongue swept inside to tangle with hers.

"After tonight," he said between fierce kisses, "you will return to your city, and we will never see each other again."

"I know." That was why this was so perfect. "No promises. No regrets."

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He caught her hands and held them as tightly as he held her gaze. "You are sure?"

"I'm sure that I'll regret it more if I don't know what it's like to have you." She met his burning gaze. "Just once."

His laugh was dark. "Once won't be enough, Chancellor, but I will agree to just one night."

She nodded desperately as she admired the dance of the undulating light on his exposed skin.

"Last chance to change your mind, Linnea." But his hands were already working at the delicate ties of her dress.

She smiled up at him. "I never back down from a challenge, warrior."

His answering growl sent heat pooling low in her belly. Then his mouth was on hers again, and she surrendered to the wild need that had been building between them all night.

Tomorrow she would be chancellor again. Tonight, she would be simply a female in the arms of a barbarian who made her burn.

ChapterFour

Zexx groaned, tugging Linnea closer, the hard ridges of his arousal pressing against her stomach through the thin fabric of her dress. The warmth radiating from his

golden skin enveloped her, and his scent—earthy and wild, so different from the perfumed males of the Crestek court—sent heat to pool in her belly.

She didn't care about what she should do as chancellor or about making politically prudent decisions. Those concerns belonged to daylight, to the public persona she maintained for her people. Here, in the dim light of the tent and far away from the city she ruled, she just wanted to live in the moment.

Linnea placed her hands on his chest, tracing the dark tribal markings beneath her fingertips. She dragged her nails down his sculpted muscles to the chiseled definition of his abdomen, marveling at how different he felt even though their peoples came from the same ancestors. His skin was warmer, almost feverishly hot to the touch, and there was no give to it. She skimmed her fingers lower, dipping below the waistband of his leather pants and sweeping across the pronounced ridges that led toward his arousal.

His sharp intake of breath sent a thrill of power through her that she could make this formidable warrior lose his composure with just a touch.

The groan that escaped him reverberated through her, a sound of pure torment that made the ache between her legs intensify. There was something almost primitive in the way his control was slipping, something that called to an equally primal part of her—a part that had been suppressed beneath years of Crestek propriety and political calculation.

She freed her hand from his restraining grip and boldly cupped the impressive length of him through his pants, her eyes widening at the size and the distinct rings she could feel even through the leather.

Zexx jerked his head up, his dark eyes molten with desire and something deeper—a protective instinct that both frustrated and touched her. “We both know this should

not happen.”

She cut off his words by raking one hand through his dark hair, marveling at the silken texture so at odds with his warrior appearance. “That’s why we both want it so much, but if you can’t give it to me maybe I can find a Dothvek who—”

She didn't get to finish her sentence before his mouth claimed hers in a kiss that obliterated all thought. There was nothing restrained about it—this was pure, raw possession as he swept her lips open with his tongue. His hands moved to her waist, then slid around to grasp her ass forcefully enough to make her gasp as he lifted her effortlessly until she was straddling him.

Linnea wrapped her legs around his waist, feeling the hard press of him even through the remaining barriers of their clothing. A moan escaped her, swallowed by his hungry mouth as he devoured her with deep, claiming strokes of his tongue.

He went down to his knees and then lowered her onto the thick furs and layered blankets that covered the sand, never breaking their kiss. The woven fabric pressed into her back, the slight roughness a counterpoint to the silken heat of his skin against hers. She tugged at his leather pants, frustrated by the snug fit as she tried to free him. His hands joined hers at the task, loosening his leathers until they dropped. Then his fingers moved to her dress, slipping the thin straps from her shoulders and tugging it down her body with an urgency that sent a thrill through her.

Linnea pushed the fabric away, the cooler air inside the tent a shock against her heated skin. For a moment, vulnerability flashed through her—she was the chancellor, exposed before a warrior of a people who had been enemies for generations. What was she doing? But the doubt evaporated as Zexx sat back on his heels.

Her breath caught at the sight of his cock—thick and long with raised rings that

encircled it. The burnished gold of his skin darkened along the impressive shaft until it was a shade of dusky copper at the broad crown. A vee of ridges was positioned above his cock like an arrow drawing her eyes down, and Linnea's mouth went bone dry as she thought about how good they would feel inside her.

Zexx spread her legs with gentle but insistent hands, his gaze traveling over her exposed body with an expression of reverence and hunger that made her feel both vulnerable and powerful. Her body ached for him, and she arched her hips instinctively, as if the movement could bring him inside her faster.

"Please," she whispered.

His eyes held hers, burning molten as he dropped down. But instead of entering her, he buried his head between her legs.

Linnea opened her mouth to protest, but the words instantly became moans of pleasure as his hot tongue stroked her. She curled her fingers in the blankets, letting her eyelids flutter when the tip of his tongue found her pleasure center.

"Zexx," she said, his name both a plea and a prayer as he flicked his tongue languidly, his hands gripping her ass from beneath and holding her open to him.

Linnea let herself go, surrendering to the sensations pulsing through her and forgetting any pretense of remaining quiet. Her moans filled the tent and spilled outside, drifting into the night air. There would be no chance of hiding this now. Not that Linnea cared.

As her body started to tremble, she scraped her hands through his hair and curled her legs around his back, riding his eager mouth as her body bucked. With a scream, a final bolt of pleasure slammed into her and then she sagged onto the blankets, gasping for breath.

Then Zexx was on his knees, the crown of his cock notched at her slick entrance. He hesitated, meeting her eyes with a question in his, the tip of him barely inside her, already stretching her enough to make her suck in a breath.

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“Don’t stop now, Dothvek.”

He didn’t, thrusting into her so hard she arched her back, the sharp pain shifting into an exhilarating sensation of being filled completely and perfectly, the feeling of total bliss. A feeling she’d been waiting for her entire life.

ChapterFive

Zexx swallowed a cry as he held himself inside her. He wanted to go slow and be gentle—she was the chancellor after all, and he should show restraint—but he couldn’t. Not when his blood was roaring in his ears, and Linnea was writhing beneath him, her dark hair spread across the furs beneath them.

Even in the dim light of the oil lamp in the corner of the tent, her gold skin glistened like the sands. He stroked a hand down her face, marveling at the softness of her skin compared to the weather-roughened texture of his. She let out a breath that stirred something primal within him.

“Am I hurting you?” he asked, concern threading through his desire. He did not know much about Crestek males, but he did know they were not barbarians used to living rough and fucking hard.

She shook her head, turning it to take one of his fingers in her mouth and sucking it hard, her eyes never leaving his.

That did nothing to help his self-control. Zexx pulled his finger from her lips and captured her mouth. He needed to taste her again, to savor her sweetness and feel her

slick tongue moving against his. The faint trace of the sweet wine from the reception lingered on her lips, intoxicating him further.

But Linnea kissed him back hard, her tongue fighting with his and her fingers scraping through his hair as she pulled his head closer to hers. There was nothing of the reserved, diplomatic chancellor in the way her mouth mated with his—only raw, honest need that matched his own.

As she kissed him back with a desperate hunger, Zexx's hips moved seemingly of their own volition, stroking out and then in again. Her breathing stuttered as he held himself deep, savoring the delicious heat of her. He could feel echoes of her pleasure mingling with his own, his empathic senses creating a feedback loop of sensation that threatened to drive him mad.

When he broke the kiss and paused his thrusts, she locked eyes with him. "More."

She was so small compared to him, but she'd taken all of him and was begging for more. Zexx knew he should stop, that this joining would only complicate things. But he couldn't. He'd imagined how she'd feel around him too many times that night. As he'd watched the other Dothveks eye her with hunger, he'd allowed himself to envision her beneath him. Her tight body felt even more incredible than he could have imagined, and her breathy noises made it impossible for him not to respond.

"I do not want to hurt you," he said between gritted teeth as he slowly dragged himself out, missing the tightness of her instantly. The night air sidling through the flaps of the tent was a sharp contrast to her heat.

"I swear to the goddesses of the sand or whoever rules the heavens that if you don't keep fucking me, I'll find someone who will," she threatened, her measured diplomatic words completely abandoned in the throes of passion.

The thought of another male burying himself inside her made him hammer back into her with a possessive roar that reverberated in the tent. "No, you won't."

She grinned at his forceful statement that was almost an order.

He moved his hands to her hips, his fingers biting into her flesh as he thrust himself hard. His body vibrated with a million sensations at once as he dragged himself back out of her, feeling every tremor as she ran her hands down his stomach, tracing the bumps of his muscles to the ridges above his cock.

Zexx drove in again and again, unable to stop his savage rhythm as her gasps became cries. He reared back and scooped his hands under her, lifting her hips and hooking her legs over his shoulders. The angle let him drive even deeper, and he rolled his hips so that the ridges above his cock rubbed against her slick, sensitive nub.

Her breathing became faster and her cries louder. There was no doubt that the Dothveks in nearby tents would hear. He didn't care. The only thing that mattered was the woman he was buried in, feeling and hearing every moment of her pleasure. Through their connection, her sensations flowed into him, doubling his own pleasure until he could barely tell where his ended and hers began.

"Zexx," she cried, her fingers gripping his shoulders as he braced himself over her with both hands.

He was close enough to see her eyes fluttering as she arched back, her teeth biting at her lower lip. He rolled his hips to stroke her with his ridges again, and her fingers dug mercilessly into his skin, no doubt leaving marks that he would wear proudly.

He didn't care about the pain. It barely registered as her body began to ripple around him, and her controlled moans became uninhibited cries. He pumped harder as her muscles clamped around him so tightly he had to close his eyes as light exploded

behind his eyelids. Feeling her clench around him made Zexx lose all control. He slammed into her, reaching his release in a furious rush of heat as he bellowed wordlessly and emptied himself inside her.

Linnea held on to his shoulders, trembling and panting. He felt his heart pounding and her own pulse fluttering as he slipped her legs back down and kissed her forehead tenderly before rolling to lie beside her on the furs.

As she curled next to him and his breathing steadied, reality started to creep back into his mind. There was no going back from fucking the Crestek chancellor—or was there?

ChapterSix

Zexx slipped from the tent, his feet silent on the sand despite his inner turmoil. The sight of Linnea curled under the blanket, her dark hair spilled across the furs and her skin glowing in the moonlight that filtered through the opening in the top of the tent, had become too much. His chest was tight with emotions he refused to name.

The three moons were glowing orbs embedded in the velvet sky, casting silvery light across the still surface of the oasis pond. Wind rustled through the palm fronds overhead, a gentle murmuring that mixed with the occasional braying of jebels from their pens. The thick-furred beasts were restless tonight, perhaps sensing the charge in the air that had nothing to do with the dying celebration.

He made his way to the communal fire pit where embers still glowed orange, sending thin tendrils of smoke curling into the night air. The scent of woodsmoke mixed with the sweeter aromas of night-blooming flowers that grew wild around the water's edge.

An abandoned wineskin caught his eye, and he snatched it up, taking a long pull. The rich liquid spread warmth through his chest, though it couldn't compare to the heat of

Linnea's touch.

"Can't sleep?"

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Zexx turned to find Ruxen approaching, the dark slashes of his tribal marks standing out against his golden skin in the dim light. Like all the Dothveks, he wore only leather pants, leaving his battle-hardened chest bare to the cool night air. They'd earned their warrior marks together, fighting side by side since they were boys testing their first blades.

"Just needed air." He offered the smooth wineskin.

Ruxen accepted it, his thoughts brushing against Zexx's mind with familiar ease. Something troubles you, brother.

"The Crestek chancellor's presence has us all on edge," Ruxen said aloud, though his mental probe went deeper, seeking the source of Zexx's disquiet.

Zexx strengthened his mental shields, blocking the connection before his friend could sense the truth of what had transpired in Linnea's tent. His hands fisted at his sides as he remembered the silk of her skin beneath his palms. "She's not what I expected."

"No?" Ruxen settled onto one of the logs arranged around the fire pit, moonlight gleaming on the ridged muscles of his shoulders. "And what did you expect from Karv's sister?"

"I didn't know if she would be like him or like the other brother," Zexx admitted.

"Riz?" Ruxen spat out the name like a curse.

"She's nothing like him." The words came out more forcefully than Zexx had

intended. "She truly wants peace between our peoples."

"Peace?" Ruxen's laugh was bitter. "They've looked down on us from their city walls for generations. Called us barbarians. Savages." His disgust pulsed between them.

"Maybe we've been too focused on our differences." Zexx stared into the glowing embers, seeing Linnea's eyes flash with the same heat. "We came from the same ancestors, after all."

Ruxen's head snapped up, shock rippling through their mental connection. "Who are you and what have you done with my friend who used to say the only good Crestek was one face down in the sand?"

"Things change." Zexx took back the wineskin, using the motion to distance himself from his friend's probing thoughts. "Look at Karv. He survived thetahaduand became one of us."

"One warrior is different than trusting their leader." Ruxen's dark eyes narrowed. The firelight cast shadows across his sharp features, making him look fierce despite his relaxed posture. "What aren't you telling me, brother?"

Zexx thought of Linnea's fierce spirit, how she'd matched him passion for passion, strength for strength. How she'd felt in his arms—not delicate, but perfectly balanced to his own power. The way he'd been able to sense her emotions when he should not have.

But he couldn't let any of those memories leak through their bond. His friend would never understand how one night had shifted everything Zexx thought he knew about their peoples.

"Maybe I'm tired of holding onto old hatred," he said instead, carefully projecting

calm certainty. "We're allies now."

"Since when are you the voice of reason?" Ruxen shook his head, his long black hair catching the moonlight. "Usually, I'm the one telling you to think before you act."

Zexx's lips quirked. "Then consider this me finally listening to your wisdom."

"Now I know something's wrong." Ruxen stood, his height matching Zexx's as he clapped him on the shoulder. Their mental connection flared at the contact, and Zexx caught a flash of genuine concern from his friend. "Whatever's got you questioning everything, just be careful. Some changes come at too high a price."

Trust me with your burden, Ruxen's thoughts whispered.

There is no burden, Zexx sent back, hating the lie even as he strengthened his mental walls. They'd never kept secrets from each other before, but this wasn't his secret alone to tell. He knew he would not be able to hide what had transpired in the tent for long. Nothing stayed secret in a village with fabric for walls, after all. But he could not betray Linnea's trust so soon. Not when the scent of her lingered on his skin.

He watched his friend disappear into the darkness, guilt churning in his gut. Ruxen's soft footsteps in the sand faded, but his doubt lingered in the air like smoke from the dying fire.

Zexx touched a hand to his chest where he could still feel the echo of Linnea's heartbeat against his. One night, they'd agreed. No promises. No regrets. But already he knew that had been a lie.

He sank onto the log, taking another long drink of wine as he stared up at the dots of light scattered across the black sky. How had one woman managed to shake the foundations of everything he believed? And how was he supposed to go back to his

normal life on the sands after knowing such perfect passion?

The jebels brayed again in their pens, and the wind picked up, making the palms creak overhead. Even the oasis itself seemed restless tonight, as if it sensed the shift in the air.

Zexx gave a rough shake of his head. One thing that would not change—she was leaving, and he was staying. There was nothing that could alter that fact.

ChapterSeven

Linnea woke to sunlight streaming through the top gap in her tent's ceiling, the warmth caressing her bare skin like a lover's touch. She wasn't surprised to find herself alone—Zexx had made it clear before the first kiss that he could only give her one night. The night was over, the sun was up, and the fantasy had ended.

She sat up, letting the blanket pool around her waist as she stretched. Her body ached in the most delicious ways, but she pushed aside memories of how those aches had been earned. There was no time for such indulgences. She was chancellor of the Cresteks, not some lovesick maiden pining after a night of passion.

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The sounds of the village coming alive filtered through the tent walls—the braying of jebels, the clatter of cooking pots, voices raised in morning greetings. She needed to leave before the oasis fully woke, before she had to face knowing looks or, worse, Zexx's indifference.

Her gauzy dress lay in a heap where he'd tossed it. She slipped it on, the fabric clinging to her skin in a way that made her think of his hands. No. She wouldn't think of his hands, or his mouth, or the way he'd growled her name as if it was a prayer.

"Get it together," she muttered as she finger-combed her tangled hair. What would her advisors think if they could see their composed chancellor now, sneaking away from a barbarian's bed like a common pleasure house girl?

Not that it had felt common. Nothing about last night had been ordinary, from the way he'd touched her to the strange connection she'd felt, as if their minds had brushed against each other in the same way their bodies had.

She shook off the fanciful thought. The wine and the darkness had obviously gone to her head. Cresteks didn't have the empathic abilities of the Dothveks. Whatever she'd felt had been purely physical—intense and incredible, but nothing more.

Linnea retrieved her cloak from where she'd discarded it the night before, wrapping the heavy fabric around herself like armor. The familiar weight settled on her shoulders, along with the mantle of her position. She was chancellor first, woman second. It was time to remember that.

She peeked from the tent. The village center was mercifully empty, though cooking

fires were already burning. The scent of fresh bread made her stomach growl, but she ignored it. Better to go hungry than risk running into anyone who might delay her departure.

Especially him.

The sand was cool beneath her feet as she made her way toward the edge of the oasis where Corvak's ship would be waiting. The morning air carried the sweetness of night-blooming flowers mixed with woodsmoke, and the palm fronds overhead cast dappled shadows across her path.

It was tempting to stay, to throw aside responsibility to see where this thing with Zexx might lead. But she knew exactly where it would lead—to scandal, to whispers, to the undermining of everything she hoped to accomplish as chancellor.

She'd worked too hard to earn her people's trust to throw it away on a romance with a Dothvek warrior, no matter how much her body begged her.

"Going somewhere?"

Linnea froze at the sound of Maya's voice. She turned to find her new sister-in-law leaning against a tree, looking far too knowing for comfort.

"I need to return to the city." Linnea kept her voice steady, controlled. "There are matters requiring my attention."

"I'm sure there are." Maya's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Though I doubt any of them are as interesting as what—or who—required your attention last night."

Heat crawled up Linnea's neck. "I don't know what you mean."

"Sound travels easily in the village," Maya reminded her.

Linnea's cheeks flamed. She'd known that they would be heard, but in the moment she hadn't cared. Now she did. "It was nothing."

Maya bobbed her head. "Didn't sound like nothing." Her smile softened. "Believe me, I get it. It's scary to realize you might have been wrong about what you want, about what your life should be."

Linnea knew that it hadn't been an easy path for the human to take a Crestek mate who then pledged himself to the Dothveks.

"I'm not scared." Linnea lifted her chin. "I'm being practical. A chancellor cannot afford to be ruled by her heart."

"Maybe that's exactly what your people need—a leader who knows how to balance duty with heart." Maya stepped closer. "Don't let fear of what others might think stop you from finding happiness."

"Happiness?" Linnea laughed, though it came out bitter. "One night of pleasure isn't happiness. It's a complication I can't afford."

"If you really believe that, why are you running away before he wakes?"

"I'm not running. I'm returning to my duties." But even as she said it, Linnea knew she was lying to herself as much as to Maya.

"At least say goodbye to your brother."

Linnea shook her head as she leaned in to give the woman a quick hug. "Better if I simply go. Give him my love?"

Maya sighed. "He won't be happy you left without a word. Neither will Zexx."

So, Maya had guessed who had been in her tent, which meant others would as well. She suppressed a groan, but her decision was only strengthened.

"Zexx will understand. He has his duties, I have mine." She squared her shoulders. "Last night changed nothing."

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Maya shrugged. "Whatever you say."

But Linnea was already walking away, her steps carrying her toward the transport ship and away from the temptation of golden skin and heated looks. She'd survived worse than a broken heart. She would survive this too.

She had to.

ChapterEight

Zexx emerged from his tent into the harsh morning light, his head pounding from too much wine and too little sleep. The suns were already high, unusual for him to rise so late, but thoughts of Linnea had kept him tossing until dawn painted the sky pink.

His bare feet sank into the warming sand as he made his way through the village, passing tents with their flaps thrown open to catch the morning breeze. Tiny bells sewn along the edges tinkled with each gust of wind. Inside, he glimpsed his people starting their day—warriors strapping curved blades to their waists, the occasional female arranging piles of furs into beds, priestesses deep in meditation to the goddesses.

"The mighty Zexx sleeps past dawn?" Ruxen fell into step beside him. "The world truly has shifted."

"Some of us were up late keeping watch." Zexx tried to block his friend's gentle mental probe.

"Is that what we're calling drinking by the fire now?" Ruxen's knowing grin faded as he studied Zexx's face. "You look like you've been wrestling sand serpents."

"I feel like it too."

They passed a group of priestesses in flowing white robes, their heads bowed in morning contemplation. The scent of sacred oils and incense wafted from the temple tent where they performed their rituals.

"The chancellor left early," Ruxen said casually. Too casually. "Didn't even stay for morning meal."

Zexx's chest tightened but he kept his expression neutral. "She has duties in the city."

"And we have ours here." Ruxen clasped his shoulder. "Whatever's troubling you, brother, remember who you are."

I sense your pain,his friend's thoughts whispered.

I'm fine,Zexx sent back, stiffening his mental walls.

He'd known that Linnea was gone even before Ruxen had told him. The village felt emptier somehow, as if she'd taken some of her magic with her when she'd slipped away. It was better this way, he told himself. They'd both known it couldn't last beyond one night.

Still, his chest ached as he made his way to the communal fire where warriors and their mates worked to clear away evidence of the celebration. Dishes clanged, laughter rose. Everything seemed too bright, too loud.

The scent of fresh bread and grilled meat drew him to where Maya and Karv sat

beside the cooking fire. His newest clan member looked thoroughly satisfied, and Zexx pushed aside a flash of envy. At least someone's romance had a happy ending.

"Join us?" Maya patted the log beside her. "There's plenty of food."

His stomach revolted at the thought, but he sat anyway. Maya handed him a water skin, and he drank deeply, the cool liquid soothing his parched throat.

"Linnea left early," Maya said casually.

Zexx focused on tearing a chunk from the warm flatbread. "Did she?"

"Apparently she had chancellor duties to attend to."

"She's never been one for long goodbyes," Karv said. "Even when we were children."

Of course she had duties. Just as he had his own—training warriors, protecting the village, forgetting the taste of her lips...

"I wish she'd stayed longer." Karv sighed. "But I understand. She has a big job. Being the first female chancellor isn't a task I envy."

Zexx's guilt churned as he met his friend's eyes. If Karv knew what had happened between his sister and his clan mate... But no. He seemed not to be aware, although Maya eyed him with a knowing gaze.

"Speaking of responsibilities." Karv straightened. "I'm ready to begin my training as a warrior. That is, if you're willing to teach me."

Zexx latched onto the change of subject. This was familiar ground—the weight of curved blades, the dance of combat, the satisfaction of molding raw talent into lethal

grace. "It won't be easy. You may have survived thetahu, but that was only the beginning."

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"I'm ready." Karv's determination pulsed between them. "I want to earn my place here."

"You've already earned it," Maya protested. "Thetahaduproved that."

"Thetahaduproved his heart," Zexx corrected. "Now he must prove his skill. Starting with proper blade work."

He took another bite of bread, letting the simple flavors ground him. This was who he was—not some lovesick fool aching after a female who could never be his. He was a warrior. A protector.

The morning breeze carried the sweet scent of night flowers giving way to day blooms, and the jebels stamped restlessly in their pens, eager to be exercised on the dunes. Life in the oasis continued as it always had.

"When do we start?" Karv asked.

"Today." Zexx stood, his head finally clearing. "After you've said a proper goodbye to your mate."

Maya blushed as Karv pulled her close. Their happiness radiated outward, and Zexx had to look away.

He strode toward the training area, his heels kicking up sand behind him. Warriors were already gathering, their blades glinting in the sunlight as they performed morning exercises. The familiar sight centered him, reminding him of his purpose.

Today he would focus on teaching Karv the ancient forms passed down through generations of Dothvek warriors. Today he would lose himself in the familiar rhythm of blade work and combat drills.

And if sometimes his thoughts strayed to soft skin and plump lips, well... No one had to know but him.

ChapterNine

The Crestek city's stone walls loomed against the blue sky, the weathered stone casting shadows across the market square. Linnea stood at her balcony, the morning air already thick with heat despite the early hour. The walls that had once made her feel safe now seemed to press in around her like a cage.

Below, cloaked figures hurried through the market stalls, their heavy garments concealing the revealing dresses beneath. Linnea touched her own cloak, remembering how freely she'd shed it at the wedding celebration. How different things were here, where every gesture was watched and judged.

"The tea you requested, Chancellor."

Linnea turned to find Zelina entering her chambers, a tray in her hands. The attendant's dark hair was elegantly arranged, and her cloak was perfectly draped, but Linnea knew that underneath she wore one of the thin dresses popular among Crestek females, even those who worked for her.

Linnea moved from the balcony to her desk. "How is the mood in the city?"

"Since your brother was overthrown, you took his position, and then you attended the wedding of your other brother who decided to become a Dothvek and marry a human?" Zelina set down the tray that held an earthenware cup of the tea Linnea

preferred.

Linnea choked back a half-laugh half-groan. “Yes, since all that.”

Zelina smiled and handed the tea to her. “Some grumblings, though not as much as we feared. Many support your leadership, especially since they prefer your style to your brother’s.”

“You mean they prefer leadership to cruel authoritarianism?”

Zelina glanced toward the window. “Riz was not popular with the people, but he did have his followers, especially those who despise the Dothveks and hate the idea of peace with them.”

Linnea curled her fingers around the warm cup. “And are there many of those?”

“There are always those who need to focus their hate on others and blame them for their own unhappiness. The Dothveks filled that role for many Cresteks for a long time. Long held prejudices are not released so quickly.”

Linnea nodded as she sipped the tea and let the warm liquid slide down her throat. “If only every Crestek had the chance to spend time with the Dothveks like I have. Then they would not be so quick to judge.”

Zelina perched on the edge of the desk. “Your opinion changed even more after you returned from the wedding. Do you wish every Crestek experience what you did on the sands?”

Heat crawled up Linnea's neck. The female who served in the city couldn't know what happened in the oasis village, could she? She straightened and schooled her expression. “Maybe I do. The wedding celebration taught me a lot about our former

enemies.”

Zelina eyed her. “Did it now?”

The knowing look made Linnea want to squirm. “I told you that I had productive conversations with the Dothvek leader.”

“You did. Are those conversations why you've been different since you came back?”

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“Different?” Linnea’s voice was a croak.

“Restless. Like you're looking for something that isn't here.”

This was one problem that came from becoming friends with your attendants. Zelina knew her too well.

Linnea pushed the thought of what she might be looking for aside. "I'm fine."

"You're many things, Madame Chancellor, but fine isn't one of them." Zelina's voice softened. "Did something happen at the oasis?"

Images of golden skin and heated looks flashed through Linnea's mind. The feel of Zexx's hands on her body, his mouth on hers... She shoved the memories away. "Nothing that matters now."

"Clearly it matters if it's affecting you this much."

"The only thing affecting me is the challenge of keeping this peace alive." Linnea put down her tea and shuffled through the documents she’d been reviewing earlier, needing something to do with her hands. "The treaty is still new. Fragile."

"Then maybe we need something to strengthen it." Zelina's eyes lit up. "Or someone."

"What do you mean?"

“If we’re fighting to keep the peace treaty between the Cresteks and Dothveks, maybe

our people need to see firsthand that the barbarians aren't the enemy. Isn't that what you said? The Cresteks need to know the Dothveks."

Linnea drummed her fingers on her desk as she considered this. "How? We can't tramp the city across the sands. I do not think the Dothveks would wish even small groups of Cresteks descending upon them."

Zelina bobbed her head back and forth as she thought. Then her face broke into a smile. "We don't need to go to them. Can't they come to us?"

Linnea gave Zelina a confused look. "You wish to bring the Dothveks here?"

"Not all of them. Perhaps only one or two. We need a Dothvek ambassador. Someone to be the face of our former enemies."

Linnea's heart stuttered. An image of Zexx striding through the market in his leather pants, tribal marks on display, made her pulse quicken. Was this the way she could be with him again? He would certainly be a handsome face to represent the Dothveks.

But no. He would hate it here, confined by walls and politics. And she would hate seeing him every day, knowing she couldn't have him.

"The Dothveks aren't exactly diplomatic," she said carefully.

"Neither were we until recently." Zelina raised an eyebrow. "Things change."

"Some things shouldn't." Linnea turned back to the window, unable to meet her friend's shrewd gaze. "Some lines shouldn't be crossed."

"What lines?" Zelina came to stand beside her. "The ones between our peoples? I thought those lines are what we're fighting to bridge."

Linnea watched a group of females hurry past below, their cloaks swishing around their feet. "I'm chancellor. I can't afford to be..."

"Revolutionary? Experimental? Daring? If you can't, who can?"

Linnea thought of Zexx's smile, rare but radiant. The way he'd looked at her like she was something precious instead of something to fear or use. The safety she'd felt in his arms.

But she also thought of the whispers that would follow if anyone found out about them. The damage it could do to everything she'd worked for. The danger it would pose for him.

Of course, she didn't have to choose Zexx as the Dothvek ambassador. There were other Dothveks who could serve. But her pulse quickened as she realized that this would be her chance to see him again, to discover if what she'd felt that night was real.

It was a huge risk to bring him to the city. Not only could it risk her position as chancellor, but it would be a huge risk to her heart if she was wrong. Did she really want to bring him to her only to be rejected? Then she'd have to work with him every day, and his presence would be a reminder that the feelings she'd been so sure were real had all been a mirage.

But what if she was wrong? What if he missed her as much as she did him? What if he thought about little else but that night? What if she would be giving him the thing he desired most by summoning him to the Crestek city?

"Maybe you're right," she told Zelina. "Maybe a Dothvek ambassador would help."

Zelina beamed. "I'll send word to the leader of the Dothveks and ask them to send

their most diplomatic—”

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“No, I know who should be our diplomat. Ask Kyrana to send me her security chief.” She allowed herself to smile as she warmed up to the idea even more. “Have them send me Zexx.”

ChapterTen

Steel rang against steel as Zexx parried Karv's strike, the curved blades catching the morning sunlight. Sand flew beneath their feet as they circled each other, both breathing hard from the intense sparring session.

"Better," Zexx growled as Karv executed a particularly complex move. "But your left side is still open."

He demonstrated by sweeping Karv's legs out from under him, sending the former Crestek sprawling onto his back. But Karv rolled immediately to his feet, sand coating his bare chest and speckling his inked flesh.

"I won't fall for that twice," Karv said, raising his blades again.

Zexx allowed himself a small smile. Teaching Karv had proved an effective distraction from thoughts of Linnea, at least during the day. His nights were another matter, filled with dreams of soft skin and fierce eyes that left him restless and aching.

They clashed again, blades singing as they wove through the ancient forms. Sweat gleamed on their golden skin as the suns climbed higher, but neither warrior showed signs of stopping. Zexx had to admit that Karv was a quick study, already moving

with the fluid grace of a Dothvek instead of the rigid precision of a Crestek.

"Enough!" Maya's voice cut through their concentration. "Unless you're trying to kill each other before the midday meal."

Both men lowered their weapons, chests heaving. Zexx accepted the water skin she offered him before handing one to her mate, drinking deeply as the cool liquid soothed his parched throat.

"A messenger just arrived," Maya said, once both males had drunk their fill.

Karv perked up. "From the bounty hunters?"

"No." Maya glanced at Zexx. "From the Cresteks."

The water turned to ash in his mouth. He handed back the skin, suddenly alert. "What do they want?"

"I don't know. But Kyrana wants you in her tent. Now."

Zexx didn't wait to hear more. He strode through the village, his bare feet barely touching the sand as worried whispers followed in his wake. The bells on tent flaps tinkled as he passed, and the savory scent of the midday meal, usually so appetizing, now turned his stomach.

He burst into the ceremonial tent without announcing himself, then stopped short. Kyrana sat on her ornate chair, draped in golden robes that caught the filtered sunlight. But it was the cloaked figure beside her that made Zexx's blood run cold.

"Ah, Zexx." Kyrana's smile held an edge. "We were just discussing you."

He forced himself to bow, though his muscles were coiled tight as a spring. "My leader."

"This is Temok." She gestured to the Crestek. "Our new ambassador from the city."

"Ambassador?" Zexx spat the word. "When have we had ambassadors?"

"Since now." Kyrana's voice hardened. "Just as you will be our ambassador to them."

The words hit him like a physical blow. "What?"

"The chancellor believes having representatives in both locations will strengthen our alliance." The Crestek's voice was smooth, measured. Everything Zexx wasn't.

Linnea. Of course this was her doing. But instead of pleasure at the thought of being near her again, anger coursed through him. He forgot all memories of her beneath him, of the longing that had been tormenting him. The only thought that filled his mind was that she was using her power to manipulate him, just as Cresteks always did.

"I refuse." The words came out as a growl.

"You cannot." Kyrana's tone left no room for argument. "This is not a request, warrior. It is a command."

"You would have me live among our enemies?"

"Our allies," she corrected. "Times change, Zexx. We must change with them."

He wanted to roar his frustration, to challenge this soft-spoken Crestek, his apparent diplomatic counterpart, to combat. Instead, he clenched his jaw so hard his teeth

ached. "When?"

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"You leave tomorrow." Kyrana's expression softened slightly. "Take today to prepare yourself."

Zexx spun on his heel and stormed from the tent, not trusting himself to speak. The suns seemed too bright, the sand too hot beneath his feet as he stalked through the village.

Live in the city? Among those who had scorned his people for generations? The same ones who'd hidden behind their walls while calling the Dothveks savages?

But a traitorous part of his mind whispered that she would be there. That he would see her again, breathe her scent, hear her voice...

No. She had orchestrated this to prove her power over him. To show that even a Dothvek warrior could be bent to her will. Memories of his night with her had tormented him, but that did not mean he would allow her to rule him like they had. He was a Dothvek warrior. He would not be a puppet for anyone. Not even her.

He would go because his leader commanded it. But he would show Linnea that some things couldn't be controlled. Even if it meant hardening his heart against the only woman who had ever touched it.

He would be ambassador because his leader commanded it, but he would not allow any female to rule his heart. Not again.

ChapterEleven

Linnea stood at the tower window, her fingers pressed against the cool stone opening as she surveyed the city spread beneath her like a colorful tapestry. The square below bustled with activity, draped in vibrant fabric swags that snapped in the breeze, creating ripples of color against the pale stone buildings. Market stalls formed a honeycomb pattern in the center where Cresteks in differently colored robes—silver for government officials, blue for scholars, purple for merchants, and beige for the commoners—haggled and bartered.

The heady scent of exotic perfumes wafted up even to her high perch, along with the cacophony of voices. So different from the village on the sands. For a moment, she allowed herself to remember the Dothvek oasis—the musky smell of jebel fur, the whisper of the wind over the water, the way the sand caressed her feet as she sank into it. The simplicity of it had stirred something in her, something she hadn't felt in the polished corridors of the Crestek city.

"Stop it," she muttered to herself, smoothing the front of her silver chancellor's robes. "You can't reshape generations of customs in a single rotation."

She was chancellor now. Her brother Karv might have found his destiny among the Dothveks, but hers was here, navigating the treacherous waters of Crestek politics. After Riz's death, someone had to step up and prevent further chaos. The irony wasn't lost on her—she hadn't craved power, yet here she was, the first female to hold the highest position in their city.

A sharp knock on the door broke her reverie.

"Enter," she called, not turning from the window.

"Chancellor," her adjunct, K'Nar, announced with his customary formality, "the Dothvek ambassador has arrived as requested."

She froze, her spine stiffening instinctively before she forced herself to turn with the practiced calm she'd cultivated since taking office. But all her preparation shattered the moment Zexx stepped into the room.

His tall frame seemed to consume the air, his gold skin gleaming in the sunlight streaming through the windows. Dark tribal markings curved across his bare chest and down one arm, the same markings she'd found herself tracing with her eyes during her brother's bonding ceremony. His long black hair was pulled back, revealing the sharp angles of his face.

Her heart thundered so loudly in her chest she worried he might hear it. Heat crept up her neck and burned her cheeks. She'd told herself the feelings she'd experienced in the Dothvek village were nothing—a momentary fascination with something forbidden—yet here she was, reacting like some lovestruck adolescent.

"Thank you, K'Nar," she managed, dismissing her adjunct with a slight nod. The door closed with a soft click, leaving them alone.

She expected—what? The same intensity she'd felt in his gaze before? That low rumble in his chest when he'd said her name?

Instead, his scowl deepened, his eyes barely meeting hers before skittering away to examine the ornate carvings on her office walls.

"Ambassador Zexx," she said, falling back on formality to mask her confusion. "Thank you for coming."

"I was given no choice," he growled, his voice a rough burr laced with fury.

She moved behind her desk, grateful for the barrier between them. "I thought you would be the best ambassador for this new era of cooperation between our peoples,"

she said, shoulders squared. "But if you don't believe you can fulfill that role adequately, I can certainly request someone more qualified from Kyrana."

His head snapped up, eyes finally locking with hers. If she thought he looked angry before, now he looked positively furious, the muscle in his jaw working as he clenched his teeth.

His gaze bored into her. "There is no one more qualified to be here than me. I will not disappoint my leader. I serve at Kyrana's pleasure."

But not mine, the unspoken message hung in the air between them. Something twisted painfully in her chest. She'd spent days anticipating his arrival, rehearsing what she might say, how she might build on what had happened between them. Had she imagined it all?

"Good," she said, her voice coming out more brittle than she intended. "K'Nar will show you to your quarters. We've prepared them according to Kyrana's instructions—I hope they'll be acceptable."

He gave a curt nod, still glaring as if she'd personally offended him.

"The first diplomatic meeting will be tomorrow," she continued, fighting to keep her voice steady. "My adjunct will provide you with the necessary information."

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His gaze remained hard, unflinching. Where was the Dothvek who had looked at her with passion in the village? Who had sent that thrill down her spine with the brush of his lips? It was almost impossible to believe that his touch had made her shudder.

"Is there anything else, Chancellor?" The way he said her title made it sound like an insult.

She wanted to demand more from him. She wanted to ask what had changed. Instead, she waved her hand in dismissal, the wide sleeve of her silver robe catching the light. "That will be all, Ambassador."

He turned and stalked out, his bare feet silent on the gleaming stone floor, leaving nothing but the lingering scent of sand and sunbaked skin in his wake.

The moment the door closed, she slumped into her chair, pressing her palms against her eyes to fight the hot tears of frustration threatening to spill. This was not how it was supposed to go. She'd convinced the council that a Dothvek ambassador would strengthen their new alliance. She'd argued that Zexx's position as head of security made him the perfect choice.

But she hadn't been entirely honest with herself about her motives.

She'd wanted to see him again. She'd wanted to explore whatever had sparked between them in the tent. And now she was stuck with a hostile Dothvek who clearly resented being here, who might have never felt anything for her at all except fleeting lust.

She dropped her hands and stared at the ceiling, the ornate patterns blurring through unshed tears.

"Congratulations, Linnea," she whispered to the empty room. "You've just complicated your first major diplomatic initiative because you couldn't separate your personal feelings from your duties. Some chancellor you are."

Outside her window, the city continued its bustling rhythm, oblivious to her turmoil. It was a reminder that she had an entire city looking to her for leadership. She couldn't afford to be distracted by a Dothvek who didn't want to be here, no matter how her traitorous heart tried to convince her otherwise.

ChapterTwelve

Zexx stalked from the chancellor's office, every muscle in his body rigid with frustration. The stone walls of the Crestek tower seemed to press in around him, trapping the air and making each breath feel shallow and unsatisfying. Everything about this city felt wrong—hostile, even. The high walls that encircled it blocked the horizon like a prison, cutting off his connection to the endless sands beyond.

The silent guard who'd escorted him up now led him down a spiraling ramp that curled around the interior of the tower. His bare feet slapped against the cold stone—nothing like the warm embrace of sand that had cradled his steps since birth. They descended just one level below the chancellor's office, close enough that he could still sense her tumultuous thoughts. Thoughts he tried to ignore as he steadied his own roiling emotions.

Below them, through gaps in the tower's architecture, he caught glimpses of Cresteks moving about in their flowing robes, all designated by color to mark their status and position. So different from the Dothvek way, where all were equal and there was no such thing as being born into a certain status. The crowded streets made his skin

crawl. Where was the space to breathe? To move? To truly see another warrior coming?

"Your quarters," the guard finally spoke, gesturing to an ornate door with one hand. His suspicion was palpable. To him, Zexx was still the enemy, no matter what diplomatic title they'd pinned on him.

Zexx grunted acknowledgment, refusing to offer more courtesy than necessary. The door swung open to reveal his prison for however long Kyrana insisted he remain.

When the door closed behind him with a decisive click, he shuddered. The tightness in his chest that had been building since leaving the sands now threatened to choke him. The floor beneath his feet was polished to a mirror shine, so cold and unyielding compared to the plush furs layered over soft sand in his tent. The furniture—hard-backed chairs with stiff cushions, a bed frame raised high off the ground—all designed for show rather than comfort.

He moved to the window, his one salvation, and leaned out to get the best view. From this height, he could barely see over the towering walls to where the sands began, glittering gold in the afternoon sun. His heart ached with such sudden fierceness that he had to close his eyes.

"Remember your duty," he growled to himself, the whisper rough. He was here for his people, for the future of the Dothvek clan. Kyrana had been clear—this alliance needed nurturing, and he was to ensure the Cresteks kept their word.

But why him? The question had burned since she'd issued her command. He and Linnea had agreed to one night only. Had she changed her mind? Did she desire him more than her speedy departure would have indicated?

He cut off the thought before it could torture him, but Linnea's face filled his mind

anyway. Her piercing eyes, the way her silver robes had draped around her slender form, how her voice had hardened when he'd made it clear he didn't want to be here.

The twist in his gut wasn't guilt. It couldn't be. She was the reason he'd been torn from his home, from the warriors he led, from everything he knew. Her request for him specifically as ambassador had sealed his fate. As much as his body reacted to her presence—and sons of the goddesses, how it did—he couldn't allow himself to fall for her again. If he wanted any chance of returning to the sands, he needed to fulfill his duty quickly and efficiently, with no entanglements.

"No entanglements," he repeated aloud, trying to make the words sink in.

He pulled away from the window and explored the rest of his quarters, fingers trailing over surfaces too smooth, too artificial. A second doorway led to a bathing chamber that made him stop short.

"By the goddesses," he breathed, staring at the sunken pool carved from the same pale stone as the walls. Steam rose from the surface of the water, which bubbled gently as if it were alive. He had heard tales from Kush about the Crestek luxuries when he'd been trapped in the city while trying to save the human who became his mate, but he had dismissed most of them as exaggerations.

Perhaps he had been wrong.

He approached the pool cautiously, dipping his fingers into the water. Heat—perfect heat—enveloped his skin. He wasn't a stranger to bathing in the oasis pond, but that water was cool. Without further hesitation, he stripped off his leather pants, the only clothing Dothvek tradition dictated, and sank into the steaming water.

A groan escaped his lips before he could stop it. The tension that had coiled in his muscles since entering the city began to dissolve, carried away by the gently churning

water. He submerged himself to his chin, letting his long hair float around him.

"Treacherous," he muttered, even as he felt himself relax. "This is how they do it—lure you in with comfort until you forget the feel of sand between your toes."

He closed his eyes and tried to imagine he was back in the oasis, bobbing in the pond that edged the village. But instead of the sounds of jebels and the rustling of tent fabric, there was only silence, broken occasionally by the distant murmur of voices from the city below.

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And instead of clearing his mind, the hot water only seemed to sharpen his memories of seeing Linnea again. The flush that had risen to her cheeks when he'd entered, the way her eyes had widened momentarily before she'd schooled her features into the mask of chancellor. The scent of her—gods, her scent had nearly undone him the moment he'd stepped into that office.

But behind her desk, dressed in those formal silver robes, she was every inch the Crestek chancellor—the enemy his people had fought for generations. She'd looked so unlike the passionate female who'd insisted he claim her.

He sank deeper into the water, letting it cover his mouth. He didn't know what Linnea expected of him in this role—diplomat, spy, trophy to prove Crestek dominance? But he knew what he expected of himself. Strength. Resolve. The discipline to resist both the stone city's temptations and its chancellor's allure.

No matter how his body responded to her presence or how these luxuries tried to seduce him, he could not forget that he was Dothvek. His heart belonged to the sands, and there it would remain.

"Ambassador," he tasted the foreign word as he rose from the water. "Play the part, complete the mission, return home."

Water cascaded from his body as he stood, droplets pattering against the stone floor. In that moment, he made a vow to himself: he would be the perfect ambassador—cold, efficient, and utterly impenetrable.

Especially to the one woman who threatened to breach all his defenses with nothing

more than a look.

ChapterThirteen

"The Dothvek ambassador hasn't left his quarters since his arrival yesterday," K'Nar reported, his voice perfectly neutral though Linnea detected a hint of satisfaction in his eyes. "He's refused all offers of tours through the city and barely touched his breakfast this morning."

Linnea nodded, fingers drumming against the polished surface of her desk as she gazed out the window at the afternoon sun casting long shadows across the city square. The colors of the fabric swags had dulled in the fading light, no longer vibrant but muted, like her expectations.

"I'm not surprised," she said, though a small part of her had hoped that Zexx would adapt to his role, that his duty would overcome his obvious distaste for their city.

Her mind drifted traitorously back to the Dothvek village—to flickering lantern light casting shadows on tent walls, to the heady scent of night-blooming flowers mingling with woodsmoke, to the warmth of golden skin beneath her fingertips.

She shook her head sharply, banishing the images. That night had been a moment of weakness, something that should never have happened and that no Crestek could ever discover. A scandal like that would shatter the fragile trust she'd built with the council, especially as the first female chancellor.

Then why had she insisted on bringing Zexx to the city? Why risk everything she'd worked for over what had been nothing more than a desert fling?

Because it wasn't just lust, a small voice whispered in her mind. It was more.

She swallowed hard, pushing the thought away. Whatever she might have felt didn't matter now. Zexx had made it abundantly clear that he wanted nothing to do with her beyond the most frigid diplomatic relations—and perhaps not even that, given his self-imposed isolation.

"The water reclamation project in the eastern quarter is behind schedule again," K'Nar continued, consulting his notes. "And there have been seventeen violations of the new commerce ordinance in the market square this week alone. The enforcement officers are requesting additional—"

She barely heard him, her thoughts still circling around the Dothvek one floor below. Had she dragged him from his home against his will? The realization sat like a stone in her stomach. She had used her position to satisfy her own selfish desires, convincing herself and the council it was for diplomatic purposes.

The scent of ink and parchment filled her nostrils as K'Nar shuffled his papers, the scratching of his stylus against the surface oddly grating.

"—and the artisans' guild is petitioning for an extension on their tax—"

"K'Nar," she interrupted, a plan forming in her mind. "I need you to arrange something."

He looked up, startled. "Of course, Chancellor. What do you need?"

"I want to host the Dothvek ambassador for dinner in my quarters tonight." The words tumbled out before she could reconsider them.

K'Nar's eyebrows shot up. "A diplomatic dinner? I'll arrange for the council members to—"

"No," she said firmly. "Just the ambassador and me."

His mouth thinned to a disapproving line. "Chancellor, protocol dictates—"

"I need to discuss sensitive matters with the ambassador," she said, injecting authority into her voice. "And I want my quarters transformed for the occasion." She took a deep breath. "Make it look like the inside of a Dothvek tent."

K'Nar's stylus clattered to the floor. "A... tent, Chancellor?"

"Yes. And send the chef to me directly. I'll need to discuss a special menu."

He bent to retrieve his stylus, his movements stiff with poorly concealed shock. "As you wish, Chancellor," he said, his tone carefully neutral. "Though I confess I don't know what a Dothvek tent looks like."

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"Find someone who does," she said, her voice sharper than intended. She did not trust herself to describe the inside of the tent she'd slept in with Zexx. "Perhaps one of the scholars who's studied their customs. And have the invitation delivered immediately."

K'Nar nodded, gathering his papers with jerky movements. "Will there be anything else, Chancellor?"

"That's all for now."

He bowed stiffly and walked to the door, muttering under his breath about tents and barbarians and the impossibility of his task.

When the door closed behind him, she rose from her desk and began to pace. The smooth stone floor was cool beneath her bare feet—she'd taken to removing her shoes in private, finding comfort in that small rebellion against Crestek formality.

Was she making a monumental mistake? This olive branch could easily be construed as a trick, or worse, as something inappropriate. But she couldn't bear the thought of Zexx suffering in silence, trapped in unfamiliar surroundings because of her self-absorbed actions.

She paused at the window, gazing out toward the distant desert that glimmered gold on the horizon. The sands where Zexx belonged. The sands he might be longing for this very moment.

"I just want him to feel welcome," she whispered to herself, though the knot in her stomach told a different story. She wanted more. She wanted to see that spark in his

eyes that she'd glimpsed in the village, that intensity that had made her skin tingle and her heart race.

But what if this dinner failed to thaw his icy demeanor? Could she accept him as nothing more than an ambassador, maintaining cool diplomatic relations until his duty was complete and he returned to the sands? Could she let him go?

Her reflection stared back at her from the polished glass, silver robes glinting in the fading light. She barely recognized herself—the formal attire of the chancellor felt like a costume, something she wore rather than something she was.

In the Dothvek village, there had been no such pretense. On the sands, she had been free from the weight of her family's name and history. Free from the expectations that shadowed her.

And Zexx had seen her. Not the chancellor, not the sister of the former regime, but her.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts.

"Enter," she called, smoothing her robes and composing her features.

The head chef stepped in, bowing deeply. "You wished to see me, Chancellor?"

She took a steadying breath, pushing aside her doubts. "Yes. I need a special meal prepared for tonight—something that would remind a Dothvek of home."

The chef's expression shifted from confusion to intrigue. "Desert cuisine? An interesting challenge, Chancellor."

"Can you do it?"

"Of course," he said, a spark of excitement in his eyes. "Though I'll need to send to the market for certain spices..."

As she outlined what she remembered of Dothvek food from her brief time in the village, the knot in her stomach began to loosen. Perhaps this wasn't such a foolish idea after all. Perhaps offering Zexx a taste of home was exactly what was needed to begin rebuilding the bridge between them.

Or perhaps she was deluding herself, crafting elaborate excuses to be near him again.

Either way, by tonight she would have her answer. And she would need to accept it, whatever it might be.

ChapterFourteen

Zexx followed the stiff-backed guard through the spiraling ramp of the Crestek tower, his irritation growing with each step. The tunic they'd provided for this "formal diplomatic dinner" chafed against his skin, restricting the natural movement of his muscles. The woven fabric felt almost offensive against his skin, which had known nothing but open air and desert sun since childhood.

His fingers itched to tear it off. In the village, he would never be confined like this—by walls, by clothing, by protocol. Everything about the Crestek city felt like a scratchy shirt against his soul, tight and suffocating.

The guard stopped at an ornate door at the end of the top level. "The chancellor's personal chambers," he announced, his tone implying Zexx should be honored by the invitation.

Zexx grunted in response. Let him think him the savage barbarian they all whispered about. Better that than revealing how his pulse had quickened at the mention of

Linnea's private quarters.

The door swung open, and he stepped inside, prepared for more stone walls and rigid furnishings.

His breath caught.

Beige fabric draped from the ceiling in wide swaths that met at a point in the center of the room, cascading down the walls like a waterfall of cloth. Tiny bells adorned the edges, jingling softly as the fabric swayed in the breeze from an open window. It was unmistakable—a Dothvek tent, recreated within these stone walls.

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Even with the hard floor beneath his feet and the distant sounds of the city drifting up from below, the sight struck something deep within him. It was not home, but it was reaching toward it—an effort he had not expected.

And in the center of it all stood Linnea.

Gone were the formal silver robes of the chancellor. Instead, she wore a dress of shimmering, nearly translucent fabric. The same dress she'd worn to her brother's weddings. The material caught the light from the oil lamps scattered around the room, making her glow like a mirage on the desert horizon.

He had seen her in less, a fact his body remembered all too well, but his throat tightened nonetheless as memories of that night welled up within him.

The guard closed the door behind him with a soft click, leaving them alone in this strange blending of their worlds.

"I arranged for traditional Dothvek food," Linnea said, her voice carrying the formal tone of her position despite the intimate setting. "And had the room prepared to make you feel more welcome."

"You didn't need to do that," he replied, the words coming out gruffer than intended. "But... thank you."

What he didn't say was how the sight of her standing beneath tent-like fabric transported him instantly back to the oasis village—to that night when duty and tribe had been forgotten in favor of something else entirely. The very memory he'd been

fighting to erase.

She gestured to a low table set with bowls and platters. "Please, sit."

He crossed the room and lowered himself to the cushions, surprised to find furs and rugs layered beneath them. The food spread before them wasn't exactly like the meals served in his village, but it was close enough that a wave of homesickness crashed over him, followed by grudging gratitude.

There was braised meat in rich, spiced sauce, flatbread still warm from the oven, and roasted vegetables that reminded him of their solstice celebrations. Someone had gone to considerable trouble to research and prepare this meal.

They began eating in silence, the tension between them thick. Linnea reached for a metal implement beside her plate, attempting to spear a piece of meat, and he couldn't suppress a grin.

She noticed immediately. "Why are you laughing at me?"

"Dothveks eat meat with wedges of bread," he explained, tearing off a piece of the flatbread to demonstrate. Without thinking, he scooped up a portion of the spiced meat and held it toward her lips. "Like this."

She hesitated only briefly before leaning forward to accept the offering. Her lips brushed his fingertips as she took the food, sending a jolt through his body that had nothing to do with the spices.

He pulled back quickly, dabbing his fingers on another piece of bread while fighting to control his breathing.

"You're not being honest," he said abruptly, meeting her eyes across the table. "About

why you brought me here tonight. Why you've gone to such lengths for this dinner."

Linnea sat straighter, adopting her chancellor's posture. "I want to improve diplomatic relations between our peoples. As leaders, we should—"

"Try again," he interrupted, watching her composure crack around the edges.

She spluttered, stammering something about cultural exchange before her shoulders suddenly slumped. The mask fell away completely.

"Fine. I wanted you to come," she admitted, the words bursting forth like water breaking through a dam. "I've never felt as alive as I did during that night in the village. I was an idiot to think that ordering you to come here would work out well, that you'd just..." She shook her head, her dark curls catching the lamplight. "I understand now that it meant more to me than it did to you. I'm sorry for commanding you to come to the city. If you want to leave, I won't stop you."

Her vulnerability stunned him into silence. The powerful Crestek leader, laying her desires bare without pretense or political maneuvering. The passion in her words struck him like a physical blow.

He studied her face in the warm light—the slight quiver of her lower lip, the defiant tilt of her chin even in her vulnerability. She was Crestek, yes, but she was also simply Linnea—the woman who had felt like fire in his arms on the sands.

"I have no intention of leaving," he said finally.

She nodded, resignation settling across her features. "I suspected you wouldn't want to let your leader down."

"It has little to do with that anymore," he said, his voice dropping lower. "And

everything to do with you."

Linnea's head snapped up, her eyes widening as she processed his words.

The last rational part of his mind screamed warnings—about duty, about the dangers of entanglement with the enemy, about the impossibility of anything lasting between the chancellor of the Cresteks and a Dothvek warrior.

He silenced it.

"Now it's time for me to give you an order," he said, rising from the cushions and moving toward her with the slow, deliberate pace of a hunter. "Take me to your bed."

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Linnea's mouth fell open in shock, her lips parting in a perfect circle that stirred memories of how those soft lips had tasted.

“Or do I need to carry you again?” he growled.

ChapterFifteen

Her heart hammered against her ribs as Zexx's words hung in the air between them. His command—for that's what it was—sent heat rushing through her body like wildfire.

"You don't need to carry me, and we don't need a bed," she managed, finding her voice at last. She gestured toward the cushions and furs scattered across the floor, their arrangement deliberately reminiscent of the ones in his tent. "I wanted tonight to be as much like our night in the oasis as possible."

Zexx's dark eyes blazed as he took in the arrangement, then returned to her with an intensity that made her knees weak.

"Perhaps you're more like a Dothvek than I thought," he said, his deep voice rumbling through the tent-like space.

A thrill ran through her at his words. To be recognized as having something of the Dothvek spirit within her—especially by him—felt like validation of a desire she'd never voiced.

Zexx reached for the hem of his tunic and pulled it off in a single rough motion,

tossing it aside with obvious relief. "I've been aching to do that all night," he husked.

She couldn't help but stare. His skin gleamed gold, every sculpted muscle defined as if carved from the desert stone itself. The markings across his chest and shoulders were dark lines that curved along the contours of his powerful frame.

Unable to resist, she stepped closer and curled her hands around him to run her fingers along the ridges that traced down his back. Although Dothveks and Cresteks shared the same ancestry, generations of living on the harsh sands had made his people stronger, more primal. Where Crestek men were lean and unmarked, Zexx was all power and ancient symbolism etched into his very skin. Even his back ridges were more pronounced and the skin harder.

"You're trembling," he observed, his eyes never leaving hers.

"You have that effect on me."

His hands found her waist, warm through the thin fabric of her dress. "I've been wanting to see you like this again since the moment I set foot in your city," he said, his breath hot against her neck as he placed deliberate kisses along her throat.

His fingers worked at the delicate fastenings of her dress, slowly revealing more of her skin to the cool night air drifting in from the window. With each new bit exposed, his touch became both more reverent and more possessive, and her head swam with need.

The fabric slipped from her shoulders, pooling at her feet like water. Zexx drew in a sharp breath, his gaze traveling over her with such intensity she could almost feel it as a physical caress.

"Even more beautiful than I remembered," he murmured, lowering her gently onto

the cushions and furs.

She was weak with wanting him, her body responding to his every touch as if they'd never been apart. His gentle exploration soon gave way to something more dominant, more urgent, as they rolled across the furs, their bodies finding the rhythm they'd discovered that night in the village.

Outside, the city continued its evening routines, completely unaware of what was happening in the chancellor's chambers. That thought alone was intoxicating—that here, in the heart of the Crestek tower, she was breaking every unspoken rule of her position. If anyone knew she was taking a Dothvek to her bed, she would be removed as chancellor immediately, the alliance possibly shattered beyond repair.

And yet, that forbidden nature only heightened every sensation. Each caress of his rough hands against her smoother skin, each clash of their mouths as they kissed with growing urgency—all of it was made sweeter by the risk.

"You're thinking too much," Zexx whispered against her ear, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin there. "I can sense it."

"An occupational hazard," she gasped as his fingers brushed her nipples. "Being chancellor means always—"

"You're not chancellor here," he interrupted, rolling them so that she was beneath him, his powerful form caging her in the most delicious way. "Here, you're just Linnea. And tonight, you're mine."

The possessiveness in his voice should have offended her—she who had fought so hard to be recognized for her mind rather than as someone's property. Instead, it sent a fresh wave of carnal hunger coursing through her.

With Zexx, she could surrender the control she maintained so rigidly everywhere else. With him, she could simply feel without analyzing every potential consequence.

His mouth traveled down her body, his tongue hot and his lips eager. She arched into his touch, her fingers tangling in his long hair as he buried his head between her legs. She gasped as his tongue parted her, his mouth working her to the point of shattering.

When she couldn't bear it any longer, she pulled him back up to her, meeting his fierce gaze with her own. "My turn," she whispered, pushing him onto his back and straddling his powerful form.

Linnea traced the dark swirls on his chest with her tongue, following their intricate patterns across his skin. He tasted of salt and spice and something uniquely his—a flavor she had dreamed about in the lonely nights since their first encounter.

Then she dragged her tongue lower, licking a trail down his vee of ridges. She fisted the base of his cock, a smile teasing the corner of her lips at the memory of its rigid girth. With a wicked glance up, she ran her hand up the length of it, her fingers bumping the raised rings. When a hiss escaped him, she kissed the tip of his crown.

"I've missed this."

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He bit back a desperate groan and brushed a strand of hair from her face. “Linnea.”

“I love the sound of my name on your lips. Almost as much as I love taking your cock in my mouth.” Without another word, she slid her lips over the crown, swirling her tongue around the silky skin. She moved her mouth down, taking as much of him as she could before sliding her lips back up.

His hips moved as she continued to suck him, and his breathing became ragged. When his cock twitched in her mouth, Linnea squeezed the base, but before she could suck harder, Zexx was reaching down and pulling her off him and up his body. His hand replaced hers at the base of his cock as he positioned her on top.

Linnea braced her palms on his chest as she hovered over him, thinking that forbidden fruit had never tasted so sweet. As she sank down and their bodies joined, a desperate moan slipped from her lips. Her body had been aching for him since the moment she’d left the Dothvek village, and she’d never felt as complete as when he was inside her.

Linnea moved herself on top of him, her head tossed back, and her eyes closed as she allowed herself to sink into the sensations. His ridges stroked her just right and she tilted her hips forward to rub against the ridges above his cock, her pleasure building.

Zexx gripped her hips, moving her on his cock as he thrust up to meet her. “Look at me, Linnea.”

She was barely aware of his words until he repeated them. Then she opened her eyes and locked onto his, letting her head fall forward and her hair cascade around her

face. As his thrusts became faster, Linnea slid her hands to his slick chest, feeling the rapid beat of his heart.

Then her body started to shudder, and she threw her head back, her mouth opening in a silent scream as ripple after ripple of delicious tremors coursed through her. Zexx thrust once more before holding her onto his cock as he roared, his body jerking with his release.

Linnea flopped forward, her body sagging as she fell onto Zexx's chest. She didn't care that the furs and blankets were tangled beneath them or that they were both glistening with sweat. She rested her head on his chest and listened to his heartbeat slowed to a steady rhythm.

As she lay curled beside him, she couldn't help but wonder what tomorrow would bring. How could she look at him in a formal setting and not remember the feel of his skin against hers?

As if sensing her thoughts once more, Zexx tightened his arm around her. "Don't," he murmured sleepily.

"Don't what?" she asked, tracing idle patterns on his chest.

"Don't start planning how to keep this secret, how to manage the political fallout, how to balance your duty with your desire." His voice was rough with satisfaction but tinged with understanding. "That's for tomorrow's light. Tonight belongs to us alone."

She smiled against his skin, marveling at how well he already knew her. "When did you become so wise, Dothvek?"

He chuckled, the sound rumbling through his chest beneath her ear. "Perhaps your Crestek strategy is rubbing off on me."

"A cultural exchange indeed," she whispered, allowing herself to sink into the warmth of his embrace, pushing thoughts of tomorrow's complexities into the distant future where they belonged.

For now, in this tent-like sanctuary high above the city, she was simply a woman in the arms of a warrior who had somehow breached all her carefully constructed defenses. And for the first time since she'd become chancellor, she felt utterly, completely at peace.

ChapterSixteen

Zexx jerked awake, disoriented by the unfamiliar surroundings. For a heartbeat, he couldn't place where he was—this wasn't his tent in the oasis, nor the cold stone chamber he'd been assigned in the tower. The fabric draped overhead was familiar yet wrong, the scent of spices and perfume mingling with something uniquely feminine that tugged at his memory.

Linnea.

The realization crashed over him as he registered the warm weight of her curled against his side, her dark hair fanned across his chest, her breathing deep and even in sated sleep. The chancellor of the Cresteks lay in his arms, naked and vulnerable, their limbs tangled among furs and blankets meant to emulate his home.

Moonlight streamed through the high windows, casting silver patterns across her golden skin. The bells on the draped fabric had gone silent, the only sounds now her gentle breathing and the distant hum of the city below.

Then panic seized him as he noticed the position of the moons through the window.

How long had they slept? How much time had passed while they'd lost themselves in

each other?

"Linnea," he murmured, gently shaking her shoulder. "Wake up."

She made a soft sound of protest, burrowing closer to him. Even half-asleep, she was captivating, and it took all his willpower not to give in to the desire to hold her until dawn.

"Your adjunct will be expecting me to leave the dinner," he pressed, his voice urgent but low. "We need to move quickly."

Her eyes fluttered open, confusion giving way to understanding as she took in their situation. "What time is it?" she asked, her voice husky from sleep.

"Late," he replied, reluctantly disentangling himself from her warm embrace. "Too late for a diplomatic dinner to still be in progress."

She sat up, the furs falling away to reveal all of her body in the moonlight. The sight nearly undid his resolve to leave. Her skin bore faint marks from his attentions, small reminders of their passion that sent a surge of primitive satisfaction through him.

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"You're right," she said, rubbing her eyes. "We've been careless."

He stood, searching for his discarded clothing while trying not to stare as she stretched languidly. His tunic had been flung carelessly across the room in his eagerness to be free of it. Now he retrieved it with reluctance, knowing it would feel even more confining after the freedom of skin against skin.

"What's our story?" she asked, watching him dress with barely hidden desire in her eyes.

"That we discussed trade agreements until we both grew tired of talking," he suggested, pulling on his leather pants.

Linnea laughed softly. "No one who knows me would believe I'd tire of talking politics."

He couldn't help but smile. "Then perhaps we argued. That would be believable enough."

She rose from the furs, and he had to clench his fists to keep from reaching for her again. The knowledge that they would both pay dearly if discovered was the only thing preventing him from carrying her back to that nest of cushions.

"Help me," she said, reaching for the sheer dress she'd worn earlier. "This fastens at the back."

His fingers brushed the nape of her neck as he secured the ties, and he felt her shiver

at his touch. Even this mundane act of dressing felt intimate, charged with the memory of how he'd undressed her hours before.

When she was clothed, he helped her straighten her hair, his fingers gentle as they worked through the tangles their passion had created. She leaned back against him, her eyes closing briefly at his touch.

"We shouldn't do this again," she whispered, though her body said otherwise. "It's too dangerous."

"I know," he agreed, even as he pressed a kiss to the crown of her head, breathing in the scent of her. "For both of us."

The sudden sound of the door opening sent them springing apart. Linnea's adjunct stood frozen in the doorway, his eyes widening as he took in the disheveled room and their suspiciously perfect postures.

Zexx reacted on instinct, dropping into a formal bow that felt ridiculous given what had transpired between them. "Thank you for the dinner, Chancellor," he said, his voice deliberately gruff. "But it will take more than one meal under a tent to repair relations between our peoples."

Linnea's eyes flashed with understanding before her face settled into the cool mask he'd seen in her office. "The Dothveks carry as much blame as the Cresteks for the discord between us, Ambassador," she replied, her tone clipped. "Perhaps if your people were more willing to embrace change rather than clinging to outdated traditions, we might find more common ground."

He scowled authentically—her barb about traditions had struck close to home—and stomped toward the door, brushing past the adjunct with deliberate rudeness.

"Chancellor," the adjunct stammered, "I didn't realize—"

"It's fine, K'Nar," Linnea cut him off. "The ambassador and I were just concluding our... discussions."

He caught a final glimpse of her as the door closed—standing proud and tall in her chambers, every inch the chancellor despite her slightly swollen lips and the telltale flush that still colored her cheeks.

Only when he was halfway down the spiraling ramp did he release a heavy breath. They'd been reckless, foolish. A moment's difference in timing and they would have been discovered in a far more compromising position.

He descended slowly, his mind racing. What madness had they unleashed? And how hard would he have to work to conceal the desire that even now coursed through him at the memory of her in his arms?

By the time he reached his chambers, his body was tense with the strain of maintaining the façade of diplomatic animosity. He slipped inside, securing the door behind him before making his way to the bubbling pool in the bathing chamber.

He stripped off the clothing he'd so recently donned, letting it fall to the stone floor. The steaming water welcomed him as he submerged himself, hoping to wash away the evidence of their encounter. But instead of cleansing him, the heat only brought back vivid flashes of their night together.

Linnea's head thrown back in ecstasy, her throat exposed to his kisses. The way she'd whispered his name like a prayer when he'd claimed her body. How perfectly she'd fit against him as they'd moved together on the furs.

His body responded instantly to the memories, arousal flowing through him with

renewed urgency. He groaned, sinking deeper into the water. Being ambassador had suddenly become a far more challenging task than he could have ever imagined.

Keeping their secret was no longer simply a matter of political expediency—it could be a matter of life or death for both of them. The Crestek council would not hesitate to remove Linnea from power if they discovered she'd taken a Dothvek lover. And Kyrana would not be pleased if she knew he'd bedded the leader of their former enemy while serving as ambassador.

Yet even as he contemplated the dangers, he couldn't bring himself to regret what had happened. For the first time since arriving in this stone prison of a city, he felt alive—truly alive, as he only ever had on the open sands beneath the stars.

The water swirled around him, carrying away the physical traces of their passion but doing nothing to diminish the burning in his blood. If anything, the forced separation only intensified his hunger for her. Knowing she was a few floors above him, perhaps lying in the same furs where they'd found such pleasure, was a special kind of torture.

He closed his eyes, letting his head rest against the edge of the pool. Tomorrow would bring the challenge of facing her in front of those less understanding than her adjunct, of maintaining the pretense of diplomatic coldness while remembering the heat of her skin against his.

They would have to be careful. Strategic. Every glance, every word would need to be measured and controlled.

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A bitter laugh escaped him, echoing off the stone walls. He, who had always lived by instinct rather than calculation, would now need to become as politically adept as any Crestek councilor. The irony was not lost on him.

As he finally emerged from the water, his skin flushed from the heat, he caught his reflection in the polished metal mirror on the wall. He hardly recognized himself—the fierce Dothvek warrior now caught in a web of secrecy and desire, playing at politics while his heart thundered with forbidden longing.

"What have you begun, Zexx?" he murmured to his reflection.

Only silence answered, broken by the soft bubbling of the pool behind him and the distant sounds of the city that never truly slept. Beyond the walls, somewhere far across the sands, lay the village where he belonged—where life made sense and duty was clear.

But as he dried himself and prepared for what little remained of the night, he knew with bone-deep certainty that he could no longer imagine a future that didn't include Linnea. Whatever game they'd started, whatever dangers they now faced, they were bound by something that superseded their differences.

He just hoped they would both survive the playing of it.

ChapterSeventeen

"The eastern quarter's water supply issues have been resolved," K'Nar reported, his stylus scratching against parchment as he made notes. "The engineers believe the new

reclamation system should prevent further shortages through the dry season."

Linnea nodded, attempting to focus on his words while her mind stubbornly drifted elsewhere. The morning light streamed through the high tower windows, casting long shadows across her office and illuminating the dust motes that danced in the air. Usually, she found comfort in these morning briefings—the orderly recitation of problems solved and tasks completed provided structure to her days as chancellor.

But today, she could barely concentrate on governance when her body still hummed with memories of the night before.

"Chancellor?" K'Nar's voice pulled her reluctantly back to the present. "Did you hear what I said about the artisans' tax petition?"

"Of course," she lied, straightening in her chair. "I think we should approve the extension, given the circumstances."

K'Nar's eyebrows rose slightly. "I was actually recommending that we deny it, considering their third quarter profits."

She bit the inside of her cheek, annoyed at her own distraction. "Yes, that's what I meant. Deny the petition."

Her adjunct studied her with barely concealed curiosity. No doubt he was still puzzling over the scene he'd walked in on last night—the disheveled room, the tension between her and the Dothvek ambassador, the hastily contrived argument.

If he only knew the truth. If he could see the marks Zexx had left on her skin, hidden now beneath her formal robes. If he could read the thoughts that kept intruding on her attempts to govern...

His hands on her waist, strong enough to bruise but gentle in their exploration...

The heat of his mouth against her throat...

The thickness of him inside her, his eyes locked with hers as he stretched her...

She shook her head sharply, banishing the images. This had to stop. Whatever madness had taken hold of her last night could be nothing more than a momentary lapse, a forbidden fling. She was chancellor of the Cresteks, responsible for an entire city and a fragile peace. If her people discovered she was sleeping with the enemy—with a Dothvek warrior, of all things—there would be chaos. The peace was too new for her people to accept their leader with a former enemy. Even if the common people could be convinced to accept it, her more conservative council would not.

Or worse.

"Is there anything else I should know?" she asked K'Nar, forcing herself back to the business of leadership.

"Just one matter," he replied, consulting his notes. "The Dothvek ambassador has requested an audience this morning to discuss his official duties."

Her heart stuttered in her chest. "Has he? When?"

As if summoned by her question, a knock sounded at the door. K'Nar moved to answer it, and she used the brief moment to compose herself, straightening her silver robes and schooling her features into what she hoped was an expression of calm authority.

All her efforts shattered the moment Zexx stepped through the doorway.

He hadn't bothered with a tunic today, his golden chest bare and gleaming in the morning light, his black skin ink on full display. The hard ridges of muscle that she'd traced with her fingers and lips the night before were now exposed for anyone to see, a blatant reminder of his otherness—his Dothvek nature that flaunted Crestek conventions of propriety.

K'Nar's eyes widened comically, his gaze darting between them as if trying to determine the appropriate protocol for a half-naked ambassador.

"Ambassador Zexx," she managed, her voice steadier than she felt. "I wasn't expecting you quite so soon."

"Chancellor," he replied, his deep voice sending an involuntary shiver down her spine. "I wished to discuss my duties."

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K’Nar cleared his throat. "Shall I stay for the meeting, Chancellor?"

"That won't be necessary," Zexx answered before she could, his tone leaving no room for argument. "Our discussion is...sensitive in nature."

Her adjunct hesitated, clearly torn between propriety and following the ambassador's implied command.

"It's fine, K’Nar," she said, making the decision for him. "Please see that we're not disturbed."

He bowed stiffly and backed out of the office, closing the door with a soft click that seemed to echo in the sudden silence.

She stood behind her desk, using it as a barrier between them. "You could have warned me you were coming," she said, striving for a professional tone. "And perhaps considered wearing proper attire."

Zexx's lips curved into a smile that was both predatory and amused. "Dothveks consider this proper attire," he said, moving around the desk with the fluid grace of a hunter. "Besides, you seemed to appreciate it last night."

Heat rushed to her cheeks as he stepped closer, his spicy, sun-warmed scent enveloping her—a scent that hadn’t faded despite his departure from the sands. "We need to be careful," she whispered, even as her body swayed toward his. "K’Nar already suspects something."

"Let him suspect," Zexx murmured, leaning in until his breath warmed her ear. "The only topic I want to discuss is those sounds you made last night in my arms."

Her face flamed and she swatted at his chest, unable to suppress a laugh despite herself. "You're impossible."

"Impossibly drawn to you," he agreed, sweeping her into his arms with such sudden strength that she gasped. "I haven't stopped thinking about you since I left your chambers."

His confession mirrored her own experience so perfectly that her resistance crumbled. She allowed herself to melt into his embrace, her hands moving to his bare shoulders, feeling the warmth of his skin beneath her palms.

Reality intruded quickly, cooling her desire. "We have to keep this secret," she said, pulling back enough to meet his gaze. "If anyone discovers us, we could both be in danger. There are factions on the council who don't approve of the peace between our peoples, who would use this as proof that I'm unfit to lead."

Zexx's expression shifted, playfulness giving way to fierce intensity. His arms tightened around her protectively, a low growl rumbling in his chest.

"I would never let anyone hurt you," he said, his voice dropping to a dangerous register that sent chills across her skin. "I would defend you with my dying breath."

The raw sincerity in his words left her speechless. This wasn't diplomatic flattery or the heat of passion speaking—this was a vow, solemn and binding. In the space of a few days, this man who should have been her enemy had become her protector, her confidant, her lover.

For one dizzying moment, she allowed herself to wonder what it might be like if their

love wasn't forbidden. If she could walk openly beside him, not as chancellor and ambassador but simply as Linnea and Zexx. What future might they build together, bridging their two peoples not through formal treaties but through the bonds between them?

The fantasy was so seductive, so enticing, that words rose unbidden to her lips. "Zexx, what if we—"

The door burst open without warning, and they sprang apart, her heart thundering in her chest.

K'Nar stood in the doorway, his face flushed with exertion. "Chancellor, forgive the interruption, but there's an urgent matter requiring your attention."

ChapterEighteen

The adjunct's golden face was flushed and his breathing as heavy as if he'd run up the spiraling ramp.

"Chancellor," he gasped, forgetting even to bow in his urgency. "There's a protest forming at the eastern edge of the city. Cresteks unhappy with the peace accord. They're gathering in numbers, and the guards are concerned it could turn violent."

The transformation in Linnea was immediate. Gone was the woman who had melted in Zexx's arms moments before, replaced by the stern, unwavering chancellor. Her spine straightened, her shoulders squared, and her expression hardened into an impenetrable mask of authority.

But beneath that mask, he sensed something else entirely: fear.

The realization struck him like a blow. He shouldn't be able to sense her emotions

this clearly. His Dothvek empathic abilities were limited to others of his kind—or to a mind mate. He'd sensed her the night before, but that had been different. That had been passion and hunger, and he'd been sure the connection would fade once he wasn't inside her. But no, it was just as strong now, and it shouldn't be. The thought sent a cold tremor through him. Linnea couldn't possibly be his mind mate. She was Crestek, born of the people he'd been taught from childhood to fear and despise.

Yet there it was, unmistakable—her anxiety flowing into his consciousness as clearly as water in a stream. He could feel her concern for her position, for the fragile peace, and most unsettling of all, for him.

He struggled to keep his face impassive as this inner turmoil raged. His Dothvek brothers had found mind mates among the human and alien females who had crashed on their planet, but even that had been unprecedented. This connection with Linnea defied everything he thought he knew about their peoples, about himself.

"How many are gathered?" Linnea asked, her voice steady despite the apprehension he could feel radiating from her.

"I am unsure of the numbers," K'Nar replied, "but more than the usual splinter unrest. They're chanting for a return to the old ways."

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"The old ways," Linnea repeated, contempt coloring her tone. "You mean isolation, xenophobia, and stagnation."

K'Nar shifted uncomfortably. "They're saying the peace has made us weak. That the Dothveks can't be trusted, that they'll use our openness against us, that your brother was a traitor to leave his people."

At this, Linnea visibly flinched. Zexx could feel the anger surge within her. She did not take accusations about Karv lightly. Zexx welcomed the fiery rage that pulsed from her to him, his own ire ignited by the insults to Karv, who was now a member of his tribe.

But he remained silent, watching as Linnea paced the width of her office, the hem of her silver robes whispering against the stone floor. The morning light caught in her dark hair, illuminating strands of copper he hadn't noticed before.

"We need to crush this immediately," she said, her voice hard. "If we allow this dissent to flourish, the hatred will only grow. Have the guards identify the instigators and bring them to the central holding cells."

"You mean to jail them?" K'Nar asked, his voice carefully neutral though his eyes betrayed his concern.

"I mean to make an example of them," Linnea replied. "The transition to peace was never going to be seamless, but I won't tolerate those who would drag us backward."

A knock at the door interrupted them, and another Crestek entered—older, with a

severe expression and robes of dark blue that marked him as a security advisor.

"Chancellor," he bowed stiffly. "I've just come from the eastern quarter. The guards have already apprehended several of the protest leaders. What are your orders?"

Zexx watched Linnea's reaction carefully, sensing the conflict within her. She projected strength outwardly—her posture regal, her voice firm—but he could feel her fear that any sign of weakness would be exploited, that she would be ousted as chancellor, that the peace would crumble. And beneath it all, a protective sister raged at the accusations hurled toward her brother.

His heart ached for her, for the burden she carried. Without thinking, he stepped forward into their circle.

"If I may speak," he said, the sound of his voice startling everyone in the room. Three pairs of Crestek eyes turned to him in surprise, as if they'd forgotten his presence entirely.

Linnea nodded cautiously. "Ambassador?"

"You cannot rule by fear and cruelty if you want your people to believe things are different," he said, the words emerging before he'd fully considered them. "That is the old way—the way of your predecessor, of your brother Riz."

Linnea gaped at him, and he could almost hear her protests forming in his mind. The security advisor's expression darkened with outrage at his presumption.

"With respect, Ambassador," the older Crestek said coldly, "this is an internal matter."

"Is it?" he challenged, holding his gaze until he looked away. "These protests directly

concern the peace treaty and the Dothvek people. As ambassador, I represent both."

He turned back to Linnea, painfully aware of the recklessness of what he was about to suggest but knowing with bone-deep certainty it was right. Despite his own hunger for retribution and battle, temperance was what Kyrana would advise, what the wisest of their elders would counsel. And he was, after all, not just Linnea's lover but a diplomat—perhaps one of the few hopes for preserving the peace.

"Let the people see me," he said. "Not hidden away in your tower but walking among them. Let them see that the Dothveks they fear are flesh and blood, not the monsters from their children's tales."

"That's madness," the security advisor sputtered. "They would tear you apart."

"Would they?" he asked, never breaking eye contact with Linnea. "Or would they hesitate when confronted with the reality rather than the fantasy of their enemy? When our people have met, we have found more in common than different."

Linnea's brow furrowed. He could feel her internal debate—the attraction of the idea warring with her fear for his safety and her desire to punish those calling Karv a traitor. But it was her concern that wrapped around him like a physical embrace, so strong he almost staggered under its weight.

"It's too dangerous," she said aloud. "I won't risk—"

"Trust me," he interrupted, the words hanging between them, weighted with meanings beyond this moment. "This is why I came to your city. Let me fulfill my duty."

Something shifted in her eyes, and he felt the moment she made her decision. Trust flooded from her to him, a sensation so powerful and intimate that he swelled with

both pride and a fierce determination to prove worthy of it.

She sighed, touching a hand to her hair in a rare gesture of uncertainty. "I suppose we need to plan a proper reveal, then. Not a hasty reaction, but a controlled introduction."

K'Nar's eyes traveled down his bare chest, lingering on the tribal markings that spiraled across his skin, before darting to his leather pants and bare feet.

"He can't wear that," he muttered, dismay evident in his voice.

"Why not?" Zexx challenged, amused despite the tension in the room. "Are your people so easily frightened by skin?"

"Our people," Linnea corrected automatically, "are accustomed to certain standards of formal dress, particularly for public figures." She hesitated, then added more softly, "Though I have no issue with traditional attire."

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The hint of desire that colored her words sent heat coursing through him, momentarily distracting him from the gravity of the situation. When he looked up, the security advisor was watching them closely, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“And the protest?” K’Nar asked with a sharply cleared throat to draw attention back to him.

Linnea drew in a long breath. “Let it die out. Detain no one. Ignore it.”

The council member opened his mouth then pressed it together in a thin line as Linnea continued.

“We will steal attention from the protest by announcing a welcome reception for the new ambassador—tonight.”

“Tonight?” K’Nar spluttered.

Linnea smiled, clearly warming to the idea. “On the rooftop for the Crestek elite. First, we get the elite to approve, then the rest of the citizens will follow.” She turned to him, her expression professional though her eyes held warmth only he could see. “Ambassador, I believe there are some more... appropriate garments in your quarters that might suit the occasion.”

He inclined his head, hiding his smile. “As you wish, Chancellor.”

As the others hurried to carry out her commands, she studied his face, concern evident in the line between her brows. “Why do I feel like you can read my

thoughts?" she asked suddenly.

The question caught him off guard. He hesitated, uncertain how to explain when he wasn't sure what was happening.

"Perhaps because we understand each other better than either of us expected," he offered instead, the partial truth easier than the full revelation.

She seemed to accept this, nodding slowly. "Be careful tonight, Zexx. The Crestek elite can be both welcoming and terrifying."

He captured her hand briefly, squeezing it before releasing it. "I have faced Dothvek warriors in the tundra and survived. I think I can handle a few fancy Cresteks."

"Don't underestimate them," she warned. "Especially the females."

As he left her office to prepare for the reception, her concern lingered with him, a warmth in his mind that both comforted and unsettled him. If Linnea truly was his mind mate—impossible as that seemed—then their fates were bound more tightly than either of them had imagined.

But for now, he had a more immediate challenge: convincing the most elite Cresteks that he was not the monster they believed him to be.

And somehow, he needed to do it while wearing layers of their scratchy garments.

Chapter Nineteen

Linnea stood before the polished metal mirror in her chambers, applying the final touches to her appearance for the evening's reception. The fabric tent and cushions were gone, replaced once more by the austere stone walls and rigid furnishings

expected of the chancellor's private quarters. She missed the warmth of the draped fabric, the gentle jingling of tiny bells, the fluffy furs beneath her feet—but she knew she couldn't keep such obvious reminders of the Dothvek culture on display. Not when so much depended on maintaining appearances.

Her fingers moved through her dark hair, arranging the loose curls that cascaded down her back. It was a more sensual style than she typically wore in public, where her hair was usually pinned severely away from her face. Tonight was different. Tonight was about appearing approachable to the Crestek elite. Seducing them into backing her, so to speak.

She was convinced that the dissent bubbling at the edges of their city was fueled not by the common people but by the ruling class who resented her power. The noble families had never expected a female chancellor, especially not the sister of the disgraced Riz. If she and Zexx could charm them, they would be less inclined to incite grassroots rebellions against the peace accord, and then she could work on winning the support of the masses through more practical measures.

Her gown for the evening epitomized the paradox of Crestek society—the rigid formality displayed in public contrasted with the sensuality celebrated behind closed doors. The fabric was nearly transparent, clinging to her curves like water, with her breasts pushed up by the snug bodice and her legs revealed beneath diaphanous layers that shifted with her every movement. It was typical attire for Crestek females at private gatherings, though it would be hidden beneath voluminous cloaks when moving through public spaces.

Their society had developed behind stone walls and thus its people had developed a similar approach to fashion. No one would dare appear in public without being fully cloaked, the color indicating their status. But beneath the cloaks, females wore revealing dresses. They made strategic matches but openly took many lovers. It was one of the many layers of hypocrisy that Linnea disliked about her people.

A knock at her door interrupted her preparations. "Enter," she called, assuming it was K'Nar coming to give her a final report about the attendees.

When the door opened, her breath caught. Zexx stood in the doorway, transformed by formal Crestek attire. How was it possible he looked even more dangerous in clothing befitting a scribe? Slate blue pants hugged his powerful legs, a cream-colored tunic fell below his waist, and a sleeveless black cloak with gilded detailing draped elegantly over his broad shoulders.

Despite the outfit, there was something untamable about him—a primal energy that no amount of Crestek finery could disguise. The contrast between his civilized appearance and the wild intensity in his eyes made her pulse quicken.

"Chancellor," he said formally, though his gaze traveled over her with such heat that the title seemed absurd.

"Ambassador," she replied, equally formal despite the flush rising to her cheeks.

He closed the door behind him, crossing the room in three long strides. "Is this what Crestek females wear to parties?" he asked, his voice dropping low as he circled her slowly.

She turned with him, meeting his gaze boldly. "It is. Particularly among the elite."

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"And the males? Do they approve of their females displaying themselves so... generously?"

She smiled, recognizing the jealousy lurking beneath his question. "Crestek females have their pick of men, Ambassador. As you know, there are fewer of us due to the illness that took so many females from both our populations. Many Crestek females take multiple lovers, even the ones with mates. It's not uncommon."

Zexx growled low in his throat, the sound so possessive that she felt it resonate through her body. He stepped closer, his hands finding her waist through the thin fabric of her gown.

"I do not wish for you to take any lover but me," he said, his thumbs tracing small circles on her hips.

She laughed softly, delighted by his reaction despite herself. "I won't. I'm far too busy to manage multiple males." Then, more seriously, she added, "But I'm pleased you want me for yourself."

"Want? No, Linnea." His grip tightened slightly. "Desire. Need. Crave. These are better words."

She wasn't accustomed to such raw possessiveness from men. Crestek males tended to approach relationships with cool practicality, knowing they were easily replaced in a female's affections and could hardly demand exclusivity. But this primal side of Zexx—this absolute certainty that she was his and his alone—stirred something equally primitive within her.

"Thank you for agreeing to this reception," she said, changing the subject before she could be tempted to suggest they skip the party entirely. "I know you would not choose a party for the elites."

"This approach seems... inefficient," he admitted. "Mingling with a few dozen highborns rather than showing myself to hundreds of citizens."

She smoothed a non-existent wrinkle from his cloak. "Trust me. If we can win over the upper class, the rest of the Cresteks will follow. They may not admit it, but they take their cues from the elite. Besides, this controlled setting allows us to present you as sophisticated and cultured—not the savage barbarian they expect."

Zexx raised an eyebrow. "And that is what you want? For me to appear tamed?"

"For tonight, yes," she said, meeting his gaze. "Play the role of the civilized diplomat, and tomorrow I'll personally take you through the market quarter where the people can see you."

The door opened without warning, and K'Nar entered, stopping short when he saw Zexx already in her chambers. His eyes darted between them, calculation evident in his expression.

"Chancellor, the guests are arriving," he said, his voice carefully neutral. "It's time."

She stepped back from Zexx, smoothing her gown. "The Dothvek ambassador came to escort me to the reception," she explained, though she doubted K'Nar believed the convenient lie.

"How... chivalrous," her adjunct responded dryly.

The three of them departed her chambers and ascended the final spiral toward the

rooftop. As they climbed, she sensed Zexx's growing tension. For a warrior accustomed to open spaces and the endless horizon of the sands, the confines of the tower must have been suffocating. At least the reception would offer him sky and stars, if not the comfort of his desert home.

They emerged onto the rooftop terrace, and even she, who had attended countless such gatherings, was momentarily struck by the spectacle. Lanterns hung from delicate chains, casting warm golden light across the assembled guests. The night air carried the heavy scent of exotic perfumes, mingling with the aroma of spiced wine and the subtle incense burning in ornate braziers. Musicians played a lilting melody on stringed instruments in the corner, the notes rising and falling like water.

The Crestek elite had outdone themselves tonight, their attire more elaborate and revealing than usual, as if determined to assert their cultural superiority to their Dothvek guest. Females in gauzy gowns similar to hers floated among males in richly embroidered robes, all of them wearing the carefully constructed expressions of people accustomed to political maneuvering.

The chatter ceased abruptly as they stepped fully into view. Every head turned, every eye fixed on Zexx, who stood tall and uncompromising beside her despite the unfamiliar surroundings.

"Distinguished guests," she called, her voice carrying across the suddenly silent terrace. "It is my honor to introduce Ambassador Zexx of the Dothvek clan, representative of Kyrana, their esteemed leader. He comes to us in the spirit of peace and cooperation. I trust you will make him welcome."

The silence stretched for a heartbeat too long, then broke suddenly as several females moved forward almost as one, their expressions transforming from wary assessment to predatory interest.

"Ambassador," purred a female in a gown of deep purple that barely covered her dusky nipples. "How fascinating to meet a real Dothvek. You must tell me everything about life on the sands."

"Is it true that Dothvek males only take one mate?" asked another, her fingers boldly stroking the fabric of his cloak. "I hope you would not limit yourself here."

A third female, bolder still, slipped between the others to offer Zexx a goblet of wine, her body pressed unnecessarily close to his as she did so. "I've heard the most extraordinary things about Dothvek stamina," she murmured, just loudly enough for Linnea to hear.

She watched as Zexx was surrounded, separated from her by a circle of Crestek females who eyed him like a delicacy they couldn't wait to sample. He handled their attention with surprising grace, his responses measured and diplomatic even as his eyes occasionally sought hers over their heads.

"The plan seems to be working better than we hoped," K'Nar whispered beside her, a note of satisfaction in his voice. "The females, at least, appear to find our barbarian ambassador quite... acceptable."

She took a long sip of the wine a servant had handed her, feeling the sweet liquid burn a path down her throat. Zexx was now being introduced to several council members, their initial wariness giving way to curiosity as they engaged him in conversation. Every few moments, one of the females would touch his arm or laugh too loudly at something he said, their intentions as transparent as the fabric of her gown.

"You don't regret your decision, do you, Chancellor?"

Linnea started at the female voice now at her side. She managed a smile at the female

attendant. “Zelina, you’re working this event?”

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“I wouldn’t miss it,” she confessed, refilling the chancellor’s wine from a pitcher. “I wanted to see how your plan with the Dothvek was going.” She tracked Zexx and the Crestek females buzzing around him. “I’d say it’s a success.”

Linnea took a sip of wine. “More than I expected.”

Zelina patted her arm as she backed away. “Congratulations, Chancellor.”

Linnea nodded mutely as she watched another female boldly run her fingers along Zexx's forearm, ostensibly to examine his tribal markings, and a realization struck her with the force of a physical blow. For all her concerns about his jealousy, perhaps she was the one who should be worried. What if Zexx found the attention of these Crestek females not unwelcome but enticing?

The thought made her stomach clench with an emotion she rarely experienced: pure, unadulterated jealousy. And suddenly, the victory of seeing her plan succeed tasted remarkably bitter.

ChapterTwenty

Zexx stood surrounded by a circle of Crestek females, their bodies pressing closer with each passing moment, their perfumes mingling into a cloying cloud that threatened to suffocate him. The formal clothing K’Nar had insisted he wear felt like a prison—the tunic too tight across his chest, the cloak heavy on his shoulders, the boots confining his feet that longed for the freedom of bare contact with the ground, preferably warm sand.

"Is it true that Dothveks sleep under the stars?" asked a female in a dress so sheer he could count the freckles on her skin beneath it. Her hand rested on his forearm, fingers tracing the edges of his tribal markings where they extended beyond his sleeve.

"Often," he replied, keeping his voice even despite his discomfort. "The desert nights are cool, and the view of the heavens is unobstructed."

"How romantic," sighed another, her painted lips forming an exaggerated pout. "Do you ever get... lonely out there on the sands?"

The suggestive emphasis made her meaning unmistakable. These females weren't interested in Dothvek culture or the peace accord—they were hunting, and he was their prey. An exotic specimen to be captured and sampled.

"Dothveks are never truly alone," he explained, stepping back slightly only to bump into another female who had positioned herself behind him. "We live communally in the village, and even those who venture into the deep sands remain connected through our empathic abilities."

"Empathic abilities?" This from a third female, jewels piercing her ears all the way to the points. "You can sense feelings? How fascinating. What am I feeling right now, Ambassador?"

Her eyes held his, a challenge in their depths as she deliberately pressed her body against his side.

"Curiosity," he said diplomatically, though what he sensed from her was raw, undisguised lust. "And perhaps a bit too much wine."

They laughed at that, the sound high and artificial compared to the honest, full-bodied

mirth he was accustomed to hearing around the Dothvek communal fires.

"Tell us more about your daily life," urged the first female. "What do you wear when you're not so... formally attired?"

"Animal skin pants," he answered honestly. "The desert is hot during the day. Excess clothing is impractical."

"Just pants?" The female's eyes gleamed. "Nothing else at all?"

"Nothing else," he confirmed, watching as they exchanged meaningful glances.

"Perhaps you could give us a demonstration sometime," suggested one boldly, her fingers brushing against his chest. "For cultural exchange purposes, of course."

He smiled tightly, aware that he needed to charm these influential women but increasingly uncomfortable with their blatant propositions. He knew the Crestek society had different customs regarding mating, but the aggressive nature of their pursuit was jarring.

"I spent my childhood learning to track sand serpents," he said, deliberately changing the subject. "They can grow to the length of many men and move beneath the surface with barely a ripple to mark their passage."

"How thrilling," murmured a female in blue, though her tone suggested she found him more thrilling than his hunting tales. "You must be very... skilled with your hands."

At least she had not asked about his sand snake. Zexx supposed he should be grateful for that.

He looked up at the night sky, seeking momentary escape in the familiar constellations that shone overhead. They were the same stars he'd grown up beneath, yet they seemed dimmer here, muted by the city's lights and the concentration of smoke from many cooking fires. In the heart of the sands, the points of light blazed a carpet across the inky blackness of the sky.

A pang of homesickness struck him unexpectedly. He missed the simplicity of the sands, the honesty of survival, the clarity of purpose that came with warrior life. Everything in the Crestek city was its opposite—elaborate instead of simple, deceptive rather than honest, convoluted instead of direct.

He reminded himself why he was here: for his people, for the peace accord, for Linnea. Especially for Linnea, whose safety now felt as essential to him as his own.

The thought of her centered him, and he scanned the rooftop terrace, seeking her out among the crowd. The gathering had grown louder as more wine flowed, laughter and conversation blending with the music from the trio of musicians in the corner. Strings of glittering beads were draped from pole to pole around the space, catching the light from hanging lanterns and throwing prismatic reflections across the guests' faces.

Platters of elaborate foods circulated—intricate delicacies he couldn't identify by sight or smell, though the aromas were intriguing. So different from the simple, hearty meals shared around their communal fires and scooped up with wedges of bread, yet another reminder of the gulf between their peoples.

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Finally, he spotted Linnea standing near the edge of the terrace, engaged in conversation with an older male in formal robes. Even from a distance, he could sense her emotions—a mix of professional composure overlaying something darker, sharper. When her eyes met his across the gathering, she smiled, but he felt her disapproval like a cold wind.

He excused himself from his admirers, ignoring their protests as he made his way to Linnea's side. The older male bowed and retreated as he approached, either from respect or wariness—he couldn't tell which.

"Am I doing something wrong?" he asked quietly when they were relatively alone.

Linnea's smile tightened. "You're perfect," she said, but the words didn't match the emotions he sensed from her. After a moment's hesitation, she added, "I just hate seeing all these females who want to bed you."

The admission surprised him—not the observation itself, which was obvious, but her willingness to voice her jealousy. "They can want all they like," he replied, leaning closer to her. "I desire none of them. Only you."

He felt her pulse of pleasure at his words, so strong and clear it almost made his knees buckle. The intensity of this mind-mate connection between them was growing stronger, binding them together in ways even he didn't fully understand.

"We've been diplomatic long enough, I think," she said, her voice steady though her emotions swirled like a sandstorm. As an approaching male in ministerial robes drew near, she smiled brightly and made introductions. "Minister Taal, may I present

Ambassador Zexx. Ambassador, Minister Taal oversees our agricultural programs."

He inclined his head respectfully as the minister began to speak about irrigation techniques, but Linnea suddenly pressed a hand to her temple.

"I apologize," she interjected, her voice strained. "I seem to have developed a terrible headache. The excitement of the evening, perhaps."

Zexx understood her strategy immediately. "Chancellor, you should rest," he said, infusing his voice with concern. "Allow me to escort you to your chambers."

Minister Taal looked disappointed but nodded sympathetically. "By all means, Chancellor. Your health must come first."

Zexx offered Linnea his arm with formal propriety, maintaining the charade as they bid farewell to the guests nearest them. Once they reached the spiraling ramp, however, propriety evaporated like morning dew under the desert sun.

The moment they were out of sight, he swept Linnea into his arms, cradling her against his chest as he descended the ramp at a pace that made her gasp.

"Zexx!" she whispered, though her arms wound around his neck. "Someone could see us."

"Let them," he growled, though he kept his voice low.

When they reached the level of her quarters, he made a split-second decision, striding past the door and continuing down the winding interior ramp to his chambers.

"They won't look for you here," he explained, pushing his door open and then kicking it shut behind them. "At least not immediately."

The bubbling pool in the bathing chamber sent tendrils of steam into the main room, the air warm and moist compared to the cool night above. He carried Linnea toward the bed, his lips finding hers in a kiss that held all the hunger he'd been suppressing throughout the interminable reception.

She responded with equal fervor, her fingers working at the fastenings of his formal attire with surprising dexterity. "These clothes suit you," she murmured against his mouth, "but I prefer you without them."

He laughed, the sound rumbling from deep in his chest. "On that, Chancellor, we are in perfect agreement."

As they fell onto the bed together, his diplomatic duties forgotten in the heat of her touch, he thought that perhaps being an ambassador wasn't such a terrible fate after all.

ChapterTwenty-One

Linnea gasped as Zexx carried her through the doorway of his quarters, her arms wound tightly around his neck as if she might float away without his anchoring presence. The sudden transition from the cool air of the spiraling ramp to the warm air of his chambers as steam from the bubbling pool curled into the main room sent a pleasant hum across her skin.

The moment the door closed behind them, cutting off the world outside, something changed in Zexx's demeanor—the Dothvek's restraint finally surrendering to desire. His eyes darkened as he carried her toward the steaming pool, and when his lips found hers, the kiss held none of the careful diplomacy he'd shown at the reception. This was raw, unfiltered hunger, and it ignited an answering fire within her.

Her fingers found the fastenings of his formal attire, working with an urgency that

surprised even her. The rich fabric that had made him look so striking among the reception guests now felt like an offensive barrier between them.

"These clothes suit you," she murmured against his mouth, her breath coming in quick, shallow bursts, "but I prefer you without them."

His laugh rumbled through his chest, the vibration traveling into her own body where he held her against him. "On that, Chancellor, we agree."

He set her down at the pool's edge, the warm stones beneath her feet radiating heat as wisps of fragrant steam rose around them. The water's surface rippled with gentle movement, inviting and iridescent in the chamber's soft lighting. Her silver chancellor's robes whispered against his ceremonial cloak in a metallic rustle of expensive fabric. The scent of him—desert wind and sun-warmed skin—mingled with the mineral-rich aroma of the heated pool, creating an intoxicating blend so different from the cloying aromas of the Crestek perfumes.

The memory of the females, with their transparent advances and possessive touches, sent a fresh surge of jealousy through her. She had watched from across the terrace, maintaining the façade of diplomatic pleasantries while something fierce and primal raged beneath her composed exterior. Their hands on his skin, their bodies pressed against his—it had taken every ounce of her self-control not to march across the gathering and claim him publicly as hers.

Now, in the privacy of his quarters, there was no reason to hide her desires. Her hands pushed his tunic from his shoulders, revealing the expanse of golden skin and dark ink that fascinated her endlessly. She traced the patterns with her fingertips, feeling the slight raised texture beneath her touch.

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"I hated watching them touch you," she admitted, the confession slipping out before she could reconsider it.

Zexx pulled back slightly, his eyes meeting hers with an intensity that made her breath catch. "And yet you're the one here with me," he said, his voice a low rumble that sent heat pooling low in her abdomen. "The only one I want."

"And you are the only one I want."

He made quick work of her dress, his warrior's hands surprisingly deft with the intricate Crestek fastenings. As the diaphanous fabric fell away, the warm, moist air caressed her exposed skin. Then he dropped his pants and kicked them aside, leaving no barrier between them.

Zexx stepped into the pool first, the water reaching his waist, rippling around his powerful form as he extended his hand to her. She took it, allowing him to guide her into the warm embrace of the water.

The sensation was exquisite—silky heat enveloping her body, supporting her weight as she moved toward him. Small jets of bubbles tickled her skin, the water's mineral content leaving it feeling impossibly smooth. She glided into his arms, their bodies meeting with slick, wet heat that intensified every point of contact.

"So beautiful," he murmured, lowering his head to trace a path along her collarbone with his lips, drops of water clinging to her skin like jewels. "Not so different from Dothvek females, yet like nothing I've ever seen before."

She arched into his touch, her entire body responsive to him in a way she'd never experienced with any Crestek lover. There had been others, of course, but those encounters had been physical release and little else. She hadn't imagined there could be more. Certainly nothing like this.

When his hands cupped her breasts beneath the water's surface, thumbs circling the sensitive peaks until she gasped his name, she felt something beyond physical pleasure—a pulse of his own desire echoing through her.

"Can you feel me?" she whispered, wondering if this impossible bond flowed both ways. "My thoughts, my feelings—can you sense them as I sense yours?"

His eyes widened slightly, surprise flickering across his features before understanding dawned. "Yes," he said, his voice rough with emotion. "It shouldn't be possible—not with a Crestek—but I feel you. Your desire, your pleasure...your heart."

The admission sent a wave of vulnerability through her. As chancellor, she had learned to guard her thoughts, to present only what she wished others to see. The idea of Zexx sensing her unfiltered emotions should have terrified her. Instead, letting the sensations wash over her was like liberation.

"Show me," she urged, pulling him closer in the water, craving the heat of his skin against hers. "Show me what it means to be truly connected."

He needed no further encouragement. His mouth claimed hers in a kiss that left her breathless, his hands exploring with increasing boldness beneath the rippling surface. The water splashed gently against the pool's edge as they moved, their bodies creating small waves that echoed their growing passion. When his fingers parted her thighs, she gasped, the sound reverberating in the steam-filled chamber. Through their strange connection, she could feel his satisfaction at her response, his pride in drawing such uninhibited sounds from the normally composed chancellor.

"No one sees you like this," he growled against her throat, his words both question and statement. "No one else knows how you come apart."

"No one," she confirmed, her voice breaking as his touch became more insistent. "Only you, Zexx. Only ever you."

The possessiveness in his eyes made her heart stutter. This powerful warrior, who could mercilessly face down sand serpents and enemy warriors without flinching, looked at her as if she were something precious and rare.

He guided her to the pool's edge, turning her around and placing her hands to the smooth stone of the ledge. He pressed his body against hers from behind and moved his hands to cup her breasts, as Linnea tipped forward and instinctively spread her legs. Zexx nestled his head in the crook of her neck, rumbling a growl as his cock slid between her legs. Linnea twitched her ass to notch his crown at her entrance, then with a single powerful motion, he thrust inside her as he nipped at her neck.

Linnea cried out as he held himself deep, the heat of the water easing the stretch but not lessening the sensation of being filled so completely she could barely breathe. Something shifted between them—some final barrier dissolving. Then Zexx dragged himself out with exquisite slowness only to drive back inside her and make her grasp at the stone ledge.

"Is this what you want?" he husked into her ear. "You want to give up control? You want to be taken by a barbarian from the sands?"

She nodded, unable to voice her desires. But he was right. She did want to abandon all her power and forget making decision after decision. She wanted him to be in control, to take her, to pleasure her without having to be told how. And considering his Dothvek abilities, that was exactly what he could do.

He nibbled Linnea's ear as he entered her so slowly she thought she might scream, each of his ridged rings sending frissons of pleasure through her. "You like being taken by a barbarian from the sands. You like letting me have my way with you, don't you?" He ran a hand up her throat and tipped her head back so that it was flush with his. "You love being fucked by a Dothvek who will never bend his knee to you, don't you, my pretty little chancellor?"

She should have rejected every word he said, but all of it was true. "And you love burying your cock inside a Crestek female you swore to despise."

He growled again and thrust harder as he released her neck and dropped his hands to her hips. Water cascaded around them as his movements were measured at first, controlled, but as their pleasure built, that control fractured. Each thrust sent ripples across the pool's surface, water splashing over the sides to dampen the stone floor beyond.

His rhythm became more urgent, his breathing ragged against her skin. She bent forward and tipped her ass higher to draw him deeper, meeting each thrust with a desperation that matched his own. The sounds of their passion mingled with the gentle splashing of water and the soft bubbling of the pool.

Her release came first, washing over her in waves that left her trembling and calling his name, her voice echoing off the chamber walls. He followed moments later, his powerful body tensing as he thrust hard and fast and then bellowed his release, the sound reverberating through the steamy air.

Then Zexx pulled her down into the water, coiling his arms around her and holding her. As she marveled at the strangeness of her situation, Linnea, chancellor of the Cresteks, remained wrapped in the arms of a Dothvek warrior, their slick bodies still humming with pleasure, their breathing gradually synchronizing in the quiet of his bathing chamber.

"I must say that diplomatic relations with the Dothveks have improved dramatically since your arrival."

His laughter rumbled beneath her ear, the sound full and genuine. "Is that what we're calling this now? Diplomatic relations?"

"Would you prefer 'cultural exchange'?" she teased, her hand sliding down his chest beneath the water, feeling the ridged muscles tense beneath her touch. "Or perhaps 'peace negotiations'?"

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He chuckled again, but Linnea knew what they were doing in secret had nothing to do with peace.

ChapterTwenty-Two

Zexx lay awake while Linnea slept curled against his side, her dark hair spilling across his chest, her breath warm against his skin. The gentle bubbling of the bathing pool provided a soothing backdrop to the quiet rhythm of her breathing. Outside, the sounds of the reception had finally faded, the last of the revelers presumably returned to their quarters as the night deepened.

His fingers traced idle patterns on her bare shoulder, marveling at the smoothness of her skin, so different from the weather-roughened texture of Dothveks. Everything about her was a study in contrasts—the softness of her body against the unyielding strength of her will, the vulnerability she'd shown in his arms versus the steel-spined chancellor who commanded a city.

The empathic connection between them troubled him even as it brought a deep satisfaction. Such bonds were precious enough among their own people—a warrior might live his entire life without finding a mind mate. That he should find it with a Crestek, with the chancellor herself... it defied all understanding. Yet he could not deny what had passed between them, the way her emotions had flowed into him, amplifying his own pleasure until it was nearly unbearable.

Mind mates. The ancient term whispered through his thoughts, something that should be impossible with a Crestek yet was increasingly undeniable.

He shifted slightly, careful not to disturb her sleep. The weight of what they'd done settled over him like the heavy stone of the city walls. If anyone discovered them—if word reached the council or the Dothvek elders—the consequences would be severe. He would certainly be sent back to his village, and Linnea would be removed from her post.

The peace they had both worked to build could shatter over this single night.

Yet even as these worries circled his mind, he could not bring himself to regret what had happened between them. He had sensed her jealousy at the reception, had felt it surge through their connection when she spoke of the Crestek females who had surrounded him. The emotion had surprised him—not in its existence, but in her willingness to acknowledge it. Cresteks prized control above all else, maintaining a facade of cool indifference even in the face of strong feelings.

But Linnea had admitted her jealousy, had claimed him with a fierceness that matched any Dothvek mate. You are the only one I want.

Her words echoed in his memory, sending a fresh wave of possessiveness through him. He tightened his arm around her sleeping form, as if he could shield her from the political storm that would engulf them if their secret was discovered.

The bed beneath them was too soft by Dothvek standards, lacking the firmness of the sand topped by furs. Yet with Linnea's warmth against him, even this Crestek indulgence felt right somehow. Her quarters would have been safer, less likely to raise questions if she were discovered leaving in the morning. But the thought of her here, in his space, marked a claiming of territory that satisfied something primitive in him.

Morning would come too quickly, bringing with it the necessity of separation, of resuming their formal roles. They would need to be careful, to guard their expressions

and maintain appropriate distance in public. The thought of watching her from across her desk, pretending indifference when all he wanted was to pull her into his arms again, filled him with a peculiar dread.

Could he do it? Could he play the stoic ambassador when his body and mind now recognized her as something more?

Linnea stirred against him, making a small sound of contentment in her sleep. The vulnerability of that sound squeezed his heart with an emotion he was not yet prepared to name. Her soft fingertips feathered across his chest, directly over the marks that immortalized his courage in battle.

Outside, the first hints of dawn began to lighten the sky visible through the narrow window. Soon, the city would awaken, resuming its relentless rhythm of politics and intrigue. Soon, they would need to separate, to don their public faces and pretend that nothing had changed between them.

But for now, in these last quiet moments before morning fully arrived, he allowed himself to simply be with her—to feel her warmth against him, to breathe in her scent, to marvel at the unexpected gift of connection in a place where he had expected only isolation—even as every Dothvek instinct deep within Zexx told him to run.

ChapterTwenty-Three

The morning light filtered through the high windows of the council chamber and dappled the parchment unrolled over the table. Linnea shifted in her chair, trying to focus on the reports being delivered by the city's water manager, but her mind kept drifting to last night—to strong hands moving over her skin, to whispered promises, to their bodies slick with sweat and tangled in sheets.

It had been four days since the reception, four nights of Zexx slipping into her

chambers after dark and leaving before dawn, four mornings of pretending nothing had changed while everything had. She was happier than she'd ever been, and that worried her more than any border dispute or resource shortage.

"The eastern aqueduct repairs are finally complete," the water manager concluded, shuffling his papers. "We should see improved flow to the lower quarters within days, though I still recommend maintaining the current rationing schedule through the end of the month."

She nodded, pulling herself back to the present. "Agreed. The people need to understand that conservation remains essential, even with repairs complete."

K'Nar made a note on his ever-present parchment, the scratch of his stylus a familiar counterpoint to the hum of voices in the chamber. The council table was ringed with the heads of various departments—security, resources, commerce, education—each with their own concerns and priorities. It was her job to balance them all, to see the larger picture, to guide their city toward prosperity and peace.

But how could she effectively serve her people when half her thoughts were occupied with a Dothvek warrior? When her heart raced every time she caught a glimpse of his imposing form and flashing eyes? When she found herself counting the hours until night fell, and they could be alone again?

"The border patrols report increased activity on the eastern dunes," the security chief was saying, his voice cutting through her distraction. "Nothing overtly threatening, but there have been sightings of Dothveks near the trade routes."

She arched an eyebrow. "They are free to traverse the sands as they always have been. The peace accord doesn't restrict their movements or ours if we wish to travel over the sands."

The security chief shifted uncomfortably, the thought of journeying onto the expanse clearly unthinkable. "Of course, Chancellor. I merely meant to report the movements of our ene—our former enemies."

She made a mental note to mention this to Zexx. The fact that her first instinct was to consult him rather than escalate their security measures represented a shift in her thinking that would have been unimaginable weeks ago.

"Take no action," she instructed. "We will not be the ones to break the peace."

As the meeting progressed through the usual litany of city concerns—market regulations, dispute resolutions, tax collections—she found an opportunity to ask the question that had been lingering in her mind.

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"What are the citizens saying about our Dothvek diplomat?" She kept her tone casual, as if inquiring about any other diplomatic matter. "Has his presence helped ease tensions at all?"

K'Nar glanced up from his notes. "Quite significantly, according to our sources. The females who attended the reception were quite... taken with him. Word has spread that he is cultured, well-spoken, and a friend to the Cresteks."

"Some were more than taken," remarked the commerce minister with a knowing smirk. "My wife tells me several prominent ladies are already maneuvering to secure private audiences with the ambassador. Diplomatic relations, they call it."

A ripple of laughter moved around the table, and she forced herself to smile along with them, though she felt a sharp twist of jealousy at the thought of those females pursuing Zexx. Their transparent attempts to seduce him at the reception had been bad enough; the idea of them continuing their pursuit in private made her fingers tighten around her stylus until she feared it might snap.

Then she remembered how Zexx had looked at her that night, how he'd ignored their blatant advances, how he'd later whispered against her skin that he wanted no one but her. He had never made her feel anything less than completely desired, completely chosen.

"The ambassador's charm has proven unexpectedly useful," she acknowledged, keeping her voice steady. "But we should ensure that his time is primarily devoted to substantive diplomatic work rather than social calls."

"I've arranged for him to tour the water reclamation facility this afternoon," K'Nar said. "The eastern settlements have expressed interest in adopting similar technology as the barbar—the Dothveks, and his report to the Dothvek leader could facilitate a formal exchange of knowledge."

She nodded, pleased that K'Nar was taking initiative in integrating Zexx into meaningful work. "Excellent. Keep me informed of his progress."

As the meeting wound down and council members began gathering their materials to depart, she found herself struggling to maintain the mask of calm efficiency she'd perfected over years of leadership. Behind it, her thoughts were a tumult of conflicting emotions.

Was it possible to be both a devoted chancellor and a woman in love with a Dothvek? Or would one role inevitably undermine the other?

In love.

The thought surfaced unbidden, startling in its clarity and certainty. When had this happened? How had she allowed herself to fall so completely for a barbarian she could never take as a mate? And what would she do when that barbarian returned to his world, and she was left to hers?

Chapter Twenty-Four

Zexx ascended the winding ramp that curled around the interior of the tower, his footfalls silent despite the formal Crestek boots he'd reluctantly grown accustomed to wearing. Even with foot coverings, he could tread without making a sound due to years of silent hunts on the sands.

The morning light streamed through the arched windows cut into the stone, casting

alternating patterns of light and shadow across his path. He'd grown accustomed to the presence of more shadow than sun, although he often longed to feel the sun's rays beating on his back.

What a strange turn his life had taken. A Dothvek warrior finding happiness within the cold stone walls of the Crestek city, in the arms of their chancellor no less.

He paused at a window, gazing across the city toward the distant shimmer of sand on the horizon. He should have been counting the days until he could return home, should have been resenting every moment trapped within these walls—yet he found himself content in a way he'd never experienced before.

Guilt shadowed that contentment like a sandstorm hiding the suns. How could he find such joy among a people he'd been raised to view as enemies? People who had oppressed and demonized the Dothveks for generations? Weren't the Cresteks the ones responsible for the illness that killed so many of their females? Hadn't their greed and desire for comforts made them weak, and hadn't that weakness damaged both their peoples?

But as much as his ire still flamed when he thought of the damage they had done, the Cresteks were no longer faceless enemies to him. They were individuals, some he'd grown to respect, others he still distrusted. K'Nar, with his pinched expressions and perpetual air of disapproval, yet fierce loyalty to Linnea. The old scholar who'd eagerly questioned him about Dothvek healing techniques, his eyes bright with genuine curiosity. The market vendor who'd pressed extra pastries into his hands when he'd passed through the market square, whispering that her son had been one of the guards saved by Dothveks during a sand serpent attack near the eastern border.

And then there was Linnea—the woman who had transformed from enemy to lover so completely that he could hardly remember a time when he hadn't craved her touch, her scent, her smile.

He continued up the ramp, adjusting the formal tunic that still felt confining despite the tailor's efforts to accommodate his broader frame. As he approached the level where the council chamber was located, the murmur of voices reached his ears. The council meeting must have ended; he'd timed his arrival to catch Linnea alone afterward.

But these voices were low, conspiratorial. His warrior's instincts flared, and he slipped silently into a recessed doorway several paces before the chamber entrance. From here, he could hear but remain unseen.

"—diminished considerably since the reception," one voice was saying, a voice he recognized as belonging to Advisor Vellen, one of Linnea's security council members. "The common people seem pacified by the barbarian's charm."

"For now," replied a raspy voice—Councilor Taal, the agricultural minister. "But a week of peace hardly constitutes a success. It's time to pay more coin for some disruption."

He tensed, his hand instinctively reaching for a blade that wasn't there. These were Linnea's trusted advisors, speaking of deliberately undermining the peace?

"Agreed," Vellen said. "This time the protest needs to make more of an impact, something the chancellor can't simply ignore. Once she imposes stricter sanctions and shows her true colors, we can make the case that she's just as oppressive as past chancellors."

"And have her removed from power," Taal finished, satisfaction dripping from his words. "The council would have no choice but to act."

Zexx's blood ran cold as their meaning became clear. These men weren't concerned about protecting the city from threats; they were orchestrating their own chancellor's

downfall.

"She's been impossible since taking power," Vellen continued, his voice dropping even lower. "A female giving orders as if she has any right to lead. Her brother was bad enough, but at least he understood how to properly deal with sand barbarians."

"I've seen how she looks at that Dothvek," Taal muttered. "Always finding excuses to have him close. Do you think there's something between them?"

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"If there is," Vellen replied, "it would be the perfect weapon against her. Even those who support her would turn if they knew she was bedding the enemy."

"Especially all the high-born females who want to bed him themselves." A crude, rasping laugh. "They would rip her to pieces without us lifting a finger."

Every muscle in his body tensed, primal rage surging through him. He wanted nothing more than to step from his hiding place and confront these traitors, to make them answer for their treachery with Dothvek justice. His fingers curled into fists so tight he felt his nails cutting into his palms.

But attacking them would only confirm their beliefs about his people being savage and violent. It would play directly into their hands, giving them precisely the ammunition they needed against both him and Linnea.

He remained frozen in the shadows as their footsteps moved away, continuing up the ramp and eventually fading from hearing. Only then did he release his breath, a wave of nausea washing over him as their words echoed in his mind.

They were deliberately sabotaging the peace, paying for protests, planning to use them to force Linnea into heavy-handed action that would turn her people against her. And worse—they suspected their relationship and planned to use it as a weapon.

He stepped out from the alcove, his body feeling strangely disconnected as he continued toward the council chamber. The stone walls that had begun to feel almost familiar now seemed threatening again, closing in around him like a trap. How many other Cresteks in positions of power harbored the same hatred? How many others

plotted against their own chancellor? Who else was in on the plan?

The chamber door was partially open when he reached it, voices drifting out as the last council members departed. He waited until they had passed, nodding mechanically in response to their respectful acknowledgments, before slipping inside.

Linnea sat at the head of the long table, sunlight sifting through the high windows and turning her dark hair to silk shot with gold. She was reviewing documents, her brow furrowed in concentration, and for a moment he simply watched her—this woman who carried the weight of an entire city on her shoulders while traitors whispered in her shadow.

When she finally looked up and saw him, her face transformed, lighting with a smile that made his chest ache. How could he tell her that her own advisors were conspiring against her? That he was being eyed as a potential weapon against her?

"Ambassador," she said, the formal title at odds with the warmth in her eyes. "Is something the matter?"

He crossed to her, placing his palms on the cool surface of the table and leaning forward. "Linnea," he began, his voice rougher than he intended. "There's something you need to know."

Chapter Twenty-Five

The council chamber had nearly emptied when she heard the door open again. She looked up, expecting K'Nar returning with some forgotten detail, but instead saw Zexx standing just inside the doorway.

Her heart leapt at the sight of him, tall and powerful even in the formal Crestek clothing he'd taken to wearing during daylight hours. The dark blue tunic suited him,

the color emphasizing the gold of his skin and the warmth of his eyes. His hair was pulled back from his face, revealing the strong lines of his jaw and cheekbones.

But as their eyes met, a chill ran through her. His expression was solemn, his shoulders tense. Something was wrong—she could sense it as clearly as if he had spoken it aloud, this strange connection between them growing stronger with each passing day.

The last of the council members brushed past him with a respectful nod, leaving them alone in the chamber. Zexx closed the door behind them, his movements deliberate, almost reluctant.

"Ambassador," she said, the formal title falling from her lips automatically though they had been anything but formal with each other in the sanctuary of her chambers. "Is something the matter?"

He crossed the room slowly, his usual fluid grace muted by whatever burden he carried. When he reached the council table, he placed his palms flat on its polished surface, leaning forward slightly as if bracing himself.

"Linnea," he began, his voice low and rough with emotion, "there's something you need to know."

She was suddenly cold, as if standing in the shadow of something vast and terrible approaching on the horizon.

Her expression shifted, concern replacing pleasure as she sensed his distress. That connection between them—the one that defied explanation, that shouldn't be possible between a Dothvek and a Crestek—flowed strong and clear, carrying his turmoil to her even before he could put it into words.

"Tell me," she said simply, setting aside her documents and giving him her full attention.

She watched as he struggled to find the words.

"Your security advisor, Vellen, and Minister Taal," Zexx said finally, the words coming out rough and strained. "I overheard them on the ramp. They're not your allies, Linnea."

She kept her face composed, though she felt a sharp flash of alarm course through her. "What are you talking about?"

"They're paying for the protests," he said bluntly. "Creating dissent deliberately to force you into harsh action that will turn the people against you. They want you removed from power."

She stared at him, disbelief rising within her. "That's impossible. Vellen has served the chancellorship for fifteen years. Taal was my father's closest advisor."

"I know what I heard," Zexx insisted, his jaw tightening. "They were discussing it. They're planning to escalate the protests to force your hand."

"Perhaps you misunderstood," she said, rising from her chair. "Political discussions can sound conspiratorial to outsiders. Maybe they were discussing hypothetical scenarios, contingency planning—"

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"They weren't hypothetical," Zexx cut in. "And there's more. They suspect there's something between us. They spoke of using it against you if they could prove it."

A cold fear gripped her heart, but it quickly transformed into something else—anger. Not at her advisors, but at the messenger who was suddenly threatening everything she'd built.

“What do you advise? Should I stop trusting my councilors? Should I ignore decades of their service? Should I take your word over theirs?”

Zexx's eyes widened. "You think I'm lying to you?"

"I think perhaps you misheard or misunderstood." The words poured out of her, fueled by fear she couldn't acknowledge. "Or maybe you're trying to drive a wedge between me and my advisors. Isn't that what a good Dothvek would do?"

The moment the words left her mouth, she regretted them. But some wounded, frightened part of her couldn't stop.

"After all, should I really trust someone who just weeks ago considered my people the enemy?" Her voice rose. “You never wanted to come here. You never wanted to leave the sands. You admit that, and you’ve admitted being angry with me for summoning you. Maybe this is your way of sabotaging me from within."

Zexx's face transformed, hurt flashing across his features before a cold mask slipped into place. "Is that what you believe?"

"I don't know what to believe," she said, turning away from him, unable to bear the pain in his eyes. "But I know these Cresteks. I've worked with them for years."

"And you have only known me a fraction of that time," he growled, his accent thickening with anger. "Is that what you're saying? You don't know my heart? You don't feel our connection?"

"Do you expect me to trust some Dothvek powers I don't even understand or fully believe over my own advisors?"

"I expect you to trust me," he said through gritted teeth. "I have done nothing but try to protect you."

"I don't need your protection!" she snapped, whirling back to face him. Her eyes burned with unshed tears, but she refused to let them fall. "I am the chancellor of the Cresteks. I managed before you arrived, and I'll manage long after you've gone. And don't forget, Ambassador, that in this city, I am your superior."

A terrible stillness came over him. When he spoke, his voice was quiet, controlled, and somehow more devastating than any shout could have been.

"Thank you for reminding me of my place, Chancellor," he said formally, inclining his head in a curt bow. "I won't forget it again."

He turned and strode toward the door, his back rigid with anger. Part of her screamed to call him back, to apologize, to admit that her outburst came from fear—fear that he might be right, fear of what that would mean.

But pride and panic held her tongue, and she watched him go, the door closing behind him with a terrible finality.

Only when she was alone did she allow the tears to come, hot and bitter. She sank into her chair, her body trembling with sobs she couldn't contain.

What had she done? Pushed away the one person who had seen her—truly seen her—not as the chancellor but as Linnea? Accused him of treachery when everything within her knew he spoke the truth?

She despised herself in that moment, for her weakness, for her cruelty. Because deep down, she knew Zexx wasn't lying. She had seen the looks Vellen gave her when he thought she wasn't watching, heard the whispers that stopped when she entered rooms. She had known, and she had ignored it because the truth was too painful to face.

And now she had lost the only person whose heart she'd truly known.

ChapterTwenty-Six

Zexx stormed from Linnea's office, the door slamming behind him with a satisfying thud that echoed through the stone corridor. His breath came in sharp bursts, his hands clenched into fists so tight that his knuckles went white. How could she not believe him? How could she ignore what she felt?

Should I really trust someone who just weeks ago considered my people the enemy?

Her words cut deeper than any blade, precisely because they contained a kernel of truth. He had arrived in the Crestek city viewing her people as enemies. But he had changed—forher,becauseof her.

Rage and hurt battled within him, the emotions so overwhelming that they clouded their connection. He could still sense her, a turbulent storm of feelings that mirrored his own, but the subtleties were lost beneath the roar of his anger. Was she regretting

her words? Was she still convinced he was trying to manipulate her? He couldn't tell, and at that moment, he didn't care.

He descended the spiraling ramp, each step heavy with resentment. Crestek attendants flattened themselves against the walls as he passed, their eyes wide with alarm or curiosity. Let them stare. Let them whisper about the angry Dothvek in their midst. He was tired of pretending to be something he wasn't—a polished, civilized diplomat when every instinct in his body screamed for action.

The confined space of the tower suddenly felt suffocating. Since his arrival, he'd spent almost every moment within these stone walls, venturing out only for carefully orchestrated appearances or quick visits to the market. He needed air—real air, not the stale, perfumed atmosphere of the chancellor's residence or even his own quarters.

He didn't care if there was danger lurking in the Crestek city. He didn't care if protestors still harbored resentment toward Dothveks. He needed to escape, if only for an hour.

His pace quickened as he reached the lower levels of the tower. Guards stationed at the massive entry doors straightened as he approached, uncertainty flashing across their faces. Was the ambassador allowed to leave unescorted? Should they stop him? But something in his expression must have warned them against interference, as they merely inclined their heads and pulled the heavy doors open.

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He burst into the open air, the sudden brightness momentarily blinding after the dim interior. Drawing a deep breath, he sought the scent of home—the dry, clean smell of sand baking under twin suns. Instead, his nostrils filled with a cacophony of unfamiliar odors: the heavy sweetness of female perfumes, the savory aroma of meat cooking over coals, the musty scent of too many bodies pressed together in too small a space.

At least the formal Crestek attire he wore—slate blue tunic, dark pants, and long, hooded cloak he'd come to tolerate—allowed him to blend into the crowd. He may have been taller and broader than most Crestek males, his skin a shade more golden, but at a glance, he could pass as one of them.

Nevertheless, he felt eyes tracking his movement as he strode away from the tower and into the busy square that formed the heart of the city. Cresteks of all stations filled the wide space—nobles in elaborate robes discussing politics, merchants hawking their wares, children darting around adults in games of chase. On a normal day, he might have found it fascinating, this glimpse into the everyday life of a people he'd been taught to hate. Today, he barely noticed as he pushed through the throng, replaying his confrontation with Linnea in an endless, painful loop.

I don't need your protection! I am the chancellor of the Cresteks. I managed before you arrived, and I'll manage long after you've gone.

The market sprawled before him, stalls arranged in haphazard rows that somehow managed to form a navigable maze. A vendor offering grilled meat on skewers called out to him, the spices reminding him fleetingly of the communal meals in the Dothvek village. Another sold brightly colored fabric that shimmered in the sunlight,

while a third displayed scrolls of parchment covered in the flowing script of Crestek writing.

He moved through them all, unseeing, his mind still in that council chamber with Linnea. Why had he expected her to believe him instantly? These were her advisors, Cresteks she'd worked with for years. Of course she would defend them. Of course she would question him.

But to suggest he would deliberately sabotage her...

The hurt flared anew, raw and searing. He had given her everything—his trust, his body, his heart. And in return, she had reminded him that he was nothing more than a foreign ambassador, a pawn in her political game.

And don't forget, Ambassador, that in this city, I am your superior.

The memory of those words drove him deeper into the city, away from the market square and into the warren of narrow alleys that wound between the tall stone buildings. Here, the sounds of the bustling crowds dimmed, replaced by the occasional drip of water, the scurrying of small creatures in the shadows, the distant echo of voices. The light faded too, the buildings pressed so close together that the sun's rays barely reached the street below.

The cool dimness suited his mood. He slowed his pace, letting his breathing settle, allowing the anger to ebb. In its wake came a hollow feeling, an emptiness that ached worse than the rage.

What now? Return to his quarters in the tower and pretend nothing had happened? Continue playing the role of ambassador while Linnea's advisors plotted against her? Leave the city entirely, returning to the sands where he belonged?

The thought of abandoning Linnea, even after their bitter exchange, sent a jolt of alarm through him. No, he couldn't leave—not with traitors in her inner circle, not with her safety at risk. Whatever she believed about him, whatever she felt, he could not simply walk away.

He would go back to her. He would try again, more calmly this time. He would present the evidence of what he'd heard, appeal to her intelligence rather than her emotions. And if she still rejected his warning...

He stopped, suddenly aware that he had wandered farther than intended. The alley had narrowed, the buildings pressing in on either side like the walls of a canyon. The sounds of the market had faded completely, replaced by an eerie silence broken only by his own breathing.

Where was he? He had paid little attention to his direction, too consumed by his thoughts to mark his path. The stone buildings all looked the same to him, and he could barely see the sky or locate the position of the suns. He could navigate easily on the sands, even when dunes stretched endlessly in all directions, but this unfamiliar city with looming walls was a different matter.

He turned, intending to retrace his steps, when a prickling sensation crept up his spine—the unmistakable feeling of being watched.

His warrior's instincts, dulled by weeks of diplomatic pretense, sharpened instantly. He kept his movements casual, as if he were merely a Crestek who had taken a wrong turn, while his senses strained to locate the observer.

Nothing moved in the shadowy alley. No footsteps echoed off the stone, no breathing disturbed the silence. Yet the feeling persisted, growing stronger with each heartbeat.

He was not alone.

Years of training on the sands had taught him to trust this instinct above all others. It had saved his life during sand serpent attacks, warned him of approaching sand storms, alerted him to the presence of fellow Dothveks sneaking up on him during battle practice.

Someone—or something—was watching him from the shadows.

He let his hand drift casually to his side, reaching for a blade that wasn't there. In his haste to leave the tower, he had forgotten that he no longer carried weapons as part of his diplomatic role. The realization sent a cold chill through him.

For the first time since arriving in the Crestek city, he was truly vulnerable—far from allies, unarmed, in an unfamiliar part of the city where few would hear a struggle.

And someone was definitely watching him.

ChapterTwenty-Seven

Linnea paced the length of her office, each step a sharp echo against the stone floor. The hot pulse of anger was already fading, leaving a throb of regret in its place.

Was Zexx trying to undermine her? Drive a wedge between her and her advisors? The thought made her stomach twist with a sick mixture of hurt and betrayal.

But even as the suspicion swirled, she knew it wasn't true.

When he'd stood before her, handsome face lined with concern, telling her what he'd overheard, she had felt the truth of his words. Not just heard them—felt them, as if they were her own memories rather than his recounting. The same inexplicable connection that let her sense his emotions, that tied them together in ways she couldn't begin to understand, had carried his honesty to her with undeniable clarity.

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"Goddesses preserve me," she whispered, sinking into her chair. "I'm making decisions based on feelings now?"

A bitter laugh escaped her. If anyone knew she was relying on intuition rather than evidence and logic, she'd be dismissed as exactly what her detractors already claimed—a foolish female who was unfit for leadership, ruled by emotions rather than intellect.

But her gut had never led her astray. Not when she'd sensed her brother's growing instability, not when she'd pushed for peace with the Dothveks against all advice, and not now, when it told her that Zexx spoke the truth.

Which meant she had just accused the one person truly loyal to her of treachery while defending those who actually plotted her downfall.

The realization sank in her gut like a stone. She'd lashed out at Zexx not because she didn't believe him, but because she didn't want to believe him. Because accepting his warning meant accepting that she was surrounded by enemies, that the stability she'd worked so hard to build was an illusion, that her trust in her advisors had been misplaced.

"I'm such a fool," she groaned, pressing the heels of her palms against her eyes.

The memory of his face as she'd thrown her position in his face—And don't forget, Ambassador, that in this city, I am your superior—sent a wave of shame through her so intense she tasted bile in the back of her throat. She had hurt him deliberately, cruelly, when all he'd tried to do was protect her.

She stood abruptly, her chair scraping against the floor. She had to find him. Had to apologize, to tell him she believed him, to make this right somehow.

Her feet carried her swiftly through the corridors of the tower, past startled attendants who flattened themselves against walls to let her pass. She rarely moved with such urgency or lack of decorum, and she could sense their curious gazes following her as she took the winding ramp down to the level where Zexx's quarters were located.

She pounded on his door, not caring who might see or what they might think. "Ambassador," she called, loud enough to be heard through the thick wood but not so loud as to draw attention from the entire floor. "Please, open the door. I need to speak with you."

Silence. She pressed her ear against the wood, hoping to hear movement inside, but there was nothing.

"Chancellor?"

She whirled around to find K'Nar standing behind her, his expression unreadable.

"Have you seen the ambassador?" she demanded, not bothering with explanations or pleasantries.

K'Nar's brows rose slightly. "He left, Chancellor."

"Left?" Her heart stuttered. "Left for where?"

"The city, I believe," K'Nar replied, his tone careful. "He departed through the main entrance some time ago. Alone," he added, clearly troubled by this breach of protocol.

A cold weight settled in her stomach. Zexx was wandering the Crestek city alone? Despite the success of the reception, despite the progress they'd made in fostering acceptance, there were still many who resented the Dothveks. Who might see a lone ambassador as an opportunity to strike a blow against their former enemy.

"We have to find him," she said, already moving toward the ramp. "Now."

"Chancellor, you can't simply run into the city after him," K'Nar protested, hurrying to keep pace with her. "It's not safe, and it's certainly not appropriate for someone of your station."

"I don't care about appropriate," she snapped, taking the ramp at a pace that made her formal robes swirl dangerously around her ankles. "If anything happens to him, if he's harmed by my people, the peace accord could collapse. We could be looking at renewed hostilities with the Dothveks."

It was a political justification, one that K'Nar would accept, but it wasn't her true motivation. The thought of Zexx in danger, alone and possibly still upset from their argument, filled her with a fear so profound it made it hard to breathe.

"At least allow me to summon the guards," K'Nar insisted, his shorter legs working overtime to match her stride. "We can organize a proper search party."

"There isn't time," she replied, reaching the main level of the tower. The guards stationed at the entrance straightened as they saw her approach.

K'Nar muttered something that sounded suspiciously like a curse—unusual for her proper adjunct—and then grabbed her arm, pulling her to a stop.

"Chancellor, wait," he said, lowering his voice so the guards couldn't hear. "If you insist on this madness, at least let me fetch cloaks that will not betray your position."

You cannot walk the city streets as the chancellor. It would cause chaos, and you would be instantly recognized."

He had a point, loath as she was to admit it. She nodded tersely, and K'Nar disappeared for what felt like an eternity. He returned with two beige cloaks, the kind worn by middle-tier Cresteks—neither the elaborate garments of the nobility nor the rough cloth of the common folk.

"Here," he said, draping one around her shoulders and pulling the hood up to obscure her face. "Keep your head down and follow my lead."

She nodded, surprised and somewhat impressed by K'Nar's efficiency in arranging their subterfuge. Perhaps her adjunct had hidden depths she hadn't suspected.

They passed through the tower entrance, the guards too well-trained to question the chancellor but clearly puzzled by their hasty departure and concealing garments. The afternoon sun hit her face, warm and somehow accusatory, as if reminding her that she'd driven Zexx out into its harsh glare.

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The city sprawled before them, a busy square that was surrounded by a maze of stone buildings and crowded streets. Where would Zexx have gone? The market was directly ahead, a churning sea of bodies and colorful stalls. To their right, the administrative district housed another tower and various government offices as well as the homes of higher-ranking officials. To their left, the winding streets of the merchant quarter led eventually to the main gate.

She turned in a slow circle, panic rising in her throat. "Where do we even start looking?"

Zexx could be anywhere in this labyrinth. He could have wandered in any direction, and with each passing moment, the chances of finding him diminished. The thought of him alone in the city, potentially confronted by those who still harbored hatred for his people, made her chest constrict painfully.

K'Nar studied her face for a moment, then nodded as if coming to a decision. "This way," he said, gesturing toward a narrow street leading away from the main square. "If the ambassador wanted solitude, he would avoid the crowds."

She didn't question how K'Nar might know this, grateful simply to have a direction. They moved quickly, the hood of her cloak keeping her face in shadow as they wove through the throngs of people going about their daily business, oblivious to the chancellor in their midst or the crisis unfolding.

"He can't have gone far," she murmured, more to reassure herself than anything. "He's unfamiliar with the city."

"Which makes him more vulnerable," K'Nar replied grimly. "The outer districts can be... unwelcoming to strangers, especially those who look different."

The implication sent a fresh wave of anxiety through her. She quickened her pace, nearly overtaking K'Nar as they turned down another street, this one quieter and lined with smaller buildings.

"Are you certain this is the right way?" she asked, unable to keep the edge of desperation from her voice.

K'Nar hesitated, then nodded. "If I wanted to escape the tower and find peace, this is the path I would take."

She didn't have a better suggestion, so she followed, trying to quell the rising tide of fear. What if they couldn't find him? What if something had already happened? What if their last interaction remained those terrible, hurtful words she'd thrown at him in anger?

The thought was unbearable. Somewhere in the stone maze of the Crestek city, Zexx was alone and possibly in danger. And it was her fault.

She had to find him. Had to make this right.

Had to tell him that she believed him, that she was sorry, that she—

She cut the thought off abruptly. That she what? Cared for him? Needed him? Loved him?

None of it would matter if they couldn't find him in time.

ChapterTwenty-Eight

He stood motionless in the Crestek alley, every sense alert to the unseen presence watching him from the shadows. The narrow passage smelled of dank puddles and fetid rot, the close buildings trapping odors that made his nostrils flare in disgust. Water dripped somewhere nearby, a steady plink-plink-plink that marked time as he waited for whoever lurked in the darkness to reveal themselves.

He cursed his temper silently. Had he not been so blinded by rage after his confrontation with Linnea, he would never have wandered into this unfamiliar part of the city alone and unarmed. In the Dothvek village, such a mistake would be inconceivable—their tents arranged in patterns as familiar to him as the markings on his own skin, the open sands offering no hiding places for enemies to lurk, save those that dwelled beneath the surface. Here, the maze of stone passages and buildings so tall they cast long shadows even at midday created countless opportunities for ambush.

The weight of being watched pressed heavier with each heartbeat. Whoever they were, they were skilled at concealment—no scuff of a boot or rustle of fabric betrayed their position.

Patience had never been his strongest virtue. "Show yourself," he called, his voice echoing off the stone walls. "Only cowards hide in shadows."

He shifted his weight to the balls of his feet, adopting the fighting stance that had served him well in the tahadur ritual. Even without weapons, he was far from defenseless. The formal Crestek tunic restricted his movement somewhat, but he could still fight if necessary.

"Just as we expected," a voice said from the darkness, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

Two figures materialized from recessed doorways on either side of the alley, moving

with the practiced stealth of those accustomed to avoiding notice. Both were male Cresteks, their hoods pushed back to reveal faces younger than he'd anticipated. They wore simple clothing, neither the elaborate garments of the elite nor the simpler attire of the lower classes—deliberately unremarkable, the kind of people who could move through crowds without drawing a second glance.

Despite their sudden appearance, his instinctive tension eased slightly. Even though he hadn't often used his empathic abilities on others since arriving in the city, he sensed no malice from them—only curiosity and a strange mix of hope and caution.

"Who are you?" he demanded, remaining in his defensive stance. "What do you want with me?"

The taller of the two stepped forward, his hands raised to show they were empty. "We are friends," he said, his voice low but clear. "We are members of the resistance."

"The resistance?" He frowned, confused. "The group that fought for peace and reunification between our peoples? That resistance ended when the peace accord was signed."

A bitter smile crossed the shorter male's face. "One resistance ended. Another grows in its place."

He studied them more carefully, noting the way they positioned themselves to keep watch on both directions of the alley. These were not random citizens who had stumbled upon a Dothvek in their midst; he sensed they had been tracking him, waiting for an opportunity to make contact away from prying eyes.

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"You must be pleased with the peace, then," he said, deliberately casual as he probed for information. "Your goals were achieved."

The taller male—barely more than a youth, he realized—shook his head. "The peace is fragile. There is a movement growing against it, larger and better organized than you might imagine."

"Some of those who wish to sow dissent are within the Crestek leadership itself," the other added, his voice hardening. "The same council members who smile and toast to unity in public whisper of isolation and war in private."

It confirmed exactly what he had overheard, what Linnea had refused to believe. He kept his expression neutral, unwilling to admit that he already knew the truth of their claims. If these two were indeed part of a resistance network, they might have valuable information—but trust had to be earned, not freely given.

"Why tell me this?" he asked. "I am merely an ambassador."

The taller youth snorted. "You are more than that. You are Kyrana's chosen representative, a warrior who was security chief on the sands, and—" he hesitated, exchanging a glance with his companion, "—you are close to the chancellor."

There was something in the way he said it that made his skin prickle. Did they know about his relationship with Linnea? Or were they merely referring to his diplomatic position? Regardless, they seemed to know a great deal about him.

"You could be in danger," the shorter one continued. "The same elements that wish to

unseat the chancellor would not hesitate to eliminate a Dothvek ambassador if it served their purpose. Especially one who threatens their plans."

"And what plans might those be?" he asked, relaxing his stance slightly but remaining alert.

Another meaningful look passed between them. "We're still piecing that together," the taller one admitted. "But we know they intend to force the chancellor into actions that will make her appear tyrannical, eroding support for her leadership and the peace she champions."

It aligned perfectly with what he had overheard. He studied the pair more intently, sensing no deception in them. Either they were telling the truth, or they believed they were.

"If you ever need help," the shorter one said, "you can count on us. Our network extends throughout the city and into the government towers."

Curious. Who in the tower was feeding them such accurate information?

A dark laugh escaped him before he could suppress it. "I need help right now. I seem to have lost my way."

The tension broke, both youths smiling despite the seriousness of their conversation. "We can lead you back," the taller one offered. "It's not far, though it's easy to get lost in these back streets if you're unfamiliar with them."

As they began walking, they flanked him protectively, their eyes constantly scanning their surroundings. The shorter one moved slightly ahead, checking each intersection before signaling it was safe to proceed.

"You mentioned a network," he said as they navigated the twisting passageways. "How extensive is it?"

"More extensive than the chancellor's advisors would believe," the taller youth replied with a hint of pride. "We have sympathizers in every quarter of the city, including within the government itself."

"Spies, you mean."

"We prefer to call them allies," the shorter one said over his shoulder. "Their goal is the same as ours—preserving the peace, protecting the chancellor from those who would undermine her."

The idea of a shadow network operating within the Crestek city both unsettled and intrigued him. If what they said was true, Linnea had allies she didn't even know existed—Cresteks working to protect her from threats she refused to acknowledge.

"And what do you want from me?" he asked, never one to believe in altruism without purpose. Not from Cresteks.

The taller youth's expression grew serious. "Be vigilant. Watch the council members closely, especially Vellen and Taal. And..." he hesitated, "...protect the chancellor. She is more isolated than she realizes."

He almost stumbled at the mention of the exact advisors he had overheard plotting. Either these Cresteks had allies uncomfortably close to the traitors, or they were part of an elaborate deception he couldn't yet fathom.

The sound of voices reached them as they approached an alley that opened onto what appeared to be the edge of the market square. Sunlight spilled into the narrow passage, a welcome contrast to the dim corridors they'd been traversing.

"How do I find you if I need your help?" he asked quickly, sensing their time was short.

"Our members nearest the chancellors will make themselves known to you," the shorter one replied.

The cryptic answer raised more questions than it answered. Before he could ask, both Cresteks tensed, their heads turning toward the sound of hurried footsteps approaching from a passageway.

"Remember," the taller one whispered as they began backing away, "not all who smile at you wish you well, and not all who hide in shadows are your enemies."

With that enigmatic warning, they melted into the darkness of an alley, their forms disappearing so completely it was as if they had never been there at all.

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He turned toward the passageway just as two cloaked figures appeared at the entrance, silhouetted against the brighter light beyond. One was quicker, moving with the precise efficiency he recognized immediately as belonging to K’Nar. The other...

"Zexx?" A familiar voice called, tentative yet urgent.

His heart gave a traitorous leap of recognition. Even muffled by the hood pulled low over her face, he would know Linnea's voice anywhere.

She had come looking for him.

ChapterTwenty-Nine

"How do you know where to go?" Linnea asked as K’Nar led her beyond the market and into the network of alleyways that branched off from it. The cloying scent of overripe fruit and grilled meat gave way to the mustier odor of damp stone and neglect as they left the bustle behind.

K’Nar glanced back at her, slowing just enough to let her catch up. "I didn't always serve in the tower, Chancellor," he replied, a hint of something she'd never heard before coloring his usually formal tone. "I wasn't high born. I know the city better than most who run it."

She nearly stumbled at the revelation. In all the years K’Nar had been her adjunct—first when she was merely a council member, then as chancellor—she had never thought to ask about his background. Had never considered that there might be more to him beyond his meticulous record-keeping and unfailing propriety.

"I didn't know," she admitted, shame heating her cheeks despite the cool shadows of the alley. First Zexx, now K'Nar—how many others had she misjudged or simply failed to truly see?

"Few do," he said simply, then stopped at an intersection where three narrow passages met. A pair of Cresteks leaned against a wall nearby, their faces half-hidden by their hoods. She recognized the marks of the artisan class on their worn cloaks, the slight staining around the cuffs that came from working with dyes or inks.

K'Nar approached them with none of the cautious distance she might have expected from her proper adjunct. "Brothers," he said, his voice shifting to adopt the cadence of the lower quarters. "Have you seen a Dothvek pass this way? Tall, broad, formal cloak?"

The taller of the two nodded, pointing down the leftmost passage. "Headed that way not long ago. Looking a bit lost, he was."

"My thanks," K'Nar replied, pressing something into the man's hand that she couldn't see. The exchange was so quick and natural that she almost missed it.

They continued in the direction indicated, the passage narrowing until they had to walk single file. The walls seemed to press in closer with each step, the strip of sky visible above dwindling to a slender ribbon of blue. The scent of mildew and stagnant water grew stronger, making her nose wrinkle beneath her hood.

After several more turns, the alley began to widen again, gradually leading them back toward what she suspected was the edge of the market square. She frowned, certain they were doubling back on their path.

"K'Nar," she began, prepared to question the directions they'd been given, when they rounded a final corner, and she stopped short.

Three figures stood at the far end of the alley where it opened onto a brighter space beyond. Two of them slipped quickly into the shadows as if they'd never been there, leaving one tall, unmistakable silhouette outlined against the light.

Zexx.

Relief flooded through her so intensely that her knees nearly buckled. "Zexx?" she called, unable to keep the tremor from her voice.

He turned toward them, his face hidden in the dim light of the alley. For a moment, they both stood frozen, the space between them charged with everything they'd said and left unsaid. Then he strode toward her, his movements fluid and powerful even in the confining Crestek attire.

Her heart lurched, certain for a breath that he might sweep her into his arms right there in the alley. Instead, he stopped a proper distance away, inclining his head in a formal gesture that hurt more than any of the angry words they'd exchanged.

"Chancellor," he said, his voice carefully neutral.

The title stung like a slap. She straightened, her training taking over where her emotions threatened to unravel. "Ambassador," she replied, equally formal. "We were concerned when we learned you had left the tower unescorted."

"A lapse in judgment," he acknowledged, his eyes never leaving hers despite his rigid posture. "I required some air and time to think."

K'Nar cleared his throat discreetly. "Perhaps we should continue this discussion somewhere less... exposed."

He was right, of course. They stood in a public alley where anyone might pass by or

overhear. Even now, she could sense eyes watching from windows above, curious about the cloaked figures conversing in hushed tones.

"Of course," she said, gathering the shreds of her composure. "Ambassador, if you would accompany us back to the tower."

"As you wish, Chancellor."

The formality was excruciating, each syllable of her title a reminder of the wall she had erected between them with her accusations. She wanted to tear it down, to tell him she believed him, that she'd been afraid and lashed out in that fear, that she was sorry.

Instead, she said, "I apologize for the miscommunication earlier. Your concerns deserve proper consideration."

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"And I regret leaving your office without taking formal leave," he replied, the careful phrasing doing nothing to hide the undercurrent of emotion in his voice. "It was disrespectful to your position."

Their eyes met, and an entire unspoken conversation passed between them in that gaze. I'm sorry. I was afraid. I believe you. I need you.

K'Nar glanced between them, something suspiciously like a suppressed smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Shall we?" he suggested, gesturing toward the market square.

He took the lead again, guiding them back through the maze of streets with the same confident efficiency. This time, she noticed how he kept to the less crowded paths, how his eyes constantly scanned their surroundings, how he positioned himself to shield her identity from curious onlookers. Like Zexx, there was more to her adjunct than she had ever bothered to see.

She and Zexx followed side by side, close enough that their arms occasionally brushed, sending jitters of awareness through her with each contact. When his fingers accidentally—or perhaps not so accidentally—brushed against hers, she felt a pulse of emotion that wasn't her own: affection tinged with desire, overlaid with a protective fury that took her breath away.

The sensation was so startling that she nearly stumbled. It should have frightened her, this connection to her innermost self. Instead, it felt like coming home after a long journey.

"Are you well, Chancellor?" K'Nar asked, noting her misstep and glancing over his shoulder.

"Yes," she lied with a smile to her adjunct. "Just eager to return to the tower."

He nodded but flicked his gaze to Zexx before turning around again.

As they approached the tower, its stone facade gleaming in the late afternoon sun, she felt a knot of tension she hadn't even been aware of begin to unwind. He was safe. Whatever had happened in the alley, whatever strangers he had been speaking with when they found him, Zexx was unharmed.

Then curiosity unwillingly tickled the back of her brain. But who had he been talking to, and why had they slunk away so quickly?

ChapterThirty

Zexx walked beside Linnea through the thinning market crowd, their shoulders occasionally brushing despite the careful distance they tried to maintain. He was torn between his growing desire to trust her completely and the instinct, honed through generations of conflict, that cautioned against trusting any Crestek too much. Even her.

A fruit vendor called out his final prices of the day, the sweet scent of overripe berries wafting toward them as they passed. The smell triggered an unexpected wave of homesickness—not for the scent itself, which they rarely encountered in the desert, but for the clean, pure aromas of his home. The smoky tang of the communal fire at dusk. The rich aroma of sizzling flatbread. The pungent musk of jebel fur after a day's travel.

What would it be like to take Linnea back there? To the towering palms that provided

swaying shade from the twin suns, the crystal-clear pool that reflected the brilliant night sky? She would be safe there, protected by the entire clan. No treacherous advisors, no plotting council members, no need to hide what they felt for each other.

The fantasy was so vivid he could almost feel the warm sand beneath his feet instead of the cold stone of the Crestek city. Almost smell the night-blooming flowers that ringed the oasis instead of the mingled odors of too many bodies pressed together.

But such thoughts were as fleeting as sunrise dew. Linnea was chancellor of the Cresteks, bound to her city and her people by duty as surely as he was bound to his.

"We're almost there," K'Nar murmured, breaking his reverie as the tower's imposing silhouette loomed before them. Guards stood at attention on either side of the massive entrance, their expressions carefully neutral as they approached.

He could sense Linnea gathering herself beside him, straightening her shoulders and lifting her chin as she prepared to resume the mantle of chancellor. The transformation fascinated him—how she could shift from the woman who had frantically searched the city for him to the composed leader of an entire people in the space of a heartbeat.

"Chancellor," one of the guards acknowledged with a bow as they passed, his eyes flicking curiously to him and then away.

The relative quiet of the tower's interior was a relief after the noise of the market, the stone walls muffling the sounds from outside and creating a pocket of stillness. He drew a deep breath, preparing to finally speak openly with Linnea about everything—the plotters within her council, the resistance members in the alley, the growing danger to them both.

But they had barely crossed the entrance hall when two figures hurried toward them

from the direction of the spiraling ramp. He recognized them immediately—Vellen and Taal, the very advisors he had overheard plotting against Linnea.

"Chancellor," Vellen called, his face a mask of concern that might have fooled him had he not known better. "Thank the stars you've returned. There's an urgent matter requiring your immediate attention."

Taal's gaze settled on him, his eyes narrowing slightly. "A matter of internal security," he added pointedly.

Linnea glanced between her advisors and Zexx, a flicker of unease passing across her features before she composed them once more. "Of course," she said, her voice steady. "Ambassador, if you'll excuse us?"

He wanted to refuse, to insist on staying by her side, to expose these traitors for what they were. But the pleading look she gave him—a brief, desperate glance that begged him to understand—stayed his tongue. They were playing a dangerous game, and confronting her advisors directly would only expose their hand.

"Chancellor," he replied formally, inclining his head in acknowledgment. The distance between them felt like miles rather than the mere feet that separated them physically.

"We'll confer later," she assured him, though whether she was addressing the ambassador or the man she took to her bed each night was impossible to tell.

He watched her walk away with the two men he now knew to be her enemies, every instinct screaming at him to stop her, to protect her. But he remained where he stood, a silent observer as she disappeared up the spiraling ramp with Vellen and Taal flanking her like executioners escorting a prisoner.

K'Nar lingered behind, glancing at his departing chancellor before turning to Zexx. His unremarkable face, which he had always dismissed as bland and servile, now held a shrewd intelligence he had failed to notice before.

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"A word, Ambassador," he said quietly, drawing him aside to a recessed alcove where they wouldn't be overheard by the guards.

He bristled at the presumption, unused to taking orders from anyone but Kyrana or his warrior captains. "If this is about—"

K'Nar gripped his arm with surprising strength for one of his slight build. "Be careful," he hissed, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Is that a threat?" Zexx demanded, tensing beneath his touch.

His fingers tightened. "It's a warning. Be more careful than you have been." His gaze bored into his with an intensity that belied his mild appearance. "Both your lives depend on it."

The words hit him like a blow to the chest. There it was—confirmation of what he had already suspected. Their secret wasn't so secret after all.

"How long have you known?" he asked, not bothering to deny his implication.

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. "Since the night of the reception. Maybe longer. Perhaps from the moment you arrived." Then his expression sobered. "But I'm not the only one with eyes, Ambassador. And not all who watch are as discreet—or as loyal to the chancellor—as I am."

Zexx studied him, searching for any hint of deception or ulterior motive. His empathic abilities, growing stronger by the day, detected only sincerity and a deep

concern for Linnea's wellbeing.

"Why tell me this?" he asked. "Why not report what you know to the council?"

K'Nar glanced up the ramp where Linnea had disappeared with her advisors. "Because I serve the chancellor, not the council. Because I've known her since she was a junior member fighting to be heard in a room full of males who dismissed her. Because I've never seen her as alive as she's been since you arrived." He released his arm. "And because I believe the peace between our peoples is our only hope for survival. I believe in resisting those who would break the peace."

The pointed words stunned Zexx into silence. Was the unassuming adjunct one of the closely placed allies the Cresteks in the alley had meant? Before he could ask, a guard strode past them and K'Nar stepped away, putting appropriate distance between them.

"You should join them." Zexx jerked his head up, knowing he could not ask questions now. "She needs allies in that room."

K'Nar nodded, but before turning to go, he whispered, "Be vigilant, Ambassador. The walls have ears, and not all of them belong to friends." With that cryptic warning, he hurried after his chancellor.

Zexx remained in the alcove for several moments, processing everything that had happened. The encounter with the resistance members in the alley. Linnea finding him despite the vastness of the city. K'Nar's unexpected alliance. And now, Linnea closeted with the very men who plotted her downfall.

If K'Nar was right, and he believed he was, he and Linnea had been playing with fire and were about to get badly burned.

ChapterThirty-One

She slumped into her chair the moment her advisors left, pressing her fingertips against her temples where a headache throbbed with increasing intensity. The day's events had worn her down to raw nerves—the fight with Zexx, the panicked search through the city, the tense walk back to the tower, and now the interminable meeting with Vellen and Taal.

The last rays of sunlight filtered through the high windows, stippling golden patterns across the stone floor that belied the icy dread pooling in her stomach. For over an hour, her advisors had spoken in increasingly urgent tones about the danger Zexx posed—not just to the peace, but to her position as chancellor.

"His very presence inflames tensions," Vellen had insisted, his usually placid face flushed with apparent concern. "The common people see him as a symbol of our weakness, of our capitulation to barbarians who spent generations raiding our borders."

Taal had nodded gravely, adding, "The council is growing restless. There are whispers, Chancellor, about the ambassador's presence here. Whispers that could become shouts if not addressed quickly."

The memory of their words made her blood boil anew. The veiled threats had grown less veiled as the meeting progressed, culminating in Taal's parting statement: "We cannot shield you from the consequences if you continue on this path, Chancellor. Send the Dothvek back to the sands where he belongs."

Her fingers curled into fists atop her desk. If Zexx was right—and in her heart, she knew he was—these men were not warning her but threatening her. Setting the stage for her removal if she didn't comply with their demands.

Yet was there truth in their warnings, regardless of their motives? Her people did have a long history of hatred toward the Dothveks. The peace was new, fragile, a seedling that could be trampled by the first strong wind of public opinion. While the females at the reception had found Zexx appealing, their desire alone couldn't protect him if the citizenry turned against his presence—or against her for harboring him.

Could she risk everything—the peace, her position, the stability of their city—for the sake of her feelings for one man?

The door to her office swung open without the customary knock, interrupting her spiral of anxious thoughts. She straightened, prepared to snap that she had not approved any further meetings, assuming K’Nar had returned with yet another crisis demanding her attention.

Instead, Zexx filled the doorway, his broad shoulders blocking view of the corridor beyond. The sight of him sent a flutter through her chest that had nothing to do with surprise.

"Zexx," she breathed, rising to her feet. "I didn't expect—"

He closed the door behind him with one hand, his eyes never leaving hers as he crossed the room in long strides. The intensity in his gaze made her words falter and die in her throat.

"I need to apologize," she said quickly, suddenly nervous that he had come to confront her about her earlier outburst. "What I said before—accusing you of manipulating me—it was unforgivable. I was afraid and I lashed out, but that's no excuse. I understand if you're still angry with me, and you have every right to be--"

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Her rambling apology was cut short as he reached her, his hands cupping her face as he pressed his lips to hers in a kiss so forceful it bent her backward over her desk. The taste of him—wild and spiced, like nothing she'd ever known before him—flooded her senses, driving coherent thought from her mind.

When he finally pulled back, his eyes were dark with desire, his breathing ragged. "You're forgiven," he said, his voice a husky growl that sent heat pooling low in her abdomen. He traced his thumb along the curve of her cheek as if memorizing the contours of her face. "Your anger doesn't matter. It only matters that you came for me."

The vulnerability in his voice made her heart ache. "I will never lash out at you again," she promised, turning to press a kiss into his palm. "I was angry at the truth, not at you. Never at you."

Zexx kissed her again, his lips gentle now, and she realized with startling clarity that she would give it all up—the chancellorship, the power, the responsibility—for more of him, more of this. The thought should have terrified her, this willingness to sacrifice everything she'd worked for, everything she'd believed defined her.

Instead, it felt like freedom.

ChapterThirty-Two

Zexx slipped from Linnea's office, closing the door silently behind him. The corridor was mercifully empty, though his senses remained on high alert as he moved along the spiraling ramp.

He had gone to her office intending to talk, to tell her about the rebels in the alley, to strategize about the traitors in her midst. Instead, the moment he'd seen her—looking so fragile and beautiful in the fading light, her face drawn with exhaustion yet still so proud—all rational thought had abandoned him.

He hadn't cared about their earlier argument, about how her accusations had wounded him, about the danger surrounding them. He had only known that he needed to taste her sweet lips and wrap his arms around her.

The stone beneath his feet felt insubstantial as he descended the ramp, his mouth still tingling from their kisses. But it hadn't just been her soft mouth that overwhelmed him. He had sensed her thoughts and had felt the hum of desire within Linnea.

He stopped abruptly, one hand bracing against the wall as the truth he'd been avoiding crystallized with undeniable clarity.

His mind mate, his one true mate, was undeniably a Crestek.

A harsh laugh nearly escaped him at the cosmic irony. He, who had spent his life detesting the Cresteks, who had looked down on his Dothvek brothers who had found non-Dothvek mates, had fallen for not just any Crestek, but their chancellor.

The stories the elders told around the communal fires—of warriors who found their one true mate, whose minds and souls connected in ways that transcended physical desire—had always seemed like myths designed to give purpose to their empathic abilities. Yet here he was, experiencing exactly what they had described: the deepening connection, the ability to sense her emotions across distances, the perfect anticipation of her needs and desires.

Despite the incredulity of it, despite everything it would mean for both their peoples, he could no longer deny the truth. Linnea was his. She'd been his from the beginning.

Their love was destiny.

The realization hit him with such force that he nearly stumbled, missing a step on the ramp and catching himself on the wall again. He loved her. Not just desired her, not just craved her, but loved her with an intensity that frightened him in its totality. And it had been determined by powers beyond his control. It had been fated.

He was so shaken by this truth that he walked past the level where his quarters were located, continuing upward in a daze until he reached the top of the tower. The need for air, for space, for some connection to the world beyond these confining stone walls drove him toward the rooftop terrace where the reception had been held.

The night air embraced him as he stepped outside, cooler now than it had been during the day but still carrying the faint, tantalizing hint of the sands that lay beyond the city's walls. He drew a deep breath, letting it fill his lungs as he tried to center himself.

Then his ears caught the sound of furtive whispers coming from the edge of the rooftop. Instantly, his warrior's instincts took over. He froze, then moved silently into the shadow of a large decorative urn, his bare feet making no sound on the stone floor. He was not the only one who had sought the privacy of the terrace tonight.

"—foolish female won't listen to reason," a voice hissed, one he recognized immediately as belonging to Vellen. "She actually defended him, insisted he was essential to the diplomatic mission."

"She's besotted with the barbarian," Taal replied, his tone dripping with disgust. "It's written all over her face whenever he's in the room."

His body went rigid as he peered through the darkness, making out two cloaked figures near the balustrade, their faces hidden by their hoods but their voices

unmistakable.

"If she doesn't agree to send him back to the sands, we'll have to take matters into our own hands," Vellen continued, his voice dropping even lower. "The Dothvek must be eliminated."

"And then her," Taal added, as casually as if discussing the weather. "The council is already prepared for a vote of no confidence. Once the ambassador is gone, they'll move against her immediately."

He couldn't breathe, his lungs frozen as their words confirmed his worst fears.

"The protest tomorrow should help matters along," Vellen said, satisfaction evident in his voice. "Nothing like a public display of outrage to make the chancellor appear weak and ineffective."

"And if she tries to suppress it forcefully, she looks like a tyrant," Taal agreed. "Either way, her position becomes untenable."

"We should return before we're missed," Vellen said after a moment. "The next council meeting is at midday tomorrow. By then, her fate—and his—will be sealed."

He pressed himself deeper into the shadows as they moved toward the entrance, holding his breath until the door closed behind them and their footsteps faded down the ramp. Only then did he allow himself to exhale, the air rushing from his lungs in a shaky gust.

They were going to move against Linnea tomorrow. And against him.

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His mind raced through options, discarding each as quickly as it formed. He could confront them directly—but without proof, it would be his word against theirs.

Then he remembered the words of the young rebels in the alleyway. There were others in the underground movement who were closely placed to Linnea. Others who would help him.

Instinct told Zexx he knew one of them well. All he had to do now was find him.

ChapterThirty-Three

Linnea had been awake for over an hour already, sitting at her small personal desk with various policy documents spread before her. The early hours had always been her sanctuary—the quiet moments before the tower fully awakened, before demands and crises consumed her day.

Yet despite the stack of resource allocation proposals and security reports demanding her attention, her mind kept drifting back to Zexx. To his hands on her skin, his lips against her throat, the intensity in his eyes as he'd kissed her.

He'd stayed away from her quarters the night before, but she knew he was only being careful. Heat bloomed in her cheeks at the memory of his kisses, and she couldn't suppress the smile that curved her lips even as she tried to focus on the trade agreement before her.

A soft knock at her chamber door pulled her from her reverie. "Enter," she called, hastily reorganizing the neglected documents to give the appearance of productivity.

Zelia entered carrying a tray with her breakfast, but her movements seemed oddly stiff, her eyes carefully avoiding Linnea as she set down the tray.

"Is something the matter?" Linnea asked.

"I know I'm not supposed to say anything, Chancellor, but you've always been kind to me, and..." she hesitated, a blush creeping up her neck, "I think the Dothvek is good for you."

Linnea blinked, momentarily thrown by the non sequitur. "I appreciate your... assessment of the ambassador," she said carefully, "but what does that have to do with whatever has you so nervous this morning?"

She glanced over her shoulder again before replying. "There's going to be a protest later today. Against you and your policies. Against having the Dothvek here." Her fingers twisted nervously in the fabric of her dress. "They're saying it will be much bigger than the last one."

A chill ran down her spine despite the warming room. Zexx had been right all along—there was organized resistance to her leadership, and it was gathering strength.

"I should assemble my advisors immediately," she murmured, half to herself.

Zelia's face twisted into a frown before she could smooth her expression, but not quickly enough to escape her notice.

"Why did you make that face?" Linnea asked, her voice sharper than intended.

She looked genuinely frightened now, her eyes darting toward the door as if contemplating escape. "I've spoken too much already, Chancellor."

"Zelia," she said, gentling her tone. "Please. Whatever you know could be important."

She swallowed hard, then squared her slim shoulders. "I know I'm just an attendant, Chancellor, but I hear things. The walls in this tower aren't as thick as some believe." She leaned closer, her voice dropping even further. "You shouldn't trust the old Cresteks around you. Not when it comes to the Dothvek. Not when it comes to the peace."

Before she could press her for more details, the door opened and K'Nar entered with a stack of parchment scrolls.

The young woman squeezed her hand briefly, then hurried off. She cut her eyes to Linnea's adjunct briefly before exiting with a quick bow, the door closing behind her with a soft thud.

Linnea sat motionless as K'Nar hurried forward, the breakfast growing cold before her as she processed what she'd just learned. Not only was there a protest planned for today, but apparently her own advisors—the "old Cresteks" around her—couldn't be trusted.

As K'Nar started talking about the latest water surveys, Linnea's mind raced. If she couldn't trust any of the Cresteks in her government, who could she turn to? Zexx was one man—a formidable warrior, certainly, but still just one man. And as a Dothvek, his involvement would only further inflame those who opposed her leadership and the peace.

She could appeal to the Dothveks for help, she supposed. They would come to Zexx's aid, and perhaps to hers by extension. Their warriors were fierce, their loyalty to their own unquestionable. But how would she even contact them? The oasis village was days away across the desert, and any messenger she sent would be noticed by her advisors, who apparently were working against her.

Then it hit her—there were more Dothveks than just those on the sands.

Her heart thumped nervously as the idea took shape. The bounty hunter ship that had left their planet carried both Dothveks and Cresteks among its crew. They had established a communication system with them—the encrypted channel that Maya had used to contact her friend Cat. If she could reach them, explain the situation...

But the communications hub was at the top of the tallest tower in the city, staffed by technicians who reported directly to the security council—to Vellen. Accessing it without arousing suspicion would be nearly impossible, especially if, as Zelia suggested, her movements were being watched.

She could send Zexx instead—but no, he would be even more closely watched than she was. Any move he made toward the communications hub would trigger immediate alarm, especially with a protest against his presence already organized.

K’Nar hadn’t seemed to notice her distraction as he unrolled scrolls over the stone desktop. She rose from her desk and moved to the window, gazing out over the awakening city. The market square below was beginning to fill with vendors setting up their stalls for the day, unaware of the political storm brewing within the very heart of their government.

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“Chancellor?” K’Nar finally interrupted his own chatter about the water reclamation system.

She turned, focusing on her adjunct as a new thought occurring to her. K’Nar. Of course. Why hadn’t she thought of him before?

Her adjunct had surprised her yesterday with his knowledge of the city's back streets, his apparent sympathy for her relationship with Zexx. Could he be trusted? Or was his helpfulness merely a more subtle form of betrayal, designed to lull her into a false sense of security?

No, her instincts said he was loyal—and after doubting her instincts about Zexx with such disastrous results, she was inclined to trust them now.

She spun around, pinning the Crestek with a fierce gaze. “You told me yesterday that you came from the darker parts of the city and worked your way up.”

K’Nar nodded hesitantly. “That is true.”

“But I have a feeling that your loyalties—at least some of them—still lie with the people. Am I right?”

K’Nar opened his mouth and then closed it again without answering.

“It is right that you should care about the people,” Linnea continued. “I care about them too, even though I was high born. And I care about the peace with the Dothveks. Mostly because I think it’s the right thing for our peoples, but also because

I care about the Dothveks. Well, mainly one Dothvek.”

K’Nar fought a grin. “I am aware, Chancellor.”

Linnea released a breath. “Then you know I can’t let him get hurt because some in leadership want me out.”

K’Nar’s entire countenance changed, his shoulders squared, and his spine snapped straight. “You are not the only one working to protect the Dothvek and save your position.”

Linnea saw her adjunct in an entirely new light. “I hope you know that you can trust me.”

He gave a curt nod. “I do. I did not at first. As you said, you’re a highborn, but I took this position so I could watch you and see if you were what you claimed to be.”

“And?” Linnea prodded.

“You have earned my loyalty and the efforts of the underground movement to keep you in power and maintain the peace.”

Linnea’s mouth fell open. “There is an underground movement working to keep me in power?”

K’Nar stepped closer, as if someone might overhear them. “Yes, but the challenge does not come from the citizens. It comes from your advisors.”

Just as Linnea had suspected and Zexx had claimed. She should not be surprised to have this confirmed, but it pained her, nonetheless.

“I have a plan to get more assistance, but I’ll need your help.”

K’Nar’s chest swelled. “Anything, Chancellor.”

She touched a hand to the adjunct’s arm, glad to have another ally in the den of vipers.

ChapterThirty-Four

Zexx burst into Linnea's office, his heart pounding against his ribs with the urgency of what he needed to tell her. He’d meant to find K’Nar first, but he’d realized with some embarrassment that he did not know where the adjunct slept. His feeble wanderings looking for the Crestek during the night had been fruitless and frustrating, to say nothing of the curious glances he’d drawn from guards.

He'd fallen asleep planning what he’d tell Linnea as soon as light broke, but her office was empty. The morning light streamed through the high windows, illuminating the desk where just hours before they had lost themselves in each other. Her documents were arranged in neat stacks, her seal placed precisely at the edge, but there was no sign of Linnea herself. No sign of K’Nar either, who was typically at her side during the early hours, briefing her on the day's agenda.

"Chancellor?" he called, knowing it was futile. The stillness of the room made it clear no one would answer.

He tried to quell the panic rising in his chest. Perhaps she had slept in. Perhaps she was meeting with other officials elsewhere in the tower. There were countless innocent explanations for her absence.

Yet none of them felt right. Linnea was nothing if not predictable in her routine—a discipline born of years navigating the treacherous waters of Crestek politics.

He turned and strode from the office, his bare feet silent on the stone floor as he made his way to her private chambers. The corridors seemed unnaturally quiet, the usual bustle of attendants and officials reduced to the occasional guard who stiffened at his approach, their gazes following him with poorly concealed suspicion.

Without bothering to knock, he pushed open the door to her quarters, relief flooding through him when he saw no signs of struggle—no overturned furniture, no evidence of force. But his relief was short-lived. The room was empty, and the bed already made.

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Real fear gripped him now, cold and sharp as the edge of a sand serpent's tooth. Where was she? And why did every instinct he possessed scream that something was deeply wrong?

He closed his eyes, centering himself as he'd been taught in warrior training, and sent his consciousness outward, searching for the now-familiar pulse of Linnea's mind. If she was in danger, he would sense it—he was certain of that much. Their connection had grown stronger with each passing day, each shared touch, each coupling.

At first, there was nothing—just the dull hum of numerous minds, too distant or too unfamiliar to read clearly. Then, faintly, he caught it: the slightest thread of determination, a steady resolve that could only belong to Linnea. Not fear, not pain, just...purpose.

She wasn't in immediate danger, then. But where was she? And what was she doing?

He couldn't read her mind clearly enough to know her location or to send his own thoughts to her, as he might with a fellow Dothvek. The connection between them was profound but still somehow limited—perhaps by her Crestek lineage that had abandoned empathic powers, perhaps by his own inexperience with this type of bond.

Frustration surged through him as he stormed from her quarters, nearly colliding with a figure rounding the corner at the same moment.

"Ambassador!" K'Nar stumbled back, steadying himself against the wall. "I've been looking for you."

He regarded the Crestek warily, even though he felt sure the adjunct was an ally. "Where is she?"

K'Nar glanced down the corridor, then took his arm with surprising boldness, pulling him back into Linnea's quarters. "I'm the one on the inside," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "The one they told you about in the city."

His eyes widened. He could only be referring to the resistance members he'd encountered in the alley—information no one else could possibly know unless...

Zexx's hunch had been right. "You're part of the underground movement. You've been working against the traitors in the council all along."

K'Nar nodded, a grim smile briefly crossing his face. "For longer than you might imagine. But there's no time for that now. The chancellor has gone to send a message to the Dothveks."

"What? The oasis village is days away across the desert. She couldn't possibly—"

"Not those Dothveks," K'Nar cut in, his voice tight. "The ones on the bounty hunter ship. The ones with the human mates."

Zexx blinked, momentarily stunned. Of course—the Dothveks who had left the planet with their bounty hunters. The warriors who had found mates among the human and alien females and chosen to travel the stars with them. He had once looked askance at them, believing they had abandoned their ways for foreign pleasures. Now, he understood them all too well—and would be grateful for their presence if they could help protect Linnea.

But even as hope flickered, pragmatism doused it. "They might not be close enough to help," he said. "We can't count on them arriving in time."

"Which is why we need to get to the chancellor immediately," K'Nar agreed. "The communications hub is at the top of the northern tower, and she went alone—against my advice. I created a diversion to give her time, but she insisted on sending the transmission herself."

"Take me to her," Zexx said, already moving from the room.

Instead of leading him to the ground level exit as he expected, K'Nar guided him down, past the exit and into the foundations of the tower itself. The air grew cooler and damper as they descended, the stone walls slick with moisture that gleamed in the light of the occasional torch.

"The old passageways," K'Nar explained as they entered a narrow tunnel. "Built when the city was first constructed, when the sandstorms raged and before the buildings grew so tall. The web of them extends beneath the city still, but few remember they are here."

The pair moved quickly through the passage, which eventually connected to another tunnel leading upward. The climb was steep, the light fading to blackness and the air growing thinner as they ascended what felt like hundreds of steps carved directly into the stone.

"For the first time, I miss those infernal ramps," Zexx grumbled.

"This is a hidden stairwell that runs up the back of the tower. Do not fear. This tower also contains a ramp."

Zexx smothered a dark laugh as he pressed his hands to the walls to guide himself up in the pitch blackness. If he survived long enough to reach the sands, he swore he would never take the open skies for granted again.

By the time they emerged, pushing a heavy stone door to exit the cramped stairwell, they were both breathing heavily. K’Nar motioned up and they walked the last of the interior ramp until they were at the very top of what he realized must be the northern tower, facing a doorway guarded by two Cresteks in gray robes.

The guards straightened at their approach, their brows furrowing in confusion, likely because they hadn’t heard the pair walking up the ramp from the bottom of the tower.

"The ambassador wishes to speak with the chancellor," K’Nar said smoothly. "A matter of diplomatic importance."

"The chancellor insisted on privacy for her transmission," one of the guards replied, his gaze darting suspiciously between them. "She said she was not to be disturbed for any reason."

The other guard was staring at him with undisguised hostility. "What's the Dothvek doing here anyway? I thought he was—"

The first guard cut him off with a sharply cleared throat then glanced uneasily at the door. "Perhaps we should check on the Chancellor."

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Something in their tone, in the way their hands tightened on their weapons, set his nerves on edge. These weren't merely dutiful guards—they were decidedly unfriendly to his presence and seemed startled to see him walking freely.

The guards exchanged a look, then both moved toward the door, clearly intending to interrupt whatever Linnea was doing inside. Zexx tensed, ready to stop them, when the door swung open. Linnea stepped out.

She was every inch the chancellor—spine straight, silver robes immaculate, expression composed and authoritative. Not a single ebony hair out of place, not a flicker of worry in her clear eyes.

"Thank you for your vigilance," she said to the guards, her tone crisp and professional. "The transmission requested by the council has been completed successfully."

Her gaze landed on him, and she smiled with diplomatic distance that revealed nothing of their true relationship. "Ambassador Zexx, what brings you to the communications hub? Is there a matter requiring attention?"

"I wished to speak with you, Chancellor," he replied, matching her formal tone and quickly devising a plan. "About my imminent departure."

"Of course." Her tone was even and unsurprised, as if she understood instantly what he was doing. "We can discuss it as we walk. K'Nar, you'll join us?"

Her adjunct bowed slightly. "As you wish, Chancellor."

They moved toward the stairway, Linnea between them, her pace measured and unhurried despite the tension he could feel thrumming from her. Only when they had descended several levels, well out of earshot of the guards, did she speak freely.

"The bounty hunter ship and your Dothvek brethren are on their way, but it will still be at least a full rotation before they arrive."

"You're certain the communications officers believed you?" K'Nar asked, equally quiet.

"That I was on a mission from the council? I don't know," she admitted. "They're almost certainly in league with Vellen and Taal. I could sense their suspicion the moment I requested privacy."

"Your comment about leaving was clever," K'Nar said. "It will confuse the guards enough to slow any thoughts of pursuit. If they are in on the conspiracy, they will believe the council was successful in forcing out the ambassador."

Zexx gave the adjunct a grateful nod.

Linnea glanced between the two. "How did you two become allies?" her gaze alighted on Zexx. "How did you know he could be trusted?"

"Because he knew about my meeting with the rebels in the city alleyways. They told me that they had members closely placed to you."

"I've been working with the underground resistance since before the peace accord was signed," K'Nar said. "We've been monitoring the council members who oppose reform policies, gathering evidence of their conspiracy."

"I wish you'd told me sooner," Linnea said.

"The fewer who knew, the safer you were," K'Nar told her. "Or so we believed. We underestimated how quickly they would move against you."

Before Linnea could respond, the sound of rapid footsteps echoed from above, accompanied by shouted commands that grew louder with each passing moment. Simultaneously, a dull roar rose from outside the tower—the unmistakable sound of a large crowd.

Zexx moved to one of the narrow windows cut into the stone wall, peering out at the square below. People were gathering in numbers he hadn't seen since he'd been in the city, but their faces were twisted with anger rather than curiosity, their voices raised in chants he couldn't quite make out from this height.

"The protest," he said, turning back to Linnea and K'Nar. "The one I overheard Vellen and Taal planning last night. They're moving against you now."

"And the communications officers are coming for us," Linnea added, glancing up toward the sounds of pursuit. "They must have reported my transmission and discovered that the council did not request a transmission be sent."

Zexx scowled. "Or that I had announced my departure."

K'Nar's usually calm face was tight with urgency. "We need to move. Now."

Zexx grabbed Linnea's hand, abandoning any pretense and began to run.

ChapterThirty-Five

Their footsteps thundered against the stone as they raced down the spiraling ramp, the sound echoing off the walls and mingling with the shouts of their pursuers above and the dull roar of the crowd below. Linnea's robes tangled around her ankles with each

step, threatening to send her tumbling down the steep incline.

Zexx kept pace beside her, his movements fluid and silent despite their speed, while K’Nar led the way, surprisingly swift for someone she'd always viewed as merely a diligent bureaucrat. How little she had known about those closest to her, how blind she had been to the currents flowing beneath the surface of her government.

They reached the hidden entrance to the tunnels, a section of wall that looked identical to every other stone surface in the tower until K’Nar pressed his palm against a specific block. The wall slid open with a grating sound that seemed deafening, even over their panting.

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Instead of immediately entering, K’Nar hesitated, turning back to them with an expression she'd never seen on his typically composed face—a mixture of resolve and fear that made her heart stutter.

"I should separate from you here," he said, his voice low and urgent. "Create a distraction. Send the guards away from you."

"What? No," Linnea protested, though she kept her voice hushed. "We stay together."

K’Nar shook his head. "I can send any pursuers in the opposite direction while you escape. Two fugitives are easier to hide than three, especially when one is..." he glanced at Zexx's unmistakable form, "...so distinctive."

She hesitated, torn between the tactical sense of his plan and her concern for his safety. K’Nar had been her adjunct for as long as she’d been in power, a steady, reliable presence through the most tumultuous periods of her leadership. He’d been seen with them, which meant he might be treated as a traitor. The thought of leaving him to face their pursuers alone made her stomach twist with anxiety.

"They'll suspect you helped us," she said.

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. "Let them suspect. I've been playing this game longer than you've been chancellor, my lady. I know how to appear loyal while serving other masters."

The sound of footsteps and voices grew louder above them. They had moments, no longer, to decide.

"Take this," K'Nar said, unfastening his cloak and handing it to Zexx. "It won't disguise you completely, but it might help in the shadows."

Zexx accepted the garment with a solemn nod, a wordless exchange of respect passing between the two.

"Go," K'Nar urged, already turning toward the ramp. "I'll find you when it's safe."

Linnea's throat tightened as she watched him straighten his clothing, smooth his expression into its usual bland efficiency, and stride purposefully back toward the main corridor. She hoped with every fiber of her being that it wouldn't be the last time she saw the trusted adjunct who'd become her friend.

"Come on," she whispered to Zexx, pulling him into the tunnel as the wall slid shut behind them.

The passage was dark and damp, the air stale with the musty scent of age and disuse. She led the way, grateful that her earlier journey through these tunnels with K'Nar had given her at least a basic familiarity with their layout. He'd insisted they move through the secret passages to stay hidden as long as possible, and now she was grateful. Her heart pounded so loudly she feared it might echo off the stone walls as they navigated the labyrinthine corridors, turning left, then right, then left again.

"Where are we going?" Zexx asked, his voice a low rumble behind her.

"Somewhere they won't think to look for us," she replied, feeling her way along the wall as the passage grew darker. "Somewhere beneath their notice."

They continued in silence, the only sounds their breathing and the occasional distant drip of water. The chill of the underground seeped through her robes, raising bumps on her skin despite the heat of exertion.

After what felt like ages, a new scent began to permeate the stale air—the warm, yeasty aroma of freshly baked bread mingling with the savory smell of grilled meat and spices. The kitchens. They were approaching the vast underground complex where meals for the entire governmental tower were prepared, where dozens of staff worked from before dawn until late into the night.

The passage widened, branching off in several directions. Linnea paused, orienting herself by the increasing strength of the kitchen smells, then chose the rightmost tunnel. Light began to filter in from somewhere ahead, and the sounds of activity grew more distinct—metal clanging against metal, voices calling orders, the hiss of steam.

They emerged behind a stairwell and stepped into a dimly lit corridor lined with storage rooms, just beyond the bustling kitchens. She pulled Zexx into the shadow of a large storage rack as a group of workers passed, carrying trays laden with food destined for the upper levels.

As the corridor emptied again, she spotted a familiar figure—Zelia, the young attendant who had warned her about the protest that morning, the one who'd first given her idea to bring Zexx to the city, emerging from the kitchen with a tray.

"Zelia," she called softly, stepping just far enough into the light for the young woman to see her.

She startled, nearly dropping the tray before recognition dawned in her eyes. Then fear replaced surprise as she glanced nervously between Linnea and Zexx, who remained partially concealed in the shadows.

"Chancellor," she whispered, quickly setting down the tray and hurrying over. "They're looking for you everywhere. The guards, they're saying—" She broke off, clearly afraid to repeat whatever rumors were circulating.

"You were right about the dangers," Linnea said, keeping her voice low. "About whom I could trust. Now I need your help again. We need a place to hide, just until nightfall."

Zelia bit her lower lip, glancing over her shoulder toward the busy kitchen. For a moment, Linnea feared she would refuse, that perhaps her trust was misplaced once again. Then the young woman gave a short, decisive nod.

"Follow me," she said. "Quickly, before someone comes."

She led them down a different corridor, this one narrower and more poorly lit than the first. The stone walls here were rougher, the floor uneven beneath their feet. They ascended a short flight of stairs, the air growing warmer and stuffier when Zelia opened a door and led them through it.

"The staff quarters," Zelia explained in a hushed voice. "No one important ever comes down here."

The corridor opened into a warren of small rooms, most with doors closed. From behind some came the sounds of snoring—no doubt night-shift workers sleeping through the day. Zelia stopped before a door near the end of the hall, glancing around once more before pushing it open.

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"My room," she said, ushering them inside. "It's not much, but no one will look for you here."

The space was tiny, barely large enough for the narrow bed, small table, and chest of personal belongings it contained. A single window high on the wall provided the only natural light, filtered through a grate that suggested it opened at ground level somewhere in the city.

"I'm sorry it's so small and shabby." Zelia wrung her hands as she watched them take in the sparse accommodations.

"It's perfect," Linnea assured her, meaning it despite the tight quarters. "Thank you, Zelia."

As the young woman nodded and turned to leave, a wave of guilt washed over Linnea. She had lived her entire life as a highborn, served on the council and then as chancellor, and yet she had never known—never bothered to learn—that the people who served the government lived like this, in cramped cells beneath the very floors she walked each day. How much else about her city had she been blind to? How many other realities had she failed to see because they didn't directly impact her comfortable existence?

"You'll be safe here," Zelia said, her hand on the door. "No one would ever think to look for the chancellor in the servants' quarters. And none of the day shift will be near the rooms until late tonight when the day's work is done."

"We'll leave as soon as it's dark and we can move around unnoticed," Linnea

promised. "Zelia, I can't thank you enough for risking yourself this way."

She offered a small smile. "You've always been kind to me, Chancellor. That matters more than you might think." With that, she slipped out, closing the door softly behind her.

Left alone with Zexx, Linnea stood motionless in the center of the tiny room, suddenly overwhelmed by the reality of their situation. In the space of a single day, she had gone from chancellor to fugitive, from leader to outlaw. Her own advisors had betrayed her, turned her people against her, and were now hunting her through the very tower she had once ruled.

"Linnea," Zexx said softly, his voice pulling her from the edge of panic.

She turned to him, opening her mouth to say something—anything—to maintain the illusion of control she'd been clinging to. But no words came. Instead, the façade crumbled, her shoulders sagging as the weight of everything crashed down upon her.

He pulled her into his arms with a gentleness that contrasted sharply with his stormy expression. She pressed her face against his chest, breathing in his scent as the tears she'd been holding back finally spilled over.

They weren't soft, dignified tears befitting a chancellor, but hot, angry sobs that shook her entire body. She cried for the betrayal of those she had trusted, for the peril facing K'Nar, for her own blindness that had allowed this conspiracy to fester. But most of all, she cried for her people, who deserved better than leaders who would sacrifice peace for power.

Zexx held her through it all, one hand stroking her hair while the other remained firm around her waist, anchoring her when everything else had been torn away. He didn't offer empty reassurances or platitudes—just his steady presence, his silent strength.

"I should have believed you from the start," she said when she could finally speak again, her voice rough from crying. "You tried to warn me, and I accused you of—"

"Shh," he murmured, pressing his lips to the top of her head. "You believe me now. That's what matters."

She pulled back just enough to look up at him, this warrior from the sands who had somehow become her strongest ally, her deepest connection. "What do we do now?" she asked, the question encompassing far more than just their immediate situation.

His dark eyes held hers, unwavering in their certainty. "We survive," he said simply. "And then we fight."

In the dim light of a servant's room, Linnea found herself believing him. Believing in him. And crucially, believing in them.

ChapterThirty-Six

Zexx held Linnea as her tears soaked into his tunic, her body trembling against his in the dim confines of the servant's quarters. The room was small enough that he could have touched both walls at once if he'd extended his arms, the air close and warm with the scent of their mingled breath. A single shaft of dusty light filtered through the high grated window, casting elongated shadows across the worn stone floor.

Her emotions crashed over him in waves—anger, betrayal, guilt, fear—yet instead of drowning in them as he might have expected, he felt strangely anchored. Connected. Each surge of feeling that passed from her to him through their bond only strengthened his resolve to protect her, to stand beside her through whatever came next.

He understood her pain. The sting of betrayal was familiar to him—he had felt it in

his own heart when the Dothveks former leader had been revealed to be a murderer. That shared understanding flowed between them now, a current stronger than words could express.

Gradually, her sobs quieted, her breathing steadied, though she remained in his embrace as if drawing strength from the contact.

"I wasn't sure why my brother left to join your people," she said, pulling back just enough to look up at him. "I never understood his fascination with the sand dwellers, his insistence that there was something essential your people preserved that ours had lost. But now I do. Your people are loyal and brave. You live as equals, not as masters and servants. You do not have highborns and commoners. There are no Dothveks who live in decadence while others exist in squalor."

She glanced around the tiny room, taking in the sparse furnishings, the single threadbare blanket on the narrow bed, the chipped cup on the small table. "I had no idea that workers lived like this beneath the towers. All these years, I've walked the halls above, never questioning where the people who serve us retire at night." Shame colored her voice. "What kind of leader doesn't know such basic truths about her own domain?"

Zexx guided her to sit on the edge of the bed, crouching before her so their eyes remained level. "The Dothveks aren't perfect," he said, thinking of his own prejudice against the Cresteks. "But we do share thoughts, which means we know other Dothveks' hearts. It is impossible to harbor hate when you feel another's pain and joy."

He took her hands in his, feeling their delicate strength. "When you live on the sands, what happens to one happens to all. That is why we say, what happens to you happens to me. It's the only way we can survive and flourish. When one suffers, all suffer. When one prospers, all prosper."

Linnea's eyes, still bright with tears, held a wistful longing. "That kind of life sounds wonderful," she said softly. "To be part of something so unified, so genuinely connected."

"You would be welcomed in my village," he told her, meaning every word. The thought of taking her back to the oasis filled him with a profound yearning. "But then the Cresteks would lose you as a leader, and having a leader who wants change and equality is something your people desperately need."

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Something shifted in her expression—the vulnerability receding, replaced by a steely determination he'd seen before when she'd met with her councilors. She straightened her spine, squaring her shoulders as if already reclaiming the mantle of chancellor.

"You're right," she said, her voice gaining strength with each word. "I'm not going to let a bunch of old, high-born Crestek males push me out. Not when there's so much work to be done, so many wrongs to right." She stood abruptly, nearly knocking him backward as she moved toward the door with sudden purpose. "We need to go now, find K'Nar, gather whatever allies we still have—"

Zexx caught her arm, pulling her gently but firmly back. "We need to be clever about this," he cautioned, recognizing the reckless courage that threatened to send her rushing headlong into danger. "You need more than just me to back you." He gestured to their surroundings, the hidden room beneath layers of stone. "And we can't leverage the arrival of the bounty hunter ship if we're stuck in the basement of the tower. Or worse, captured by your enemies."

Linnea paused, the fire in her eyes dimming slightly as reason reasserted itself. "You're right," she admitted, though he could feel her impatience vibrating through their connection. "We need a plan."

She paced the small space, three steps in one direction before having to turn. "My brother mentioned hidden passages the resistance used during the height of tensions between our peoples. Tunnels that led beyond the city walls, out to meeting points in the rocky outcroppings." She stopped suddenly, eyes widening. "I think I remember where one is—not far from here, connecting to the old storage chambers in the eastern section."

"We should wait until the search has died down, until the protest has dispersed," he advised. "Moving now, when they're actively hunting us, would be too risky."

She nodded. "We'll wait then."

The logic was sound, but it wasn't the only reason he wanted to delay their departure. The thought of a few hours alone with Linnea, away from the constant vigilance and pretense required in the tower, away from the imminent dangers they would soon face again, held its own appeal. He arched an eyebrow, allowing a hint of suggestion to enter his voice. "I wonder how we'll pass the time until then."

The tension in the room shifted, the air suddenly charged with a different kind of energy. Linnea's lips curved into a smile that reached her eyes, chasing away the last shadows of her tears.

"That," she said with a husky laugh that sent heat coursing through his veins, "is another thing I love about Dothveks. Always practical about survival, but never forgetting to live in the moment."

His breath caught at her casual use of the word "love," though he knew she hadn't meant it in the way his heart instantly seized upon. Still, the possibility that she might someday use that word with its full weight of meaning made his pulse quicken.

He closed the distance between them, his hand finding the curve of her waist as if drawn there by some magnetic force. "Living in the moment is a skill developed when life on the sands can change in an instant," he murmured, drawing her closer. "A sudden sandstorm, a serpent's attack—you learn to savor what you have while you have it."

Her hands slid up his chest to link behind his neck, her body yielding against his. "Then teach me, Dothvek," she whispered, her breath warm against his lips. "Teach

me to savor this moment, when everything else is so uncertain."

He didn't need to be asked twice.

ChapterThirty-Seven

The stone floor was cool against Linnea's bare feet as they slipped from Zelia's room, the door closing behind them with barely a whisper of sound. The suns had dipped low since they'd sought refuge in the tiny quarters beneath the tower, sending shadows stretching from the narrow window and across the floor. Now the corridors lay silent and dimly lit, most of the staff either asleep or still working in the kitchens below.

Zexx moved ahead of her, his steps soundless despite his larger frame, every movement fluid and controlled. They both wore cloaks with the hoods pulled low over their faces, keeping their heads down as they walked.

Linnea's heart fluttered in her chest like a trapped bird as they crept along the corridor, past doors behind which service staff slept. They approached the entrance to the kitchens, intending to pass by quickly, when a figure darted out from the doorway. Linnea froze, ready to bolt, but then recognized Zelia's slight form. Her eyes were wide, her cheeks flushed as if she'd been running.

"Chancellor," she whispered, glancing nervously over her shoulder before continuing. "I've been watching for you. You need to know—the protest, it flopped."

Linnea blinked, not quite processing her words. "What do you mean?"

"Counter-protesters came," she explained in a rushed whisper. "Hundreds of them, supporting you and the peace accord. They overwhelmed the others, the ones who were planted. It became clear very quickly that most of the city stands with you."

Hope bloomed in Linnea's chest, warm and unexpected. "The people support me?"

Zelia nodded emphatically. "More than the council realized, it seems. The search party gave up long ago." Her expression darkened. "But the council released a statement. They're saying you were kidnapped by the Dothvek ambassador. They're saying this is a violation of the peace."

Zexx stiffened beside her, his hand instinctively moving to where his weapon would normally be. "They've made me the villain in their tale."

"They've ridden the tide of support for you to their advantage, now claiming that you must be saved from the treacherous Dothvek." Zelia's gaze darted to Zexx. "They're calling for your capture. Dead or alive."

The momentary hope Linnea had felt morphed into renewed determination. Her people might support her, but the council had seized control of the narrative. Without muscle behind her to physically stand up to their lies, words of support would mean nothing. For that kind of strength, she needed to get out of the city—to the bounty hunters who were on their way, to the Dothveks who might rally to Zexx's side.

"Thank you for telling us," Linnea said, reaching out to squeeze Zelia's hand gratefully. "And for hiding us. You've taken an enormous risk."

Zelia straightened her shoulders, a fierce pride replacing her fear. "My grandmother was part of the resistance during the worst of the conflicts. She always said that sometimes loyalty to justice matters more than loyalty to authority." A faint smile touched her lips. "I won't tell anyone I saw you."

As they hurried away, Linnea heard Zelia's voice behind them, explaining loudly to someone in the kitchen that she had been talking to one of the guards from the tower, asking about the excitement earlier. A clever girl, providing herself with an alibi.

Linnea hoped her deception would protect her from suspicion.

They moved swiftly through the underground corridors, the dim lighting from wall sconces casting slender shadows across the rough stone walls. She scoured her memory for what her brother had told her about the resistance passageways, wishing she'd paid more attention to his enthusiastic explanations. He had been fascinated by the network of tunnels beneath the city, had spent hours exploring them with his resistance friends. At the time, she'd dismissed his interest as youthful rebellion. Now, their lives depended on those same passages.

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"It should be somewhere near the eastern storage chambers," she murmured, more to herself than to Zexx. "There was a symbol carved into the wall—three vertical lines crossed by one horizontal."

They made several wrong turns, each dead end increasing the anxiety knotting her stomach. What if she remembered incorrectly? What if the passage had been sealed? What if they were trapped down here, wandering until someone eventually spotted them?

"There," Zexx said suddenly, his keen eyes spotting what she had missed—a faint carving in the stone, almost worn away by time but still visible if you knew to look for it.

Linnea ran her fingers over the symbol, feeling the shallow grooves beneath her skin. "This is it."

Pressing against the wall as her brother had once described, she felt the stone give way slightly, then slide to the side with a grating sound that seemed impossibly loud in the quiet corridor. Beyond lay a tunnel narrower and lower than the passages they'd been traversing, clearly meant for quick escape rather than regular use.

She hesitated at the entrance, a wave of apprehension washing over her. The passage was dark, cramped, the ceiling so low that Zexx would need to stoop to avoid hitting his head. The thought of crawling through that confined space, with tons of stone and earth pressing down above them, made her breath catch in her throat.

"I'm right by your side," Zexx said, seeming to sense her fear. He took her hand, his

warm fingers entwining with hers. "We do this together."

Drawing strength from his touch, she nodded and stepped into the tunnel. The entrance slid closed behind them, plunging them into near-total darkness with only the faintest glow from phosphorescent fungus growing along the walls to guide their way.

The air was thick with the smell of loamy soil and damp stone, the earthy scent filling her lungs with each shallow breath. The walls pressed in on either side, forcing them to move single file, her shoulders occasionally brushing against the rough surface. Cold droplets of water fell from the ceiling, landing on her face and neck in an irregular pattern that made her flinch each time.

She focused on putting one foot in front of the other, on the steady rhythm of Zexx's breathing behind her, on anything but the weight of the city above their heads and the suffocating closeness of the tunnel walls.

"Did I ever tell you about the time my friend and I tracked a sand snake?" Zexx's voice came from behind her, startlingly loud in the confined space.

"What?" she asked, momentarily confused by the non sequitur.

"We were young warriors, eager to prove ourselves," he continued, as if they were sitting comfortably around a fire rather than inching through a claustrophobic escape tunnel. "We followed its trail for half a day across the dunes, thinking ourselves so clever, so skilled."

Despite her fear, she found herself drawn into his story. "What happened?"

"When we finally spotted it and struck, the creature wasn't as injured as we thought. It pulled me under the sand, dragging me down where the grains would fill my lungs."

She could hear the smile in his voice as he added, "This is definitely better than being dragged beneath the sand."

She waited for more, then asked. "Then what happened? I know you survived because you're here, but how?"

"My friend dove in after me with both blades extended in his hands. He hacked the sand serpent enough to make it stop its descent and reverse course, then we both rode the flailing beast back to the surface where we leapt off."

"He risked his life to save you?"

"He did." His voice was warm at the memory. "What happened to me, happened to him."

Linnea couldn't help being warmed by the story. Then a surprised laugh escaped her, echoing strangely in the narrow passage. "Did you tell me that story just to distract me from where we are?"

"Perhaps," he admitted, and she could feel his pleasure at having succeeded. "Did it work?"

"It did," she said, affection humming through her at his kindness.

"I also told you that story to remind you that we are in this together every step of the way. What happens to you, happens to me."

Linnea's throat tightened. How strange that this warrior from the sands, who had once been nothing more than a passionate lapse in judgment, now understood her fears so intuitively.

They continued on, the passage gradually beginning to slope upward. Her laughter faded as she spotted something ahead—a faint sliver of lighter darkness that gradually resolved into a thin line of actual light.

Relief surged through Linnea so intensely that she broke into an awkward, crouching run, desperate to reach the exit, to feel open air on her face again. The light grew stronger with each step, revealing the outline of what appeared to be a wooden door and the light seeping in through gaps in the planks.

She reached it first, pushing against the weathered boards with both hands. It resisted for a moment, but when Zexx's hands joined hers, the hinges gave way with a groan of surrender. Fresh air rushed in, cool and sweet after the stale atmosphere of the tunnel, and she nearly sobbed with relief.

But as she prepared to step through the opening, the sound of voices froze her in place. Male voices, low and gruff, coming from just outside the doorway.

Terror gripped her, stealing her breath and locking her muscles. Had the council's guards found their escape route? Had they been waiting for them all along, knowing they would eventually emerge like sand rats from a hole?

She felt Zexx tense behind her, his body coiling with the readiness of a warrior prepared to fight. His hand found hers again, squeezing once—reassurance or farewell, she couldn't tell which.

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The voices grew closer, words becoming clearer, and she pressed herself against the tunnel wall, desperately hoping the darkness would conceal them for just a moment longer.

ChapterThirty-Eight

Zexx stood just inside the mouth of the tunnel, Linnea's body tense against his as the voices outside grew clearer. Her fear pulsed through their connection, and he tightened his grip on her hand, offering what comfort he could through touch alone.

Then, through the narrow opening of the door, he caught fragments of speech that made his heart leap—not the clipped, formal tones of Crestek guards, but the deeper burr of Dothvek voices, the rhythm of speech he'd known all his life.

"It's okay," he whispered against Linnea's ear, feeling her startle at the unexpected words. "It's my people. Our rescue party."

She turned to him, confusion replacing fear in her eyes. "The bounty hunters? But how—"

He pressed a finger to her lips, then gestured toward the door. Together, they pushed it wider, stepping out from the confining darkness of the tunnel into the soft light of the twin suns just beginning to rise over the rocky outcroppings that surrounded the city.

Before them stood a group unlike any he'd ever seen—Dothvek warriors with their curved blades and bare chests standing shoulder to shoulder with their mates.

Tori, the Zevrian security chief of the bounty hunting ship, stood at the forefront of the group, her dark curls piled haphazardly atop her head and a wicked-looking blade gripped casually in one hand. Her face split into a grin when she saw them emerge from the tunnel.

"We were just coming in to find you," she said, twirling her blade with a flourish before sheathing it. "Figured you might be stuck in that maze of stone the Cresteks call a city."

Linnea stepped forward, her back straightening as she instinctively assumed the posture of chancellor despite her dirty cloak and disheveled appearance. "Thank you for coming," she said, her voice steady despite the exhaustion Zexx could feel emanating from her. "I wasn't sure how quickly you'd arrive."

A tall Dothvek warrior with dark slashes marking both sides of his bare chest stepped forward. K'alvek had been among the first of their people to take a human mate, although Zexx did not see the pale-haired captain he'd married.

"We were closer than you knew," the Dothvek said. "And we used knowledge from one who knows the secret entrances well."

As if on cue, another figure moved to the front of the group—a male whose gold skin and inked chest marked him as Dothvek, yet whose bearing was distinctly Crestek. T'Kar, son of a former chancellor, who had chosen the sands over the stone city and later joined the bounty hunters.

"Chancellor," he greeted Linnea with a formal nod. "Brother of the sands," he added to Zexx with a grin.

"T'Kar," Linnea responded, surprise evident in her voice. "I would not have expected to see you return to these walls."

A shadow passed across his face. "Nor did I expect to return. But when your message came through, speaking of treachery within the council and danger to the peace..." He shrugged one powerful shoulder. "Some debts transcend personal history."

"The council has turned against Linnea," Zexx explained, looking around at the assembled group. "They orchestrated protests against her leadership and the peace accord, are attempting to frame me for her kidnapping, and are now hunting us both."

Linnea took up the narrative, her voice growing stronger as she detailed the betrayal of her advisors, the evidence of their conspiracy, and the counter-protest that had revealed how much support she still had among the common people.

"I am sure they would like for me to perish in the rescue attempt while Zexx is killed. That way they can install a new chancellor," she concluded. "Someone who will isolate the Cresteks once more and abandon the peace that has only just begun to take root."

K'alvek's expression darkened, his hand moving instinctively to the hilt of his blade. "Familiar tactics," he growled. "The Dothveks also had a ruler who stole power and used violence and death to do so."

"And look how well that ended for him," commented a female Zexx recognized—tall and lithe with lavender hair that seemed to change shades as she moved.

Zexx stiffened as he watched the Lycithian shapeshifter. He was on guard in case she decided to shift into a massive beast or a deadly viper, as he knew she'd done before.

"It sounds like you're the leader your city needs," K'alvek said to Linnea, his voice carrying the weight of one who had seen many leaders, both worthy and unworthy. "One who understands the value of alliance over isolation, of peace over pointless conflict."

Tori's face fell slightly. "Wait, so there's not going to be a battle?" She tapped the hilt of her blade with obvious disappointment. "We came all this way, and I don't get to stab anyone?"

The lavender-haired female rolled her eyes. "There will be plenty of chances to draw blood when we capture our next bounty, Tori." Her voice was melodic and slightly otherworldly. "The Magatti slaver we've been tracking should put up a valiant fight, and he despises females, which will make it all the sweeter."

"Thanks, Bexli." Tori reluctantly removed her hand from her weapon. "That helps."

Zexx watched the females with a mixture of fascination and gratitude. These were the outsiders who had changed their isolated world forever—who had crashed onto their sands and, in doing so, awakened possibilities none of them had imagined. Without them, his brothers would never have left the planet to be galactic bounty hunters. He would never have met Linnea. Without them, their two peoples might still be locked in the cycle of mistrust and violence that had defined generations.

Linnea stepped closer to him, her shoulder brushing his as she addressed the group once more. "I need to address my people," she said, determination hardening her voice. "To counter the council's lies and reclaim my position before they can do more damage."

Zexx stiffened, concern flooding through him at the thought of her walking openly into the city where her enemies had control. "It's too dangerous," he said, unable to keep the edge from his voice. "They've already branded me your kidnapper. What's to stop them from claiming I've manipulated you, or worse, from simply having you killed the moment you appear?"

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She turned to him, her eyes meeting his with the quiet strength he'd come to admire so deeply. "My people came out to support me when it mattered. I won't abandon them now."

His heart ached with love for her—for her courage, her sense of duty, her unwavering commitment to her people even when they had failed her. But he couldn't bear the thought of losing her, not when he had finally discovered what it meant to be truly bonded to another soul. But he knew he could not be the one to stand in the way of her destiny.

"Do you trust me?" he asked her, his voice dropping low enough that only she could hear.

She didn't hesitate. "I do."

Those two simple words filled him with a fierce determination. He turned to K'alvek, gesturing for him to join him a few paces away from the others.

"I have a plan," he told him when they were out of earshot. "One that will protect Linnea while allowing her to reclaim her position."

The seasoned warrior studied him, his eyes shrewd beneath dark brows. "I hope this is better than your plan to spear the sand snake," he said dryly. "The two of us barely survived that."

The city walls loomed before them, pale stone gilded by the rising suns as they approached the main gate. The bounty hunters and Dothvek warriors formed a protective semicircle around Linnea, their weapons not drawn but visibly present—a clear warning to anyone who might consider interfering with their approach.

Linnea kept her gaze fixed on the gate, trying to ignore the knot of anxiety tightening in her stomach. Zexx, K'alvek, and T'Kar had disappeared an hour earlier, slipping back through the hidden tunnels into the city while they circled around to approach from the main entrance. Their absence left her feeling oddly exposed despite the formidable group surrounding her.

What if the plan failed? What if the council had gathered enough guards to overwhelm even the Dothvek warriors? What if Zexx was captured or worse?

"Your face is like a scroll anyone can read," Tori commented beside her, her blade now secured at her hip but her hand never straying far from its hilt. "He won't let you down, you know."

Linnea glanced at her, startled by how accurately she'd read her thoughts. "Do you have the same empathic abilities as the Dothveks?" she asked, wondering if this was yet another aspect of these off-worlders she had failed to consider.

Tori laughed, the sound bright and unexpected in the tense atmosphere. "Nah, nothing that fancy. You just have that same look my captain gets when one of us is heading out on a solo mission—like you're trying to calculate all the ways things could go wrong and whether you should insist on going with him."

"I'm not used to letting others fight my battles," she admitted, smoothing her stained cloak with hands that refused to remain still.

"From what I hear, you've been fighting alone for a long time," Tori replied,

surprising her with her insight. "Maybe it's time to let someone have your back."

Before Linnea could respond, movement at the gate caught her attention. Slowly, the massive doors began to swing outward, the ancient hinges groaning under their weight. She stiffened, half-expecting Crestek warriors to rush through the opening, weapons raised.

But the gates continued to open without opposition, revealing the familiar main thoroughfare leading into the city center. No guards blocked their way, no weapons were leveled at them. She exhaled a heavy breath.

"Looks like the first part of the plan worked," Bexli murmured, her lavender hair shifting brighter as she moved forward to flank Linnea on the other side.

Linnea nodded, then squared her shoulders and strode through the gate with what she hoped appeared to be confidence rather than the nervous determination she actually felt. The bounty hunters and Dothveks followed, their presence drawing curious glances from early-rising merchants setting up their stalls in the market square.

As they approached the central plaza before the tower, she saw them—Zexx, K'alvek, and T'Kar standing at the base of the steps, and kneeling before them, bound and clearly furious, were Vellen and Taal. Several other council members she recognized as being loyal to the traitors were similarly restrained, guarded by additional Dothvek warriors who must have entered through other tunnel access points.

Relief flooded through her, so intense it nearly buckled her knees. The plan had worked.

Zexx's eyes found hers across the plaza, and even at this distance, she could feel the connection between them pulse with shared triumph and concern. He had succeeded in capturing the traitors but wouldn't rest easy until she was safely back in power.

By now, a crowd had begun to gather, drawn by the unusual sight of Dothveks and various off-worlders in the heart of the city. Whispers rippled through the growing throng, fingers pointing, expressions ranging from fear to fascination to relief as people recognized her among the group.

This was the moment—the opportunity to reclaim her position, to address the lies that had been spread, to set her city on a new path. She moved to the steps of the tower, climbing several to gain height over the assembled citizens. The familiar stone beneath her feet felt somehow different now, as if she were returning not just to her position but to a new understanding of what that position should mean.

She raised her hands, and a hush fell over the crowd.

"People of the Crestek city," she began, her voice carrying clearly in the morning air. "You have been told many things in the past day—that I was kidnapped, that the peace was threatened, that your security required a return to isolation."

She paused, looking out over the sea of faces—merchants and artisans, guards and servants, nobles and commoners alike—all waiting to hear what had truly transpired.

"I could stand here and tell you comfortable falsehoods," she continued. "I could claim that everything is as it always was, that nothing needs to change. But I've learned, perhaps too late, that leadership without honesty is merely manipulation."

The crowd stirred, uncertain how to react to such unprecedented candor from their chancellor.

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"The truth is this: members of my own council plotted against me because I wished to continue the peace with the Dothveks, because I believed—still believe—that we are stronger with allies instead of enemies." She gestured to the bound advisors. "These Cresteks wanted me to fail. They orchestrated protests, spread lies, and were willing to sacrifice our future for their own power and prejudice."

Murmurs spread through the crowd, eyes turning to the captive council members with growing anger.

"They will be taken to a place where chaos and fighting are welcome," she announced, having decided this punishment during their approach to the city and Tori's tales of how she ended up with her mate. "Let them live among those who share their appetite for conflict, far from the peace we are building here."

Tori had grinned when Linnea had proposed this solution. She assured Linnea that she was more than happy to deposit the treacherous Cresteks in a place that was filled with enough treachery of its own to make them feel right at home.

She drew a deep breath, knowing that what came next would define her leadership more than any decision she had made before.

"I stand before you not just as your chancellor but as a Crestek who has seen the flaws in our society—the inequality, the hidden suffering, the rigid hierarchies that benefit few at the expense of many." Her voice grew stronger with each word. "I invite you to join me in building a city where peace and prosperity are not reserved for the elite, where every Crestek has equal value and equal opportunity. Join me in creating change and building a lasting peace."

The silence that followed her words stretched for a heartbeat, then two—a silence in which her own pulse seemed deafening in her ears. Then, from somewhere in the crowd, a single voice shouted, “Peace!” The cry was taken up by others, spreading through the gathering until the plaza echoed with voices raised in support.

Near the front of the crowd, she spotted Zelia, her face alight with fierce joy as she clapped and waved. Beside her stood K’Nar, looking somewhat battered but very much alive, a smile of quiet satisfaction on his usually composed face.

She raised her hands again, waiting for silence to return. There was one more truth that needed to be spoken.

"There is something else you should know," she said, her voice softer now but no less determined. "The Dothvek ambassador did not kidnap me as you were told. He saved me. Without his warning, without his protection, I would not be standing before you now." She turned to where Zexx stood, tall and proud at the base of the steps. "If he agrees, he will be staying as my ambassador, to help me lead our city into this new era of cooperation and understanding. But I will also be spending some time among the Dothveks on the sands so I can truly understand them."

Zexx stepped forward, his golden skin gleaming in the morning light, his tribal markings a stark reminder of his heritage. But instead of the expected acknowledgment, he shook his head.

"I will not stay as your ambassador, Chancellor," he said, his deep voice carrying easily to the farthest corners of the plaza.

A ripple of confusion passed through the crowd. Her heart stuttered, a moment of irrational fear gripping her before she saw the look in his eyes—not rejection, but something infinitely more precious.

"I will stay," he continued, "but only if you agree to become my mate."

Tears blurred her vision as she nodded, unable to speak past the emotion tightening her throat. In full view of her entire city, before Cresteks and Dothveks and interstellar bounty hunters alike, Zexx climbed the steps to where she stood and swept her into his embrace.

The cheers that erupted around them seemed distant compared to the thundering of her heart as his lips found hers. In that moment, all the barriers between them—of species, of culture, of history—fluttered away like a feather on the breeze.

They were no longer Crestek and Dothvek, no longer chancellor and warrior, no longer separated by the stone walls and vast sands that had divided their peoples for generations. They were simply Linnea and Zexx. And that was more than enough.

ChapterForty

Zexx lay beside Linnea on the thick pile of furs, their bodies slick with sweat, their breathing gradually slowing as their passion ebbed into a warm, contented glow. Above them, fabric draped from the central pole with tiny bells along the closed flaps.

Outside, the sounds of celebration continued—the low thrumming of drums, the occasional burst of laughter, the melodic singing of the priestesses. But here within their private sanctuary, there was only the two of them, cocooned in the scent of desert flowers and aromatic oils that had been part of their bonding ritual.

The glow from the oil lamp on the low table cast golden patterns across Linnea's skin, highlighting the curves and planes of her body in a way that made his breath catch. Her ebony hair spilled across the pale furs, a striking contrast that made his heart race and his cock thicken anew.

"I'm surprised you wanted to return to the Dothvek village for our wedding," he said, trailing his fingers along the curve of her hip. "I would have thought the chancellor would need to be married in a grand ceremony in the city."

Linnea smiled, turning onto her side to face him. "I wanted to return to where it all started," she said, her voice soft with affection. "Our love story began in a tent." She traced one of the black lines on his chest. "Besides, I already had the grand ceremony when I was confirmed as chancellor. This was for us, not for anyone else."

Zexx captured her wandering hand, bringing her fingers to his lips. "When did you know?" he asked, curious about the moment she had first felt what he had struggled against for so long. "When did you first realize what was between us?"

"That first night," she admitted, a faint blush coloring her cheeks. "I tried to tell myself it was just physical attraction, just the exotic appeal of someone so different from anyone I'd known. But it was more than that, even then."

"I fought it for a long time," he confessed, remembering his initial resentment at being sent to the stone city, his determination to remain aloof and untouched by its chancellor. "I thought loving you would be a betrayal of my people, of everything I'd believed my whole life."

"And now?" she asked, her finger tracing the outline of his lips.

"Now I know that loving you has made me more truly Dothvek than I ever was before." He pulled her closer, feeling the perfect fit of her body against his. "Our people believed in connections that transcended understanding, in bonds forged by something greater than ourselves. How could I deny that when I felt it every time we touched, every time our minds joined? I believe that something greater than attraction or desire brought us together. Whether it was fate or the magic of the ancient goddesses or both, I am grateful for it."

She smiled, leaning down to press a soft kiss to his lips. "As am I. Though I'm not sure the goddesses of the sands intended for a Crestek chancellor to become the mate of a Dothvek warrior."

"Perhaps they enjoy surprising us," he suggested, pulling her back down to rest against his chest. "Perhaps they knew that our peoples needed more than treaties and diplomatic agreements to truly find peace."

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"They needed us," Linnea murmured, already drifting toward sleep. "The chancellor and the warrior, the stone and the sand."

"The perfect mating of opposites."

The tent suddenly seemed filled with the weight of everything they'd overcome—the prejudice of generations, the plots of enemies, the barriers of their own making. Yet here they were, Crestek and Dothvek, bound now by both the ancient rituals of his people and the promise they'd made to each other.

"I love you, Zexx," Linnea whispered, the words simple yet profound in their absoluteness. "More than I ever imagined possible."

"And I love you," he replied, the phrase still new enough on his tongue to send a thrill through him. "Beyond sand and suns, beyond stars and time."

She nestled closer, her head fitting perfectly into the curve of his shoulder, her breath warm against his skin. "Are you certain about living in the city?" she asked, the question tinged with lingering concern. "I know how much you missed the sands, how confined you felt within those walls."

Zexx tilted her face up to his, wanting her to see the truth in his eyes. "I will be happy wherever you are," he told her. "The walls don't confine me when you're beside me. Besides," he added with a smile, "the city has changed since you've begun your reforms. The gates do not stay closed, the people are allowed to walk along the sands, Dothveks are welcome traders. It is freer now."

"Still," she said, her fingers playing with a strand of his hair that had fallen across his shoulder, "I'll want to come to the oasis for frequent breaks. To breathe the desert air, to sleep under the stars, to remind myself of the simplicity we can so easily forget in the politics of the city."

He rolled on top of her in one fluid movement, pinning her hands above her head as he grinned down at her. "Are you certain it's the desert air you crave?" he teased, lowering his head to nip gently at the sensitive spot beneath her ear. "The stars above? The simplicity of village life? Or could it be something else entirely?"

Her laughter vibrated through both their bodies, a sound that never failed to fill him with joy. Then she arched against him in a way that sent heat surging through his veins once more. "I will confess that the opportunity to have my fierce Dothvek warrior without interruptions from council meetings and diplomatic crises is a particularly compelling reason to visit the village."

"I thought as much," he murmured against her throat, releasing her wrists to slide his hands down her sides, savoring the way she responded to his touch. "Using the chancellor's official visits for your own pleasure. Very devious, mate."

"I learned from the best," she retorted, her hands now free to explore his body with the same deliberate attention he was giving hers. "A certain ambassador taught me that diplomacy can be very pleasurable."

He demonstrated her point by claiming her mouth in a kiss that left no room for doubt.

Epilogue

The Crestek traitors shuffled up the metal ramp of the bounty hunter ship, their wrists bound with energy cuffs that glowed a soft blue in the early morning light. Vellen

kept his head high, his expression fixed in a mask of defiant dignity despite his fall from power. Behind him, Taal stumbled slightly on the uneven surface, earning a not-so-gentle prod from Tori's blade at his back.

"Keep moving," she said, clearly enjoying her role as prison escort. "Your new home awaits, and I hear the Den of Thieves on Kurril is lovely this time of year." Her sarcastic tone made it clear that "lovely" was the last word anyone would use to describe the notorious outlaw haven.

The prisoners said nothing as they were marched into the dark, cool interior of the ship. The temperature difference between the desert heat and the climate-controlled vessel created beads of condensation on the metal walls, giving the loading bay a damp, unwelcoming atmosphere. The hum of engines warming up vibrated through the deck plates beneath their feet, a subtle reminder that their fate was sealed—they would never again set foot on the planet they had tried to control.

T'Kar waited inside, his expression stern. The former chancellor's son who had chosen the sands over stone now stood as living proof that transformation was possible—a fact that seemed to particularly unsettle Vellen, whose gaze kept sliding away from the bare-chested warrior as if unable to reconcile what he saw.

"Secure them in the holding bay," T'Kar instructed. "Bexli will monitor them. If they so much as breathe too aggressively, she has permission to shift into a sand scorpion."

Tori's eyes lit up at this prospect. "Ten credits says one of them wets himself the first time she goes full Lycithian in front of them."

"I don't take bets I know I'll lose," T'Kar replied with a hint of a smile, before gesturing for her to proceed with the prisoners.

As the traitors were led deeper into the ship, K'alvek watched them go with grim satisfaction. Justice had been served—not through execution or imprisonment within the Crestek city, where they might still have found sympathizers, but through exile to a place where they would experience what it was like to be powerless.

With the prisoners secured, K'alvek made his way through the ship's corridors toward the bridge. The vessel felt alive around him, a familiar symphony of mechanical sounds and electronic beeps that had become as much his home as the sands of the Dothvek village had once been. The transition from desert warrior to spacefaring bounty hunter had been unexpected, but he had never regretted following his heart—and his mate—to the stars.

The bridge doors slid open with a soft hiss, revealing the command center of the ship. At the helm sat Caro, her hands dancing in perfect coordination across multiple control panels, her dark hair pulled up in a high ponytail. To her right, Danica occupied the captain's chair, her blonde curls spilling over her shoulders, her expression focused as she reviewed data on a holographic display.

"Prisoners secured," K'alvek announced, crossing to stand beside Danica. "No problems?"

She looked up at him, her serious expression melting into a warm smile that was reserved solely for him. "None that I've heard about. Though Tori seems disappointed she didn't get to use her new blade."

"There will be other opportunities," he said, resting a hand on her shoulder. "That slaver still has a high price on his head."

Danica reached up to cover his hand with her own, a simple gesture that still sent a pulse of warmth through him even after all their time together. "True. And speaking of other opportunities—" She was interrupted by Caro's sudden exclamation.

"Captain, we're receiving a transmission," the pilot said, one hand adjusting controls while another tapped rapidly on a sensor pad. "It's coming in on a heavily encrypted channel."

"Source?" Danica straightened in her chair, instantly alert.

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Caro's tilted her head. "It's from a Vandar warbird."

K'alvek moved closer to the viewscreen, surprise rippling through him. "The Vandar? We haven't heard from them in a while."

"Which Raas is it?" he asked, referring to the commanders who led each warbird. "Vassim? Kaalek?"

Caro turned to face them. "No. It's one we don't know. A designation I've never seen before."

Danica and K'alvek exchanged glances. A new Vandar Raas? An unknown designation? They'd made alliances with several warlords, but the Vandar were anything but predictable.

K'alvek's fingers tingled in anticipation, as his mate instructed Caro to put the transmission on screen, "This should be interesting."

* * *