



Benet (Badari Gladiators #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Benet Arencollo was a top ranked gladiator in the Five Systems, second in command at the House of Badari and acclaimed celebrity.

He had the world at his fingertips...until he was kidnapped and taken to the Outlier Empire to compete in the sinister Empress's Games.

The shady noble who ordered him taken believes he's an actual genetically engineered Badari Warrior.

As Benet participates in training for the deadly events to come, he looks for ways to escape but Outlier is like a black hole – no way out.

The only redeeming aspects of his captivity are working with a mysterious Badari who serves the Empress and finding the one woman who could capture his heart.

Marushka Nichevsky is a child of privilege and the daughter of the man who kidnapped Benet.

She wants to be a veterinarian but she's engaged to a man she barely knows and thoroughly despises and will be his trophy wife.

Benet is everything she ever dreamed of in a romantic partner but their love is doomed given her position in Outlier society and Benet's place as a prisoner.

Can Benet keep up the pretense of being a true Badari? Will his friends at home be able to locate and rescue him? And will he and Marushka find a way to be together?

Author's Note: This is the fourth book in the Badari Gladiators series and can be read as a standalone (mild spoilers for earlier books).

There are two instances of domestic violence off the page, not involving Benet, although the aftermath is shown and he is present for that.

A couple other incidents of violence.

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Chapter One

Now that the gladiators who fought for the House of Badari were free men, there was no longer any entertainment in the form of potent feelgoods and willing ladies provided for them by the Master of the House.

Kyden, the former gladiator known as the Death Dealer, who was now the Master thought grown men could find their own entertainment without his help.

Benet Arencollo was sure his mate-wife Lady Elara had undoubtedly made her opinions known as well.

Actually the change was fine with Benet. Not being a slave far outweighed the benefits of the old system. He certainly had no problem finding parties, feelgoods and agreeable company on his own. As the third highest ranked gladiator in the House, he was much in demand.

The games earlier in the day had gone well.

The House of Badari with Rennyrr, Talinn and himself to lead the team had vanquished their opponents with a minimum of bloodshed and a maximum of the showmanship the House was now famous for.

There'd been no matches to the death, thank the gods.

Benet could be lethal when the occasion demanded it but he preferred to leave the other side bloodied and bruised but alive.

Kyden was making inroads on his goal of getting the populace of the Five Systems to realize the gladiators were men and women with lives to live, not puppets to die for the crowd's entertainment.

There'd been the obligatory after-game debriefing with Kyden and the others, going over their strengths and weaknesses and then he'd gone to his apartment in the massive house to shower and put on his best clubbing clothes before going out to celebrate.

Now he waited at the stairs for his private car to be brought by one of the servants and a huge party awaited at one of the swankiest clubs in the city.

Benet wished he felt more excited about the night ahead. The clubs, the women and the feelgoods were all becoming a blur to him, none of them bringing the pleasure he craved. He was going through the motions of being a celebrity bachelor athlete but it was pretty meaningless.

Kyden and Elara emerged from the house, arm in arm, both dressed to the nines.

"Off to the Senator's?" Benet asked as the couple descended the steps to stand next to him.

"Big political meet and greet and fund raiser," Elara said. "It's work, trust me."

"But later, we'll play," Kyden added, his massive hand on Elara's back in a protective, possessive gesture. He dipped his head to kiss her. "I've been promised."

"Yes, you have." She laughed, leaning closer to Benet and lowering her voice. "We're taking a few days off and going to stay on my family's lunar estate. No interruptions, no shop talk, just us."

“Have fun.” His groundcar came gliding up and as the servant stepped out, he sat in the driver’s seat and shut the door. Kyden’s limousine was pulling up behind him so he accelerated from zero to one hundred and took to the air, heading for the heart of the city and the party.

And that was the last thing he remembered when he woke up an indeterminate time later, head aching and reflexes slowed.

Benet opened his eyes reluctantly, wondering why the seven hells the room was so cold and then as he stared around at what was obviously a cryosleep awakening chamber, his adrenaline spiked.

“What the fuck is going on here?” He tried to sit up but he was in restraints and naked on a bare metal table, hence the cold.

He indulged a brief hope he was caught in a nightmare, maybe on a bad trip from an illicit feelgood spiked into his drink.

“Hey,” he shouted, having figured out he wasn’t getting loose from the table without help. “I don’t know what’s going on here but I demand to be released.”

“You’re hardly in a position to make demands,” said a disembodied male voice from a speaker hidden in the room.

“Relax, the med robo is coming. A few injects to finish countering the effects of the cryosleep and you’ll be fine.

I’ll get paid and you’ll be on your way to your final destination. Everything good.”

“Where the hell am I?” he asked as the chamber door opened and an oddly shaped robo floated in on an antigrav cushion.

Benet eyed the robo with distaste and submitted to its cursory examination, probes, sensors and injects with more curses. When he got loose someone was going to pay dearly for this outrage.

“In transit to a new life, buddy,” said the voice with a chuckle. “I wish I could say it was a better life but then I’d be lying. You’ll get your answers soon enough but I have a feeling you won’t like them.”

Benet didn’t like any of this but he especially didn’t like the robo and what it was doing, however when the examination was complete and he’d had two more injects, the clamps on the table retracted and he sat up, dizzy.

He wished he had the strength and co-ordination to jump the robo and rip its ‘head’ off but that wasn’t happening.

“Helluva a hangover,” he said, sliding off the table.

He had to hold onto the edge to keep from falling.

The robo drifted out the door again and he was alone with his dazed but murderous thoughts.

“Incoming,” the voice said and a panel in the wall across from him opened. A pile of garments was pushed out, falling on the floor in a heap, with a pair of boots landing on the top. “You’ve got about two minutes to get dressed or they’ll be taking you out naked. Have a nice trip.”

Benet staggered to the clothes, finding a pair of pants, a tunic with a complicated braided leather belt that he cast aside for now, no underwear and a vest with a gold and red two-headed bird crest stitched into one side panel.

He disdained the vest but put on the other clothes and wound the belt around his waist to keep the tunic in place.

As he was fastening the boots the door opened and a squad of six men marched in.

Ordinarily Benet could have taken them but right now he was not at his best by a long shot.

“You will come with us,” the leader of the group said. “Wear the vest.”

Benet noticed the squad was all wearing jackets with the same bold crest. “Not a member of your club, buddy,” he said, doing his best to stand straight. “Got my own boys and when they find me which they will, you’re going to be sorry about this whole kidnapping scheme.”

Several of the soldiers smirked. The officer wasn’t fazed by Benet’s attitude.

“Take my advice and forget the past,” he said, not unkindly. “There’s no return for you. Now put the vest on and let’s go.”

Benet walked away from the disputed piece of clothing.

The soldiers formed up around him, all with their weapons drawn.

He didn’t recognize the armaments but the muzzles resembled stunners rather than blasters or projectile weapons.

So he wasn’t to be killed, or at least not right now.

Who in the Five Systems could he have pissed off to the extent of staging an elaborate kidnapping?

With the flick of his fingers the man in charge sent one soldier scrambling to gather up the vest and the whole group proceeded out of the room, Benet in the middle.

He trudged down a corridor bearing all the hallmarks of a spaceport. Checking behind him, he saw the door had closed and there was a vibration in the floor under his feet. Spaceport? Landing pad? Where the seven hells had he been taken?

After walking through several more passageways with his escort, he emerged into an open area and as he was prodded to keep walking, there was the sound of a ship lifting off behind him.

He watched a small ship arrowing into the sky, which was a washed-out blue nothing like his home world.

There were faint rings in the sky, stretching across the horizon from edge to edge.

The spectacle gave him a sinking feeling in his gut because there was nothing like it in the Five Systems.

The soldiers loaded him into the enclosed back of a groundtruck, where he sat on a hard bench and did his best not to get thrown around while the vehicle made its way to his next destination.

The road had serious curves and was definitely climbing a mountain.

Benet was getting pretty nauseated by the time the truck came to a halt and the back panel was thrown open.

The fresh air hit his lungs like a miracle cure as he was marched into a building so old and greenery covered it looked as if it had grown from the mountain, through more corridors, past gaping servants, down several flights of stairs, to be locked in an

actual dungeon.

There was straw on the floor and chains hung from the wall but thankfully no one tried to restrain him.

He faced the barred door. “Hey, what the seven hells is going on here? When do I get some answers?”

The officer, who’d dropped the vest onto the shelf in the cell before he stepped out, gave an unpleasant smile. “Soon.”

Frustrated Benet wanted to ram his fist through a wall but since the dungeon was built of stone, he refrained.

For the next few minutes he examined every inch of the small space and concluded there was no escape possible.

The floor was a single slab of stone and there was no window.

Lucky I don’t suffer from claustrophobia.

He seated himself on the shelf and ran through a few mental exercises he usually did before entering the arena at home to engage in combat.

Whatever was going to happen to him he needed to be centered and calm and ready to exploit any slightest advantage given to him.

He pushed aside all his questions about why he’d been abducted.

The answers were useless to him right now.

He wanted to stop reacting to events and resist effectively.

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Lingering cryosleep hangover was dulling his mind and cushioning his usually lightning fast reflexes.

He scrubbed a hand over his face and grimaced.

Ironic his life had finally taken a good turn, being a free man and being Kyden's second in command at the gladiatorial house and now here he was, someone's prisoner, caught up in what had to be an insane plot.

Kyden will come for me, once he figures out I've been kidnapped and finds out where I've been taken .

Benet's job was to stay alive until then and be ready to do his part in the escape.

His old friend and comrade was loyal to the core and while he and Benet weren't related the way Kyden, Rennyrr and Talinn were, the two of them were brothers of the arena.

He'd do anything for Kyden and he knew the reverse was also true.

"Well you're no Badari," said a deep voice right outside the cell door, as if echoing Benet's thoughts. The tone was contemptuous and amused.

Benet rocketed to his feet, angry at being taken off guard.

He stared at the newcomer, taking every detail from head to toe.

“And you certainly are,” he replied in Badari.

After the incident where Benet had stumbled over Talinn being held as a slave on an alien planet, it was decided he needed to learn the Badari language to better deal with any future encounters.

Kyden had been his primary tutor but the other two men practiced with him constantly.

Now it was his visitor’s turn to be taken aback. Eyes wide, the man stared at Benet in disbelief. “And how is it you speak my tongue?”

“My brothers-in-arms taught me,” Benet said.

“What Generation are you?” The man had a full head of silver hair, which Benet found astonishing.

Kyden was from an older Generation than either Rennyrr or Talinn yet his hair was deep brown.

No one knew how old Kyden was but clearly the man in front of him had to be older yet.

“One,” he said now, raising his eyebrows. “This has meaning for you?”

“Can we discuss the details of what I know about the Badari later? What’s going on here? Do you know why I was snatched?”

“There’s no time to talk now,” the man said. “The guards are coming to take you out to the training field where you’ll be expected to defeat twenty men to prove your worthiness and skills. To prove you are in fact a Badari.”

Benet stared at him. “What in the seven hells are you talking about? I’m a damn fine gladiator and my boss is Badari but that doesn’t mean I can take on twenty men and live to see the sunset.”

“Listen closely. You’re in the dungeon of Grand Duke Nichevsky, cousin to the Outlier Empress.

He’s determined to win this year’s Imperial games and he went searching for a Badari of his own to make it happen.

He’s asked the Empress to sell me to him any number of times and she always refuses.

She takes great delight in refusing in fact.

Somehow he heard about your House of Badari in the Five Systems and sent a team to abduct one.

The mercenaries picked you, not understanding the situation. ”

Head spinning, Benet fisted his hands on the bars of his cell. “I’m in Outlier?”

“You got that one fact from everything I said?” His companion chuckled derisively. “Yes, and there’ll be no going back. “

Shaking his head, Benet said, “I’ll get home—I’m a survivor.”

“Best they think you are Badari if you don’t want to get dead.

” The man’s tone was harsh. “Listen, you’ll be facing trainees out there today plus a few guards and untrained servants the duke ordered to participate to up the numbers.

There will be a few true fighters mixed in.

If you're such a great gladiator you should be able to hold your own.

It's not a battle to the death, only a test."

Benet heard sounds from the corridor and next moment a squad of guards appeared. The man who'd been talking to him nodded and walked away without another word. Curious what his deal was, Benet stepped away from the bars as ordered.

"Time to put on a show," the officer said as the door was unlocked and swung open. "Come with us."

Benet thanked the Lords of Space for the heads up his unusual visitor had given him.

At least he wouldn't be taken by surprise.

With luck he'd manage to surprise whoever was waiting and this Grand Duke who'd had him kidnapped.

And then he wanted to have a long conversation with the Badari and learn what he could about this place and the games.

Disappointment was uppermost in Dmitri's mind as he left the dungeon area and headed outside, needing fresh air to clear his head and settle his inner beast. From the moment the duke had revealed his scheme to kidnap another Badari, Dmitri had tried to keep his hopes under control.

To meet another Badari here, after all the long dreary centuries—it would be a gift from the goddess.

Not that he wished for one of his own kind to suffer being kidnapped and forced to compete in the Games, but to have another Badari at his side would be incredible.

He rubbed his chest, where the pack bond used to reside, binding him to his brothers and his Alpha.

There was nothing there now. He was as untethered as any human.

Goddess, just to see and speak with one of his own kind again...

He let the thought trail off. He'd warned the duke it would be extremely difficult to take a Badari prisoner.

The joke was on Nichevsky since the man in his dungeon was no more a Badari than the duke himself.

His expensive team of mercenaries had caught themselves a prime fighter all right, but human.

But he spoke Badari well enough and the only place he could ever have learned Dmitri's native tongue was from another Badari.

In fact the prisoner had implied there was more than one where he'd been snatched from.

Hearing his own language had nearly brought Dmitri to tears although he'd never admit it.

The kidnapped gladiator could at least converse with Dmitri and let him enjoy using his mother tongue.

He could give Dmitri information about these other Badari.

He was tall, heavily muscled and had the air of a lethal soldier, Dmitri judged, going over his brief time in the dungeon hallway.

But he's hungover from cryosleep and won't be able to defeat twenty men on his own, even if half of them are nothing but yokels from the estate.

There are a few ringers there who can hurt him.

In some ways he's a gift to me from the goddess and if I don't take action I'm throwing him and what he can tell me away.

He's not a Badari and he won't heal as I do and then the duke will have him executed even if he does survive the melee.

Besides, his Badari friends would want me to intervene. Teaching him our language means they must be close and demands I step in.

Decision made, Dmitri broke into a run, using his Badari speed and headed for the practice field where the uneven 'test' was to be conducted.

He was never reluctant to take part in a fight, beat up a few of these repellent Outliers, and thwart their plans so today would be a golden opportunity for him.

And if I vouch for the prisoner as being a Badari, who can question me?

No one would dare, not even the duke. The idea was vastly amusing to Dmitri. All these centuries since he was brought to Outlier he'd gloried in small rebellions and hidden gestures and this would be the best joke of all, helping a human masquerading as a Badari.

Benet's escort took him outside the castle into the late afternoon sunlight and into a grassy expanse enclosed by sonic fencing.

A group of men waited at the far end of the rectangle.

From here Benet could see they were clutching wooden swords and shields.

He took note of a few who seemed comfortable with the weapons because those would be his serious challengers.

Twenty to one was bad odds even for a gladiator of his caliber but if he could mow down enough of the untrained men right away without giving the more expert fighters an opening to take him, then he stood a chance.

The guards took him to the center of the makeshift arena, where there was a viewing stand of sorts, occupied by several men and one young woman.

Benet's eyes went to her instinctively because she had a sweet face currently set in an expression of distress.

On his behalf, he hoped. Now wasn't the time to be eyeing a local beauty but something about her drew his attention like a magnet.

She was richly dressed and obviously high ranking, her elaborate hairdo accented with jeweled combs and big rings on her slender fingers.

The nobleman in the center of the group, seated on the thronelike chair with an elaborate crest carved into the gilt back, cleared his throat.

"You will fight," this man said in heavily accented Basic.

“You will show me what you can do and I warn you, it had better be good after all the trouble and expense I’ve gone to.

” His eyes narrowed and he snapped at the officer. “Where is his vest?”

“I’m not wearing that thing,” Benet said. “When I fight I only wear the symbol of my own House and since I have no insignia here, I’ll fight bare.”

He could tell the noble was upset but Benet was going to deal with this mess he was in his way, not bending a knee, not giving in on any point.

He might never see the Five Systems again and would probably be executed here in the Outlier Empire but he’d die with his pride intact.

Turning away from the viewing party, Benet scrutinized the massed group of opponents.

He could tell which five were the seasoned warriors by the way they held their weapons and their stance.

The other fifteen exhibited varying degrees of being scared and grimly determined.

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A servant brought him a wooden shield and sword, which he accepted with a grimace, swinging the useless blade to get the feel of the weapon.

At least no one could kill him either today but a mob could do him serious damage and unlike Kyden and the other real Badari, he didn't have magical powers of healing.

He decided to stick to his original strategy of ridding himself of the riffraff first while avoiding the actual experts.

If he engaged with the good fighters first, even untrained yokels could swarm him while he was distracted and bring him down.

Trumpets blew, at which Benet rolled his eyes.

The pomp was ridiculous here in this grassy field with the situation set up the way it was.

It was about as far from honorable combat as it could get and nothing like the arenas he fought in back home.

He'd believe himself to be acting in a farce except for having been kidnapped and now facing a throng of opponents.

The mob was advancing, weapons raised. Suddenly there was a roar and the Badari came sprinting onto the field, moving at the speed only a true Badari could manage.

He carried one of the practice swords but no shield and came directly to Benet, slapping him on the shoulder, causing him to stagger several feet to the left. “We fight together.”

“What the blazes do you think you’re doing?” The noble had his hand raised, which stopped Benet’s opponents in their tracks. He was addressing the Badari, plainly displeased.

“We Badari fight as a team,” the warrior said, pointing to Benet and then to himself. “I stand with my brother, always.”

Benet stuck out his hand. “I’m Benet and I’m grateful to have you on my six. But why?”

“Call me Dmitri,” the big man rumbled. “And I want to hear more of these Badari you claim to know. If I wish to learn more, I have to keep you alive, yes?”

They shook hands and pivoted to face the other men, who were glancing at the noble, plainly uncertain what he wanted them to do now.

“All right, proceed,” the man said grumpily. “It’s not what I had planned but we all know Dmitri does what he wants unless his owner is here to pull his reins. What are you waiting for?”

Benet knew what he was going to do and his plan hadn’t changed a bit even with Dmitri’s arrival.

He raised his sword and shouted defiance, running to meet the oncoming throng.

Dmitri was at his back and the epic fight commenced.

Apparently there were rules, which Benet wished had been explained to him too but if either he or the Badari touched one of their opponents with their sword, men in bright yellow tunics pulled their victim from the fray.

Of course Benet's 'touch' was a smashing blow or an uppercut with the edge of his shield so most of the men he engaged with weren't leaving on their own two legs.

Towards the end he and Dmitri were back-to-back, brawling with the core of men who'd known what they were doing and the fight was fierce.

Benet was in the grip of battle fever, which sometimes overtook him in the arena at home and having Dmitri with him was like fighting as a team with Kyden so no one was going to defeat him today.

Finally the fight ended, with the last few men lying on the ground, battered but not dead, as they would have been had they met Benet in the arena in this kind of a situation.

Dmitri threw his sword far away, raised his head to the sky and howled a victory cry.

Benet dropped his faux weapon and shield and grinned, chest heaving.

He and his teammate slapped each other on the back and turned to face the viewing stand.

Benet's gaze went to the girl first. She was deathly pale and seemed shocked by what had gone on. He was glad he hadn't killed anyone in her presence. Noticing him eyeing her, she managed to smile and gave him a little nod. Dmitri waved to her with a cocky wink.

The noble was on his feet, chest puffed as if he'd won the battle personally.

“Oh yes, you’ll do, Badari. When you take the field at the Games wearing my crest—which you will do, no more of this rebellion, hear me?”

All my rivals will know they’ve been bested and the prize will be mine.

” He turned to the girl, who Benet assumed was his daughter, going by the resemblance in bone structure and shape of the eyes, except she was beautiful.

Holding out his hand, he said, “We’re done here. ”

“Yes, father,” she said meekly, rising and brushing wrinkles from her elaborate dress. As she walked away with her parent, followed by the hangers-on, she cast a shy glance over her shoulder at Benet.

“Grand Duchess Marushka,” Dmitri said, not even breathing hard. “I’m her official bodyguard. She’s like a daughter to me.”

Benet heard the implicit warning. “Lovely girl. Now what?”

Dmitri stepped to his side, resting one brawny arm on his shoulders and said, “Now we retire to my house here on the estate and drink. Tomorrow we start training so you perhaps have a chance to live.” The Badari shook one finger in Benet’s face.

“Not to escape. There is no escape from the Outlier Empire. This place is like a black hole—once you’ve been sucked inside, there’s no way out. ”

Deciding to reserve his opinion on the issue until he gathered more intel, Benet walked with Dmitri off the field.

The Badari waved away the squad of guards who had obviously come to collect Benet and return him to his dungeon or somewhere else equally depressing.

The officer in charge frowned at Dmitri and made rapid fire threats in Outlier but the big warrior laughed and kept walking, taking Benet with him.

“Badari stick together so you will live with me. I have an extra room.”

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Chapter Two

Marushka could tell her father was quite pleased with himself as she walked toward the main house in his company.

He was talking to his friends rather than to her but she followed her usual strategy of being seen and acting as the dutiful daughter.

No one expected her to have an opinion about fighters or the Games.

She did have an opinion, however. She'd never seen a man to match Benet.

He couldn't possibly be an actual Badari, could he?

She'd have to get Dmitri aside later and quiz him because even though her bodyguard had claimed Benet as a brother and despite what her father was choosing to believe right now, the new fighter was human through and through.

No way he was Badari. He didn't stand seven feet tall, he didn't flash any talons or fangs during the mock combat and he didn't display any of the feral, catlike moves like Dmitri.

Her bodyguard had explained to her once he had an alien predator's DNA mixed in with his, which gave him the extra capabilities.

How that had been achieved eluded her despite her scientific training but she believed him.

Benet was magnificent though, all cut muscles and bold confidence, which she admired. Not many men stood up to her father in such a manner.

And handsome.

Marushka's cheeks grew pink as she considered Benet's appearance.

She felt stirrings of desire deep in her core and stifled a giggle.

You don't even know him. He might have a wife or a string of girlfriends back home for all you know.

He might be as unpleasant and untrustworthy as — as other people I know.

I need to talk to Dmitri and then I need to find out for myself.

One of her father's toadies asked the question she had but was reluctant to ask, lest she show too much interest in the new acquisition. "Are you going to keep him in the dungeon during training, your grace? Seems counterproductive?"

"He can live with Dmitri. The man won this event at the Games five times—he knows the requirements and how best to train. One Badari to another. Dmitri doesn't do anything useful here but eat my food but we're all at the pleasure of the empress of course and she insists he be here, close to my daughter.

" Her father gave her a condescending smile and Marushka returned an equally bland one. "He can earn his keep for a change."

Dmitri was her official bodyguard, at the command of the empress herself, so he did have an important duty to perform, but Marushka was used to her father's attitude that anything to do with her—except for her impending marriage of course—was

insignificant.

I don't care , she reminded herself defiantly.

It gives me more freedom to do what I want when he's not here and not paying attention to me.

And what I want is to spend time with this new fighter and see if there's more to him than the attractive exterior.

Not only was she curious about Benet himself but she was hungry for information about life outside the boundaries of the Outlier empire. Surely it was less repressive elsewhere in the galaxy.

Benet living under Dmitri's roof was perfect because she'd treated his house like her own since she was a toddler.

Indulging her fascination with Benet would present no problem.

She'd have to be careful not to upset Dmitri but he didn't like the idea of her impending marriage any more than she did so he'd be tolerant.

"I appreciate the hospitality," Benet said. "How is it you get away with saying no to everyone from the Grand Duke on down? It's a useful trick I need to learn."

"I don't belong to them," Dmitri said simply, echoing an earlier comment he'd made.

He raised one hand to the heavy gold chain he wore around his neck and pointed at the engraved disk in the center.

"I belong to the Empress and thus no one but she can give me orders. Now her, I have

to obey or face torture or death but she's the only one, by her own decree. ”

They were heading for a small cottage, which Benet assumed must be Dmitri's home.

The place was pristine, with trimmed hedges lining the walls and a big tree providing shade.

“I still don't get it—if you belong to the Empress, why are you here?

What do you have to do with me? Is she involved in my kidnapping? ”

“Best we wait to get inside before we have this conversation,” Dmitri said. “Always there are listening ears in Outlier. The same in my cottage as well but I have ways to block them there.”

Consumed with curiosity Benet held his questions and walked the rest of the way in silence.

Entering the small house, he admired the open floor plan, with a large sitting area, a kitchen and stairs leading to the second floor.

Incredible hand woven rugs were scattered on the wooden floors and tapestries and gilded portraits and icons hung on the whitewashed walls.

There was a giant fireplace big enough to roast a small ox but the kitchen appliances gleamed and were modern.

He saw a stasis keeper among other useful furnishings.

“My home is your home,” Dmitri said with a sweeping gesture.

“There are two bedrooms upstairs and you may have the smaller one, since you are the smaller Badari.” He chuckled at his own joke and moved to the entertainment center, cueing up an instrumental selection that filled the air with violins and horns in a sweeping overture.

“Now we can talk,” he said, moving close to Benet and keeping his voice low.

“I disabled the vids and they’ve been too afraid of me to reinstall them but they won’t let the audio go. ”

“Kind of you to open your home to me,” Benet said in a normal voice, nodding to show he understood the need for caution.

“We need to celebrate the reunion of brothers,” Dmitri said making a grand gesture toward the kitchen. “I have only the best Outlier vodka. Come.”

Benet followed him into the kitchen and watched as the Badari poured two large glasses full of the clear liquid. He took the one he was handed and raised it in a toast. “To the Badari.”

After clinking glasses, Benet drank deep. The feelgood was fire burning his throat and he figured at least it might burn out the rest of the lingering cryosleep aftereffects. Dmitri drank his in one long gulp and slammed the glass on the counter.

“Now we eat and we talk.” He took several packets out of the stasis keeper and ripped them open, revealing thick steaks. “It’ll only take me a minute or two to get these ready. Go, check out your room and by the time you return we can eat.”

“I don’t know how I’m ever going to repay you,” Benet said. “I owe you so much already. I doubt the bastard who had me kidnapped is going to compensate me for my time.”

“No doubt, he won’t.” Dmitri laughed. “I have a generous allowance from the Empress and not much to spend it on. Between brothers there is no debt. Speaking to me in my own tongue and bringing news of other Badari is a gift I never expected to receive so we’re even.”

Hurting in more than a few places where the wooden swords of his opponents had struck, Benet plodded up the stairs and located the bedroom he was going to borrow.

The bed was big enough for a Badari and he ached to lie down and let go of everything that had happened to him since he awoke, and sleep for twelve hours or so.

Instead he went to the bathroom and used the refresher, although no doubt a long hot shower would have felt better but he didn’t want to keep Dmitri waiting.

When he emerged, he found clean clothes lying on the bed so he got dressed and ventured downstairs.

“Vlada, the housekeeper sent over a servant with things for you,” Dmitri said, eyeing him critically.

“She’s efficient but if you need anything else I’ll introduce you to her tomorrow and you can ask her yourself.

I let the boy lay out clean clothes for tonight but the rest of your stuff is there, in the container.

” He pointed to an antigrav crate floating in the entryway. “Deal with it later—dinner is ready.”

Benet came to collect his plate, which was more of a platter, with the large steak,

cooked rare, steamed vegetables and a hunk of crusty bread. “I didn’t think I was hungry until I saw this. Thanks.”

“We’ll eat outside,” Dmitri said. “No bugs in the garden.”

Taking the double meaning in the Badari’s comment, Benet was relieved they could talk freely outside. He had so many questions he had no idea where to start and he was sure his host would have an equal number about Kyden and the others.

“I refreshed your drink,” Dmitri said, grabbing his own. “Let’s go.

As soon as they were seated at the rustic table in the small backyard, Benet cut into his steak and savored the first few bites. “What the seven hells was all that today?”

“A test, of you and me. Would I accept you as Badari, would I help you, would you survive the mob he’d assembled, what level were your skills—in Outlier there are many agendas.” Dmitri pointed his knife at Benet. “Keep the fact firmly in mind.”

“Does the warning go for anything you say too?”

“I’ve been here a long time,” the Badari said. “No doubt I’ve picked up more than a few Outlier habits but I remain true to my own kind and the principles of my goddess. We Badari have honor if nothing else.”

“The Great Mother,” Benet was on familiar ground here.

“Kyden speaks of her often. I don’t know if he’s ever seen her but he planted a grove of trees in the back acreage of the House where we all live and it’s off limits to everyone but the three Badari and their mates.

They go there to worship as I understand it. ”

“Mates?”

“Yes, each of them has met a special woman and claimed her as their mate,” Benet confirmed.

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“The goddess has blessed them then.” Dmitri stared at his plate for a long time.

“I wasn’t so fortunate but then again, given my situation, probably best I not have a woman to love.

The empress is a jealous bitch. This one and the three who came before her during my time here. It’s a family trait, I think.”

“How did you end up here anyway? Kyden and the other two were sold clandestinely by guards at the labs where all of you were created, or so he told me.”

“I was a gift,” Dmitri said, rubbing his chest in a gesture Benet had seen Kyden make a thousand times over the years, as if there was an ache deep in his heart.

“Or a bribe. The Khagrish scientists chose me out of my entire pack and brought me here, to Outlier, to give to the woman who was empress then. They wanted a concession from her. I wasn’t exactly clear what, whether it was special equipment or rare materials or what.

No one cared to explain the transaction to me—in their eyes I was simply the mindless beast being transported.

The scientists thought the empress would be pleased to have her own genetically created pet.

I don’t know if the Khagrish got what the scientists wanted but the empress was bored with me in two days.

She gave me to her daughter, and I've been handed down through the generations, ending with the one who sits on the throne now. I'm an asset of the crown."

"How old are you?" Benet eyed Dmitri's flowing mane of silver hair. "I mean, Talinn, our newest gladiator is Generation Six."

"I have no idea," Dmitri answered before taking a long pull from his drink. "I think Badari can live pretty much forever if we don't have the damn Khagrish killing us off. How old is your Kyden?"

"I don't know the answer," Benet said. "I don't think he does either."

Dmitri sat forward. "The Khagrish had a lot of trouble creating us. What they call Generation One really isn't.

The scientists had a lot of failed attempts and horrible mutations before my time, according to what I heard.

My Generation was full of men who were more alien predator than human.

"His expression grew distant and it was as if he was seeing the past. "They were in a lot of pain, mental and physical and of course the Khagrish protocols made it all worse. I was one of the so-called lucky ones. Whatever they needed from the Outlier was their plan for smoothing out their process and breeding us true, generation to generation."

"The whole thing is so morally repugnant I can't even imagine how an advanced civilization could commit such atrocities," Benet said. "I respect Kyden and the others, and you, what happened isn't your fault but no one should ever have to endure what those scientists put your people through."

“Khagrish don’t think like you do,” Dmitri replied simply. “Alien, through and through.”

“But now you’re here, at this estate, guarding the duke’s daughter?”

“It’s complicated. She’s officially the ward of the Empress, even though her father is alive.

She’s a Grand Duchess herself, having inherited a huge territory when her mother died.

Once she gets married we’ll see if I stay assigned to her or if the empress will have a new game to play.

She likes interfering with people’s lives.

If you’re ever anywhere near her, take my advice and try not to draw her attention. You don’t want that. I know.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes and then Dmitri said, “Tell me about my brothers in the Five Systems. Is this Kyden an Alpha?”

Benet thought he sounded oddly hopeful. “I call him boss myself but yeah, I’ve heard the other two refer to him as the Alpha. Like I said before, Kyden, Rennyr and Talinn don’t share Badari secrets outside their tiny circle of three and the mates.”

“Does it bother you?” Dmitri was eyeing him shrewdly.

“No. I have my own friendship with Kyden going all the way back to my first day in the arena. And I’m his executive officer at the gladiatorial house so our work relationship is solid.

He'll be searching for me and as stubborn as he is, he'll find me, even here in Outlier.

"Benet wished his confidence was as rock solid as he made himself sound.

"There's no escape," Dmitri said.

"I'm not staying here the rest of my life. I've got a good life waiting for me in the Five Systems and I intend to find a way back there." Benet couldn't allow himself to give up hope.

"Was there a woman for you?" Dmitri asked with what Benet was coming to understand was his usual blunt manner.

"No, I never wanted to settle down. I had a good thing going, especially after Kyden bought the House and freed us all. Top ranking in the arena brings perks, if you follow my logic. I haven't met anyone I wanted to have more than a fling with. No mate, to use Kyden's term."

"How exactly do you think you'll accomplish this escape you've pinned your hopes on?"

"I don't know yet—steal a ship maybe. I can pilot."

"How about we focus on what you were kidnapped and brought here to do?" Dmitri asked.

"You have to stay alive to escape." He finished his drink and rose.

"Training starts tomorrow morning at eight. I'll be in charge of that, never mind what the duke intended.

You have a month to get ready for the Games and it won't be easy. ”

“I pick things up fast,” Benet assured him. “Especially if I'm not hung over from cryosleep. What kind of games are these? Combat like today?”

“I'll answer all your questions tomorrow morning,” Dmitri said. “Stay out here as long as you like. There aren't any night-biting insects on Throne. Try to make peace with your current destiny as I had to do—it'll make the challenges ahead of you go more easily.”

“I can't promise,” Benet said truthfully, rising from his chair. “What you're asking is beyond me right now. I think I'll turn in, natural sleep sounds good. Thanks for the dinner. Settled my stomach better than any inject from the robo doc.”

“One advantage to being here is the food,” Dmitri said as they took their plates and walked inside. “Much better than anything the Khagrish ever fed me in the labs. Help yourself to whatever you fancy in the stasis keeper for breakfast. Bear in mind the day is going to be intense.”

“At least no one will be trying to kill me, right?”

“That I can promise. Until the Games begin.”

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Chapter Three

Kyden sat in his office at the gladiatorial House he owned and drummed his talons on the desk.

His mood was dark and angry. There'd been no sign or sighting of Benet since the night they'd parted at the front entrance.

As far as Kyden could tell he and Elara were the last two people to see him.

His groundcar had been found parked in a public lot and there was no trace of him on any security feed in the city.

After all his years in the gladiator system Kyden had contacts and friends in all the lower strata of the Five Systems society and he'd worked every single one in his efforts to locate his friend.

Elara had a huge web of contacts in the upper levels of society and she and her father the Senator had made extensive but futile efforts to flush out anyone who might have the tiniest clue in relation to Benet's disappearance.

The planetary police had done their own investigation, spurred on by Kyden and the Vasclavians, as well as the publicity about Benet's absence from the gladiatorial contests where he'd been supposed to compete.

Benet was an extremely popular fighter, with a huge following of fans and the news and gossip sheets had a field day with theories and bogus tips and sightings.

There was even a rumor he'd run off with a superstar singer who had been visiting the Five Systems during the time frame in question.

The singer had hastily denied the reports and insisted she'd never even met Benet, which Kyden knew was true.

He was stymied as to what to do next and that wasn't a position Kyden liked to find himself in.

He knew Benet and his friend wouldn't simply walk away from his life and disappear.

He was too proud of his standing as a gladiator and of his position in the House, as second in command.

Both had been hardwon and well deserved and Benet had had a bright future.

Even if he quit the active arena as Kyden had done, there were still exhibitions in which to showcase his skills and the work the House of Badari was doing on many fronts, not just the care and training of top notch fighters, was something Benet enjoyed.

Kyden's gut instinct was something bad had happened to Benet and his friend needed him to get him out of trouble.

He always listened to his gut but without facts to go on, he was stuck.

The galaxy was a big place and while the Five Systems was a relatively small piece of it, even the mighty Sectors didn't span the entire galaxy.

There was the lawless Hinterlands, other independent nations like the Five Systems

and then the vastness of the enemy territory ruled by actively hostile enemies.

Kyden couldn't take all that on without even a smidgen of a clue.

He'd prayed to the goddess for help several times now, even though Benet as a human wasn't her concern but he was part of Kyden's family which ought to matter.

So far he'd received no answer from the deity.

His com chimed and he took an annoyed, quick look, seeing the incoming call was interstellar.

The sender was an old, retired gladiator named Two Swords, who'd crossed paths with Kyden briefly in the arena many years ago and more recently had been instrumental in helping Rennyrr survive his time in the harsh arena system of another planet.

Kyden paid the old man a retainer to act as a sort of scout for him, should another Badari appear anywhere in the gladiatorial ranks.

Gibbz 'Two Swords' knew everyone in the business and they all talked to him.

With a sigh, he decided to answer the call. Engrossed as he was in worry for Benet, he still had a gladiatorial House to run and Two Swords never called unless he had a genuinely worthy prospect to discuss.

The two men exchanged brief pleasantries and then Two Swords went straight to the reason for his call. "Hey, are you missing a man?"

Kyden sat upright in his chair and his talons deployed. "Why do you ask?"

“I heard a weird rumor the other day, slept on it and figured I’d bring it to you. You at all familiar with the Empress’s Games in Outlier?”

“Only that they happen,” Kyden replied, holding his impatience under tight control. “None of my business.”

“Until now maybe,” Two Swords said. “There’s whispers some Grand poobah Duke or whatever had brought in a ringer, one of your best is what I was told.

Wanted to warn you off messing with anything in Outlier, can’t trust those people.

But then I also heard maybe your man went without your knowledge or consent. ”

“Benet’s gone missing,” Kyden said. Two Swords was unquestionably loyal and there was no reason not to tell him about Benet.

“I’m guessing maybe this grand duke is so hellbent on winning the games this time he might have persuaded our friend Benet to come be his ace in the hole.”

“Benet wouldn’t go willingly.” Now Kyden’s fangs were pushing against his control as he grew more upset.

“Not for any amount of credits.” Gibbz had no response and there was silence on the interstellar link for a moment as he considered the matter.

“Thanks for the tip—you’ve given me a new direction to extend my search for information.

I never would have considered the possibility of Outlier being involved since they don’t have our style of gladiatorial combat. ”

“That’s what you pay me for,” Two Swords replied cheerily. “Be careful, all right? My sources clammed up, like they’d been talking out of turn and someone was upset about it.”

“You watch your back too,” Kyden said. “I’m not there to do it for you.”

“I’ll be all right. I didn’t survive to this age without knowing a thing or two.” Gibbz cackled. “I know where a lot of bodies are buried. Catch you later.”

“I’ll be posting a bonus to your account,” Kyden said with gratitude.

Elara knocked and walked into the office, stopping after a few feet. “What’s wrong? You look ready to go into the arena and take on a team of cyborgs with a spoon. I know that Death Dealer expression.”

“Two Swords was on the com,” Kyden said, gesturing at the desk unit. “He thinks Benet was kidnapped and taken to Outlier.”

Eyes wide, Elara whistled. “Bad news indeed if it’s true. Even my family doesn’t have any connections we can use there. How in the seven hells can we extract him safely if he truly is there?”

“Thinking it’s time to talk to my silent partner and see what he can find out for us.

” Kyden was referring to Prince Pargen, a relative of the noble who ruled over the Five Systems and a friend to Kyden and Elara.

Pargen had funded Kyden’s bid to take over the House when the previous Master had been killed in a terrorist incident.

The fact Kyden had saved the prince’s life also factored into things.

“Tread carefully,” Elara said as she moved to the desk and sat in his lap, putting her arms around his neck. Her face was set in serious lines. “Not even Pargen has any direct power in Outlier for all his influence here..”

“If he can confirm the rumor that’ll help.”

“And then what? I can’t simply ask my father to let us borrow a Vasclavian ship to enter Outlier space for a rescue mission,” she said, a frown marring her forehead.

“I love Benet but there are hard limits when dealing with anything to do with Outlier. Scary people who don’t follow any rules but their own. ”

“Buy him maybe?” Kyden suggested.

“It’d be a hefty ransom, I’m guessing. Whoever is behind this would be more likely to ask for favors and concessions than credits anyway and we’re not in a position to do much for them.”

“Nor do I want to.” The idea left Kyden cold. “I’ll have to talk to Pargen, see what ideas we can come up with. The one thing I do know is I’m not leaving him there for the rest of his life to rot. He may not be Badari but he’s my brother of the arena and our bond is unbreakable.”

“One of the things I admire most about you, my love, is your loyalty,” Elara said, kissing him on the cheek. “In this case though I think your bond is going to be severely tested. Better pray to your goddess as well.”

“I have been and I will continue,” Kyden promised. “But he isn’t one of her children so I don’t know if she’s listening to my appeals.”

“Don’t ask me why because I couldn’t tell you,” his mate-wife said, “But I have a

feeling she might take an interest in this situation. I haven't had a vision or a dream about it but the whole thing is so complicated and so risky to you if you insist on going to rescue him—" She set a finger over his lips as he drew breath to argue.

"I know you will if that's what it takes to save Benet and your Great Mother is interested in you, so... "

He hoped she was right. Good as it was to know where Benet had probably been taken, the prospects for ever seeing his friend again, much less for retrieving him were dismal. It would take the help of the goddess.

Benet was awake early the next morning. He'd slept well in the unfamiliar bed and as he stretched and did a few isometric exercises he was pleased to find the effects of the cryosleep had finally worn off.

His head ached a bit from the feelgoods he'd had the night before to keep up with his host, but a dose of headclear would fix the problem.

Rummaging through the clothing the housekeeper had sent for him he found a suitable pair of pants.

Once he was ready, he went downstairs and into the kitchen area to explore the stasis keeper and figure out a breakfast. Eggs and bacon would do nicely and more of the crusty bread.

He doubted there'd be coffee but he'd take anything with a caffeine kick.

He heard the front door open behind him but didn't think anything of it, assuming Dmitri had been out for an early morning run. "I'll cook us breakfast," he said, turning with his hands full of the supplies he'd found, only to do a doubletake and stop in his tracks.

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Marushka the daughter of the house stood there, dressed in a simple sundress and sandals, hair loose and flowing, clearly admiring his abs.

Benet wished he'd taken the time to put on a shirt, not that he minded her frank appreciation of what he had to offer, but she was a lady and much higher in the social order here than he'd ever be.

A pair of large, purebred dogs gamboled at her side, clearly interested in the enticing aroma of the bacon. They were fluffy and white, with faces set in a permanent grin. Impossible to resist. The pair came forward to sniff at him.

"My lady, what a surprise," he said in Basic, hoping she'd understand. He added a bow and moved to the counter to set down the foodstuffs.

"I'll take you up on breakfast," she said cheerily, seating herself at the table and smoothing the tablecloth. "I've only had morning tea so far and Dmitri makes the best pancakes."

"I'm doing eggs and bacon today," Benet said. "He cooked dinner so it's my turn."

"So domesticated," she teased.

"I appreciate what he did for me yesterday and I'm grateful to be a guest in his home instead of cooling my heels in the dungeon. Unless you have a squad of guards waiting outside to take me there." He chuckled to show he wasn't serious.

"No guards. Dmitri's my bodyguard," she said.

“And once my tiresome father departs for the capital, which he did before dawn, things go back to normal.” Gesturing at her dress and casual hairstyle, she added, “Like this. I’m left to my own devices which means I come to see Dmitri.

And I bring my dogs. Father doesn’t like them so they’re glad of freedom today.

Meet Oksana and Boris, shameless beggars who have been fed today, allow me to assure you. ”

Benet wasn’t sure he understood the way things worked at this estate but he dug through a cabinet and found suitable frying pans. Cracking eggs after laying out the strips of bacon in another pan, he went to work cooking.

“You seem much better today,” she said. “I was so sorry for you yesterday. My apologies on behalf of no one but myself for the way you were kidnapped and brought here. I had nothing to do with it and nothing in my power to undo it either but for what it’s worth, my sympathies.”

“Kind of you. Dmitri said your father wants me to win some games for him?” Benet figured he might as well gather what intel he could, although her beauty and her proximity were severely distracting.

He needed to redirect his focus. She called the dogs to heel and both settled at her feet, avidly watching Benet.

Should he offer them a few morsels? Who could be immune to the mute appeal in their eyes?

“Not just any games but the Imperial Quadrennial,” Marushka said.

“He invariably loses in the overall medal count and the big featured events and last

time he was ridiculed for the team he fielded, which incensed him. The head trainer was executed and the surviving fighters sent to the mines. My father is big on obtaining revenge for failure by anyone to make him look good. Be warned.”

“So I’m part of a team? Who are my teammates?”

“Don’t worry about them,” Dmitri said, descending the stairs.

“You’re a team of one for the main event.

” He crossed the floor to Marushka and they embraced, his hug lifting her out of her chair and into the air, which set her to squealing in mock protest and the dogs romped, jumping on him and barking.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he said to her as he set her on her toes.

“Your father wouldn’t like it and neither would Prince Vasili. ”

“I have a few more months of freedom,” she said with a frown.

“And I intend to make the most of it. Until his ring is on my finger and the priest declares us wed, the prince has no power over me. I do what I please and what pleases me is time with you. And our new friend.” She nodded in Benet’s direction.

“I hope the scrambled eggs will please you.” Benet served her a generous portion. “I added cheese and chives.” He set a jar of jam next to her elbow and tore off a hunk of the bread for her. “No butlers and waiters here.”

“Good. I hate all the pomp and ceremony and life at the capital in the imperial palace is even worse than my existence here.” She slathered jam on the bread and took a big bite.

“I like a girl with a healthy appetite,” Benet said, dishing up Dmitri’s breakfast, which was five times the size of hers.

“I came to watch the training,” Marushka said, waving a piece of bacon. “Benet needs someone to cheer him on.”

“I’m honored.”

“Marushka is a silver medalist herself,” Dmitri said after swallowing another huge bite of eggs. “She competed in the equestrian events at the last games.”

Benet gave her a look of respect and she blushed. “I had a good horse who followed commands like a dream,” she said.

“Not competing this year?” Benet asked.

“No, I have too much to do getting ready for my wedding and all the social events surrounding the occasion. I would have loved to enter the ring again but father said no and the empress reinforced his refusal.”

The mention of the fact she was engaged was a setback to the way Benet’s thoughts were running about the beautiful duchess, although she didn’t seem to care much for her intended.

Probably just as well though. He wasn’t here to find a woman, he was here to figure a way out and go home.

Already he could tell Marushka would be a serious distraction if he wasn’t careful.

“You’re the most exciting thing to happen on this old estate in years,” she said, leaning on her elbows and staring at him intently. “Although I’m sorry about the

circumstances. But if we could win the games, that'd be huge."

He wasn't sure how he felt about her attitude, considering he was a prisoner and his entire life had been upended. He could care less what a victory in these games would mean for her family. "Would it be enough to get my freedom?" he asked bitterly before he could stop himself.

Marushka blinked and seemed a little taken aback. "Maybe, if the Empress was impressed enough and if you could speak to her."

"Sorry but none of this is a game to me," he said, trying not to let his frustration bleed through too much.

This lovely woman wasn't the cause of his problems. She was only trying to be friendly.

"I had my entire life and everything that mattered to me ripped away once and I refuse to suffer the pain a second time."

"What happened?"

"It's how I became a gladiator," he replied.

"I was young and idealistic and fought for what I believed in when my alliance of planets went to war against one a few light years away. We lost or were sold out and as the losers, we were taken prisoner and sold as slaves. I ended up in the Five Systems and managed to survive in the arena."

"If you fight beside this Kyden you told me of, you must be a good fighter indeed," Dmitri said.

“I have a good life there and I want to get back to it.” Benet spoke the truth from his aching heart.

“Was there someone special for you?” Marushka asked with more than idle interest, or so he inferred from her tone.

He shook his head. Best to try to discourage her now. “I’m a player, your highness. Probably many ladies in the Five Systems mourning my absence.” He was trying for a lighter tone since it wasn’t her fault he’d been kidnapped but to his own ears he sounded a bit pathetic.

“Oh.” Now she played with her remaining food and the dogs sat up to lay their heads in her lap as if trying to cheer her up.

“We’re all too serious,” Dmitri said, setting his plate and mug in the dishwasher. “Time to show you the first challenge. Come.” He strode out of the kitchen and Benet hastily finished his juice and followed. The Grand Duchess trailed behind.

Dmitri led them out of the cottage and across a wide swath of carefully tended green lawn, through a thin strip of trees and into a huge clearing.

Benet stopped and eyed the structure in front of him, letting out a whistle.

“What in the seven hells is that mess? Looks like the duke dropped a freighter full of junkyard scrap here.” He could see the primary structure was an open geodesic dome but then the space within was full of complicated smaller structures interlaced in uneven patterns.

“You’ll see. First we’ll walk around it.” The Badari ushered Benet toward the structure, which resembled a demented version of a child’s jungle gym, but with spikes. The framework shuddered in the morning breeze and parts inside shifted

visibly.

After he'd made a 360 degree circle around the thing, which was two stories high, Dmitri stopped.

"You have to make your way through one like this at the games, without getting sliced up by the sharp edges. Time is important. The man who posts the fastest time on this and the obstacle course gets the most favorable position on the field of combat."

"Climb through it?"

"I'll show you." Walking up to the nightmare installation, Dmitri grabbed two struts carefully and hauled himself up and inside the complicated maze of metal.

Benet watched in disbelief as the huge man worked his way through the coils and stacks of razor-sharp extrusions, moving generally upward and toward the center.

He and Marushka circled the maze again, accompanied by the dogs, to keep Dmitri in view until he leaped to the ground from about fifteen feet up on the opposite side.

A few scratches on his arms were already closing.

"Okay I'm in awe," Benet said. "But how in the name of the underworld demons did you do that? It all looks basically the same to me and it's all deadly."

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“Once you’ve entered, you have to find the path, which does exist by the way.

There’s one allowing you to proceed with the least amount of damage,” Dmitri replied, “This is an exact replica of the one which will be at the imperial games and I have the clues to the safe routes memorized. You must do this as well.”

“You’ve done this before?” Benet asked. “In competition?”

Dmitri rubbed the back of his neck and stared at the floor. Marushka said proudly, “He won the Games five times and the Empress ruled he couldn’t compete any longer. Dmitri is unbeatable.”

“I believe it.” Benet had no doubt. How could humans possibly hope to defeat a Badari in a contest like this?

“Ae you ready to try it?” the Badari asked.

Hells no . “Sure, show me the ropes.”

They walked to the front again and Dmitri explained how to enter the maze.

Benet hauled himself up and paused in the tight safe space to check the area out.

Nothing but sharp surfaces with maybe a few places he could contort himself and get through.

If a man as big as Dmitri could get through relatively unscathed, he ought to be able

to accomplish the feat.

“Do guys die at these games of yours?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Every time,” was the unsurprising answer. “The referees vaporize the body and the game goes on. Look to your right and up three feet. See a hole?”

Benet surveyed the designated area. “I wouldn’t call it a hole, you’re being too generous.”

“That’s your next move.”

“And then?”

“I’ll tell you at each point. We go slowly this morning.

After the dry run we’ll go to the house and draw it out.

You must memorize the best path from each of the five entrances.

The Grand Duke paid a huge amount of credits to have this duplicate structure erected here.

Other nobles will have done the same to a lesser extent no doubt and their men will also be practicing. ”

By the time Dmitri called a halt to the exercise, Benet’s body was as battered as if he’d been through a ringer.

He was dripping in sweat and blood as well, from a few cuts gotten when he wasn’t limber enough to avoid the cutting edges.

He'd made it through once after getting hopelessly entangled and having to backtrack.

"What are the small nodules?" he asked as he rubbed his face with a towel and guzzled a sports drink Marushka handed him.

"Those are self-directed robots," Dmitri said. "In a few days we'll practice with those powered up."

"Robots?" Benet hadn't thought it could get any worse. "What do they do?"

"Attack the contestants." Dmitri slapped him on the back which nearly sent him reeling. "Tomorrow I'll show you how to disarm them. Fortunately it's simple. You did a good job today, keeping your head and taking directions. I think maybe you'll be fine, Badari or not."

"Encouraging as that is to hear and I thank you, I think I'd rather face an arena full of men trying to kill me than this fiendish contraption."

"Don't forget the obstacle course which follows," Marushka said helpfully.

"Who dreamed up these tortures?"

"It was a long time ago. The Empress several centuries ago had a diabolical prime minister whose greatest delight was to amuse her and both of them were cruel. He designed many special tortures and punishments as well as these games," Marushka said.

"I learned all about both of them in my history classes. Heaped with praise of course but I could read between the lines to see how evil they both were."

“I knew them,” Dmitri said heavily. “A more evil pair of beings probably never existed. She was by the far the cruelest of the mistresses I’ve had to answer to since I was brought here.”

“There’s a reason folks stay out of Outlier if given a choice,” Benet said. “Your reputation is deserved, my lady.”

He felt bad because she was obviously hurt by his insulting remark and it was true she herself hadn’t done anything to him but he was having a hard time coping with his feelings about what had happened to him and what he was going to be forced to do for her father.

Dmitri shot him a stern look but didn’t say anything.

Five minutes later she made an excuse and walked off in the direction of the main house, the dogs running ahead, chasing each other.

“I’ll tell her not to come and watch any more if you continue to be mean to her,” the Badari said as soon as she was out of earshot. “Marushka is a genuinely sweet girl, like a daughter to me and she only wishes you well. She’s a delicate flower this cursed empire will crush all too soon.”

“I’ll apologize tomorrow.” Benet took a deep breath. “I’m upset and I’m angry and determined to get the fuck out of here any way I can but most people in Outlier had nothing to do with my problems and she’s one of them.”

Dmitri shook his head. “I told you, there’s no escape.”

“Did you try?”

“I had nowhere to go, my friend. I have no idea where the planet I come from lies in

the galaxy. No one does.” He rubbed his chest again as if soothing an old ache.

“The goddess put me here for her own reasons and so I accepted my fate and will live out my years where she wants me to be. I do the best I can with each day. You should do the same.”

Benet had heard Kyden say much the same thing more than once about his own situation in the Five Systems. He could understand their thinking on the subject but for himself he refused to accept permanent captivity in the Outlier Empire, no matter how well treated he might be.

He intended to walk free at home again or die in the attempt to get there.

Training continued daily and Benet got quite good at working his way through the metal maze without suffering too many cuts and posted better and better times while doing it.

Marushka continued to keep them company most days and he found a quiet moment to apologize to her, which she accepted graciously and told him she hadn’t been upset.

He had to bury his intense anger at being kidnapped and brought to this place at the whim of the duke because the emotion served no purpose right now, except as an extra push to work on escaping.

On the surface he was going along with the duke’s plans as if he’d accepted his servitude.

He and Dmitri had many conversations in the evening about how he might be able to escape and find his way to the spaceport in the capital city.

“My choice was to stay but I had nowhere to go,” Dmitri said. “I couldn’t ever get home. I will do nothing to hinder you and I’m doing my best to help you survive the current situation.”

“Which I appreciate more than you’ll ever know,” Benet interrupted him.

They clinked feelgood bottles and drank, after which Dmitri continued.

“I’d like to see you go free. I pray to the goddess to help you in fact.

If you’re going to escape it has to be soon however; after Marushka gets married I may be sent to live at her new home with Vasili or I may be ordered to Court, or sent somewhere else, depending on Ekateren’s whims. The point is I won’t be here and I won’t be able to help you even to the extent I’m doing now, my friend. ”

Benet had taken Dmitri’s words to heart and started going for a long run in the evenings, ostensibly as part of his ‘training’, but actually to scope out the estate’s security.

Throne might seem like a medieval world stuck in the mists of time but the force fence, the roving guards, and the robo dogs were all too modern and efficient.

He was allowed to do his run along the perimeter of the compound but the moment he set foot off the road which circled the estate, a drone or dog or groundcar full of guards would appear and chivy him onto the approved path.

The entrances were heavily guarded and Dmitri told him drones and aerial patrols also flew overhead.

Even a former soldier as well trained as Benet had been by his own Special Forces wouldn’t be escaping the place without serious outside help, which wasn’t to be

found on Throne.

Finally Dmitri declared him ready to begin the obstacle course and that morning they hiked to a different part of the estate's grounds.

Benet marveled at how much the Grand Duke had to be spending with all his efforts to field the winning team at the Games, not even counting what it must have cost to hire mercenaries to kidnap a Badari from the Five Systems.

Unfortunately the team had grabbed the wrong gladiator and gotten a superbly physically fit, well-trained fighter and former soldier who was not a Badari. Not even close. Dmitri was adamant Benet must never reveal the screwup.

"He's a pompous proud man and will have you killed immediately if he learns of his mistake," the Badari warned. "I've claimed you as my brother and who here would doubt my word."

"I don't like you putting yourself at risk to do so," Benet said.

"I belong to the Empress, not to him. She would find the whole thing amusing, knowing her." Dmitri was unconcerned.

Benet had a hard time controlling his amusement when he saw the obstacle course. After the dangerous metal maze he'd been expecting another high tech risky situation but when he reached the site, he found a few walls to scale, a tightrope or two and a lot of running.

Dmitri wagged his finger under Benet's nose. "No so fast, my friend. Today we'll do the bare course but we'll gradually build up to the full effects."

"Full effects?" Dmitri and Marushka were obviously in possession of a few facts he

was missing and probably wasn't going to like. "What are those exactly?"

She shuddered. "Flames, acid pits, sharp toothed predators—many an unwary competitor meets his or her end on the actual course during the games. It's all so barbaric—I'm ashamed of my people when it comes to this truthfully.

But the games were established so long ago and have become unalterable tradition. "

"And people wager on the results," Dmitri added.

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Benet threw back his head and laughed. “Now I feel at home. Betting is huge in the Five Systems, with bookies taking bets on every aspect of what happens in the arena, including whether anyone’s underwear will fall off, which has happened to rookies on occasion.

Or they don’t wear any and when their kilts fly up the crowd gets an extra X rated thrill. ”

Marushka and her two dogs established themselves in the shade where she’d have a good view of the course and Dmitri and Benet walked through the layout. As he went and listened to Dmitri explaining the lethality of each feature of the obstacles, Benet was astonished at the pure evil of the design.

“It’s a damn good thing I have perfect balance,” he said. “So many of these challenges seem to require it.”

“Remember speed through the course is also a big factor,” Dmitri reminded him.

“What was your best time?”

Raising an eyebrow, Dmitri smirked. “You’ll never beat it, not being a true Badari, brother.”

“Maybe, maybe not, but I like to know what target I’m aiming for.”

The Badari told him but the number was pretty meaningless right now, until Benet had the complete set of functioning barriers to surmount.

He tucked the time away in his head for later.

If he had to do this dumbass, dangerous stunt because he'd been kidnapped and brought here, then he was going to do his best.

His first trip through the course was at a leisurely speed, getting a feel for the order of the obstacles.

“These walls will be vibrating,” Dmitri said, indicating a stretch of the course. And plates rise up from the floor at random intervals, trying to force the runner off balance and throw him into a shock barrier or worse.”

“Nice. We can try that tomorrow.”

Truth be told as the week wore on, Benet enjoyed the obstacle course.

The metal maze was intense and stressful but he liked the challenge and physicality of overcoming the barriers.

Each day Dmitri added a few more of the live elements he'd be facing, or simulations of them, as there was no need to risk an acid bath or a pit full of long snouted, razor-sharp toothed reptiles, or a fall into a nest of angry vipers.

By the end of the week Benet was running the course in times near to Dmitri's and the Badari—and Marushka—were properly impressed.

He hadn't been kidding when he claimed his balance was impeccable and even the barrier which was a greasy one inch pipe stretching over an acid pit with swinging weights coming at him from either side didn't faze him.

“We're cutting practice short today,” Dmitri said on the fifth day. “Tonight we go and

fulfill our duty as bodyguards.”

Benet poured a bottle of water over his head because he was hot and sweaty. “I don’t remember the duke saying anything about me working as a bodyguard.”

“I told you before, I’ve taken over since I claimed you as a true Badari, may the goddess forgive me. The duke has no say in what I decide as long as you’re ready for the games.”

“So are we guarding Marushka?” Benet asked. He’d wondered about her absence today. Usually she joined them at breakfast and spent the entire day with them. He’d missed her and hoped she wasn’t getting sick.

“Of course. That’s my assignment from the current empress. She’s going to a party at her fiancé’s estate.”

“You’d think she’d be safe there,” Benet said.

“No one of the imperial blood is ever truly safe anywhere on Throne Planet,” Dmitri replied soberly.

“Assassination is a political tool for advancement here and often approved of by those in power at the highest ranks. Outlier is a snake pit. But tonight Marushka’s greatest danger will be the son of a bitch prince she’s engaged to. ”

“Tell me how you really feel. So it’s not a love match?”

“Hardly. He played the nice guy, turned on the charm while he was courting her but we all knew since the empress favored him for her ward Marushka would have to accept the proposal. But she was dazzled and fancied herself in love. Believed she was fortunate to have an arranged marriage with a man she actually liked.” Dmitri

frowned and his fangs descended.

“Had she resisted she might have been able to avoid the engagement—the empress is quite fond of her. But Vasili played his game carefully and my poor devochka had his massive ring on her finger before she caught ever larger glimpses of his true character..”

“Why haven’t I seen this ring?” Benet couldn’t remember her ever wearing an engagement ring any of the times he’d seen her.

“She had it on the day you arrived, because her father was here to see, but you were probably distracted by the twenty men assembled to beat you up” Dmitri pointed out sarcastically.

“Yeah, no doubt. And the lingering effect of the cryosleep.” Benet had done protective details during his time in the military, before the arenas.

He guessed Dmitri had picked up the fundamentals during his long time in Outlier.

“What do I wear? Not this, surely.” He gestured at his shorts and tee shirt.

“The housekeeper has sent over a uniform for you. I’m sorry but you’ll have to wear the family crest tonight. We have to do everything by the book to keep Marushka out of trouble. There’ll be many eyes on her.”

“The Empress won’t be there, will she?”

“No. This is a party for the younger set. Vasili is a key player amongst the group, socially and politically. He’s been smart about building his alliances and maneuvering less powerful people into positions where they have no choice but to do his bidding.

Fortunately I'm outside his sphere of influence but even I can only do so much to protect her.

And once she's married I'll have no say—" Dmitri's voice trailed off and Benet heard a faint growl.

He had a bad feeling about the coming event but if Marushka's fiancé was such a bad actor, he was glad he'd be there to back Dmitri up.

Chapter Four

A few hours later he had to forcibly remind himself of his earlier acceptance of the evening's assignment.

He'd showered, shaved and gotten dressed in the most ridiculous uniform he'd ever seen outside of a historical trideo—the black pants were okay except for the gold ribbon down the sides, but the jacket was a scarlet nightmare, with fringed epaulets and gold buttons, a sash and of course the crest emblazoned on his left chest in red and black.

There was a hat too, which was covered in shiny black fur, weighed a ton, gave him an instant headache and smelled faintly like anti-moth crystals.

"I'm glad I'm not the only one who looks ridiculous tonight," he said to Dmitri as they made their way to the main residence on the estate.

"If the lady gets into any serious trouble tonight our first fight will be getting out of these damn costumes."

"The event will be decorous in public," Dmitri said, adjusting his hat. His badge was stitched on gold thread, with tiny jewels set around the edge and a two headed roaring feline in the center, on its hind legs, a crown on each head. "Vasili has his own security. We must play our parts."

"A girl couldn't ask for more handsome escorts," Marushka said and Benet turned to watch her descend the grand staircase, moving gracefully despite her massive dress,

which was pale blue, with ruffles and a train and covered in floral patterns picked out in pearls and diamonds.

She had an empress's ransom in jewelry on and her hair was piled high into an elaborate do with birds and flowers woven into it.

Benet gave her his best bow and extended his hand. "Allow me to escort you to the groundcar, my lady."

She rested her hand on his arm and this time he saw the giant engagement ring, eyeing it with distaste.

"You're a fairy tale princess," he said to her as he brought her outside to the waiting limousine.

"Don't let appearances fool you." Her answer was tart. "This dress has ten petticoats and stays and weighs more than I do, I think, yet I must remain graceful at all times and dance and mingle. If we were at Court I'd be in an even fancier costume."

Benet found that hard to believe but he took her word for it.

Living in Outlier seemed to be a head spinning mix of modern and medieval, in an uneasy blend.

He and Dmitri got her and the dress into the luxurious groundcar and then took their seats at the rear of the vehicle.

There was a partition between them and Marushka, but she lowered the glass so they could talk as the human chauffeur drove them off the estate grounds and onto a modern road.

“Has Dmitri briefed you on what’s going on tonight?” she asked Benet.

“I have,” the Badari answered for him.

“You won’t try to escape, will you?” The intense stare from her blue eyes drilled into him.

Benet wasn’t going to admit anything but the idea had crossed his mind.

Dmitri could take care of Marushka without his help and had been doing so for years.

He could steal a groundcar, head to the spaceport, sneak aboard a ship or steal a small ship...

oh yes, he’d considered the possibilities thoroughly.

She held out her hand and he took it. “You must promise me you’ll stay with us tonight.

The consequences if you try to escape and are caught would be horrendous.

It makes me sick to think of it. Dmitri would be in trouble and so would I.

I requested you for this duty tonight—I’ll feel better with you there. ”

And now he was stuck. He hadn’t realized she’d asked for him to protect her.

Benet swallowed hard. “I’ll give you my word for tonight, my lady, but I do intend to find my way home at some point.” Or Kyden will come and extract me from this nightmare.

“So, a promise for one night only?” she asked, clasping her fingers around his.

He was so tempted to lean forward and kiss her but Dmitri’s bulk in the seat next to him was a reminder of his place in this costume drama of an evening.

He was a bodyguard, not the prince, despite all the guilt on his ridiculous uniform.

“I’m sure you have better things to think about than me tonight.

I’ll be there the whole evening and in the morning I’ll hit the obstacle course like your father wants me too. Okay?”

She squeezed his hand and withdrew hers. “I accept.” Busying herself getting a bottle of feelgood out of a compartment beside her seat, she turned to Benet. “Would you care for a drink?”

“I’m on duty.”

“So am I, in a way, and I’m only going to get through this if I’m on my way to being drunk,” she said, her expression forlorn. “Fine, I’ll drink alone.”

“Go easy, devochka ,” Dmitri said. “You need your wits about you to handle Vasili and the crowd of jackals and vultures he attracts.”

Marushka turned away from them, sipping her drink. “I can handle myself and him.”

The rest of the drive was made in silence.

The house where the party was being held was huge, much like the estate where Marushka and Dmitri lived, and there was a great bustle of limousines coming and going. The Nichevsky chauffeur had to wait for several minutes for their turn at the

grand entrance.

“Copy me, do what I do and you’ll be fine,” Dmitri said to Benet as they exited the groundcar and put their massive hats on again.

He opened the door for Marushka and then he and Benet walked behind her as she made her way through the crush of people, many of whom seemed to be there merely to gawk at the arriving nobility.

Benet had to shove a few overeager people behind the velvet ropes meant to contain the spectators.

He remembered what Dmitri had said about assassination and his gut tightened.

Marushka was completely vulnerable out here and didn’t seem aware at all of the danger she could be in.

He ramped up his situational awareness about a thousand times as she went to the rope to greet people she evidently recognized.

“Your grace, we shouldn’t linger,” he said, touching her elbow as she admired a rosy cheeked baby and exchanged pleasantries with the mother. “It might not be safe for you out here.”

“Nonsense, these are Vasili’s people, which means they’ll be mine as well soon,” she said, but she did move toward the stairs, which satisfied Benet.

“Medieval much?” he whispered to Dmitri as he climbed the imposing flight of stairs toward the house itself.

Dmitri merely shrugged. “It’s Outlier. This is how they do things here.”

There was a receiving line and Marushka accepted cold kisses on the cheek from various older women, who Benet gathered must be Vasili's relatives and overly enthusiastic embraces from several elder men, one of whom tried to kiss her full on the lips but she gracefully evaded him.

Vasili was at the end of the line and he left his family to pull her in for a passionate kiss, while his mother protested the lack of decorum and his father loudly proclaimed the lovers should be allowed to reunite however they wished.

Benet kept his face expressionless but he was disturbed.

They hadn't even made it into the damn house yet and already he didn't like the way the evening was going.

When Marushka stepped away from Vasili, he and Dmitri got closer and escorted her inside.

Benet glanced over his shoulder to see the prince staring at him, eyes narrowed, obviously not happy Marushka had brought her bodyguards to his party.

"I need to freshen up," Marushka said as the men handed off their fur hats to a uniformed footman. "This way."

She seemed quite at home in Vasili's mansion, leading them through a corridor to what she said was a lady's retiring room.

She disappeared inside while Benet and Dmitri stood guard and prevented anyone else from entering.

He figured a place this big must have plenty of other retiring rooms for guests and Marushka needed a few minutes alone.

Eventually she reappeared, wearing a huge, fake smile and they followed her to the next destination, which was a giant ballroom.

Benet barely managed to repress a whistle as he entered in her wake.

As big as the room was, it was filled with people.

There was a live orchestra and people dancing energetically, while throngs of other guests sat or stood along the walls in small groups and chatted.

Waiters moved among the crowd passing out drinks and single bite appetizers.

Marushka made her way to a small group sitting on sofas, who made room for her to sit and immediately engaged her in conversation in rapidfire Outlier.

Benet didn't speak the language but he recognized cattiness when he heard it and guessed there was a lot of gossip going on.

Marushka said little but watched the couples whirling across the floor with barely disguised longing.

"She can't dance until Vasili gets in here," Dmitri said quietly. "He insists on being her first partner but he's in no rush."

Benet kept his negative opinion of the prince to himself.

He checked out the room, realizing the walls were covered in slabs of pure amber, broken up by long gilded mirrors and elaborate paintings the likes of which he'd only seen in museums or historical trideos.

There were candles in golden holders everywhere, but more modern lighting subtly

illuminated the party as well.

The ceiling was one huge painting, of what he couldn't be sure, but perhaps a depiction of a myth or a legend, given all the clouds and winged figures. These people have credits to burn.

Dmitri nudged him in the ribs and Benet saw the prince finally making his way into the room. He was surrounded by a bevy of women, who seemed to be flirting heavily with him and trying to get him to dance.

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“Later, I promise,” he said as he arrived in Marushka’s vicinity.

“Have to do my duty and have the first dance with my fiancée, y’know.

” He then proceeded to kiss them each on the cheek and finally the group went away giggling in search of other partners.

Vasili bowed to Marushka and held out his hand.

She stared at him for a moment. “You promised me Olgana and Svetlira wouldn’t be here. You swore after the last time you wouldn’t see them again.”

Vasili was unmoved, snagging a glass of feelgood from a passing servant and draining it in one gulp before casually setting the glass aside.

“Their families are old friends of my parents. My mother insisted—what could I do? This is still my parents’ home after all.

Now get off the damn sofa and dance with me. People are staring.”

In fact, the girls on the sofa next to Marushka were whispering behind their fans and giggling, although they quieted when Benet glared at them.

Marushka rose, shaking out her skirt a bit and took Vasili’s hand reluctantly.

He closed his fingers over hers so tightly Benet saw her wince but then the couple swept smoothly into the mix of dancers.

He watched them closely the entire time they danced and it appeared to him the prince was lecturing Marushka about something.

She maintained her calm demeanor but he noticed the signs of stress around her eyes and lips.

There was no time to talk to her though. Having danced with the prince she was now free to accept invitations from others and was whirling and twirling her way through complicated dance after dance while Benet and Dmitri watched.

If she was his woman, he'd spend the entire evening with her and etiquette be damned, Benet thought, watching Vasili dancing and flirting with yet another richly dressed girl.

And where on the seven hells did that fantasy come from?

He liked Marushka, enjoyed her presence at breakfast every day, and appreciated her support during the training sessions but he was focused on escaping.

Wasn't he? And what did he have to offer an Outlier Grand Duchess even if he did find a way to get off the damn planet and go home?

Fiercely Benet ordered his cock to stand down as she came toward them after yet another dance, which she'd actually seemed to enjoy.

She'd been laughing and obviously comfortable with the young gallant who escorted her to the sofa when the song ended, which was a marked change from her previous turns around the floor.

Fanning herself, she sank onto the embroidered cushions and accepted a refreshing drink from Dmitri, while the young man bowed and continued their conversation.

Suddenly Vasili was there, shoving past the man with a curse, and grabbing Marushka by the wrist so hard she dropped the glass, spilling wine all over her dress.

He dragged her to her feet and pulled her in the direction of the nearest door.

Footmen were coming to escort her recent partner from the room.

Benet was in motion without conscious thought, hastening after the engaged couple, Dmitri at his back.

When he emerged into another of the endless halls, he hesitated. There was no sign of Marushka and her hot-headed fiancé.

“This way,” Dmitri said, moving to the righthand corridor. “His father’s library is up these stairs and he’s taken her there before for discussion, as he calls it.”

“What’s the guy’s problem?” Benet asked, catching up with Dmitri. “How can she let him treat her like that?”

“Marushka has been well trained in the social graces,” the Badari replied, scorn in his voice.

“She doesn’t make scenes and she understands she has to defer to Vasili, especially at his own home.

I’ve tried to support her in her independence but a woman can only go so far on Throne in asserting herself, unless she’s the Empress.

She’ll be his to do with as he pleases when they’re married.

You have to understand this. She’s as trapped as you are. ”

Benet ascended the stairs two at a time and at the top went toward the sound of raised voices, only to arrive at a pair of heavy, embossed doors at the end of the short hallway. He heard Vasili's sharp tones in the room beyond and tried to open the door but it was locked. "Now what?"

"We wait. We guard the door. We're here for her when their discussion is done.

She'll have to stay through dinner and the concert in the garden afterward.

" With a shrug Dmitri leaned against the other half of the door.

"I've wanted to kill him at least a dozen times since they got engaged and he revealed his true nature but I can only kill on the command of the Empress.

And even more to the point, Marushka herself has forbidden me to intervene. "

Nobody made me promise a damn thing. Benet's mood was savage.

He and the other man stood awkwardly beside the door for a few minutes.

Benet could hear the rise and fall of angry voices inside the room but couldn't make out any words.

Then he heard the sound of a blow, Marushka screamed and there was a heavy thud.

Turning to the door, he raised his booted foot and kicked it open, splintering the lock.

He rushed into the room to find Marushka on the floor, hand to her face, eyes wide in shock with Vasili standing over her, hands fisted.

Benet didn't hesitate for an instant but grabbed the prince by the shoulder and sent

him spinning across the room, to slam into a heavy reading table.

“How dare you break into this room,” Vasili shouted. Gathering himself the Outlier noble rushed to attack Benet.

He heard Dmitri behind him attempting to get Marushka to her feet but he kept his concentration on Vasili. It took him one blow to knock the prince out and send him toppling to the floor in a heap.

“You killed him?” Marushka cried.

“Hells no, simply gave him a taste of his own medicine,” Benet said in satisfaction.

“We must get out of here before the household is alerted and comes,” Dmitri said.

“Can you walk or should I carry you, devochka ?”

“I—I can walk.” She sounded shaky and Benet was skeptical but he agreed with Dmitri’s estimation they needed to be gone.

He followed them into the hall and Marushka directed them past several servants and down a set of stairs which were narrow and uncarpeted.

They emerged in a room outside the kitchen, where more servants were hard at work, barely glancing up from dinner preparations to gawk as Benet and his companions made their way through, reaching a door which led outside.

“Stay here, keep an eye on her,” Dmitri said. “I’ll get the groundcar.”

“I can’t leave,” she protested. “It simply isn’t done. I have to be here for dinner and the concert afterward.”

Benet touched her swollen cheek gently, where a bruise was already forming, ugly and purple. “You want to sit at table with all these people bearing his mark on your face? You can’t be serious about staying—you need to be at home, have a cup of tea, put ice on your cheek and regain your calm.”

Dmitri looked at the two of them and nodded.

“Benet talks sensibly.” Then he was gone, sprinting into the dark, presumably to find the limousine.

Benet hoped he knew where he was going. There wasn’t much time before the alarm was raised.

He wasn’t worried for himself— he was already in so much trouble just being here in Outlier he couldn’t concern himself with assault on a petty prince—but he wanted Marushka safely away from here.

She was trembling and it dawned on him she was probably in shock and chilled from the night air so he took off his fancy scarlet jacket and draped it over her shoulders.

Putting his arm around her, he drew her away from the building to a set of wooden tables and benches close by.

“You need to sit. Dmitri will be here soon.”

She sank onto a bench, her elaborate dress and petticoats poufing up, the hem now bedraggled and dirty.

“I made him angry, dancing with Jervan,” she said after a moment of silence.

“We’ve known each other since we were born practically because he lives on the next

estate over.

He's like a brother to me, nothing romantic at all but Vasili accused me of flirting with Jervan and encouraging him to take liberties.

He said I embarrassed him in front of his family and all his guests. That I was wanton."

Benet knelt in front of her and took her hands, which trembled. "All of what he said is pure crap. I watched you dance with the guy and it was obvious you were friends and nothing more. Vasili is a bully and an abuser—you can't marry a man like that."

She stared at him, eyes wide. "I must, it's all settled. My father has been paid the bride price and spent it already. There can be no thought of backing out now because Vasili had a bad night. Maybe he drank too much. I'll be more careful of his feelings?—"

"I know you don't want to hear this right now but nothing you do will ever be good enough for him. It's a pattern I've seen before with my own mother and the man she married after my father died. He's going to escalate his violence—you can't appease him."

Marushka bit her lip and averted her eyes. "Can we not talk about this right now, please?"

He had a lot more he wanted to say and he wished he'd killed the bastard when he had the chance.

As a gladiator he knew exactly how much force to put into one of his blows and he'd deliberately aimed to knock the prince out, not execute him.

Rising to his feet, he rested a hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently but stayed silent.

Lights came around the curve in the service road running close to the building and a moment later the groundcar pulled up.

Dmitri was at the controls and he popped the passenger door, making summoning hand gestures.

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Benet brought Marushka to her feet, his anger rising all over again as she winced when he touched her arm and he noticed more bruises from where the prince had forcibly dragged her to the library. He carried her and the damn dress to the limousine and got her inside.

She caught his sleeve as he turned to close the door. "Please, sit with me?"

He slid into the seat and Dmitri had the groundcar reversing and roaring away from the mansion while the door was still closing.

"I sent a message to the prince's mother in your name," he said, keeping his attention on the controls. "I said you had a migraine and were indisposed."

"I'll follow up with her tomorrow. Thank you."

Not another word was said for the entire trip to her home.

Marushka leaned her head on Benet's shoulder and he put his arm around her, hoping he could offer silent comfort at least. When they arrived at the estate the housekeeper and Marushka's maid were waiting on the steps and the older women took charge of the duchess immediately, leading her inside.

Benet stared after her, his mind whirling.

He hoped the women would take good care of her and he wished he could talk to her further.

Dmitri tapped him on the shoulder. “I’m leaving the groundcar here,” the Badari said, waving a hand at the vehicle.

“Not my problem to solve. We’d better get back to my house and get some sleep. ”

“What’s going to happen next?” Benet asked as they walked across the manicured lawns in the direction of Dmitri’s dwelling. “Is the engagement broken now?”

“We’ll see. I expect there to be quite a bit of activity tomorrow,” Dmitri said ominously, “But don’t expect too much, my friend.

This is Outlier and the aristocracy is old and rotten at the heart.

I can attest to that after all these years living here.

Individuals might be worthy, like my devochka, but give her a few years as the prince’s wife and she’ll become as hard and jaded as the rest of them.

Or she’ll die. Survival in the imperial circles drains one of whatever gentle and good qualities might have been in your heart at the beginning. ”

“You’ve stayed true to your Badari code of honor as far as I can see,” Benet said while he waited for Dmitri to unlock the door.

His Badari companion gave him a smile with fangs revealed.

“Ah, but remember I’m not a person to them.

I’m an asset of the crown. I go where the woman who is Empress sends me, I observe, I listen, I do other things as commanded but I’m not now nor have I ever been a member of their society.

I've done things which bent my honor but I prayed to the Great Mother for forgiveness." Dmitri yawned. "I'm for bed."

"I think I'll grab a sandwich and a feelgood and go sit outside," Benet said.

He was too keyed up to sleep right now. What had happened to Marushka infuriated him and brought up all kinds of bad memories from his own childhood.

He had no regrets about knocking the prince out but he knew the situation wasn't over and he suspected he was going to be powerless to care for the woman at the heart of it.

His adrenaline rush was crashing now and as he sat in the garden he stared at the stars and prayed to Lords of Space to help Marushka.

Usually after action or after the arena he'd seek out female companionship, to take the edge off and there were willing women on the estate, since several had made their interest in him quite clear as he did his morning run and his workouts later.

But his thoughts were only for Marushka.

He kept seeing her pale face, disfigured by the ugly purple bruise, and he wished he could take her pain away.

He shouldn't indulge his growing attraction to her—she was an aristocrat and engaged and he was a kidnapped gladiator, bent on escaping as soon as he could and between the two of them nothing was possible.

His heart and his cock weren't listening to cold logic tonight though.

He decided to go see her first thing in the morning if she didn't come for breakfast as

per her usual routine.

But his intentions were thwarted as soon as he descended the stairs in Dmitri's house and entered the kitchen.

"No Marushka today?" he said.

Dmitri handed him a cup of coffee and motioned him to the table. "Sit down. I need to update you on a few overnight developments."

"All right." Benet seated himself and blew on the coffee but apprehension made his gut tighten. "She's doing okay though?"

"I haven't seen her yet but there's been no word otherwise.

The housekeeper is an old ally of mine and she would let me know.

"The Badari sat, the chair creaking a bit under his weight.

"You've been sequestered on the estate until the games.

No more bodyguarding and you're forbidden to set foot outside the property line.

"He drew a deep breath. "The Grand Duke is flying in later this morning and he and Marushka will be attending a sort of summit meeting at the prince's estate, chaired by his mother, who is a formidable dowager and a lady in waiting to the empress.

I'll attend with them." Dmitri raised one hand.

"I'll find a moment to relay your concern to Marushka and I'll tell you what transpires at the meeting when I return. "

“I’m grateful. But she can’t be in the same room with the bastard.”

“You have no power to convert your bold statement into reality,” Dmitri said.

“Her father will be with her and the Dowager is fully invested in quashing this scandal and preserving the engagement. All the parties involved want to keep it from the Empress but of course there was a great deal of talk about Marushka leaving the gala before dinner with her migraine and her two bodyguards but not her chauffeur and then the prince falling downstairs and breaking two ribs as well as his nose at roughly the same time.”

Benet chuckled. “Is that the story he’s going with? Lame. I should have killed him.”

“Be glad you didn’t and be grateful the prince’s family is trying to minimize the embarrassment of admitting the truth of the evening’s events or you’d be in shackles and on your way to the Empress’s torture chambers already. I wouldn’t be able to save you.”

“If she was my daughter, I’d be breaking the engagement, not getting together for a sit down, whether the old lady is going to mediate or not,” Benet said.

“I feel the same,” Dmitri admitted. “She’s like a daughter to me, since I was assigned to her when she was so little.

Devochka means daughter in Outlier. But the Duke is in debt—he could lose everything if he’s not careful.

He already spent her bride price to hire a crack team of mercenaries to go to the Five Sectors and kidnap you, among other things.

He needs this alliance of families desperately and Marushka is his pawn.

It'll only stave off the inevitable for a while, in my opinion.

Gambling is a sickness with him and unfortunately luck isn't on his side.

He must have done something to piss Lady Luck off in fact because his outcomes are usually so disastrous.

"Dmitri's laugh was ironic. "Take you for example. He spent all those credits and ended up with a human not a Badari, although he doesn't suspect the truth.

Do I think you can win the obstacle course event at the Games?

Yes, if luck shines her smile on you. But the odds won't be in his favor because people won't bet against you, believing you to be a Badari like me and I won five times. "

"We're getting off the subject a bit," Benet said.

"So there's no way Marushka can get out of this marriage?

"The idea bothered him immensely. Having seen how his mother had fared with her abusive boyfriend all those years ago, he couldn't bear the idea of the duchess being forced into the arms of the prince.

"None. I'm hoping her father can negotiate an agreement where Vasili doesn't put his hands on her in anger again."

Benet thought that was next to useless as protection for Marushka.

He made a vow to himself to find a way to talk to her in private as soon as possible.

If only he could escape to the Five Systems, he could take her with him.

The instant the idea occurred to him he admitted it was off the charts wild and unlikely but not totally impossible.

He could pilot a ship and he was determined not to spend the rest of his life here as a glorified prisoner.

Kyden and Elara would take Marushka in and help her find her way.

He knew better than to say any of this to Dmitri, who would throw more cold water on the idea.

I have to get to the capital and then figure out a way to get to the spaceport and steal a ship.

He had access to various information sources here in Dmitri's house and he figured he could do careful research under the guise of trying to learn more about Throne and Outlier.

He could pretend he was accepting his fate and wanting to assimilate into the culture.

Gathering intel had been part of his mission when he was in his system's Special Forces.

Maybe his skills were rusty but he was highly motivated.

Chapter Five

B enet had a hard time staying motivated for the rest of the day especially once Dmitri donned a uniform and went off to the mansion to accompany Marushka and her father to the meeting at Vasili's estate.

Aware he wouldn't hear anything until late in the evening he forced himself to train hard and run the obstacle course over and over.

He even tackled the metal maze twice and was pleased with his progress.

There was no word by dinnertime so he heated up a meal from the stasis keeper and sat outside to eat, gazing at the stars and wondering what Kyden and the others were doing at home, and if they knew where he was yet.

Kyden wouldn't tamely accept the idea of leaving him in Outlier as a conscripted athlete so he needed to keep his situational awareness high for any hint of an attempt to contact him or initiate an extraction.

He admitted to himself he wouldn't want to leave Marushka.

She was on his mind more than she should be, given her position in the Outlier aristocracy and her fate.

He speculated whether Dmitri could be mistaken and the engagement might be called off.

What father could stand by and let his daughter go unwillingly to an abusive husband?

Surely the Grand Duke would see her bruises and listen to her account of the evening and do the right thing.

Wouldn't he?

But then what? Benet didn't have anything to offer a high-born girl like Marushka.

At least Kyden had become the Master of a gladiatorial House and associate of a member of the Five Systems royalty when he claimed his mate Elara.

Fate wasn't likely to drop anything similar in Benet's lap and certainly nothing to equal what Marushka had now.

Benet did all right with his gladiatorial pay and his salary and profit sharing in the success of the House of Badari—Kyden was a generous boss—but besides his flashy groundcar, he hadn't accumulated much in the way of worldly goods.

He lived in his apartment at the House and had quite a respectable savings account on New Switzerland.

He'd be a good catch for any ordinary woman, he told himself without false modesty. But a Grand Duchess?

After his third bottle of cold feelgood, he decided he was only making himself miserable with dreams of trying to have a relationship with Marushka.

Wrong woman at the wrong time. He didn't even know how she felt about him.

Sure they joked around and teased each other and he desired her, but maybe he was reading too much into her small touches here and there and her interest in watching him train.

With a curse he tossed his bottle in the recycler and rose to go to bed.

The front door opened and Benet heard Dmitri's heavy tread. He went into the house and found the Badari in the kitchen, pouring himself a stiff drink of Outlier vodka.

"Well? Is the engagement still on?" he demanded to know.

Dmitri closed his eyes to savor the burn of the drink for a minute and then said. "Yes. Of course. I told you. There was a lot of negotiation as to terms—Vasili is to pay additional bride price for striking her and he gave his word to his mother and her father he'd never touch her in anger again."

"Which is a stone cold lie," Benet said.

"Once an abuser, always an abuser in my experience. The scum is reliably sorry afterward and says all the right things and does all the right things and the woman gets drawn further into the situation. That's what happened to my mother. What did Marushka think?"

"She said little. She accepted his apology and the emerald necklace and earrings he brought as a gift but I saw her flinch when he put the jewelry around her neck. She knows her place and she knows her father's dire situation.

I think she hopes everything will be all right and the spawn of a vermore will keep his word.

" Dmitri poured himself a second drink and offered the bottle to Benet, who declined

with a shake of his head.

“The couple isn’t going to be together in private until after the wedding. ”

“Are you still her bodyguard?”

“Of course. Only the Empress can end my duty and reassign me, which I believe she’ll do on the day of the wedding.

Vasili shows her only his best behavior and he won’t want me anywhere near Marushka once she becomes his wife.

” Dmitri’s broad shoulders slumped. “I pray to my goddess to work a miracle to prevent this fate for my devochka but I fear the worst. After all these years here in Outlier and watching no less than four Empresses and their despicable courts ruin the lives of others, this situation is the one breaking my heart.”

“Mine too and I just got here.”

Giving him a searching look, Dmitri said, “You have feelings for her, don’t you?”

“I could if I let myself,” Benet admitted. “She’s sweet and smart and beautiful. She’s genuine in all she does, no games, no wiles. But we both know Marushka is above my level.”

“The Grand Duchess Marushka is, yes, undoubtedly. You’ve yet to see her assume that role but I have and she can project an icy exterior with the best of them.

The woman underneath? Much as you describe her.

I managed to get a few moments alone with her and told her of your concern. She was

grateful.”

Benet had to be content with the secondhand message.

The duke was still in residence the next day according to the servants and Benet had no contact with Marushka.

He put in a full day of training, trying to keep his mind away from thoughts of her, with mixed success.

After dinner, Dmitri went to his room to read private comms he'd gotten from contacts at Court and Benet took his feelgood and went to sit outside.

He was sitting with his feet up, gazing at the stars and hoping Kyden knew where he was when Boris and Oksana came loping into the yard, coming to him for pats and scratches.

He dispensed those with enthusiasm, asking them, “Does your mistress know you’re here?”

Do I need to take you back to the house for her? ”

Next second he caught a whiff of her perfume and a sensation like a jolt of electricity ran through all his nerve endings.

“She does indeed know her dogs are here,” Marushka said softly. “I told them to find you and they came straight here.”

Both dogs went to her now, begging for attention as if they'd been ignored for hours.

Laughing she knelt to pet them and allow the pair to lick her face.

Benet enjoyed the scene, committing it to memory.

Her bruises had faded, no doubt due to med robo treatment and the sight of the beautiful woman and her two perpetually ‘smiling’ pets created a warm sensation in his heart.

“I wish you could always be as carefree,” he said.

Rising, she came to join him on the couch. “As do I.”

“Your father left?”

“This afternoon, with many instructions and admonishments left behind.” She shrugged. “I’ll ignore them all, I think. Not much time of freedom left to me. Did Dmitri tell you about our meeting of the two families?”

“He gave me the highlights.” Benet shifted uncomfortably, wanting to say much more but holding his anger and indignation in abeyance.

“It went about as expected,” she said, petting Oksana, who laid her head on Marushka’s knee and gazed adoringly at her.

“Vasili’s mother lectured me with a bunch of utter nonsense about how boys will be boys and they like to play rough and I must have misunderstood the affection he was trying to show me?—”

“If you repeat one more word that bitch said to you, I’m likely to put my fist through the wall,” Benet said, jaw clenched. “You know none of that is true. I was in the room and I saw what he was doing.”

She picked at a thread on the hem of her skirt. “Is it sad I’m reduced to hoping he’ll

be satisfied once I give him an heir and then he'll leave me alone and pursue his fun and games with mistresses?"

"I'd give anything to take you away from all of this," Benet said. The life she was describing was as cold and empty as anything he'd ever heard.

"That's not exactly an option though, is it?"

"She reached over and took his hand. "I appreciate the sentiment more than you'll ever know.

I would say I wish I'd met you years ago but even then I was destined for a political marriage to get my father and the estate out of trouble. I always understood my fate."

Benet pulled her onto his lap and she came willingly, curling up against his chest.

"I like your heartbeat," she said after a minute of silence. "So strong, so steady. Like you."

She was testing the limits of his self-control and he gave up on concealing his true feelings. Drawing a deep breath, he said, "Marushka, I?—"

She put her finger over his lips. "No, don't. Whatever you were going to say won't help the situation and I want to be at peace tonight with you. I think we feel the same but saying the words will only make things worse for both of us."

Benet was anything but peaceful. His emotions were in turmoil over what had happened to her and what her future was likely going to be.

He was also holding an attractive woman he cared for and his body was responding accordingly.

Marushka turned on his lap—she had to feel his arousal—and hugged him, which pressed her breasts against his chest. The points were curled tight and he bit back a groan.

“Kiss me?” she whispered.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:51 am

Bad idea, very bad idea his inner voice said to him but Benet decided to ignore the call of good sense.

Placing his lips over hers, he started the kiss gently, not sure what exactly she had in mind but Marushka licked the seam with her tongue and then parted her lips in an invitation he couldn't resist. He let his tongue explore the warmth of her mouth, savoring the taste of her, while holding her close.

As the kiss continued, he stroked the side of her breast until she squirmed and adjusted herself to give him better access.

Running his hand under her top, over her warm, silken skin, he cupped her breast and teased the nipple.

Breathing hard, they ended the kiss and by mutual consent lay stretched out on the couch on their sides. Marushka ran her hand over the hard length of him, trapped in his pants and then ground her hips against him.

"I have a bedroom," he said, squeezing the luscious globes of her derriere and trying not to think too hard about sinking his aching cock into her silken heat. "We could take this there and be more comfortable."

"Dmitri would hear us," she said with a frown.

"And he would not approve. I'd be on my way back to the house in a heartbeat and he might kill you."

” Taking his hand, Marushka guided him to the place where her legs met in a vee.

He slid his hand past the hem of her short skirt discovering with satisfaction how ready she was for him.

“Please,” she said, clenching around him as he inserted one finger into her folds. “I want you tonight.”

Abandoning his last shreds of caution, Benet rearranged them so he was on top of her and then removed her skirt and the lacy red thong she wore.

He moved awkwardly to where he could bring his tongue to bear and dedicated himself to bringing her to orgasm.

Marushka ran her fingers through his hair and clutched at his shoulders while whispering encouragement until she was so aroused all she could utter were moans and pleas for release.

When she came he watched her face and thought he’d never seen anything so beautiful in his life.

“That was amazing,” she said, breathing hard and limp in his arms. “But I want you inside me. I want us to come together.”

He helped her sit up and rid herself of her top and bra and then stripped to the skin himself as quickly as possible. When he came over her, he brushed her hair away from her face and said, “Are you sure this is what you want? I can stop?—”

“Don’t you dare.” Marushka shifted so the weeping head of his shaft was poised at the entrance to her body and he slipped inside ever so slightly.

With a groan he captured her lips and thrust slowly, savoring the way her muscles clenched around him and how hot and wet she was for him.

He was so turned on by what they were doing he had a hard time controlling himself but he wanted to make it as good as possible for her so he forced himself to set a deliberate pace.

His fears he might be bedding a virgin, which had him proceeding with extra caution in the beginning were allayed and he was able to go deep and hard.

Marushka clung to him, obviously sharing his passion and relishing their mutual passion.

When she came this time her entire body held him in an unbreakable embrace and her inner muscles milked his cock of every last drop of hot seed as he followed her over the edge.

Benet had never felt so well loved and satisfied before in his entire life and he held her tight in his arms as the aftershocks of pleasure rippled through them both.

“I’m not leaving you,” he vowed in a fierce whisper, kissing her throat and then her lips. “We were meant to be together.”

“We can’t be,” she said, her eyes clouded with tears. “I have to marry Vasili and you have to escape to your life in the Five Systems.”

“There has to be a way,” Benet said. “Kyden, my boss, says his people believe they’re fated to love only one woman for this lifetime and into the afterlife and I may not be a true Badari but now I know what he means.

That’s how I feel about you, sweetheart.

You're it for me. Don't ask me to walk away and leave you married to that bastard. ”

Now she was crying and he held her close to his heart while she was wracked by the emotional storm.

“I could never be sorry we had this night,” he said, “But now we know the truth of who we are to each other which changes everything. I love you.” This was the first and only time those words had crossed his lips in his entire life but the sentiment came easily from his heart tonight and he meant it.

Marushka wiped away her tears as best she could and kissed him.

“I've loved you ever since the first day, when you took the field against father's goons and fought so bravely.

I'd never seen anything like it or anyone like you.

The memory of us together here will have to sustain me for all the years ahead. ”

Benet folded her into his arms and hung on tight.

He couldn't say anything more right now because he had no solution to offer.

His own escape was mostly a pipedream at the moment, let alone any chance he had of taking a Grand Duchess with him for a life together.

As they lay together on the couch she drifted off to sleep and he tried to keep the dark thoughts at bay.

He wanted to savor what he'd shared with Marushka and the love blossoming between them but reality was a cold, dark intruder.

He didn't sleep at all but spent the remaining hours of the night holding her and memorizing all the tiny expressions which flitted across her face as she dreamed.

As the sky above lightened, getting ready for dawn, he woke her gently with a kiss.

"Dmitri will be up soon," he said. "If you don't want him to catch us here, then you'll have to get back to the house. I'll walk you."

Marushka kissed him with intensity and then rose from the couch, gathering her clothing hastily and dressing. The dogs lifted their heads expectantly, waiting to see if they were leaving. Benet shrugged into his pants and tee shirt and caught her for another long hug.

"I'll go by myself, with the dogs," she said. "If I run into anyone I'll simply say I was out walking them early." Smoothing his hair off his forehead, she added, "Take care of yourself, for me, all right? And promise me the first real chance you get to escape, you'll take it and won't back."

"Sounds a lot like a final goodbye," he said, shifting his stance a bit. "Is there something I need to know that you aren't telling me?"

Marushka waved off his concern with a laugh that sounded forced. "No, this has all been so dramatic tonight I'm just in a mood. I'll see you later."

"Promise?" He refused to let go of her hand.

"Benet, I have to hurry." She kissed him again and then ran from the garden, the dogs bounding at her heels.

He stared after her, tempted to follow but then went inside to the kitchen, where he found Dmitri sitting at the table, placidly drinking his morning beverage. "She left

safely?” he asked. “Was she here all night?”

Benet knew Badari could scent lies and he didn’t see any point in hiding the truth from Dmitri anyway.

If he’d known all along Marushka was in the garden with Benet, he could have ended the evening at any time.

The fact he didn’t was telling. “We spent the night together, yes. Your couch outside is quite comfortable.” He went on a quest for eggs and bacon in the stasis keeper. “You want breakfast?”

Dmitri rose from the table and came to stand in front of Benet. “I’m guessing she didn’t tell you we’re leaving today, she and I.”

Cold gripped Benet’s heart and he couldn’t move. “What do you mean?”

“We’ve been ordered to report to the capital city today and we won’t be returning.

You’re to stay here for the next week and then the Grand Duke will have you transferred to his compound at the capital as well.

The Games open in two weeks.” Dmitri gestured at the kitchen around them.

“I welcome you to stay in my house and consider it as if it were your own. Keep up your training. To slack off now would be a mistake.”

“Will I see you—either of you—in the capital?”

“I will come and supervise your training again, yes. Marushka will be kept busy with social events and waiting on the Empress.” Dmitri grinned but the smile didn’t reach

his eyes.

“Knowing my devochka, she’ll try to sneak away and come to you but it’ll be much more difficult to be discreet than it was here, you understand? ”

“Is Vasili going to be there?” Benet voiced his primary concern.

“Undoubtedly but for now they are to remain apart, except for the big, mandatory events. I’ll be there as well—she’ll be fine.

” Dmitri frowned and his eyes glowed, as Benet had seen Kyden’s do on occasion when he was experiencing a strong emotion.

“She’s going to have to marry him—we must both accept the hard reality, my friend.

Life with Vasili is her future and much as we both love her, there’s nothing we can do. ”

“I’ll find a way.” Benet made the vow with every fiber of his being. “If I can figure out an escape from here, do you think she’d come with me?”

“The sense of duty is strong in her and she knows her father is in deep trouble. She might not agree to run away and you must give me your word you won’t attempt to kidnap her against her will.

That would be a disaster. The Empress would probably authorize Vasili’s family to hunt you in the Five Systems. You’d be dead and she’d be punished severely,”

“I have friends and allies there,” Benet said. “I could keep her safe.”

Shaking his head, Dmitri reiterated his opinion.

“If you take her against her will, the act will kill whatever chance the two of you might have had at happiness. This is an Outlier romantic tragedy, which is a thing their culture specializes in. Take the gift she gave you last night and derive what comfort you can from knowing her heart is yours. There’s no future with Marushka for you.

” He laid one huge hand on Benet’s shoulder.

“It pains me to see you and her in such a strait. If I could fix this somehow, I would. But even if I killed Vasili, you and Marushka would not be allowed to be together.”

“I appreciate you being so direct, even if we must agree to disagree,” Benet said. “When do you go?”

“I have to pack now and be at the house in an hour. You should eat and go start your training for the day.” The Badari left the kitchen and Benet heard him ascending the stairs.

He stared at the frying pan and the eggs without seeing them.

I’ve been an idiot, wasting my time here falling in line with this plan to compete in the Games.

I should have been actively planning my escape and figuring out how to take her with me.

There was no making up for the lost time now but he vowed to do better once he reached the capital.

He didn’t know how much freedom he’d have to move around but surely in the crowds of fans and spectators for the multiday event he could manage to do cautious

reconnaissance.

There'd have to be innumerable ships coming and going from the spaceport right now as well, which meant more opportunities for stealing a ship.

No longer hungry, he put away the food and drank two survival drinks and ate a ration bar before going out to do what Dmitri had recommended and hit the training course.

He didn't allow himself to try for a last glimpse of Marushka as she departed, although he was watching from a small hill as her groundcar left.

We're going to be together he vowed silently.

You're the best thing that ever happened to me and I'm not giving you up to a monster.

Chapter Six

I n Kyden's office in the Five systems...

“After a lot of careful inquiries and talking to people I prefer not to speak with, I can confirm your man is a prisoner in Outlier,” Prince Pargen said over the open com.

“The whole thing is strange and nearly a comedy of errors but there's nothing you can do now.

No one leaves Outlier once they've been taken there against their will.

I know you're close friends with Benet but my counsel is to accept the situation and forget trying to rescue him. ”

Kyden growled, his inner beast agreeing with him that wasn't an option. “I can't abandon my brother-at-arms. I won't leave him there. There have to be options, some way to extract him.”

Elara gave him a concerned glance, her gaze lingering on his huge talons, fully deployed. “Perhaps if you can tell us what you learned, it might help,” she said tactfully, addressing the prince's holo image.

“Nichevsky, the Grand Duke who had him kidnapped, is a sportsman and a gambler. A losing gambler from what I gather. He's wanted to win top honors at the Empress's Games for decades but always fails.

What inspired him I can't even guess but he got the idea to field a Badari as a member of his team.

"Pargen's holo shrugged. "No one in Outlier pays much attention to the gladiatorial battles in the Five Systems but I guess your fame as the Death Dealer has penetrated even there. A mixed blessing in this case. Nichevsky hired a team of mercenaries and sent them here with orders to capture a Badari gladiator for him. Apparently no one realized you're not all actual Badari despite the name of the House. "

"So these idiots would have settled for any man from my roster?" Kyden said with scorn. "Fools indeed. Benet is the absolute top of the roster of fighters who aren't of my Badari blood but there's a vast gap between what a human can do and what I can do."

"They probably wouldn't have taken you yourself?—"

"Damn straight. I'd have killed them first."

"I was going to say because you're too famous." The prince's answer was mild. "You're sure you won't take my first piece of advice?"

"With respect, Your Highness, no."

"Fine. I knew you'd say that. I've managed to secure you a meeting with the Empress's First Minister. It was impossible to get to her in person."

Kyden blinked. Taking a meeting seemed like such a mild suggestion. "And what am I to do at this meeting?"

"Get yourself one of Senator Vasclavian's fancy, fully armed cruise yachts, sail into Outlier bold as brass with the border pass I got you, proclaim you're there to watch

your man in the Games—I got you tickets for the event Benet is scheduled for—take whatever papers you have to prove you own him and demand his return immediately.”

“I don’t understand,” Elara said. “First of all Benet isn’t a slave. Kyden freed everyone when he bought the House. But if Outlier is so impenetrable and hostile, how is claiming ownership going to help?”

Pargen leaned close to the holo cam. “Outlier has a complex system of slaves, thralls, serfs, indentured servants and who knows what else, going back to the original founding of the initial colony. The ruling classes—and especially the Empress—take all of it quite seriously. She or her minister in this case, won’t approve of Nichevsky having interfered with someone else’s slave.

Sets a bad precedent. You have to be careful because if the Empress approved of what Nichevsky did, there’d be no hope at all for you to save Benet.

But the Duke isn’t in particularly good standing with her so I doubt he asked for her permission.

My next piece of advice? If the minister rules in your favor, which I believe he will—” Kyden immediately assumed Pargen had paid a big bribe to the official in question, another favor he’d owe the prince when Pargen decided to collect his markers—“ Be the bigger man and make a deal with Nichevsky. He can save face if you and he make it appear you had a contract for Benet to travel there and compete on behalf of the duke’s duchy.

Then as soon as the damn Games are done, if Benet survives, which from what I heard about the event he’s in, could be in serious doubt, have him give Nichevsky the gold medal and get your asses out of there.”

Elara and Kyden exchanged glances. He pointed one huge talon at her. “You are not coming with me on this insane errand.”

“Will you take Rennyrr and Talinn?” she asked, not bothering to protest his edict.

“Talinn definitely. I need Rennyrr here with you, to run the House. Thank the goddess it’s the off season and fairly quiet right now.” Kyden looked at the prince. “I can’t ever thank you enough for all you’ve done to help Benet.”

Pargen set his fingertips to the bridge of his nose as if he had a headache. “Yes, well please try to avoid Outlier problems in the future. And if you get in trouble while you’re there, it’ll be out of my hands.”

“Understood.”

“I’ll have my courier bring you the border pass, the information on the meeting with Minister Gorbziolsky. and the Games tickets. today. Good luck with this.” The prince signed off.

“Will your father lend me a ship yet again?” Kyden asked. “This is different than any other request I’ve made of him.”

“We need our own,” Elara said. “I’m going to talk to him about leasing us one because we can’t afford to buy one outright and pay the upkeep.

Yet. The House is doing well, and our other business ventures are doing even better but a spaceship like the ones in my father’s fleet are outside our budget. ”

“All the special features he’s added,” Kyden said with a wink, thinking about the armaments the Vasclavian ‘yachts’ carried, as well as many highly advanced technical systems. As always he wondered briefly if the senator was planning an

armed rebellion at some point in the future but the family was so rich and powerful no one questioned his fleet, not even the titular ruler of the Five Systems.

“Interstellar travel might as well be in comfort,” she replied, quoting her father. “I’ll com him now. I’ll see if he has any contacts in Outlier who could be useful to you once you arrive.”

Chapter Seven

The week passed slowly without Dmitri and Marushka for company.

Even the dogs were gone. Benet put in long hours going through the metal maze and running the obstacle course.

On the sixth day the Grand Duke sent for him, having him brought to the library in the mansion by a squad of the estate's security guards.

Seated behind a massive desk, the noble was smoking a feelgood, a glass of wine at hand.

He sat and surveyed Benet critically as the guards filed into the hall.

Two bodyguards stood behind the noble's chair with blank expressions, in case Benet had any ideas about assaulting or kidnapping the man, he supposed.

"You look better than the day you arrived. Are you ready to win the Games for me?"

Benet coughed as the acrid smoke from the fat feelgood drifted his way.

"As you know, I'm a top ranked gladiator in the Five Systems. Whatever arena I appear in, whatever contest I compete in, I play to win.

To dominate. To uphold the honor and reputation of my House.

I'll do no less in these Games of yours but not for you, let's be clear. For myself and the House of Badari."

The duke raised his eyebrows and took a drink. "I can accept that." He reached into the desk drawer and withdrew the crimson and gold badge of his duchy, tossing it onto the desk. "You'll wear this. It's a requirement of the Games and I am the one responsible for your participation."

Spine straight, fists clenched, Benet took a deep breath. "During the Games, yes, I'll wear the crest."

"And on the medal stand." The duke pushed the badge toward him with one stubby finger. "Since you're so confident of winning."

"Oh I'll win." Benet leaned over and closed one hand around the insignia. "And then I want to go home. You kidnapped me, the least you can do is send me home once I've gotten your victory for you. You have no use for a gladiator outside these Games."

"Outlier has its fight clubs, its own version of arenas, but of course you're not trained for the way we fight." The duke was dismissive. "Win me my gold medal and we can discuss your future as reasonable men. Anything less and you'll never see the Five Systems again."

Unmoved by the threat, Benet didn't place much stock in the duke's promise either.

The man had agreed far too easily and a standard maxim in the rest of the civilized galaxy was not to trust the word of an Outlier.

But he was satisfied to have obtained even lip service to the idea of sending him home.

No one needed to know he wouldn't go without Marushka.

"Was that all?" he asked. "I have two more hours of training to do today."

"Tomorrow you'll be flown to the capital.

There's an apartment assigned to you in the athletes' village at the Games.

Dmitri has also invited you to stay with him in his suite at the imperial palace.

"The duke shrugged. "I don't care as long as you show up for all your scheduled meetings and training sessions.

You'll be watched, so don't try to renege on our arrangement. "

Benet was confident he could evade anyone set to spy on him if he so desired.

It was a pretty empty threat. He turned on his heel and walked out of the library, to find the squad of guards waiting for him.

They took him to the training field and left him there, where he worked out his pent-up emotions with a record time on the obstacle course and a long run on the perimeter of the estate.

He was more than ready to move on to the next phase of this insane situation. Let the damn Games begin.

Besides once he was in the capital he could find a way to see Marushka again.

The apartment at the athletes' village was small and cramped.

He was glad not to be sharing it with anyone else.

After putting away his few belongings, he ventured out into the village and mingled with the crowds.

There were a number of events involved in the Games, not all of them deadly and twisted like the one he was signed up for.

Many had a purely athletic bent and quite a few involved horseback riding.

He sat in the bustling dining area and listened to the chatter for a while—his Outlier had improved a great deal under Dmitri's tutelage—but didn't attempt to mingle.

He was getting a feel for the place and also trying to lull any suspicions of whoever the duke had assigned to shadow him.

The other athletes were a mix of Outlier society, from slaves and thralls to noble born men and women. A small percentage had been hired to compete as representatives of noble sponsors although Benet bet no one else had been kidnapped from outside the Outlier Empire in an attempt to win a medal.

In his apartment he found a com message from Dmitri, promising to come first thing in the morning to give him a tour of the Games venue and supervise a training session.

"I'll bring your favorite sweet," was how the Badari signed off.

Benet hoped he meant Marushka might accompany him. He'd missed her fiercely for the past week and worried about how she was doing.

Bright and early the next morning the door to his tiny apartment chimed and he

rushed to answer the summons.

The portal slid open and Marushka stepped inside, Dmitri at her heels.

Benet took her in his arms and gave her a long, lingering kiss while the Badari edged past them and headed into the tiny kitchenette.

“Are you all right?” Benet asked her anxiously when they came up for air. He was surprised at what she was wearing—sensible cargo pants, a plain tee shirt and a utility type jacket.

“I’m fine,” she said, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Many social events, no time alone with Vasili. The Empress has kept me close to her most of the evenings. Tonight there’s a long concert, mostly Tsiliovsky no doubt.

He’s her favorite of the classical composers.

” Marushka gave an elaborate shudder. “I’ve heard those pieces so many times over the years I could probably play them. ”

“He was a nice man,” Dmitri said, leaning on the kitchen counter.

“He was so wrapped up in his music the machinations of the court went right over his head. The empress of the time was his sponsor but she said he was a terrible lover, constantly leaving the bed to write new pieces of music. She nearly had him executed for the habit in fact but he lavished praise on her his muse and all was forgiven.”

“I forgot you actually knew him,” Marushka said. “Which is a good thing since you’ll have to be there with me tonight.”

Benet marveled again at how long-lived Dmitri was. “How did you keep your sanity all these centuries, watching people be born, grow up and then die?” he asked, trying to imagine himself in a similar situation.

“The goddess placed me here so it was my duty to observe and to survive,” the Badari said, rubbing his chest again in his habitual odd, absent-minded manner. “Badari were designed to live a long time, with our self-healing.”

“All that time and you never fell in love?” Marushka asked from her place in Benet’s arms. He could see the glimmer of tears in her eyes, no doubt thinking of the centuries of loneliness her friend had endured.

“There was a lady once,” Dmitri said after an uncomfortable silence.

“She and I became good friends and perhaps could have been more but the empress then was jealous. She didn’t desire me for myself, thank the goddess, but no one else was to have me either.

The woman was exiled and later died in a suspicious manner.

I still feel guilty about it all these centuries later.

But after her I kept my distance from everyone and they began using me to bodyguard children, which I greatly enjoyed for the most part.

” He pointed at Marushka. “You gave me a hard time more than once, devochka.”

“Sorry, not sorry,” she said, displaying her dimples.

“You don’t heal as fast as you used to, do you?” Benet asked.

Dmitri glared at him. “How would you know?”

Realizing he’d hit squarely on a subject Dmitri didn’t care for, Benet said, “Kyden had the same problem in his last few years as an active gladiator. We went to great lengths to hide the fact.”

“And what was his solution?” Dmitri asked.

“He said as soon as he met his mate Elara he recovered his full ability.”

“Well then, as we just discussed his solution won’t work for me.”

There was another awkward silence.

“Can I get either of you anything to eat or drink?” Benet asked. “There’s a lot of healthy stuff in the stasis keeper. I had to go into the city to buy my own bacon and eggs.”

Making a face, which didn’t affect her beauty at all in his opinion, Marushka said, “I’ve already eaten and the menu wasn’t healthy but it was delicious. They do eat well here in the empress’s palace. I should be going—it’ll seem suspicious if I stay too long.”

“She’s actually here to see a horse,” Dmitri said with a grin. “So don’t flatter yourself she came to check up on you .”

“A horse?”

Poking him playfully in the ribs, which didn’t hurt at all, Marushka pretended to be insulted. “I am a veterinarian, remember.”

“How in the seven hells can you juggle those duties with all the events going on at court?” Benet asked.

“I’m not the primary vet of course, but I’m listed on the official roster. It’s a handy excuse to get inside the venue and see you..” She kissed him quickly. “My father has several troika teams racing this year.”

“Teams of three horses,” Dmitri interjected.

“And one of them, Solzhy, likes to bite his harness mates, which of course isn’t good for the team pulling together and winning any races.

We have him on a strict regimen of drugs to help his anxiety so I’m here to check his blood levels.

He likes me,” Marushka added with a smile. “I always bring sugar cubes.”

“Why keep him in the race at all?” Benet asked.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:51 am

“He’s the biggest and fastest my father’s farms have ever produced. His stud fees will be immense,” Marushka answered with pride. “Especially if he’s part of a Games-winning team.”

“Stud fees, eh?” Benet raised one eyebrow and made his comment in a speculative tone. “So if I win my event?—”

“Don’t go any further with that thought.” Marushka slapped him on the chest. “Solzhy has four feet and eats hay.”

“I don’t want any woman but you,” Benet said seriously. “Your father agreed if I win the gold for him I can go back to the Five Systems.”

Her happy expression faded and she grew sober. “There’s little chance he’ll honor the agreement. I hate to say it but my father has no honor to speak of.”

“I know. He doesn’t fool me but strategically it was a good move to get him on the record I can go home.” Benet took her hand. “I’m going to get there and I want to take you with me.”

“Now you’ve done it,” Dmitri said. “We’re out of here, my lady.” He moved to steer Marushka towards the door.

She lingered, her eyes fixed on Benet’s face as if memorizing his features.

“You mean more to me than I can ever explain but the one thing I can’t do is flee my responsibilities here.”

And the Empress would send a retrieval team to drag me in chains to Outlier, where my fate wouldn't be pleasant.

She'd see the whole thing as an affront to her and she can be quite vindictive. ”

“I'd protect you,” Benet said, pulling her close. “My brothers and I'd keep you safe.”

“I know you mean the assurance with all your heart and honor,” she said, gazing at him with tears glimmering in her eyes.

“And I love you for it, but I have to live in the real world here, the harsh world into which I was born and your best efforts would fail. The Empress is inexorable and would take my elopement with you as a personal insult to her and the state.”

Benet decided not to distress her right now with further argument but he had no intention of abandoning the woman he loved now he'd found her.

If they could get out of Outlier then maybe they'd have to go to the Sectors and find a home with new identities.

It wouldn't be the life he'd planned or wanted but if he could be with Marushka he'd make it work.

“Our time is up,” Dmitri said, a tinge of a growl in his voice. “We have to go, devochka. Kiss this mad fool goodbye and let's be on our way.”

As the pair left, Dmitri turned and shook a finger at Benet. “I'll be back in an hour or so and we'll go to the practice. Be ready.”

That evening Benet collapsed into his bed, too tired even to eat, although he'd have to take in nutrients at some point.

The metal maze apparatus here at the actual site of the Games was huge.

There were assigned times for practice runs and today hadn't been his time but Dmitri wangled a slot for him anyway.

The layout mirrored the one Nichevsky had built at his estate but here there were multiple people trying to get through it from different starting points and the whole structure quaked and shook.

Then the obstacle course beyond was longer than the one Benet was used to and apparently several new obstacles had been added.

He had to reconsider his strategy for getting into and out of each challenge with the right momentum for the next one or lose time.

After finishing the practice runs Dmitri took him to a different field and drilled him on the Outlier methods of hand to hand combat, with more intensity than he'd shown before.

And Dmitri hadn't exactly pulled his punches during training bouts back at the estate.

As Benet lay on the ground after a particularly hard hit, he gazed at the Badari and said, "Either you're trying to kill me so I don't make any more suggestions to Marushka about leaving or you're trying to get me so exhausted I won't think of her tonight. "

"Both," Dmitri said agreeably, giving him a hand to rise to his feet.

"She told you the truth, there's no way for her to escape and each time you raise the idea, it's hard on her.

She spent the entire time in the stables in a corner weeping.

I had to tend to the damn horse and her and keep everyone else away.

I probably shouldn't have let the two of you become so close but I—I wanted my devochka to have a measure of happiness before marrying Vasili.

I should have known she'd fall in love with the same intensity she does everything else.

"His shoulders slumped. "And I hate having caused you this pain."

"It's not your fault, brother." Benet slugged him on the bicep and got a grim smile in reply.

"Marushka and I are meant to be together. I noticed her the first day, at the combat field. I'd have found a way to meet her on my own because I'm a determined guy and we would have fallen in love anyway. But I'm not giving up."

Dmitri shook his head but made no further comments.

He and Benet decided it probably wasn't a good idea for Benet to move into Dmitri's apartment at the palace.

Although the Badari stated the place was large enough for a roommate and had several bedrooms, they both felt Benet's presence in such close proximity to Marushka and to the volatile Empress herself was a bad idea.

"Better you stay here, with your fellow competitors and concentrate on the games," Dmitri said as they parted.

“Your only option is to win and to win you have to be one hundred percent focused. Marushka knows that. Don’t forget she too was an athlete at a previous games and she understands the discipline required. ”

“Too risky for us to try to see each other at the palace?” Benet asked. “You can’t have us both to dinner by some coincidence?”

“She’s closely watched, both formally and informally, as are all the empress’s wards and favored individuals.

” Dmitri shook his head. “Outlier is a snake pit, Throne planet is the heart of the evil and the palace is the vortex at the center. And you, my friend, are now smack in the middle of it all. Focus on the one avenue you might have to getting out of here and going home. If you win the empress might be magnanimous enough to grant your wish. Or she might decide to keep you. With Ekateren there’s no knowing. ”

Dmitri’s verdict on the possible outcomes disturbed Benet.

He could have one thing he desired or the other but not both—go home to his old life or stay here in Outlier and be near Marushka.

But she wouldn’t be his. She’d be married to the monster Vasili and Benet might or might not be able to see her occasionally.

Perhaps they could manage an affair but his whole being rebelled against the idea.

It wasn’t in Benet’s nature to sneak around and bed another man’s wife. He’d kill Vasili first.

Dmitri was right about one thing—Outlier was a snake pit.

Alone in his luxurious apartment, Dmitri paced through the rooms, deep in thought, not seeing any of the elaborate, expensive furnishings various empresses had installed for him during their lifetimes.

Humans had extended life spans now, as he understood it, but nowhere close to what a Badari could claim.

He and his beast were unhappy tonight and there was no realistic cure for their distress.

Of all the children Dmitri had been given to bodyguard, Marushka was the closest thing to a daughter of his own he'd ever had and he loved her fiercely.

Benet might not be a Badari but he'd become a brother of the heart to Dmitri during their association, with the fact he spoke Badari and understood their background as the original bond.

Dmitri had come to admire the human warrior in his own right as they worked and trained together and he could see why these mysterious Badari gladiators with whom Benet was associated had bonded with him.

His heart, which he'd believed long hardened and shriveled, ached for Benet.

Finding the one woman to love and not being able to have her was a cruel fate.

The twist on top was her impending marriage to Vasili, now known by them to be an abuser.

Dmitri debated yet again the wisdom of going to the Empress, which he could, and arguing against the marriage but he knew it was no use.

Ekatereen wasn't going to withdraw her approval based on any argument Dmitri could make.

She had her political reasons for the match and to the empress the needs of the state overrode everything else.

She'd proved it time and again in her own personal life.

Deciding to go to sleep and hope the goddess might give him a solution in his dreams, Dmitri reluctantly adjourned to his bedroom and disrobed.

Curling up in the vast bed like the feline entwined in his DNA would do, he offered a prayer to the Great Mother for his friend and his devochka and drifted off to sleep.

He was...where? It wasn't the grove of the goddess on his home world. He'd only dreamt of her three times in all his years on Throne and never had the vision taken place there. Dmitri understood it was because he'd never see the place again but the sense of loss was overwhelming.

He did stand in the midst of a circle of great trees, mature but not old growth like the ones on his planet.

There was no stone in the center to serve as a chair for her but there she stood, luminous in the moonlight, her white garments stirring slightly in a breeze he couldn't feel.

She was facing away from him so this wasn't his time to die. Dmitri went to his knees.

"You ask nothing for yourself," she said and her voice was a beautiful song, lilting and composed of many notes. "But soon you shall have what you most desire."

“My brothers?” he said in a whisper, bitterly. “I’m sure they’re long gone to dust and the afterlife.”

“Truth. Have you not longed for an Alpha to pledge your fealty to?”

“I have. You know I have.” He found himself rubbing the empty spot in his chest where the pack bond should have been anchored.

“When you meet this Alpha you must tell him the blood is the magic,” she said, turning partway toward him. “For what he desires most. His mate will need his blood.”

“I don’t understand, my lady, but if I am ever blessed enough to find an Alpha, I’ll tell him.”

Now she turned all the way and he caught a glimpse of her face, beautiful beyond imagining, austere, regal.

Dmitri gasped as if he’d been struck by lightning and struggled to maintain his balance.

Truly a man couldn’t look fully upon the Great Mother and remain in this life.

He understood what the healer had meant now when he would utter the pronouncement.

“This message is for you as well,” she said, raising one hand as if casting a blessing. “Don’t hesitate when the need arises.”

“I—I won’t. The blood is the magic,” he repeated, confused but determined not to disappoint her.

“You’ve done well here,” she said in a kindly tone. “Your honor is intact and you’ve followed my commandments even in exile. You’re a worthy son of the original Badari. Your ancestors would be proud. I’m proud.”

With a rush of terror such as he hadn’t experienced before in any situation, Dmitri realized she was walking toward him. Hastily he lowered his head and her fingertips brushed across his hair as she passed. The caress left him paralyzed and the world faded out around him.

He came awake in his bed in a convulsion, talons and fangs deployed, a growl on his lips as he shredded the silken sheets with his motion.

“The blood is the magic,” he said in a voice he scarcely recognized as his own.

Shaking, he crawled from the bed and staggered to the kitchen, where he poured himself a stiff shot of the best feelgood and drank it in one long gulp.

The glass fell from his hand and shattered on the tile floor.

His beast snarled and Dmitri allowed himself to slide to the floor, where he sat shaking his head and trying to remember each tiny detail from the vision.

The Great Mother hadn’t exactly answered his prayer nor had she provided any answers except her mysterious statement about blood.

He gave up trying to parse what she might have meant.

He was no healer, to stand in close proximity to her and translate her dictates for the other Badari.

One thing he did know with unshakable truth—the moment where he’d need to take

action upon her veiled warning must be close at hand.

As the sun rose over Throne he vowed to be ready for anything.

He'd allowed himself to backslide somewhat from the strictest observance of Badari pack law over the centuries he'd been here.

The broken feelgood glass shards all around him spoke eloquently to his lapses.

But now the time had come for him to be all Badari once more, not a partially assimilated Outlier and he would be equal to the task.

He would not fail in whatever battle the Great Mother foretold.

Chapter Eight

Benet had knocked out a satisfying, grueling practice today, finishing with power lifting in the athletes' village weight room.

He was heading to his apartment in a satisfied mood, on top of which Dmitri had sent him a com he expected tonight's event to end early and he'd be coming to visit Benet for a while.

Since Dmitri's life currently revolved around Marushka, Benet hoped his friend would be bringing her with him.

He saw so little of Marushka now and there was no chance to be intimate so he'd take whatever snippets of time he could get with her and be grateful.

The area of the village where his apartment was located seemed strangely empty tonight and Benet's instincts fired the closer he got to his building.

Even so, the men waiting managed to take him by surprise.

There must have been ten thugs wielding clubs and although he killed the first man to run at him, the others piled on and he knew he was in deep trouble.

With no one to watch his six, he couldn't defend himself adequately and although he sent more than one assailant reeling away clutching a broken arm or howling in pain from a direct blow to a sensitive area, he was getting pummeled unmercifully.

The attackers were mostly silent and once they got him on the ground the blows rained down, augmented with kicks from heavily booted feet.

He curled up to protect his vital organs as best he could and clung to consciousness.

There were no sirens or screams. No one was out strolling or running errands and no one was going to call for help for him.

When the remaining attackers withdrew, taking their dead and wounded with them, one man squatted beside Benet, yanking his head off the ground by the hair to get his attention. Benet could hardly see him for the blood pouring from his various wounds.

“Prince Vasili sends his regards,” the man said with a laugh. “Let’s see you use your magical powers of healing to recover from this, Badari. The betting is you can’t, odds are high you aren’t even the same species as Dmitri, despite what he and Nichevsky are saying.”

“Fuck you,” Benet said despite his split lip and broken jaw.

His enemy allowed Benet’s head to drop against the hard ground. One final kick to the ribs for good measure and the man sprinted away.

Benet didn’t know how long he lay still but he was getting cold and the growing realization crept over him that he was going to die in this spot if he didn’t move.

He refused to die in the street like a dog.

Getting to his feet unaided was impossible so he crawled in fits and starts until he reached the building.

He was able to leverage himself to his feet against the wall despite the pain spiking in

every inch of his body and got through the door.

The halls were as deserted as the grounds had been but he wasn't expecting help now.

Obviously residents in this area had been warned off tonight.

He was going in and out of consciousness but the innate stubbornness which had served him so well all his life kept him moving until he got to his apartment and opened the door.

Then he toppled to the floor, completely out of strength.

His thoughts as he shivered and the world grew ever darker around him were of Marushka and he prayed to Lords of Space for her not to be the one who found his body.

Tonight's entertainment at the imperial palace had been a play, to be followed by refreshments and mingling.

Dmitri had been restless the entire evening, his beast snarling and prowling and insisting they needed to be somewhere else.

In his long centuries living in Outlier he'd attended many such performances and while they usually bored him, he'd never felt this kind of agitation before.

Marushka kept shooting glances at him as he fidgeted behind her chair.

"What is the matter with you?" she asked when the applause for the end of the final act would cover her words.

"I need to go. Something's wrong," Dmitri said. "I know it. You'll be fine for the rest

of the evening, stick close to the empress and her ladies in waiting. I'm out of here."

She snagged his arm. "I don't understand any of this."

"I think the goddess is telling me I'm needed elsewhere right now. Please, devochka, let me be on my way." His talons were close to deploying of their own volition, which he'd rarely experienced before, not to be used against her but in response to the agitation roiling his nervous system.

Eyebrows raised, she noted the tips of his massive claws were visible. "You can't display those in here." Marushka kept her hold on him and got them both walking quickly toward the nearest exit, which led to a garden. Once they were outside, she stopped. "Does this have to do with Benet?"

"It must," Dmitri said, all his worries crystallizing. "I think he's in trouble."

"Come on then, there's no time to waste." She picked up the massive embroidered and embellished skirt of her gown and broke into a run, heading through the garden and toward the groundcar parking lot. "We can take the vehicle assigned to me—it'll be quicker than going to the village on foot."

Swearing under his breath, Dmitri chased after her. "I don't think you should come with me if I'm going into an unknown and dangerous situation."

"Nonsense," she said over her shoulder as she sprinted. "You might need my help."

"I'll go ahead and get the groundcar." He gave up on arguing with her and ran ahead, using his Badari speed.

He was briefly tempted to drive off and leave her behind because he was sure whatever he was walking into wasn't going to be anything she should see or be

involved in but she'd never forgive him and she'd probably try to steal another vehicle, which would cause all kinds of additional complications.

He had her limousine initiated and waiting with the door open as she emerged from the garden, skirts hoisted to a scandalous height.

Marushka slid into the seat as if they were bank robbers and pounded the console. "Go, what are you waiting for?"

He accelerated before the door was completely closed.

The athletes' village was relatively close to the palace and there was hardly any traffic so Dmitri accomplished the drive in record time. He parked neatly in a space next to Benet's building and shut down the groundcar as Marushka climbed out.

She stopped dead and he rushed around the vehicle to her side. "What is it?"

"Blood," she said, pointing to a large smear on the wall of the building and more on the door. Hand to her mouth, she whispered. "Oh, Dmitri, what happened here?"

With his excellent Badari senses and night vision, he observed signs of a fight fairly close by and a large pool of blood staining the pavement.

He picked up the scent of many men high on adrenaline and aggression, among them Benet's.

Yanking open the portal, he grabbed her by the arm and entered the building in a rush.

They took the gravlift to Benet's floor and Dmitri took note of the fact no one was around.

He could detect people behind some of the doors and grimly applauded their good sense in remaining uninvolved.

Matters of this sort on Outlier were best left to the authorities, who would tell the populace what to believe later.

No good came of getting involved in private hostilities.

He feared Benet had been the target of tonight's attack, rather than an innocent bystander in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He had Benet's access code and pounded it into the console so hard he thought he might break it.

The portal tried to open and jammed halfway.

Dmitri smelled the fresh blood and swore in Badari as he forced the panel the rest of the way open, shoving Benet's body out of the way as it went.

He was across the threshold and on his knees next to the gladiator in a heartbeat.

"Is he—is he dead?" Marushka wailed, stepping inside. Heedless of her dress she knelt beside Benet and stretched out her hand to touch him but hesitated, as if afraid to hurt him further.

"No," Dmitri replied, able to hear the stuttering heartbeat with his Badari ears. "But he's in a bad way."

Glancing around wildly, Marushka located the com unit and started to get up. "We have to call the authorities, get him to a hospital?—"

Locking his fingers into a tight bracelet on her wrist, Dmitri stopped her. “That’s the last thing we can do.”

“Are you insane?” She gestured at Benet’s bent, bruised form. “He needs more help than we can give him. Let me go.”

“Think, devochka. If we call anyone Benet will end up dead. Your father had him kidnapped because he believed Benet to be a Badari like me. If this were me and I’d been beaten into this state a few hours ago, I’d already be walking and talking again, with the more minor injuries healed, the bones mending and the major damage well on its way to being fixed.

That’s what a Badari body does . I’d be in pain but nothing to speak of for one like me.

Benet isn’t Badari and if we call for help, your father will know he isn’t and then?—”

“He’ll have Benet killed,” she said in a monotone, eyes wide. Marushka collapsed into a heap on the floor. “Then there’s no hope for him, is there? I’ll have to watch the man I love die tonight, is this what you’re telling me?”

“We’re going to help him survive this.” Dmitri spoke with more confidence than he actually possessed but surely the goddess wouldn’t have told him what magic his blood carried if it wasn’t going to be sufficient to solve this crisis.

“How?” Her voice was broken and she took one of Benet’s bruised hands in her own, pressing it to her cheek.

“The Great Mother told me my blood was the answer,” Dmitri said. “At the time of the vision I had no idea what the question was going to be but now I know. My blood can save Benet’s life.”

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“And how are you going to get this magic substance into him?” She laughed and the sound was verging on hysterical.

“You. You’re going to transfuse him.” Dmitri made his voice cold, no room for doubt.

“I’m not a doctor and we have no equipment for a transfusion. Besides, you and Benet aren’t of the same species. Your blood would be just as likely to kill him.”

Dmitri reached across and gave her a small shake. “You’re a veterinarian, you know the techniques. If I knew how to do this, I would but you’re trained to practice medicine.”

“On animals.”

Jaw set, hard edge to his voice, Dmitri pointed one talon at himself.

“The Khagrish scientists said we were animals. Sweetheart, no matter how civilized, humans are nothing but big animals, okay? We’re wasting time Benet doesn’t have.

You have to go to the vet facility in the village at the stables and get whatever equipment you need to do the job.

I’ll get him to his bed and do what I can to clean up the visible wounds but you have to hurry. ”

“And not get caught.” Biting her lip, she stared at him, then gave a curt nod. “All

right, it's an insane idea but obviously there's nothing else we can do. And I know you trust your goddess."

"With my life and Benet's," Dmitri replied, He gathered Benet's body carefully, trying not to cause further injury and rose to his feet. For a Badari the weight of even a heavily muscled, tall man like Benet was nothing.

Marushka scrambled to her feet. "All right, I'm going. This late there shouldn't be anyone else there."

Dmitri halted and surveyed her with an eyebrow raised and a frown. "Not in that. You have blood all over you now and the Court dress will draw attention even if it wasn't stained."

She shook her head as if to clear it and ran one hand through her elaborate hairstyle, destroying the braids and artificial birds and butterflies set among the curls. "What can I wear? I can't go in my underwear."

"Benet has tee shirts and sweatpants in his room so grab a set, change and go." He shrugged and continued on his way to the bedroom, satisfied she was thinking again instead of reacting in shock. He only hoped the transfusion would come in time to save Benet.

Marushka shed her formal court gown and yanked on the first clean black tee shirt she found.

She had to roll up the sweatpants and secure the waistband with a belt she found in the closet but the loose shirt was knee length on her and covered the waist. She was left with her shiny, embellished shoes but there was nothing to be done about it.

Not wasting time checking in with Dmitri again, she headed out of the apartment and

struck out across the village.

The veterinary center was next to the stables, all of which should be deserted at this time of night, except for the night watchman.

The closer she came to the buildings, the more nervous she got.

There were security guards on patrol and she hoped she could avoid them, although fortunately she'd been here a few times checking on the estate's horses, so the guards might be familiar with her.

She had official credentials but not with her.

Marushka's heart was pounding by the time she ascended the stairs to the entrance and as she reached for the door control, she paused and took a deep breath.

Calm. She had to be calm. And efficient. And if anyone was there, she had to act as if there was nothing unusual going on. She had a right to be here.

The building was brightly lit but no one else was there.

Her heels clicked on the shiny floor as she made her way briskly to the equipment storage room, emphasizing how empty the place was.

Transfusions of the kind Dmitri wanted her to carry out were extremely old-style medicine, not performed in most places but Marushka remembered they'd had one lecture on the techniques in vet school.

The professor had said dismissively transfusions were still in use in certain extremely rural portions of Outlier.

The Empress's Games drew entrants from all parts of the interstellar nation, including those scorned sections, since participation was mandatory.

Accordingly the vet center inventory should include the right devices for the procedure.

The idea was to be fair to all and provide anything any vet connected to a team could need or want.

She scrolled through the endless lists of available tech on the reader.

So absorbed was she that she didn't hear someone entering the room until the person was right behind her and one of his shoes made a squeaking noise on the floor.

Marushka jumped and let out a little scream as a man said, "If you're here this late, one of Nichevsky's prize horses must be in deep trouble indeed, your grace. "

"Dr. Kruschimir, you startled me," she said, hand to her heart.

"Sorry. What are you trying to find? Maybe I can help." He peered over her shoulder. "Transfusions? You're kidding me."

The man was an older colleague and while Marushka wasn't afraid of him, she needed him to be gone so she could take the equipment she required and hurry back to Benet.

"Well you know, occasionally the old ways are the best," she said mildly.

"We might not do it but I promised to see if what we'd need was available and have it ready tomorrow. "

Shaking his head, the vet walked past her to the other side of the room and picked up a prepacked medkit. “Better you than me. I wouldn’t want to be doing such an antiquated procedure on one of those priceless beauties your father brought.”

“We—we might not. We’re trying not to worry Father over it.

” If Dr. Kruschimir mentioned this odd encounter to anyone—and she was sure he would—there’d be problems but Marushka wasn’t going to worry about it tonight.

Solve one problem at a time., She pretended she was making notes on her handheld and scrolled to another area of the database to throw the other vet off the scent.

He puttered a bit as if waiting for Marushka but she stayed head down, scribbling totally useless notes until he said good night in a disappointed tone and left the room.

Then she shut the database and ran to the correct shelf to grab the right kit.

She hadn’t brought anything to carry it all in and she cursed her lack of forethought as she hurried to the next room to pick up an empty medbag.

This was all taking far too long and her hands shook as she packed the transfusion kit into the bag and slung it over her shoulder.

The night guard was entering the building as she walked up to the door and he nodded pleasantly and held the portal open for her. “Late night stable call, my lady?”

“Can’t be too careful with our high bred horseflesh,” she said cheerfully.

To allay suspicion she strolled toward the stables but then cut through the building, watched by sleepy, uninterested horses and ran the other way toward the apartment buildings.

Grateful not to have encountered anyone, she averted her eyes as she rushed past the blood-spattered spot where Benet had been assaulted.

The gravlift to his floor took forever in her opinion but then she was rushing down the hall and stabbing the access panel for entry.

Practically falling into the hallway in her haste, she noticed in passing Dmitri had cleaned up the entry. “I’m sorry it took so long,” she said as she darted into the bedroom. “Old Dr. Kruschimir showed up and I had to stall until he left. How’s he doing?”

Dmitri rose from the chair beside the bed and took the bag from her. “Breathe, devochka. He’s still with us by the grace of the goddess, although not doing well. He was severely beaten. I’ve done what I can for the external injuries and cleaned him up.”

She began sorting the various implements she was going to need, laying them out in a neat row on the bureau. “Has he said anything?”

“No. I think we can safely assume Prince Vasili is behind this though.” Dmitri sounded grim. “It could have been a rival team but I doubt it. The sheer viciousness of the attack argues for a personal grudge. What do you need me to do?”

She ran a decontam ray over her hands, anxiety over what she was about to do making her shaky.

“I don’t know what I’m doing. I’ve never actually done this procedure.

I’ve only seen it demonstrated in a holo once, years ago in my second year.

I don’t know how much you can give. I don’t how much his body can take.

And underlying all of that, I know he shouldn't be able to tolerate your blood.

I'm only doing this because you won't let me call emergency services and I have to do something.

I can't let him die—I love him.” Tears prickled in her eyes and she sucked in a deep breath.

Crying now wouldn't accomplish anything.

“Nothing about this is scientifically sound.”

Dmitri came to her and gave her a hug, careful not to touch her now sterile hands. “This is an act of faith. My faith in my goddess. Benet will survive, I promise you.”

She closed her eyes and tried to quell the trembling threatening to take over her body.

Anxiety ran rampant through her nerve endings.

I can do this because I must. Re-opening her eyes, she stepped to the bedside.

“I'm going to prepare his arm now. If you can sit in the chair, I'll be ready for you in a minute. ”

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Being an athlete, Benet had big healthy veins and it was easy for her to insert the port she'd need.

Dmitri was the same although it took more force on her part to penetrate his skin but the Badari was uncomplaining.

Once Marushka had a steady stream of Dmitri's rich red blood flowing into Benet, she stripped off her gloves and tossed them in the recycler.

"Now we wait. I'm going to assume this is on a par with a horse to horse transfusion, no offense, and I've based my calculations of the need on that assumption. "

Dmitri's eyes twinkled. "Sound idea. I've never been compared to a horse before. My inner beast, which is feline, doesn't much like the analogy, I must tell you."

"Well there aren't any guidelines for tiger to tiger transfusions or at least none I could find in my hasty search." She checked Benet's pulse, which was weak and thready. "No change so far."

"We just started, have patience." Dmitri leaned his head against the chair and closed his eyes. "It's been a long time since I had to endure a medical procedure of any kind."

She studied him, taking note of his partially extended talons and the tips of his fangs showing. "Is it bringing up bad memories?"

"Yes but the difference today is I chose to undergo this procedure and you're not a

soulless Khagrish scientist. And I do this for my friend.”

Marushka didn't know what to say to this so she settled for kissing his cheek and went to check Benet's vitals again.

Benet blinked and stirred slightly, surprised to find himself lying in soft cool, grass, with a starry sky above. He was sure he'd dragged himself into his apartment. Without thinking he stretched a bit and then was shocked not to experience any pain.

A beautiful woman was sitting by his side, holding his hand. Her face was averted but as he changed position she turned to smile at him. At first he saw her face clearly and then it was as if a fine mist had interposed itself between them. He blinked, wishing to see her.

“I've been holding you to life since you have no Alpha,” she said. “You're becoming one of mine today—I hope the bargain will be acceptable to you.”

Becoming one of hers? What the seven hells was she talking about?

He bit his tongue not to blurt out his questions which seemed rude and instead asked, “Where's Marushka?

Where am I? Am I...dead?” He'd been a gladiator long enough to know men didn't survive the kind of injuries he'd sustained in the uneven fight earlier.

The lack of pain he was experiencing now was a bad sign of where he might be.

“Your woman and your friend have fought for you,” she said patiently.

“I'll release you to them now. You have a long life ahead of you, Benet of the Badari.

There will be surprises and obstacles but your heart's desire will be granted.

And you will help me to help those who were created as my children. ”

Her answers weren't as reassuring as she might have hoped, not to Benet anyway, who believed he might be dead.

Leaning over she kissed his forehead and an icy ripple spread through his entire body from the point where her lips touched his skin.

He couldn't move but he didn't feel himself to be in any danger.

The woman squeezed his hand and then she was... gone as if she'd never been.

He was lying in his own bed, with Marushka holding his hand and Dmitri leaning over him with an anxious expression. His lips and his throat were dry and parched and it took him two tries to get words out. “What happened?”

Marushka broke into tears and threw herself across his bare chest. Instinctively he gathered her close, stroking her hair while she wept and exchanging glances with Dmitri over her head.

“I'm glad you came back to us, my friend,” the Badari said. “My devochka worked hard to make it happen.”

“Using your blood,” she said, sitting up and wiping her eyes before staring at Benet hungrily. “How do you feel?”

“Pretty damn good for a man who was nearly beaten to death.” He couldn't see any bruises or marks on his body, which was impossible, and nothing hurt or ached or bled.

He was wearing a pair of sweatpants and he sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed to stand.

Dmitri grabbed at one shoulder and Marushka braced the other as he discovered he was woozy.

They got him to the chair and she pushed a glass of water at him.

“You’re probably dehydrated,” she said. “You need to eat soon as well. Dmitri has a couple of high protein rations ready to heat up.”

“Did you—did you say your blood was part of my miraculous healing?” Benet asked.

His two friends exchanged looks and Dmitri shrugged. “The goddess told me Badari blood was magic. Marushka performed a transfusion last night and now this morning you’re healed.”

“She said I was one of hers now.” Benet rubbed his forehead in confusion. “I don’t understand the process—how could your blood work such a miracle?”

“She?” Dmitri’s question was sharp. “You beheld the Great Mother?”

“I believe so. I was dreaming.”

“I was so afraid to try the transfusion,” Marushka said. “But you were dying, beloved.”

“Hey, there’ll be no recriminations from me. Not when I’m sitting here feeling better than I have in my entire life.” He pulled her close for a kiss. “What are you wearing?”

“Your clothes.” She giggled. “When we came last night I had a court gown on, highly

impractical. Besides, it got bloody. I had to sneak into the vet center to steal what I needed to do the procedure so I borrowed clothes from you. I know I'm not at my most presentable right now."

Benet thought she'd never been so beautiful, even with the lines of stress on the face, her red eyes and the circles underneath them. "Most gorgeous woman I've ever seen in my entire life, even considering the Badari goddess. I like you in anything or nothing, you know that."

Dmitri cleared his throat. "We must get you breakfast and then Marushka must go to the palace and change. She's expected to be at certain events today. I believe you must appear at practice as normal. It will quell any rumors and confound whoever plotted your death."

"Vasili." Benet ran his hands through his hair.

"There were about ten of them. I wasn't paying enough attention to my surroundings obviously and that's on me.

I was anticipating our late night meeting and they jumped me.

I'm pretty sure I killed one and I know I inflicted heavy damage on several others but there were too many.

Right before I blacked out the ringleader said the beating was compliments of Prince Vasili. "

"There's nothing you can do to claim revenge," Dmitri warned. "Being alive and whole and basically proving you are Badari will have to be satisfaction enough for you, my friend. And winning the gold medal of course."

“I don’t like it but I see your point.” Benet said. “I fucking hate it here in Outlier, if I haven’t made my opinion clear before.” He pulled Marushka into his lap and hugged her. “Present company excluded. You cannot marry that monster.”

“I’m not going to,” she answered. “I’ve decided and I’ll persuade the empress to agree. But until I get a chance to talk to her privately I’ll have to act as if I’m still heading for the altar with him, disgusting as the idea is.”

“You think you can get her blessing?” Benet asked eagerly.

“Not to marry you, but to be free of Vasili, yes. Dmitri and I have been doing judicious digging and we found out a few facts about Vasili and his dealings the Empress won’t like. But I must tread carefully.”

“You’ll be with her at all times?” Benet asked Dmitri.

“Of course.”

“Once you’re free of the engagement we’ll find a way to get you out of Outlier, a path for us to be together,” Benet vowed. “The goddess said my heart’s desire would be granted and you’re the only thing this gladiator desires.”

“If the Great Mother is on your side in this matter, then despite my misgivings and qualms, I must agree a way will be found,” Dmitri said with reverence in his voice. “But you must remember her timeline isn’t yours. The solution may not be in our near future.”

“As long as I can be with you, I can be patient,” Marushka said.

Benet’s stomach rumbled and they all laughed. “Guess I’d better go eat the breakfast you’ve got prepped.”

This time when he stood, he was steady on his feet and although Dmitri stayed close as he walked to the kitchen, Benet was gratified to find himself feeling normal. He and Marushka sat while Dmitri prepared the food and then all three of them ate.

“So am I a Badari now?” Benet asked after his first plate of steak and eggs had been devoured and he was digging into a second plate of pancakes and bacon.

“What does this actually mean, you know? Will I sprout claws and fangs? Am I going to grow taller? Develop an inner beast like the one you say you have?”

Dmitri chuckled. “I doubt there will be such dramatic changes. The things you mention were programmed into me at creation by the scientists. Hopefully you’ll continue to heal as well as I do and perhaps there’ll be a few advantages in speed and endurance.

I make no promises. Saving your life was my only goal and we already achieved it. ”

Chapter Nine

The mood on his borrowed spaceship was unsettled, although morale had improved once they got past the Outlier border without incident and the pass worked as promised.

Kyden stood in the shuttle bay in his full gladiator regalia, although without weapons, which didn't make him happy but the imperial palace had confirmed his appointment today and added a caveat there were to be no arms carried.

He looked at Talinn by his side, also in the theatrical arena garb right down to the swirling red cape and grinned.

"They don't know we carry our own weapons," he said, flashing his talons.

"Tell me again why we're dressed like this?" Talinn asked, adjusting his gleaming breastplate. "Are we expecting to face a combat challenge before we can free Benet?"

"I don't think so. I was advised" —by Prince Pargen, although he chose not to state this—"to pile on the accouterments of what we do." He fingered the huge, gem encrusted Key to the House of Badari, which Pargen had also told him to wear.

It was gaudy and he felt like all kinds of fool wearing the damn thing, but apparently it was going to be impressive to the Outliers and reinforce his position as a Man to be Reckoned With.

After checking he had the necessary papers of ownership in the black leather folder

Elara had gifted him, with the crest of the House emblazoned in gold on the cover, he entered the shuttle waiting to fly the two of them to the surface.

The flight was fairly short, although they got stuck in a holding pattern above the spaceport, which the pilot advised him was bullshit as no one else was in the landing area. Kyden steeled himself again to deal with whatever the Outliers threw at him with aplomb and diplomacy.

Up to a point.

Two things puzzled him. He was getting the mental indicators of being near to another Badari, which seemed highly unlikely but his attempts to reach out and communicate with the mind he sensed were unsuccessful. “Are you detecting another brother in this place?” he asked Talinn.

Tilting his head and closing his eyes, the gladiator concentrated. “Maybe, at the edges of my reach. How can that be? Surely we’d have heard if there was a Badari here?”

I’d expect Pargen to have told me at the very least but maybe he didn’t know.

Out loud Kyden said, “It does explain a bit more about why this duke sent a team to the Five Systems to abduct one of my gladiators. If he knew of our capabilities because he’d seen a Badari in action then the plot makes more sense, in an insane manner. ”

The other thing puzzling him, which he didn’t mention to Talinn was a faint echo as if there was another person here who was Badari in an unknown fashion.

Could the first Badari have had a child?

Kyden couldn’t reach whoever the second person was telepathically either, which

frustrated him.

He didn't like mysteries where his brothers were concerned.

Right now wasn't the time to try to resolve the issue, however, not with the all important meeting with the minister within the next hour.

Once he was on the Vasclavian ship, in his quarters, he'd try again and pour his Alpha power into the effort.

A sleek limousine was waiting for them once the shuttle was finally allowed to land in a remote portion of the spaceport.

Maintaining his game face, Kyden entered the fancy groundcar with no hesitation and Talinn followed his example.

They didn't talk either verbally or telepathically during the ride to the imperial palace, which proved to be a huge compound of buildings behind elaborate wrought iron fencing and more practical force barriers.

Waiting on the steps to receive them was a stone faced flunky and a small squad of guards.

Kyden took satisfaction in the astonishment which animated the face of the waiting group when he and Talinn stepped out of the groundcar and strode to the stairs.

Two Badari in the ritual uniforms of the arena were intimidating all right.

"I hope your trip here was pleasant," the woman said, retreating a bit as the two Badari loomed over her. "The Minister has cleared his schedule and is waiting in his office."

“I appreciate him seeing me right away,” Kyden said, determined to be polite up till the moment he had to summon his inner beast. This minor bureaucrat in front of him hadn’t played any part in Benet’s kidnapping so he wasn’t going to vent his anger at her.

“If you’ll follow me,” she replied.

Once he entered the palace, Kyden was amazed at the aura of sheer age permeating the place.

The floors were intricately laid parquetry, with wood of all colors arranged in dazzling patterns.

Huge portraits and pastoral scenes were hung on the walls, broken up by occasional groupings of religious icons.

And this is only one wing where the admin offices are , he thought as they passed door after gilded door with gold nameplates and titles. What must the Empress’s rooms be like?

The minister’s office was at the end of the hallway and the space was huge, filled with heavy wooden furniture and all kinds of priceless artifacts. Kyden didn’t spare the surroundings more than a brief glance as the man he’d traveled all this way to see advanced, hand outstretched.

“It’s an honor to meet you,” the minister said as they shook.

“I appreciate your help in resolving this matter,” Kyden replied. “My associate Talinn.”

The minister nodded at Talinn but didn’t offer his hand.

He was obviously trying not to gawk at the massive Key hanging from its gold chain around Kyden's neck.

“Her Majesty has taken a personal interest in the issue at hand and is conducting business today in the small throne room. Best not to keep her waiting, so if you'll follow me.

” The Outlier rushed into the hall and Kyden followed as requested, Talinn at his back.

Amazed he was getting an audience with the empress so easily, Kyden reviewed his arguments as they walked.

The hallways became ever more gilded and grandiose, and crowded with people who stared at Kyden and Talinn in open mouthed amazement.

Both men put arena swagger in their steps and Kyden found it amusing to hear the gasps and exclamations as he passed.

His Death Dealer persona was imposing and of course he and Talinn towered over the courtiers and commoners.

If this is the small throne room, I'd hate to see the large one , he mused as guards swept open a set of golden double doors so massive they dwarfed even the Badari.

The floor here was a marvel of highly polished wood and the tapestries and paintings on the walls were sized to the room's scale. Crystal and gold chandeliers hung overhead.

The throne at the other end of the room sat on a red carpeted dais and was a marvel of gold.

With his Badari eyesight Kyden could make out details from quite a distance and he was impressed by the detailed vignettes he could see on the arms and back of the throne.

The woman seated there was imposing in her own right, dressed in a sumptuous gown with ruffled panniers accented by bejeweled ribbons and gold thread.

Her hair was a confection of curls into which jeweled combs had been set, with a massive crown on her head.

Ropes of pearls swathed her neck and chest and her hands bore gigantic rings, each probably worth a solar system's ransom.

It was her eyes which riveted Kyden. They were the coldest eyes he'd ever seen, more calculating and deadly than even those of the most diabolical Khagrish scientists.

Her face had cold, austere beauty, emphasized by skillfully applied cosmetics, but the eyes were those of an apex predator and his beast responded as if ready to do physical combat. He needed to walk carefully here.

Don't let anything she says provoke you , he warned Talinn.

I plan to let you do all the talking.

"Death Dealer Kyden, Master of the House of Badari in the Five Systems, your majesty," the Minister announced when they'd reached the throne. He went down on one knee. Kyden and Talinn contented themselves with deep bows.

Kyden figured she was supposed to speak first so he bided his time.

“We welcome you to Outlier,” she said after a moment of dead silence.

“It’s kind of your majesty to take time to discuss my claim,” Kyden replied.

“I’ve reviewed the documents and it is my decree this Benet is indeed your property and was taken from the Five Systems illegally,” she said, cutting straight to the heart of the matter. “He will be returned to you.”

Kyden heard the unsaid ‘but’ so he waited.

“My Games are about to begin,” she said, giving him a small nod, acknowledging his silence.

“It would displease and disappoint my people to have anything mar their enjoyment of the competitions. Your man has been much discussed and many wagers have been made with regard to his success or failure. His withdrawal at this late juncture would be unseemly.”

Kyden remembered Pargen’s advice to come to an agreement with Duke Nichevsky if possible.

“I appreciate your even handedness in this matter, restoring my property, yet of course wishing for the Games to go on as expected. I compete in the arena in my home system. I understand the way high level competition works. I would be happy to work out a short-term agreement for Benet to participate wearing the Nichevsky team crest as long as he goes with me after the Games conclude.”

She inclined her head gracefully and Kyden saw a gleam in her eye. He wasn’t ready to relax yet.

“Summon Duke Nichevsky,” she said to the minister.

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He lifted a hand and his flunky scuttled out of the room at a rapid pace, returning shortly with a richly dressed, pale-faced and sweating noble.

Ekatereen didn't give him a chance to collect himself, saying, "What do you have to say in self-defense after breaking our most stringent laws regarding interference with the property rights of others? I've given custody of the slave Benet back to his rightful owner, now convince me why I shouldn't enact the harshest penalties under our law against you. "

Nichevsky fell to his knees, glancing from Kyden to the Empress with tears in his eyes.

"Your Majesty, I apologize for allowing my competitive instincts to overwhelm my sensibilities about the law. As a sportsman I wished only to present the best possible team to compete in your incomparable games. For your greater glory of course."

"Of course," she said drily. "Death Dealer Kyden has graciously agreed to sign a contract with you for the services of the man in question, to compete for your team in the Games, at the conclusion of which he'll return to the Five Systems with his master.

" She flicked a glance at Kyden. "If he survives."

Kyden hadn't been able to learn much about the specific event Benet had been kidnapped to enter but he gathered it wasn't going to be one of the purely athletic events.

You didn't bring in a deadly ringer for table tennis.

He had confidence in Benet. He also enjoyed the way the duke flinched when he heard the empress refer to Kyden by his arena handle.

"I—I'm grateful," Nichevsky said, clearly astonished he was being offered a way out. "I'd be happy to sign."

I bet you are . Kyden wasn't impressed with this sniveling noble.

The empress raised a hand and a servant immediately stepped forward with a portable desk.

Another followed bearing a rolled up scroll and a third brought a pen.

The contract was laid out on the desk and Kyden and Nichevsky stood together to read it over.

Kyden appreciated the fact it had been written in Basic for his benefit.

The terms were as the empress had discussed and obviously Benet wasn't going to be able to escape competing, not if he wanted to go home.

Kyden picked up the pen and handed it to the noble. "After you."

Nichevsky scrawled a long signature on the indicated line and then Kyden did his slashing version of his name as Elara had taught it to him, the Badari having no written language of their own.

The servants rolled up the contract and tied it with a red ribbon, handing it to the minister.

Then the trio took the desk and the pen and exited as silently as they'd come.

"You will of course watch the Games from the Nichevsky box as his honored guest," the Empress said with a hint of amusement in her voice.

Kyden gave her a small bow. "Thank you, your majesty. There is one more thing."

He felt her displeasure as clearly as if she'd shot him with a stunner but he pressed onward. "Is there another of my people here in Outlier? Another Badari?"

Her lips thinned as she stared at him from the ornate throne and he had to hold his talons in their sockets with sheer willpower.

"There is," she said at length. "But he isn't your concern. You have no claim on him and he is a Hereditary Asset of the Crown. There is no question of his provenance."

"May I at least meet with him?" Kyden pressed for whatever he could get.

If there was a Badari brother here, which she'd just confirmed for him, maybe he couldn't extract the man right now but he could make plans for later.

Kyden's driving mission in life was to free any of his brothers he found and bring them to his home to enjoy the fruits of freedom the way he himself did.

He didn't care for her smile and the amusement didn't touch her eyes.

"In view of the fact Dmitri has been training your man Benet since he got here, yes, you'll inevitably meet him.

Remember to whom he belongs and act accordingly.

” Ekateren rose from her throne and walked away, exiting through a side door while the Outliers in the room genuflected.

Kyden pivoted to the minister. “I want to see my man now,. He’s been out of my control for months and I need to assess his condition.”

“Of course. His Grace the Duke will accompany you, per the Empress’s previous orders to me,” the official said. “My presence won’t be necessary, will it, Your Grace?” There was a clear threat in the mild sounding question and Nichevsky swallowed hard and shook his head.

“No, of course not,” he managed to say.

“I’ll see you to the gate,” the minister told Kyden smoothly, gesturing for the guest to precede him to the throne room exit.

Talinn at his back, Kyden led the way out of the labyrinthine halls of the palace, following his instinctive sense of direction.

The minister seemed amused at his ability to find the right twists and turns.

Nichevsky was silent, lagging behind. When they emerged into the pleasant afternoon sunshine, there were no groundcars waiting, which had the minister frowning and upbraiding his assistant in rapid Outlier.

“Apologies, Lord Kyden, but the car will be here in ten minutes. Do you wish refreshments while you’re waiting?” the minister said at last.

“I’m fine.” There was a shady area overlooking a garden so he moved there and stood staring at the expanse of greenery. Watch my six , he told Talinn. I’m going to try an experiment and I need to concentrate.

Kyden closed his eyes and summoned his power as an Alpha.

He reached out mentally, homing in on the full Badari and mysterious Badari-like signatures he sensed, which were together.

Guess I found this Dmitri and Benet. The urge to connect with the other Badari was nearly overwhelming but right now it was more important to brief Benet.

He visualized his friend and pushed his power into the mind of the man, forcing open a pathway for communication, shaking his head as he did so.

This was all wrong—how could a human possess even a primitive version of the Badari mental link?

A mystery for later. He prayed to the Great Mother for the experiment to work and a second later there was a snapping sound in his head as his demand for attention reached Benet's conscious mind.

Benet?

He sensed great confusion in his friend.

No time for long explanations. I'm here with Talinn and we'll be on our way to meet up with you in a few minutes.

The Empress agreed I could take you home after the Games are over.

Firmly Kyden beat back the wave of joy and relief in Benet's mind.

This whole rescue hinges on you being my slave for which I apologize but it was the only way so when we meet remember you're my property, not my brother-in-arms.

Nichevsky will be with me.

Now Benet was confused but not upset. He cautiously formed a mental sentence. I don't care what it took, I'm grateful, brother. Happy to pretend anything you need.

Talinn touched Kyden's arm carefully. "The groundcar is here, boss."

Kyden broke his link with Benet and opened his eyes. "Let us go then."

Once they were in the vehicle, with a subdued Nichevsky in the opposite seat, helping himself to a large quantity of feelgood, which he didn't offer the Badari, the Duke appeared to be in a state of shock.

Kyden had no sympathy for him. Seven hells, the way the empress had spoken to the man, he was probably lucky to be alive.

He cast his telepathic power out once more, finding Benet with ease now a link had been established. Is there a true Badari with you?

Dmitri, yes.

I need his name, his true name. Quickly.

There was silence from Benet so Kyden assumed he was obtaining the information required.

He kept the contact open, assuming Benet wouldn't have any idea how to make the communication work in the opposite direction.

There was much to discuss about how this had happened and he'd have to instruct his friend how to carry on telepathic conversations but not today.

He sensed the groundcar speeding smoothly over the roads. He'd noticed it bore a small flag denoting the empress's ownership and he assumed other traffic was clearing out of their way. He drummed his talons on the arm rest.

Hendon , Benet's voice said in his head.

Thank you. Now he closed the link. Time must be growing short. Switching his mental attention to the aura of the other full Badari, he sent a mental blast. Hendon of the Badari!

Kyden had to push, not as hard as he had with Benet's mind but more than he should have been required to with a fellow Badari. He had the sensation of a path opening reluctantly, synapses recoiling and then falling into the required configuration.

I am here, Alpha , said a voice laced with pure astonishment.

I'm on my way to you and Benet, brother . Kyden wished he was bringing good news for this unknown Badari but the Empress had been adamant about the man's status as hers. There was no reply but if the man hadn't had telepathy before Kyden could understand.

The groundcar swept through the gates of the athletic facility and Kyden focused his mind on the upcoming reunion with Benet.

Benet stood with Dmitri, watching the approaching limousine with eager anticipation.

He'd been sure Kyden would find a way to help him and sure enough, here his friend was, having worked a bureaucratic miracle.

Benet had just completed a run in the metal maze and he had a major slash on his left arm, which was healing nicely, thanks to his new Badari blood.

He was hot and tired and anxious to know what the terms of his release from captivity here would be but primarily he was happy.

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He had to suppress a laugh as Kyden and Talinn stepped from the groundcar, attired in their full arena uniforms, including the flowing red cloaks.

And was Kyden actually wearing the Key to the House?

The thing was a gaudy monstrosity. After being in Outlier for so long he could understand how the Key would impress the people here, however.

They were all about ostentatious displays of wealth and power.

Massive as Dmitri was, Kyden was even bigger and carried his authority easily. Anyone who wanted to challenge him, in the arena or anywhere else was a fool.

Duke Nichevsky left the car with less enthusiasm and stood off to the side.

Kyden approached and Benet stiffened into attention.

He wasn't sure exactly how his boss wanted to play this but if he was supposed to be a slave, then he knew the drill.

Speak when spoken to, ask no questions...oh yeah, it hadn't been that long he'd been a free man in the Five Systems. Kyden surveyed him, eyes narrowing as he took in the nearly healed wound, which was closing itself efficiently.

Turning to the Duke, Kyden asked, "How has the training been going? Has my man performed as expected?"

Seeming startled to be asked, Nichevsky nodded. “He’s done quite well on the metal maze and the obstacle course. As Her Majesty said, Dmitri has been in charge of getting him ready for the Games. Dmitri’s a five-time gold medal winner.”

“Benet has met or exceeded all expectations,” Dmitri said. “Is he still to compete then?”

“The duke and I have a contract for his performance,” Kyden replied. “With the Empress herself as a witness. After the conclusion of the Games I’ll be going home and taking Benet with me whether he wins a medal or not. We have an arena season to prepare for.”

Deep inside Benet there was a huge release of tension at the news he didn’t have to win a medal to go free. Of course he was going to do his best to win the gold anyway—a man had his pride. He also had questions, tons of them, but they’d all have to wait until he and Kyden had privacy to talk.

“Do you want to see him put through his paces?” the duke asked.

As if I was one of his horses. Benet took a deep breath to keep himself from objecting. If Kyden ordered him into the maze he’d have to go.

“He’s finished the training course for the day,” Dmitri said dismissively. “Weight training is next and then a run.”

Kyden stepped closer to Benet, in his face. “Do you think you can win?”

“Of course, boss, no question.” Especially now I’ve got all those Badari blood cells working their magic.

In the days since the attack and the transfusion he’d been exploring the new limits of

his endurance and strength and had been gratified to find himself probably improved by a factor of 100%.

Not to mention he could take bigger risks in the damn maze now he'd heal immediately.

Benet wasn't sure what his limits actually were but he kept pushing.

And now he had telepathy as well, at least with Kyden.

"I'm satisfied for now," Kyden said. "We can watch him train tomorrow." He glanced at the duke. "I think we're done here, no need for you to stay. I'm sure you have more pressing matters to attend to."

"Don't you want to ride to the palace?" Nichevsky gestured at the waiting groundcar.

"I'll order another one." Kyden was unconcerned. "I want to see more of the grounds here and I'm sure Dmitri can guide us, if he's won so many medals."

"It would be my honor," the Badari said with a bow.

"It's settled then. I'll see you at the Games if not before."

Talinn stepped between the duke and Kyden. "May I escort you to the car, your grace?"

Once the duke was gone, they did indeed take a tour of the athletic facilities, including the actual metal maze and obstacle course area.

If Kyden had hoped to talk privately he was destined to be disappointed since the area was quite crowded as the opening ceremonies were in a few days and teams had been

arriving in increasing numbers.

At the end of the tour, Dmitri issued an invitation.

“I’d like to cook you a traditional Outlier meal in my apartment at the palace,” he said to Kyden and Talinn. “Do you have full and free access to the city and the palace or should I make arrangements?”

Kyden flashed a small badge. “The minister gave us each one of these after the audience with the empress. He said it would allow us to go anywhere, so I assume we’re fully permitted. I’d be honored to share a meal with you. Can we bring anything?”

“Thank you, no, I have everything I require for the meal I have in mind. Shall we say seven?”

“We’ll be there.” Kyden cast a meaningful glance at Benet.

“With your permission, I’d like to invite your man as well,” Dmitri said. “It was my plan. He and I have grown friendly over the course of the training.”

Benet knew he’d have been there anyway but it was a good idea for Dmitri to make his presence explicit. He expected there were many listening ears in the vicinity right now. The empress might have given Kyden full access to her planet but the gesture didn’t mean she trusted him.

“An unusual request but given all the circumstances, he may attend the meal,” Kyden said with condescension but there was a twinkle in his eye and he gave Benet a small wink.

“Our groundcar is here,” Talinn said.

“We’ll see you this evening then.” Without another word Kyden pivoted and walked to the waiting vehicle, Talinn marching behind him.

“And now we must go make up time at the weight room,” Dmitri said, pulling Benet away from his focus on the departing car and his friends.

He wished with all his heart he could have gone with them but he could take comfort in the fact that his situation was completely changed from what it had been that morning when he got up and his repatriation to the Five Systems was now as much of a sure thing as it could be.

Outlier was full of nasty surprises, however, so he wouldn’t celebrate until he was actually in the ship flying home.

With Marushka by his side.

Chapter Ten

Dmitri was filled with an odd excitement after the encounter with the two Badari and he looked forward to the evening with anticipation.

He made Benet do the full complement of exercises in the weight room since the other competitors wouldn't take it easy on him when the time came to run the metal maze, the obstacle course and triumph on the battlefield.

When they finished, Benet went to his apartment to shower and change and Dmitri returned to his suite in the imperial palace.

He made a quick pass through the refresher, dressed with care more formally than he would on a normal evening and hastened to the kitchen to begin cooking.

The meal he had in mind was simple but filling, since there would be three predators at the table and a predator-in-the-making with Benet.

His friend would find he needed to eat more as his metabolism became more completely Badari.

While he marinated the meat slabs and got his cheese-and-potatoes dish cooking, Dmitri pondered his state of mind.

He was of course delighted for Benet that a way had been found to get him home to the Five Systems, provided he survived the games.

Ekatereen could be devious but in this case he believed her to be trustworthy.

She'd used Kyden's request to bring Nichevsky to heel and she wouldn't renege.

The empress and most of the grand dukes were at each other's throats quite a bit of the time.

For himself, he planned to enjoy the company of his true brothers while it lasted.

Depending on what his opinion was of this Kyden by the end of dinner he might even make his request for the one thing he craved even more than freedom to leave Outlier.

Only the empress could grant him release from captivity and she never would but this Alpha could give him the other.

He heard Benet letting himself in at the front door. "You're early," he said, stirring a sauce.

"Too keyed up to kill time at the apartment," Benet said. "What can I do to help?"

"Get the bread in the oven and then set the table," Dmitri said, happy to have another pair of hands.

Benet made himself useful. After he'd set the table and checked the bread, he planted himself on one of the kitchen stools, nibbled on a crispy root vegetable stick from the appetizer tray and asked, "Why didn't you want to tell Kyden your real name earlier today?"

Dmitri considered the question and decided to answer.

Revealing anything about his past was hard but he trusted Benet.

“The Khagrish give us numbers when we’re created,” he said.

“It’s one of their techniques for denying us our place as sentient beings.

Easier to mistreat and torture that way.

I remember my number—I’ll never forget it—but I won’t stain my lips by uttering it.

We Badari give ourselves names and Hendon was the name my Alpha and the pack healer gave me.

When I was brought to Outlier I decided the one thing I could do for my own sanity was to hold my real name close, to keep it a secret only I knew.

So the real me was safe deep inside, guarded by myself and my inner beast. The empress at the time hated the numerical designation and decided I was a Dmitri.

” He lifted his shoulders in a resigned shrug.

“After all this time it’s hard to open up those dusty compartments in my mind. ”

“I get it,” Benet said. “There are things I keep locked away too, believe me.”

The door chimed and next minute Marushka rushed into the kitchen. Benet enfolded her in a big hug and Dmitri politely kept his attention on the dinner until she was ready to greet him. “I didn’t think you were free tonight, devochka,” he said as he bent so she could kiss his cheek.

“I have a party at the palace later, all girls, so I won’t need a bodyguard,” she said with a grimace. “I can’t stay long but I’m dying to meet your friends, Benet, and thank them for figuring out a way to rescue you.”

“They should be here right about now,” Benet said as the door chimed. “Shall I go let them in?”

“Please,” Dmitri replied.

Benet and Marushka went hand in hand to the living room and Dmitri heard the cheerful sounds of welcome and introductions.

He took a deep breath, set aside his sauce spoon, set the pot to simmer and joined the group.

Kyden and Talinn had abandoned the arena uniforms tonight and were dressed in sensible utility pants and black tee shirts.

Dmitri had to blink hard to remind himself this was real.

He did actually have two Badari in his space after all these years.

Benet and Kyden did a joyous, back pounding hug and then the gladiator and Talinn clasped arms and bumped shoulders. Benet drew Marushka forward and introduced her.

“Nichevsky?” Kyden said, repeating her last name with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes, the culprit who kidnapped Benet is my father,” she said with a blush. “And he’s in a drunken rage right now, let me tell you. Everyone is afraid to be near him tonight since his plan backfired so badly and the empress took him to task.”

“He still gets to have Benet in the damn Games though,” Kyden said. “I’d have preferred to be on my way home to the Five Systems tonight. Being in Outlier makes me twitchy.”

Benet and Marushka exchanged pained glances and the atmosphere got a bit tense.

“She has the scent of a mate,” Talinn said to Kyden in rapid Badari. “Not yet claimed. But how can this be? Benet isn’t one of us.”

“A mystery I’m hoping to solve tonight,” Kyden replied. To Dmitri he said, in Basic, “I’m Generation Five and Talinn here is Gen Six. You must be from quite an earlier time?”

“Dmitri’s Generation One,” Benet said with a touch of awe.

The other two Badari stared.

“Come, let us sit at the table and talk, if we intend to be so serious so early in the evening,” Dmitri said. “Dinner is ready.”

Benet and Marushka helped him carry the various plates into the dining area, refusing offers to help from Kyden and Benet.

“I hate to arrive empty handed,” Kyden said, sitting on one of the reinforced chairs.

“But I wasn’t sure what you might need or like.

” He gestured at Talinn and then himself.

“We don’t drink feelgoods and I didn’t know if you did imbibe.

My mate would chastise me for the oversight if she were here.”

“You brought Benet the gift of his freedom,” Dmitri said, passing the potatoes. “Nothing more is necessary.”

There was silence as his guests served themselves and took their first bites. Marushka refused a plate of her own but nibbled tidbits from Benet's.

Dmitri turned to Talinn. "I recognize you as a Badari brother but I've never seen one such as you. Was this a new strain created by the cursed scientists?"

"He's Tzibir," Kyden said. "There have always been the feline, the canid and the reptilian packs, or at least as far as we were aware. Not in your time?"

Shaking his head, Dmitri pulled out more of his own history.

"As I explained to Benet, Generation One is a misnomer. The Khagrish spent quite a long time trying to arrive at a baseline for what they wanted. Many false starts, incorrect mutations, men who were more their alien predator than humanoid. There were a few warriors from time to time who I can vaguely recall had a more reptilian appearance, nothing as pronounced as your scales and neck frill. Those cubs were taken away promptly and never seen again. We assumed they were terminated." Marushka had a look of horror on her face so Dmitri reached over to squeeze her hand in reassurance.

"Our story is a dark one, devochka, but we keep our honor through it all."

"Strength through the pack and the Great Mother," Kyden said in agreement.

"But to complete my thought, I'm Generation One in the sense I was created in the early phases. I assume what the scientists called Generation Two was the first larger scale, stable population of men."

Kyden and Talinn exchanged glances. "So our kind has been in captivity longer than the time frame we were taught," the Alpha said. "Sobering news."

“Nothing we can do about it.” Talinn was philosophical.

“So tell me how it is that Benet has become Badari in some fashion?” Kyden said matter of factly. “I sensed both of you when we arrived at the planet and I was certainly surprised.”

“I was astonished when you spoke to me telepathically,” Benet said, rubbing his forehead. “Neat trick. We could have used the ability in the arena more than a few times.”

“I had to push,” Kyden admitted. He focused on Dmitri. “And I had to force it on you as well. Was your Generation not telepathic?”

“Not to my knowledge.” Dmitri rubbed his forehead. “Gave me quite a headache.”

“We were told by our healers it was a side effect of an experiment the scientists carried out and they had no idea we gained the ability. It’s a closely held pack secret in my time.” Kyden turned his head to make the point to Marushka.

“And mine,” Talinn agreed, serving himself more of the beef.

“I won’t tell anyone,” she said, not sounding offended in the least by Kyden’s obvious warning. “I have all kinds of secrets of my own and I’m well practiced at keeping them.”

Benet leaned over and kissed her. Dmitri’s heart ached for the two of them because he couldn’t see how their love story could have any kind of a positive ending.

He saw Kyden watching the pair closely and was tempted to issue a warning about the impossibility of taking Marushka from her home but bit his tongue.

That discussion was between Benet and Kyden.

“You asked how Benet gained Badari attributes? We have to thank Marushka.”

“She saved my life,” Benet said, kissing her hand. “And of course Dmitri was the primary factor.” He recounted the story of the gang who’d attacked him.

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Dmitri was pleased to see both Kyden and Talinn were upset and angry on behalf of their friend as the account unfolded. The two men had their talons deployed and their eyes were glowing amber.

“So I dragged myself to my apartment rather than die like a dog in the street and Dmitri and Marushka found me, passed out on the floor in a pool of my own blood.”

“He was dying,” Dmitri took up the tale. “I’d had a vision from the Great Mother a few days earlier and she told me our blood was the magic. With Benet bleeding out, I knew we had to get my blood into him, which is where Marushka came in.”

“I’m a licensed veterinarian,” she said, spreading honey on a roll. She licked her fingers and took a bite before adding, “It’s illegal for me to work on humans but many of the principles are the same?—”

Kyden held up a hand. “Wait, I thought you were a Grand Duchess.”

“I am. I always loved animals and I used to follow the vets at my father’s country estate when I was a kid. Actually, Imperial Princess Alessandra encouraged me to fight for what I wanted and to insist I be allowed to go to school for it. She fought long and hard to become a doctor. I miss her.”

“What happened to her?” Kyden asked.

“She was the Empress’s heir apparent but then she disappeared on a trip to Freemarket, the pleasure planet.

” Marushka lowered her voice and they all leaned in to hear her next words.

“I have it on good authority she and her former lover got together and managed to escape somewhere in the galaxy to live a life they wanted, not the life the empress decreed for her. Ekaterien kept them apart for twenty years and we all believed she’d executed him.

But against all odds they reunited on Freemarket.

” The Grand Duchess’s envy of the happy outcome was plain in her face and voice.

“It’s been a few years now and there hasn’t been any sign of them. ”

“Believe me, the Empress has searched, which tells us the couple succeeded. I liked Alessandra,” Dmitri said. “She would have made a good empress. But getting back to Benet, Marushka agreed to do a transfusion for me.”

“How could that have worked?” Talinn asked. “We’re not remotely human for all we have red blood.”

“It shouldn’t have,” Marushka agreed. “But there was nothing else to be done. I couldn’t just sit there and watch him die.” Tears shimmered in her eyes and Benet gave her a quick hug.

“The will of the Great Mother,” Dmitri said. “Over the course of the next few hours Benet began to heal as we do and by morning he was ambulatory.”

“I could tell I’d been beaten up,” Benet said, rubbing his chin, “But I should have been dead. And since then I’ve gained extra muscle mass, more endurance, definitely more speed, and now I discover I have telepathy. With you anyway.” He pointed to Kyden.

“It’ll improve as we practice more,” Kyden assured him. “You should be able to communicate with Talinn and Rennyrr as well. And Dmitri.”

Clearing his throat, Dmitri addressed Kyden directly. “The Great Mother also gave me a message for you. I’m to tell you’re your mate requires your blood if you hope to have children.”

There was silence as everyone stared at him but he’d said what he had to say and there was nothing to add.

“Now I owe you two debts which can’t possibly be repaid,” Kyden said. “Elara and I’d been hoping to start a family but at least in our Generation we were told we’d been created to be sterile.”

“To quote the goddess, the magic is in the blood,” Dmitri repeated.

Kyden looked around the table. “This entire topic needs to remain a Badari secret. The last thing any of us want is for non-Badari to suspect our very lifeblood confers such benefits.”

Dmitri marveled at the push of sheer Alpha power he felt as Kyden spoke. The man was strong in his role, even more than the Alpha Dmitri had followed at the labs. The energy washed over him in a wave and he savored the taste of what he’d known in the distant past, when he was part of a pack.

Marushka had to take her leave and after she was gone the conversation veered toward news from the Five Systems and updates for Benet from Kyden and Talinn on events he’d missed.

From there the three men shared what he could tell were favorite stories of arena triumphs and mishaps.

Dmitri envied the easy air of friendship between the trio and took full note of the respect Benet and Talinn obviously had for Kyden.

Decision made, he rose from his chair and knelt on the carpet beside Kyden. "I wish to swear my allegiance to you as my Alpha. Now, tonight."

He ignored a gasp from Benet and Talinn stiffening in his chair, keeping himself focused on Kyden.

"Why must it be now?" Kyden asked. "We've barely met."

Dmitri rubbed his chest where the ache never subsided.

"All these centuries I've been without the pack bond.

The loss is a constant grief, a never-ending pain and a reminder of all that was torn from me when I was brought here by the scientists to be a gift to the empress at the time.

"I'll gladly give you my fealty in return for the joy of becoming part of a pack of Badari again. "

"We're an odd pack," Kyden said in a contemplative tone, glancing at Talinn, who dipped his head in agreement.

"And small. You should know I wasn't born an Alpha but took the title once I gained control of my gladiatorial House and had found Rennyrr.

The Great Mother has signified her approval of my presumptuousness. "

"I have no doubts you're every bit an Alpha, however you came to the role," Dmitri

said, still on his knees, hope burning in his chest next to the void where the bond should be anchored.

“I’ve observed how you interact with your men and I’ve listened to your words.

My inner beast has done its assessment of yours and we both want nothing more than to be a part of your pack, to call you our Alpha. ”

“And what if my first order to you as your Alpha is you must find a way to come with me to the Five Systems?” Kyden asked.

“I would answer I must remain here, where the Great Mother placed me.” Uttering the words nearly crushed Dmitri but he owed the Alpha the truth.

“Until she releases me from this place, I can’t leave.

She said nothing on the subject when I saw her in the vision.

With the utmost respect, the commands of the goddess override even those of an Alpha.

” Would Kyden refuse him now? But all a Badari had was his honor and Dmitri couldn’t lie, nor could he make plans to flee Outlier.

Kyden nodded slowly as if he’d expected the answer to be as Dmitri presented it.

“You do realize the pack bond will cut off when I leave Outlier, which will happen as soon as these damn Games are over? At most you’ll have the bond for a couple of weeks, although I’ll always consider you part of my pack and my family. ”

Suppressing his excitement as it seemed the Alpha was going to grant his dearest

wish, Dmitri swallowed hard and again spoke his truth.

“To have a pack bond again after all this time, to belong to an Alpha such as yourself, would be like rain in the desert to my soul. I—I think it would give me the strength and courage I need to face yet more endless years in Outlier as an Asset to the Crown. I know it’ll be a near mortal blow when the bond severs once you’ve departed from orbit but I need whatever time I can have as a Badari within a pack once again. ”

Rising to his feet, Kyden said, “Very well. I’ll be honored to accept you into my pack. This should be done in the grove of the Great Mother and with due ceremony, song and ritual but our circumstances here are hardly ideal.”

Talinn left his chair and came to brace Dmitri, who remained on his knees but raised his chin to give Kyden the best access to his carotid artery.

“I swear to accept you as my Alpha from now until death, obeying your orders in all things, fighting at your side, protecting the pack from enemies, keeping the Badari secrets.” He readied himself to hold steady while Kyden completed the pact.

“Save only that as we discussed, I must remain here in Outlier until the goddess releases me.”

“In turn I give you my promise to put the welfare of the pack above all else and to rule as a just and fair leader, preserving the Badari tradition. Accept my mark, Hendon of the Badari and by so doing pledge your fealty to me.” Moving so fast he was practically invisible, Kyden extended his fangs and blooded Dmitri to seal the bond between them.

The lights in the room darkened and the floor beneath Dmitri’s knees quivered.

The pack bond slammed into him but there was no pain, only joy and warmth as the

sense of belonging once more to something bigger than himself drove out all the loneliness and despair of centuries.

He rose to his feet and Kyden embraced him, while Talinn pounded his back.

“Welcome to the pack, brother,” the Tzibir said.

Drawing back from the Alpha’s hug, Dmitri said with heartfelt gratitude, “I can die a happy man now, having tasted the joy of being a pack member once more.”

“Here’s to a long and happy life,” Benet said, raising his glass of wine as the other men each picked up a goblet and joined the toast, clinking the glasses together and drinking.

Kyden set his glass on the table and stared at Benet.

“Are you ready? If I’m adding members to my pack tonight in this unusual way, we might as well extend the pack bond to you now.

I was going to wait until we could do this in the grove at the House, with Rennyrr in attendance to sing the proper paeans to the Great Mother, but now I think we should lock it all down. ”

Benet blinked hard and took another gulp of wine.

He and Kyden had an unbreakable bond after all the years of fighting in the arena together, guarding each other’s backs as best they could, and helping each other defeat their previous owner’s nefarious schemes.

Close as he was to Kyden he’d known the three Badari had a whole other kind of bond and brotherhood.

They shared things to which he wasn't privy, although he was included in anything to do with the running of the House and its business.

He was Kyden's second in command there and even Rennyrr and Talinn accepted his authority.

But he had to admit there'd been times when he was a bit jealous of the way the Badari were a solid unit, with him as part of their group at times and not at others.

Having watched Dmitri take the oath and accept the pack bond, he knew what was involved.

He'd been hit with a bit of power in the backwash when the bond took root in Dmitri's heart and he was a little shaken by the secondhand experience, not to mention watching Kyden nip the other man's artery to seal the deal.

Was he ready to be a part of whatever pack membership entailed?

Seven hells yes .

He set the goblet on the table with a thunk, straightened his shirt and walked to stand in front of Kyden, whose eyes were positively golden with power and emotion. "I'd be proud to join the four of you."

"You carry our blood now, you are truly our brother," Kyden said.

"I've thought of you as my enforcer ever since I bought the House and established our chain of command.

To have you in my pack will be an honor.

It feels right. A human cannot accept the pack bond.

It isn't for them. But even though you don't have the inner beast or all the attributes we carry, you are Badari at the most fundamental level.

Can you accept our Great Mother as your goddess?

We owe everything to her and do our best to walk in the light of her commandments.
”

“If she'll have me as an adherent, which I'm guessing here she will, considering she's the one who told Dmitri about the blood, then yes, I can accept her presence in my life. I've always admired you and the way you live your life and uphold your principles.”

“Kneel then and speak the words required to bind you to my pack.”

Benet expected to feel a bit ridiculous kneeling on the floor in Dmitri's apartment but now the moment had arrived, he felt as if he was floating in a daze of sunshine and happiness.

Talinn and Dmitri moved to support him and he tilted his head to bare his neck.

The words of the simple oath came easily to mind.

“I swear to accept you as my Alpha from now until death, obeying your orders in all things, fighting at your side, protecting the pack from enemies, keeping the Badari secrets.”

Giving the pledge meant more to him than any other oath he'd ever sworn, including the one where he'd joined his home system's military. That had been life changing in

many ways but was still a human ritual without major impact. This was so much more.

Kyden repeated his own half of the vow and moved so fast Benet couldn't see what he was doing.

, There was a quick sting at his neck and then the pack bond buried itself in his heart.

He gasped for breath as the sheer power of the Alpha's acceptance of him as a Badari flooded his mind and body.

Benet struggled to hang onto consciousness, not in pain but on an ecstatic high he didn't want to come down from.

No wonder Dmitri and the others had mourned the loss of this incredible connection when they were severed from their original packs by the Khagrish scientists.

He could sense Kyden, Talinn and Dmitri through the link, not intrusive but there if he needed them.

The men raised him to his feet and Kyden embraced him. "Now we're truly brothers."

"Renny's going to be surprised when we get home," Benet quipped.

His companions laughed good naturedly. "I'll send him a com over the secure link once we're on our way out of Outlier space," Kyden said. "I don't want to spring this huge surprise on him without warning. He'll be pleased. He thinks highly of you as a friend and comrade."

Chapter Eleven

Finally the day for Benet's event in the Games arrived.

He stood on the appointed spot on the turf, outlined by a white circle and waited for the starter's signal.

All the practices and training had come down to this.

He and four other men waited at evenly spaced intervals around the metal maze and at the signal would sprint toward the entry point they'd received by random assignment and begin their torturous climb into, through and out of the insane creation.

A child's game elevated to an ordeal of mind and body and nerve.

Benet had practiced doing the climb from each of the five possible entry points, thanks to Nichevsky's elaborate and expensive mockup.

He'd been told the other major sponsors had similar setups.

He wondered briefly how any of the competitors from less affluent teams were going to manage this and make any kind of good time.

They'd only had the prescribed number of trial runs here at the venue.

He raised his eyes to the sky and offered a quick prayer to the Lords of Space and

then to the Badari goddess.

The crowds were huge and robo drones flew overhead and zipped close to the contestants constantly as millions in Outlier watched the events on trideo broadcasts.

Benet was an old hand at tuning out the crowd.

You had to do that in the arena where distractions would get you killed.

He was loose, he was ready, mentally and physically.

The Nichevsky team coaches and trainers stood behind the barricade a few yards away, shouting encouragement.

He tuned them out too. He hadn't worked with them at all and barely knew who they were, He fingered the red and gold Nichevsky emblem on his shirt and grimaced internally.

Yeah, he wasn't doing this for their glory.

He was doing this to get it the hell over with and go home.

Dmitri wasn't allowed on the field now the real Games had begun, since he was part of the Imperial Household but they had their telepathic Badari link, even if both of them were clumsy at sending mental messages.

Benet didn't plan to talk to Dmitri at all during the event unless there was an emergency. No distractions was his motto today.

The first warning tone sounded. Benet hunkered down, ready to sprint.

The second tone went off and then the starting gun.

He was off the mark and at the entrance to the maze in a heartbeat, using his new Badari speed.

The top twenty finishers at this part of the event would comprise the field of men who entered the combat trials later in the day.

He wasn't worried about qualifying but he wouldn't let himself get cocky either.

He'd practiced this route any number of times.

There was a tricky turn about a third of the way in, with an inviting passage which became a dead end.

He'd been caught in it enough times to easily avoid it today.

Having the Badari gift of virtually instant healing was a boon, as the sharpened edges and surfaces inside the maze were hard to avoid.

Another new element to the ordeal was the fact with five men climbing through at the same time the framework vibrated and shook and it was possible to get knocked off his feet or slammed into one of the knifelike edges as a result.

The tiny robos which crawled inside the maze were a nuisance for sure and a fiendish enhancement to the whole thing.

There were ways to disable them but that took time.

Dmitri had said he usually smashed them with his claws and moved on.

Not having talons, Benet punched them with a closed fist, stunning their workings into a stall.

He still got zapped by one or two, a small electrical charge that stung and burned through his nerve endings.

Shaking the effect off, he could see the exit ahead but there were several more twists and turns to maneuver through before he could breathe freely.

Then he was out, vaguely aware of the crowd's roar and annoyed by the zooming drones, racing toward the start of the obstacle course.

He was first as far as he could tell. He accelerated and made a Badari leap to the top of the first wall, disdaining the rope which was meant to aid climbing.

Next he had to traverse an oiled pipe over a pit of upthrust knives, followed by a climb on a simulated rock wall, using fingertips and toes.

On the other side was the acid pit, fumes rising and making him cough.

No time to hesitate. He heard the roar of the crowd and knew he had at least one competitor on his tail in the obstacle course.

Carefully he let himself down to the wooden dowel which crossed the acid pit, got his balance and began edging across.

There were giant swinging pendulum-like devices at intervals which he had to avoid at all costs, or be knocked into the acid.

Sure the referees were poised to drag any person unlucky enough to take the plunge out, but not before the athlete had been terribly injured.

The third pendulum swung on an intermittent schedule, which was a new wrinkle and Benet had to pause to figure it out.

The acrid air above the pit was making him dizzy and maintaining his balance was getting to be more of a challenge.

He saw his opportunity and rushed through the space, nearly losing his balance in the process but leaping to the ground beyond safely.

No time to hesitate—the enclosure with poisonous snakes was next.

His Badari friends told him he could probably sustain several bites and be okay as his new immune system would work frantically to neutralize the venom but he wanted to avoid getting bitten altogether.

It was a definite advantage to be first because the reptiles were sluggish right now.

Benet picked his way carefully through the cage, watching every step and also having to avoid any serpents on branches above him.

He shoved his way through the revolving door at the end with a sigh of relief.

He'd suffered a small sting on his heel about two thirds of the way through, but ignored the burning sensation and it was already fading.

Benet's luck failed him halfway through the next challenge, which was swimming through a vat of tentacled sea creatures.

The athletes were supposed to smear themselves with a repellant from a dispenser next to the door, which he did but as he stroked across the murky water a long thick tentacle came up from the depths of the pool and dragged him under.

He managed to tear the suckers away from his leg, leaving open sores behind, surfaced with a gasp and redoubled his speed.

Again referees were standing by to rescue anyone the beasts ensnared who couldn't escape in a set time limit but Benet bet most people would have drowned by the time the buzzer went off.

He crawled from the pool and got to his feet, hoping his new immune system could keep up with so many challenges.

Taking a quick look at his lower leg was reassuring as the pits were closing and clean new skin was spreading to cover the injured spots.

He shook the water from his hair and moved on to the next and final obstacle, a rope swing over a rock-filled ditch, which seemed almost mild compared to the challenges he'd already faced, and sticking the landing on a tiny platform high above the ground.

From there he had to jump and catch the edge of a cushioned wall with his fingertips and crawl over it to slide to the ground on the other side.

It was a quick sprint from there to the finish line.

He raised his arms in triumph as he crossed the line and now he played to the crowd as he would have at home in the arena, jogging down the track, shaking his fists above his head, smiling, pointing at people in the crowd, while flowers, stuffed animals and other gifts rained onto the arena area.

Young boys and girls specially chosen for the honor scrambled onto the track to gather up his collection of swag from the crowd.

Benet picked one pretty bouquet which caught his eye and a small stuffed animal

representing the avatar for the Games and strode to the edge of the track nearest the nobility's boxes.

He found Marushka in her family's box with her father, and Kyden and the other Badari, and waved the gifts at her, mouthing "For you," as he did so.

The crowd roared its approval. A Nichevsky retainer came to the fence to take the items and carry them to Marushka.

He trotted to the finish line to congratulate the next athlete who staggered over the line, after which he was interviewed by a number of sports trideo casters.

He'd had experience with that at home as well, being one of the top gladiators and a fan favorite.

He was well aware how to play to the cameras and give good soundbites.

You did well , Kyden said in his head as he headed toward the athletes' training room where the showers were.

Five men have died so far — two in the snake pit, one drowned, one fell into the acid and the last fell off the aerial platform and broke his neck.

I'm glad no one in the Five Systems ever wanted to promote this macabre 'sport'.

Yeah, me too, Benet replied carefully. How is Klorizenko doing? Dmitri and I expected him to be my opponent in the final round.

His time was impressive and he stands at second right now. Nowhere close to your time of course. Kyden sounded pleased.

I've got to shower now and then wait until the rank order is determined. We fight in the finals tonight. Give my love to Marushka, would you?

Of course. She appreciated the flowers and the stuffed animal, her father not so much.

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Benet heard Kyden's amused laugh in his mind and had to suppress an answering grin.

There was no further conversation as the Nichevsky crew surrounded him and escorted him to the facility with much cheering and back slapping.

He refused to do any more interviews and asked them all to leave him alone.

The shower was refreshing and he withdrew to his tiny cubicle to get his mind set for the finals.

A trainer brought him rations and special drinks, which he accepted.

Stretching out on the floor, he tried to grab a few winks of sleep.

At home, in the arena dressing room, he had a ritual, as did every man.

He'd check his weapons, sharpen the edge on his sword, polish his shield to dazzle the eyes of the other combatants and kept his mind sharply focused on the tasks.

He had certain exercises he did each time, in a set order and then he'd dress, donning each piece of the archaic uniform until he was the embodiment of the killer gladiator of old.

He had his lucky charms and his short prayer to the Lords of Space.

By the time the first trumpets sounded and the signal came to march onto the sands

and swear fealty to the ruler (who was never there but the ritual was always carried out anyway) he was calm and ready to fight.

Here there was no such comforting routine to be followed although he did his best.

His 'uniform' for the fight to come was a loincloth with the Nichevsky crest in an awkward spot. There were no weapons as it would be hand to hand combat, no holds barred.

The Great Mother will be with you, Dmitri said in his mind. I wish I could fight beside you as we did the first day.

Sorry it isn't a team event, Benet answered.

It will be Klorizenko. You remember the report we had on his tells and weaknesses . The remark wasn't a question.

I do .

He fights for Prince Vasili's family, let that give you extra strength to throw him from the ring. Dmitri had an evil chuckle.

Is Marushka doing all right?

White knuckled and on the edge of her seat the entire time but cheering for you.

I'd better go — the trainers are here, no doubt to tell me the Klorizenko news.

Benet cut the link as Kyden had shown him how to do and sat up to give his attention to the coaches crowding his space.

He managed to act suitably surprised and allowed them to give him a few excited tips and suggestions before sending them all away.

He had his strategy for the upcoming fight and didn't need anyone's advice. Dmitri had trained him well.

It took a long time for all the surviving athletes to make it through the maze and the obstacle course, after which the rankings were announced and revised once as another man was disqualified for his injuries even though he'd managed to stagger across the finish line.

The top 18 men would battle hand to hand for the final ranking but Benet and Klorizenko would be fighting for the gold and silver since they'd captured the top two spots.

Kyden found it all wearying and vowed to himself if anyone in the Five Systems ever dared to propose a 'sport' anything close to this abomination of a contest he'd expend maximum effort to shut the idea down.

He hated contests which killed the entrants on a regular basis.

His progress on getting death matches banned at home was gratifying and watching this spectacle reinforced his resolve.

Men and women weren't pawns to live and die at the whims of, or for the entertainment of other sentients.

Once the final standings were certified by the judges, Duke Nichevsky rose and led the way to a special dinner he'd ordered to be prepared in one of the pavilions erected for the purpose a short distance from the Games' venue.

Other groups were making their way to their own banquets and the general populace had a huge food court on the other side of the sports complex to go to.

Kyden walked with Tallin and Dmitri and they compared their impressions of the day's events and Benet's performance as they strolled.

"He beat two of my winning times," Dmitri said with pride. "I can handle that."

Talinn punched him in the arm. "Of course you can—you're ahead."

"I don't think Benet has any desire to repeat this experience," Kyden said.

"I didn't either," Dmitri answered with a frown. "Each time I competed the empress, whoever was on the throne then, ordered my participation. Ekateren could have ordered me to compete this time but thankfully did not. One never knows with her."

Kyden hated to think of Benet and Dmitri being pitted against each other so he was glad the unpredictable empress hadn't stepped in.

He was seated next to Marushka at dinner, with another lady on his other side, who ignored him for the most part, which was fine.

He liked Marushka, who reminded him a little of his own mate Elara.

Both were highborn women who probably shouldn't even have encountered a gladiator like himself or Benet, much less fallen in love with them.

He had no regrets about Claiming Elara and they were incredibly happy together.

But where his mate was ambitious and highly motivated to succeed in her personal life as well as the life they shared and their gladiatorial House and other business

interests, Marushka seemed more innocent and naïve to him.

She'd grown up close to the heart of the venomous Outlier imperial politics and when she spoke of anything to do with them she was crisp and obviously hardened but at other times she came across as young and uninformed.

He was frankly surprised she'd pushed hard enough against her place in elevated society to become a veterinarian but he admired the accomplishment.

Marushka said she was going to break off her engagement to Prince Vasili and sounded quite determined about the decision but Kyden was dubious her resolve would hold once Benet was gone.

She did carry the faint scent of being Benet's mate, to his highly developed Badari sense.

Kyden rubbed his chest over his heart where his own mate bond was quiescent, having gone dormant after he'd traveled a certain number of lightyears from the Five Systems. He hoped Elara wasn't in too much discomfort.

Fortunately the separation was purely temporary and they'd gone through this before, when he went off to rescue Rennyrr and then Talinn.

Thinking of Rennyrr, he realized the pack bond would have also gone inert once Kyden was too far away for it to manifest. We'll be home soon and all will be well. They had to get through the fights tonight and then Kyden could take Benet and go home.

He glanced at Marushka, who was being polite and chatting with Talinn on her other side during this course of the dinner. He suppressed a chuckle at the way the woman on his other side turned a cold shoulder to him. So much for my ego . He

concentrated on his fish, which was excellent.

Benet and Marushka had a hard parting ahead. He'd probed gently during the long day at the Games and she'd been adamant there was no way the Empress would allow her to leave, and would make every effort to reclaim her if she did manage to escape.

Dmitri would do his best to continue protecting her.

Kyden flicked a glance at him now, across the table, ignoring the women on either side of him.

Marushka carried the faint scent of being Dmitri's kin, although she wasn't.

He'd wondered and poked a bit at the topic but the Badari assured him he'd never even met Marushka's mother, much less fathered a child with the woman.

"I was in disfavor with the empress on the throne at that time," he'd said.

"I think she believed she was punishing me by assigning me to guard a baby. No concern for Marushka of course! Who would ever think it was a good idea to give a helpless cub to a hulking monster like me, with claws and fangs? But the moment her late mother's maid put her in my arms and she smiled at me, I knew I'd do anything to protect her. And I have."

Of course Marushka had also had nursemaids, governesses, tutors, dance teachers, riding instructors and other support as she grew up but the one constant was Dmitri.

She'd explained to Kyden her father took no interest in her but expected her to show up at age eighteen as a perfectly prepared Grand Duchess, ready to enter the upper echelons of Outlier society and to serve as his prize offering in the political marriage arena.

Kyden pitied her but at least she'd had Dmitri.

Badari placed their cubs above all else in the world when Kyden was in the labs.

It was one way the damn scientists controlled the packs, threatening the cubs.

He was eternally grateful to Dmitri for conveying the Great Mother's message revealing a blood transfusion would enable Elara to have his child, which was the thing the couple both desired with all their entwined hearts.

Dinner dragged on way too long but eventually the group was led in a procession to the viewing stands and the evening's competition began.

Of course the gold medal round would be the final event of the night so Kyden settled in for a severe test of his patience, watching the other eighteen competitors pummel each other with varying degrees of skill and finesse.

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By the time Benet was escorted out to the site of the final phase of his competition he was fighting impatience and trying to remain loose.

The crowd cheered constantly as he and his opponent, the famed Klorizenko were introduced.

The referee went over the rules, which were few.

Basically it was a foul to touch any area of the body covered by the loincloth and there was to be no eye gouging.

Anything else was fair and the loser would be the first man to put any part of his body outside the white circle.

Of course if one of them died inside the white circle, they also lost.

Klorizenko paraded around the circle, playing to the crowd, hands above his head in a premature victory sign.

Benet stood in his spot at the center, poised to strike, knees slightly bent, gathering his energy.

His opponent was a huge man, as big as Dmitri and solid muscle.

He was well coordinated too, with good balance or he wouldn't have made it through the metal maze and the obstacle course in near record time.

He'd been the unquestioned favorite to win the gold medal until Benet was plucked from his home and dropped into the mix.

The referees finally shepherded him into the required spot at the center of the circle. He and Benet bumped fists and drew apart. The warning tones sounded, followed by the starter's signal. The match would last until one man won or died.

Klorizenko's great weakness was his ego.

He was used to winning these kinds of matches easily.

Benet allowed him to make a bull rush, dodging out of the way nimbly and immediately turning to keep an eye on his opponent.

As he'd hoped, and observed in any number of holos of Klorizenko's fights, the man walked the edge of the circle, taunting Benet and inciting the crowd to cheer for himself.

Benet went from zero to full speed, ramming his shoulder into Klorizenko's side, which was like hitting a wall, but he persisted, shoving with all his newfound Badari strength.

Frantically the Outlier tried to twist away or to grab at Benet or trip him, but the gladiator was having none of it, just kept inexorably moving the mountain of a man toward the edge of the circle.

Klorizenko was raining curses and heavy blows on his back but Benet wasn't to be denied.

Mere human strength, even in a behemoth like Klorizenko couldn't prevail against his now-amplified power.

He fainted as if he was weakening, which caused Klorizenko to shift his balance to attempt to get Benet in a headlock.

Benet gave his final shove and Klorizenko stumbled and toppled out of the ring into the grass.

The venue was utterly silent.

Benet raised his fists and sought out the Nichevsky box, where Kyden, Talinn and Dmitri were grinning broadly and everyone else was in shock.

The crowd roared finally. Klorizenko shot to his feet, protesting and trying to get back into the circle but a phalanx of referees kept him at bay.

There was a pause while the officials debated if the win was within the rules and decided unanimously Benet had complied with Games regulations.

He was declared the winner and the gold medalist carried off the field on the shoulders of the jubilant Nichevsky team, coaches and trainers.

He was allowed to dress in his sweats, the Nichevsky emblem huge in red and gold on his jacket and then it was time to receive the actual medal.

Benet's name was announced last and Klorizenko spat at his feet, but the crowd noise was overwhelmingly positive.

An official in rich ceremonial robes hung the gold medal around Benet's neck and shook his hand, after which the March of the Empress was played and her personal flag was hoisted while the entire stadium stood at attention.

Benet supposed Ekaterreen was there somewhere but didn't bother looking for her.

This ceremony meant as little to him as the many such presentations he'd received in the arena at home.

Staying alive was the prize, not any fancy gold trinket or wreath of allegedly sacred leaves.

When the song ended Benet stepped off the dais and was immediately surrounded by his friends, Marushka, the Grand Duke and the others who'd been in the Nichevsky box.

He embraced the three Badari and took a lot of good-natured ribbing about his new piece of jewelry.

He kissed Marushka, which he figured he could get away with in public tonight.

"This is for you," he whispered, lifting the medal away from his chest.

The Grand Duke cleared his throat. "You cheapened my victory by not actually fighting the man," he said. "The occasion demanded a full and proper battle, to show the gold medal was fairly won."

"We have a saying at home in the arenas," Benet told him. "Whatever works and gets a man out alive is fine. Doesn't have to be pretty. I won you the damn medal, I beat Prince Vasili's man and now I'm going home with my friends."

"You mean your owner and his friends," the duke said, eyes narrowed.

Benet restrained himself from rolling his eyes and was rescued by Kyden, who stepped to his side. "I can forgive the man's exuberance tonight, your grace," he said to the duke. "It isn't often a slave can claim such a prize, now is it? He'll be in his proper place tomorrow."

Apparently mollified, the duke nodded and stepped away, taking Marushka with him.

Benet watched her go, his heart aching.

Kyden clapped him on the shoulder. “I know, old friend, and I sympathize. She’s quite a girl.

I’d say we’d find a way, like Elara and I did but Marushka spent much of today explaining to me how impossible it is for her to escape Outlier.

Tonight’s not the night to figure it out.

” He lowered his voice. “If anything can be done, we’ll do it, I give you my word. ”

Chapter Twelve

Benet wasn't able to leave Outlier behind as rapidly as he'd hoped.

There were a few events on the Games' schedule to complete and then there was a lavish closing ceremony, over which the Empress herself presided.

He was told in no uncertain terms he had to participate and wear his gold medal, so he marched in the parade and sat in the athletes' section of the audience for the performances and speeches afterward.

There were more media interviews, including one from a Five Systems network.

He had to parse that one carefully but referred most of the questions to Kyden, who sat in with him and gave vague answers.

We'll have to do a sitdown with Kelly Geffenmer, Kyden said in his head. Get our story out there the way we want it to be, once we're home.

She was a friendly reporter who'd been given a number of major scoops and exclusives by Kyden in the past, so the questions from her would be easier to handle and they could shape the resulting story.

Benet had no objections to the idea. His fame as a gladiator was highly valuable to himself and to the House of Badari and a certain amount of media interaction was required to maintain his place atop the popularity standings.

In some ways life had been much simpler before Kyden took over the House and freed everyone, establishing new ways of conducting the gladiator business—and it was a huge business—but Benet would never willingly go back to the old model. He loved his life now.

Except where Marushka was concerned.

She'd managed to escape her minders and attendants for a brief time and was waiting for him in Dmitri's apartment at the palace.

Kyden lent him the groundcar he'd been assigned and Benet was able to get to her from the athletes' village in a rush.

His heart was pounding and cold dread was in the pit of his stomach.

This would be their final meeting and he hated the thought of parting from her.

He opened the door to the apartment as he had countless times before and barely got two steps inside before she was in his arms. He captured her lips in a fierce kiss, trying to tell her all the things that were in his heart without words.

Marushka kissed him back with equal passion but broke off the connection all too soon.

Taking him by the hand, she led him toward the spare bedroom Dmitri had set aside for them.

“We have so little time today,” she said, voice shaky. “I want to remember you in my arms, our souls and bodies united as one.”

He picked her up and got them to the bed where they tore each other's clothing off

and sank onto the mattress in a desperate tangle.

His cock was hard and aching and she was already creaming for him.

Today he skipped right over the foreplay he and Marushka usually shared, getting her under him and lining himself up, ready to plunge into her heat.

“Yes, yes,” she encouraged him breathlessly, sliding her hands over his back, pressing him closer. “I need you.”

Benet needed no further encouragement to thrust deep, until he bottomed out and then he began moving in and out as she locked her legs around him.

Marushka placed frantic kisses on whatever portion of his body she could reach and held him so tight her nails left long marks on his back.

He felt the tightening in his balls and the gathering storm of release overtaking him so he teased her tiny bud of nerves with one hand.

The extra stimulus sent her over the edge into an epic climax while he let go of his iron control and matched her fervor.

He was lost in the sensations of their union, her scent, her touch and her voice screaming his name.

He might even have blacked out briefly from the intense energy they shared.

Finally he rolled over on the bed so as not to crush her and brought her against his side, head pillowed on his shoulder. “I love you,” he said with an aching heart. “How can I leave you behind? There must be a way?—”

“There isn’t,” she said, shushing him with a finger over his lips. “We’ve been all through this and I don’t want to spoil our last afternoon with rehashing the dismal truth. We’ll both survive because we must. We’ll have our memories.”

“Cold comfort,” he said, hugging her tight. “I’m not sure I can exist without you. Kyden promised me we’ll do whatever it takes to get you out of here and safe with me eventually but it won’t be quick. Can you hang on until then?”

“I’ll try,” she said with tears coursing down her cheeks. “But there’s no way to get me out of Outlier. One of us has to be realistic. This was a beautiful, unexpected miracle but it was never meant to last for us.”

“I want it to though, don’t you?” he asked, unaccountably terrified of her answer.

“Yes,” she said promptly and his heart started to beat again. “Absolutely. I’m your woman until I die, know that truth.”

“I talked to Kyden about how a Badari Claims his mate,” Benet said, fidgeting a bit as he recalled the embarrassing conversation.

Kyden had explained, not giving details about his own Claiming of course but outlining the general process.

“But you must keep in mind,” Kyden had said, “We’re driven by our inner beast, which demands claiming a mate in this manner.

You’re now counted as a Badari and a member of the pack but you won’t develop an alien predator presence in your DNA because you weren’t created in a lab by fucking alien scientists.

So you won’t have those urges compelling you to Claim. ”

It was true after the conversation Benet couldn't honestly say he had any desire to do what Kyden had described, although he accepted it as a meaningful ritual for the Badari and the human woman.

What he wanted was the mate bond Kyden described.

If it was anything like the pack bond—and Kyden assured him it was a deep, rich connection of hearts as powerful as the pack bond but in its own way—Benet craved it for himself and Marushka.

“And?” she prompted him gently.

Benet realized he'd gotten distracted by his thoughts about the way the actual Badari Claimed their mate. “Like everything else, the blood is apparently the magic,” he hastened to say.

“We need a transfusion?” Marushka sounded confused. “Who would perform it?”

“No, since I was born a human male, we don't need to share blood in that way,” he hastened to reassure her. “I think for us a tiny taste would be enough. Would you—would you do this with me?”

She stared at him, eyes wide. “If it means this much to you, then of course.”

He left the bed and retrieved the special knife he'd brought with him. Eyeing the blade, she bit her lip as he got into bed and Benet hesitated. “Are you sure?”

“I love you. If this will prove it to you and bind us, then what are we waiting for?”

“I love you too. This may hurt,” he warned, drawing the knife across the pad of his thumb. Blood welled immediately and he knew he only had a minute or two before

the cut closed and healed itself. Marushka extended her hand trustingly and he carefully opened a gash in her thumb.

He clasped his hand around hers, pressing their thumbs together so the blood would comingle. “I Claim you as my mate and forever love, Marushka Nichevsky. Mine.”

“I Claim you as my mate and forever love, Benet of the Badari Gladiators. Mine.”

They exchanged a kiss, sweet rather than passionate, and Benet withdrew his hand. Out of the blue he was moved to lick his thumb where he’d cut himself and held her matching wound to his skin. Watching him, Marushka repeated the gesture on her own hand.

“You taste sweet,” he said, astonished. “Like sunshine and flowers and the best desserts, all wrapped up in one.”

“You taste smoky and spicy and like a rich wine,” she said, smiling.

Benet gave her a hug and then went to the bathroom for the small first aid kit so he could take care of the wound on her thumb. As he was using the decontam ray on it, a wave of vertigo and warmth swept over him and he dropped the applicator onto the sheets.

“What is it?” Marushka cried, reaching out to him. “What’s wrong—” She swayed and leaned against him, head resting on his abdomen. “Why am I so dizzy all of the sudden?”

They fell onto the pillows and Benet felt the mate bond take hold in his heart. When he closed his eyes he had a vision of a golden chain going from him to Marushka. “Do you sense it?” he asked her anxiously.

Hand on her chest over her heart, eyes wide and cheek flushed Marushka was plainly in the grip of powerful emotion. “We—we’re connected. I feel your love right here. How is this possible?”

“The blood is the magic.” Benet spread his hands out as if he’d performed a great feat. “It worked, we have the mate bond. Let me see your shoulder.”

Obediently Marushka moved and tried to see what he was looking at.

“She gave it to us, the goddess blesses our mating,” Benet said in a voice of triumph. There was a small golden circle on Marushka’s skin, like a tattoo. Kyden had told him the mark meant the Great Mother approved the Claiming and was the visible sign of the union. He could scarcely believe it.

“What is it? What do I have?” Marushka demanded anxiously. “Turn so I can see your shoulder.”

As soon as he did so she traced a circle on his skin with her fingertip. “I never saw this here before.”

“Mine matches yours,” Benet said. The Badari goddess places them on mates when the couple Claims each other as we did today. Well not exactly the way we did it since I’m not a lab created Badari but evidently what we did was enough to trigger the mate bond.”

“I’m so happy,” Marushka said, brushing away tears. “Being marked as your woman.”

“You don’t mind?” he asked anxiously.

“How could I object to a visible sign of our love? And this bond we now share is

incredible.”

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“I wish I could marry you right now,” he said, expressing the deep longing in his heart. The Badari ritual was uncanny and he was well and truly committed to Marushka and knew she was all in with him, but he wanted the human ceremony to seal the relationship in the manner he was used to.

“No one here would do it,” Marushka said sadly. “And there isn’t time anyway.: She pointed at the chrono on the bureau. “I’m already late—I must rush. One of my friends is covering for me but I can’t push the deception too far.”

He held her close for one last kiss and then he had to let her go.

She dressed quickly and he escorted her to the door, where they exchanged a final caress.

Before he could process her departure from his life Marushka was gone and the door closed in his face.

He concentrated on the mate bond and tried to push his love for her through the link in one big surge of emotion.

Maybe he got a pulse of her love in return but couldn’t be positive,.

Neither of them was a natural telepath and all of this Badari development was foreign to him.

In a daze he showered and got dressed himself, heading to his apartment in the athletes’ village for the last time, heart heavy.

He was at Dmitri's a few hours later, for the farewell dinner the Badari was hosting.

All four men tried their best to be upbeat and cheerful but the conversation kept lapsing.

Dmitri's dishes were tasteless to Benet tonight and he was drinking too much of the wine.

The Five Systems contingent was scheduled to leave for the spaceport at midnight when the departure window for Kyden's spaceship to leave orbit opened up.

None of them wanted to linger. Better to cut the ties and go their separate ways.

Benet pitied Dmitri who'd been so happy to be part of a pack again. His pack bond would snap fairly soon after Kyden departed from Throne but the Badari swore he had no regrets.

"Even a brief time as a member of a pack of brothers has been a blessing," Dmitri had said during one of their many toasts.

Restless, Benet kept rubbing his chest over his heart. The mate bond was putting him on edge tonight. He wondered if it was because he was leaving Marushka behind soon. The longer he sat over dinner, the worse his anxiety got.

Kyden finally remarked on it. "I've never seen you so unsettled, brother. You're one of the coolest heads in the arena. Whatever is bothering you is roiling the pack bond too."

Talinn and Dmitri nodded their agreement with the Alpha's statement.

Benet was regretful to have caused the others discomfort. "I don't know what it is but

something's wrong. I feel it, here, where the bond anchors."

"Marushka?" Dmitri asked, a growl in his voice. "Are you sensing she's in trouble? Or ill?"

Spreading his hands in a helpless gesture of puzzlement, Benet grimaced. "I'm not facile enough with the mate bond to know."

Suddenly his com chimed. The men exchanged glances as Benet pulled his handheld from his pocket, dread cold in his gut. Other than Dmitri he only knew one person in Outlier who would com him. "Marushka," he said, rising from the table and accepting the call.

He could hardly hear her. She was weeping and her voice shook.

"Calm down, sweetheart, take a deep breath. Tell me what's wrong and where you are." He wasn't leaving the planet with his beloved in this frantic state. "Are you hurt?"

"No, not too much." She lowered her voice. "I think I killed him. There's so much blood. Can you come?"

The other three men were standing around him in a half circle now, listening to the conversation with their keen Badari hearing.

"Of course but you have to tell me where you are," Benet said patiently, although inside he was terrified for her and raging to be in action, on his way to her side. As if he did possess an inner beast like the others.

She gave him an address and Dmitri snapped his fingers in recognition "I know where that is. It's one of Prince Vasili's town apartments which he uses to tryst with

his mistresses. I'll get the groundcar."

Marushka cut the connection on a fresh bout of sobbing and Benet's field of vision literally flashed red with his anger and concern for her.

Kyden put a hand on his shoulder and he staggered a step from the push of the Alpha power, which cooled his rage enough to think rationally. "I have to get to her."

"Dmitri went for the car," Kyden said. "We'll be going in a minute but you have to get a grip if you're going to be of any use to her. Take the excellent advice you gave her and calm down. Breathe." He turned to Talinn. "I want you to go to the ship."

"You don't need me with you?" the gladiator asked in surprise.

"I think three Badari will be sufficient," Kyden said in a dry tone. "I have a bad feeling about this turn of events and I want you as backup on the ship. If things go south, tell the captain to leave orbit and head for home. Elara can figure out what to do next."

Benet could tell through the pack bond Talinn didn't much like his orders but when the men rushed outside, he peeled off and sprinted to their vehicle, roaring off in the direction of the spaceport before he and Kyden were inside Dmitri's car.

The elder Badari was too keyed up to let the car's AI drive and handled the controls himself, careening through deserted streets at speeds well above the speed limit and arriving at their destination in a fairly brief time.

He parked with a protest from the engine and then Benet and his brothers ran to the building.

It was security access controlled but Dmitri had a passcode given to him by the

Empress's security forces which worked nearly everywhere so he got them inside. "Top floor penthouse," he said as they entered the marble-floored foyer. "The gravlift is over here."

Benet took the lead, spiraling upward in the silvery stream as fast as he could go and was already pounding on the penthouse door by the time Kyden and Dmitri arrived.

The portal slid aside and Marushka fell into his arms. She was weeping and bloody, her dress was torn and she had ugly purple bruises forming on her neck where Vasili had evidently choked her at some point.

"I didn't know what to do," she wailed as Benet moved her inside so the others could enter behind him. "I didn't mean to kill him. I was trying to end things gracefully tonight, give him back his ring and explain myself—" She ended on a gulp and a shaky breath, swaying in Benet's grasp.

"Show us," Kyden said, taking charge. "Where's the prince?"

"In the dining room." She pointed in the direction of the hall.

Eyes glowing, baring their fangs, Kyden and Dmitri headed that way. If Vasili was alive, he wouldn't be for long.

"I'll kill him if he isn't dead," Benet said with fervor., hoping the other Badari would keep the man alive for his vengeance. He might not have an inner beast the way they did, but he was raging to deliver retribution to Marushka's abuser.

She gave him a hug but her face was set in sad lines. "We'd better follow them."

When he arrived in the dining room, Benet was astounded by the scene of destruction. The tablecloth was half off the table, with dishes and food scattered

everywhere. The prince lay in a pool of blood, on his back, eyes staring sightlessly at the ceiling. A steak knife protruded from his gut.

“At first he was reasonable, kind even,” she said in a monotone.

“He invited me to dinner so we could part as friends. I was such a fool. I came, made a pretty speech, handed him the ring and he—he refused to take it. He grabbed me and said he’d have what he’d been promised and no dog of a Badari would get in his way.

We fought, he tore my dress and when he saw the golden circle on my shoulder, he went insane, I truly believe.

I told him it was our mate mark and he swore he’d cut it off my body.

He was choking me. I was close to blacking out and I knew he’d carry out his threat and rape me besides.

I fumbled for anything to strike back with and I felt the hilt of the steak knife.

I—I stabbed him three times before he let me go.

” She took a deep breath and Benet held her close.

“When I close my eyes I see the expression on his face as he fell.”

“I think we all agree he deserved to die,” Kyden said. “Right now we have to figure out what to do to minimize the danger to you and to us if we’re found here.”

“I’ll say I murdered him,” Dmitri announced. “Pretend I found out too late he’d lured Marushka here, I broke in to find him choking her and I killed him.”

“Which is incredibly gallant but even in Outlier the authorities must know a Badari doesn’t use a knife to kill.” Kyden flashed his talons. “We have better weapons. Will the authorities believe you?”

“Many truths are buried in Outlier cemeteries,” Dmitri said. “It’ll depend on what the Empress wants to happen. Marushka will be my witness.”

“No, no I won’t,” she said on the edge of hysteria. “I’m not going to allow you to take the blame for my actions. It was self-defense. I won’t be punished for defending myself.”

Dmitri came to her and Benet released his hold on her.

“Devochka, listen to me. The authorities are just as likely to charge you anyway if you don’t support my confession.

And the news and the gossips will have a field day dissecting your life and your relationship with Benet.

We need to get you out of here. I’ll wait for the police by myself. ”

“I’m not leaving her here in Outlier,” Benet said, “Not after this. We have to take her with us.” He glared at Kyden. He stripped off his tee shirt and gave it to Marushka, since her torn gown was gaping and revealing her lacy underthings.

“Thank you,” she said. “This is all such a mess?—”

There was pounding at the door and muffled shouts to open up.

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Before Benet could take any action, the door splintered open and a phalanx of police and private security guards rushed in, weapons at the ready.

“I killed him,” Benet said calmly, stepping in front of Marushka. She shrieked and tried to push him aside.

“He’s lying to save me,” she yelled at the police captain. “It was self-defense.”

“They’re both lying,” Dmitri roared at the top of his lungs, silencing everyone else. “I did it.”

Kyden shook his head but didn’t join in the mass confessions. Brandishing his blaster, the police officer turned to him. “What do you have to say?”

“Not a thing. We want to speak to a lawyer.” Kyden’s calm demeanor seemed to upset the police even more than the multiple confessions.

The Alpha focused on Benet and the two Outliers and pushed a burst of Alpha power at them, judging by the jolt Benet received to ensure compliance with the forthcoming order.

. “No one says another word until we have a lawyer.”

The four of them had been hustled off to an imperial prison, taken in separate groundcars, handcuffed and shackled.

Benet was outraged Marushka had been treated in such rude fashion but he was

helpless to do anything about the rough treatment.

Now they waited in a large cell, all four of them.

He was seated on one of the wooden shelves serving as beds and Marushka was using his lap as a pillow while she tried to nap. Water had been brought but no food.

Dmitri had insisted the four had to be allowed to remain together and the police captain eventually agreed.

No one knew exactly what the Badari's status or his authority might be and he did after all report directly to the Empress so the officer obviously took the safest route until more could be learned.

Until the Empress weighed in.

Dmitri was pacing the length of the spacious cell, which had obviously been designed to hold a large group of detainees.

Back and forth he went, much like a giant predatory cat, which he said his inner beast was.

Kyden leaned against one damp wall, motionless, deep in thought.

He hadn't been charged with anything but was detained as a material witness.

Benet speculated whether there was anything Kyden could do to get them help.

Did his relationship with Prince Pargen offer any hope in this dire situation?

Benet was determined to see Marushka walk free and he'd tell any story it took to

accomplish that end result.

He and Dmitri shared the same goal and they needed to put their heads together and come up with a unified story to present to the authorities, making it clear Marushka was a victim who was in shock and an unreliable witness to the night's events, having been assaulted and being present at a murder scene.

He wished the lawyer Kyden had demanded would show up.

Kyden had been allowed one call and told them quietly he'd left a message at the Five Systems Prince's office.

At this hour of the night and not knowing anyone else he could trust in Outlier there was nothing more to be done.

There was a rush of footsteps in the corridor outside the cell and excited voices, which was all the warning they had before a police officer unlocked the door.

Five imperial security guards swept in, weapons hot and for a minute Benet feared they were all going to be executed here and now.

He tried to shield Marushka and calculated the odds he and the other two Badari could fight their way out.

Suicide.

The guards forced them against the wall in a line and he was even more apprehensive they were going to be put to death in the next few minutes. Frantic futile ideas for saving Marushka's life flashed through his mind.

"Her Imperial Majesty Empress Ekateren," a new voice announced and the ruler

herself swept into the cell, followed by another phalanx of guards with weapons at the ready.

The empress was impeccably dressed in a slightly more restrained version of her massive Court gowns, wearing a satin and fur trimmed cape as well and with her hair done up in her usual complicated style of curls and jewels.

Her makeup was flawless and she was totally out of place in the grimy cell but fully at ease and in command.

Her face was inscrutable as she assessed them with one eyebrow raised.

Dmirtri bowed and Marushka curtsied, nearly losing her balance before Benet caught her. He and Kyden stood shoulder to shoulder as if about to enter combat in the arena.

“Do not waste my time,” she said in a sharp voice.

“I am aware Marushka stabbed the prince and I don’t wish to hear any more of these false confessions from anyone else.

The DNA evidence is quite clear who was and who was not involved.

This entire situation got quite out of hand and now it’s fallen to me to clean things up.

I warn you, people rarely like my methods.

” She pointed at Marushka. “Stand forward, girl.”

Benet wanted to hold her back but she slipped around him and stepped three paces in front of him and the others.

“I’m here, your majesty. I admit my guilt but it was self-defense. I was trying to break my engagement to him and Vasili took it badly. I’ll accept whatever punishment you deem proper but please let the others go. The Badari were only trying to help me.”

“Did I give you permission to speak?” Ekateren’s tone was harsh and her frown epic. She fiddled with her long ropes of pearls and tapped her toe impatiently. “What if I offer you freedom? I’ll execute the others and the whole affair will be hushed up.”

She can do it too , Dmitri said in Benet’s head.

Marushka swayed and rushed to Benet’s arms. “I’d rather die with my man.”

Throwing her head back the empress laughed as if she’d been told a good joke. “Of course you would. So dramatic, so young.” She beckoned to Marushka. “Come here, child, don’t be afraid. You’ve been dear to my heart for a long time.”

Glancing uncertainly at Benet, Marushka squared her shoulders and walked to the empress, the line of guards parting to allow her access. Ekateren embraced her in a hug and kissed her cheek in a grandmotherly fashion.

She’s as likely to slide a knife through the girl’s ribs, Kyden said grimly. If she does, we kill her. The guards can’t get all of us before we get her.

“Brace yourself,” Benet heard the empress whisper to Marushka right before she pushed the girl away.

“You are hereby declared a nonperson in Outlier, stripped of your titles,” she said, pointing at Marushka with a beringed finger.

“To be exiled forthwith from my empire, never to return. Your estate is forfeit, the

entire Nichevsky estate is forfeit and while I'm at it, Prince Vasili's estate is forfeit as well.

His parents should have curbed their foolish prince's ambitions and his dark desires.

They certainly shouldn't have allowed him to create this mess which I have to clean up.

" Looking Marushka up and down, she said impatiently, "Well, girl, do you understand the sentence?"

"Yes, your majesty."

Benet moved to her side and put his arm around her as she seemed about to faint.

"You will leave my empire on the first available outgoing ship, never to return, am I clear?" Ekateren turned her attention to Kyden. "I believe yours is the next ship with clearance. You will take her."

Every inch the Alpha, Kyden said, "It will be my pleasure."

"You'll all be taken to the spaceport under guard now," the empress said.

She moved to stand in front of Dmitri, who gazed at her with his eyes glowing.

Ekateren reached up and used the imperial seal on her ring to unlock the heavy gold chain.

"You are no longer an asset of the crown." She handed him the necklace and pendant.

"This is worth something, even outside my borders. Do with it as you will. I banish

you from Outlier. I condemn you to live with your people and dream of the glories you knew here. You must also travel on the first ship, with them, tonight as you're no longer welcome here. .”

The pack bond was wild with mixed emotions from Dmitri—exploding joy at being freed and sorrow at leaving his life in Outlier, and its Empress. The impact gave Benet a blinding headache until Kyden exerted his control to make the emotional storm bearable for the others along the link.

Dmitri went down on one knee. “Thank you, your majesty.”

She unbent a tiny fraction and Benet thought he saw a glint of sadness in her eyes.

“I hoped we might receive word of your people again. After all this time you deserve to live out your life with them.” Her whisper was barely audible.

Ekatereen touched his cheek with one fingertip and then swung around, strolling from the cell without another word or a backward glance, as if she was leaving a boring garden party.

Most of the guards exited the cell with her but five stayed behind to herd the prisoners out of the cell at gunpoint and down the corridor, outside to a groundcar park, where a large limousine waited.

A clerk handed out their personal possessions, which had been removed when the group arrived at the prison.

Benet helped Marushka into the car first and then he and the other two Badari followed.

He was barely seated when the vehicle was in motion, speeding through the streets,

surrounded by a fleet of police groundcars with sirens screaming.

The motorcade drove onto the landing field and to the remote space where Kyden's shuttle waited. As the group piled out of the car, Benet noticed a second shuttle and a lot of activity going on under bright lights. Talinn came up to them as the police got in their vehicles and drove away.

"Thank the goddess you're all here. I've got orders from the spaceport authorities for us to leave as soon as the last of the cargo is loaded," he said.

"Cargo?" Kyden asked.

"We've been inundated with cargo for the last few hours," Talinn told him.

"No idea what's in any of the crates but we scanned it and there's nothing explosive.

No shipping manifests and all the guys delivering the stuff will say it's by the order of the Empress.

The captain says we can make room for it all but he was pretty upset about the horses?—"

"Horses?" Marushka lifted her head from Benet's shoulder and showed interest in her surroundings for the first time since leaving the cell behind.

"Six of them, real beauties. I guess we've cleared part of the hold to house them for the trip. There was plenty of bedding and food sent with them. Two dogs too."

"I don't understand any of this," Kyden said, "But we're getting out of here while the going is good, before the empress rethinks her generosity."

“I need to see to the proper care of the animals,” Marushka said. “So yes, we need to hurry.”

Relieved she was showing an interest in events again, hopefully coming out of her shock a little, Benet took her by the elbow as the others moved toward the shuttle. “I’m sorry you didn’t get a chance to say goodbye to your father or anyone else but I’m grateful she took pity on us.”

Marushka shivered. “We’re so lucky. I think maybe losing her granddaughter to the man she loved might have touched Ekateren’s frozen heart a tiny bit.

To our benefit, for which I thank Alessandra.

” She bit her lip. “I won’t lie, it’s hard to leave my homeland with no notice but I’m going with you, the man I love, so I have no fears and I’m absurdly happy for an exiled nonperson with no estate to bring to marriage. ”

“You’re not a nonperson to me,” he said, pulling her in for a kiss. “You’re my mate, soon to be my wife. You’re my whole world. We’ll make a new life in the Five Systems. You can be a vet and I’ll keep my day job working for Kyden and we’ll be happy.”

“Ever after,” she said with a smile.

Not to interrupt this tender moment but hurry the hell up , Kyden said in his head. The Empress could change her mind any time according to Dmitri.

Benet took Marushka’s hand and they ran to the shuttle’s ramp. The other cargo shuttle lifted into the sky as the couple stepped into their flyer and a few minutes later they too were airborne, on their way to freedom and a future together neither had thought would ever be possible.

The lights on the ground grew more and more distant as the shuttle ascended to the huge Vasclavian ship waiting in orbit. Benet thanked the Great Mother for all her help, from Kyden finding a way to rescue him to meeting his mate and bringing her home.

It might not have been pretty but everything worked out and they were leaving Outlier alive with no regrets. The future held infinite possibilities now and he and Marushka would make the most of them together.

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Two months later, in the Five Systems...

Benet stood in the access tunnel of the arena, listening to the crowd.

He was ready for action, in his standard uniform, red cloak thrown over one shoulder, breastplate gleaming, sword and shield ready.

There was another event first, however, and he edged forward to watch.

Marushka was in the House's box in the stands, with Elara and the other mates and he wished he and his mate could share this moment in person.

He settled for sending her a pulse of affection through the mate bond.

The gate across from him opened and trumpets blew a welcoming blast as Dmitri swept into the space.

He was driving a modified chariot, drawn by a troika of three horses—a bay, a black and a pure white—and he wore the standard uniform as well.

His silver hair streamed in the wind and he looked like a demigod at the very least, as if he could shoot lightning from his fingertips.

Handling the reins with one massive hand, he waved at the cheering crowd as the chariot embarked on its first circuit of the arena.

At the end of the circle he climbed onto the rim of the chariot, which had been

specially modified in a way invisible to the crowd and as they screamed their appreciation, he stepped onto the backs of the two outside horses, one foot on each.

The harness to the chariot severed, with arena stagehands rushing out to move the vehicle out of the way but the audience's attention was on Dmitri, making his second pass around the sands standing on the backs of the galloping horses.

He dismounted with a complex tumbling move and ran to face off with ten of Kyden's best intermediate gladiators for a mock battle in Outlier style.

Benet had choreographed the entire thing, which was one of his skills Kyden prized highly.

He had an ability to train the men to do elaborate stunt routines which appeared dangerous to the paying customers but which were really safe as long as everyone hit their marks and knew their cues.

Dmitri had been adamant he didn't wish to engage in real combat ever again and Kyden had honored the request. Dmitri's ability with the horses was an extra plus—this trio had been among the six highly trained steeds the Empress had sent into exile with Dmitri and Marushka, along with her two dogs.

That wasn't all she sent. Kyden had rented a massive storage space for all the crates which had been loaded onto the Vasclavian ship and Marushka had spent days sorting through the contents, with help from Benet and the other Badari mates.

The cargo was an insane mixture of household furnishings, dishes, priceless works of art, fabulous jewels dumped in willynilly, delicate statues wrapped hastily in Marushka's billowing court dresses for which she now had no use, books, several carpets...

it looked to Benet like someone had ransacked the estate house and her apartment and

scooped up whatever they could.

Marushka pounced on her veterinary instruments with glee.

Elara was helping her deal with the stodgy Five Systems bureaucracy to become licensed as a veterinarian.

Kyden had already hired her to care for the six horses the empress had sent.

Benet found Marushka weeping in the storage space one day and when he sat to comfort her she showed him a scribbled note.

“It’s from Vlada, the housekeeper,” she said between sobs.

“She wishes us well but she’ll miss me. She was like a mother to me—I wish I’d been able to say goodbye to her at least.”

“So she packed all this?” he asked, waving at the piles of items and the as yet unopened crates still to be sorted.

“I’m assuming so, yes, with the help of the staff.

Ekatereen must have given orders to send as many of my things with me into exile as they could in the hours we sat in the dreary cell.

And they sent a lot of family heirlooms as well.

I suppose Vlada included those because the empress was declaring the estate forfeit to the crown.

I hope Ekatereen left my poor father a pittance at least but he wasn’t in good favor with her.

And he'll gamble it away if she did. I suppose I sound like a terrible daughter but Dmitri is the father of my heart—my own parent used me for collateral and sold me to Vasili. ”

Out of all the incredible bounty so far Marushka had only moved a few things into their quarters at the House of Badari.

She'd taken a small painting of her mother and a few knickknacks.

Benet planned to build them a house soon but even then there'd never be enough room for all the items the loyal servants had pillaged on Marushka's behalf.

Kyden had been buying up land around the House with plans for his gladiators to build their own homes when the time came and Benet's was to be the first. Kyden was adamant the pack and his extended 'family' at the House of Badari would remain in close proximity. Benet had no issues with the decree.

The crates marked for Dmitri were packed more neatly and encompassed the entire contents of his apartment at the imperial palace.

All his furniture, books, paintings, clothing and other possessions had been sent.

Benet privately assumed the empress had planned all along to send him to the Five Systems with Kyden.

There were also several of the messily packed crates from the estate for him.

Dmitri had been thrilled to find the entire contents of his kitchen, from spices to utensils to specialized cooking vessels.

He and Arinna, the Admin who ran the physical plant of the House of Badari were at odds over the kitchen right now in fact because Dmitri wanted to set himself up there

and cook, while Arinna argued he couldn't be allowed to upset or displace the actual cook they paid an exorbitant salary to feed the Master, his mate-wife, the gladiators and the staff.

Between the two of them Marushka and Dmitri had so much stuff, they'd decided to open a museum to display the best of the items. Jaine, Renny's mate-wife had been on her way to research Outlier at the time she was kidnapped by pirates and taken to an arena on a far-off planet where Renny had rescued her.

She was a highly trained historian with several degrees and published scholarly papers in the Sectors and she'd agreed to curate the museum and the exhibits.

Not much was known about Outlier and the assumption was, when the duo pitched this idea to Kyden, that people would flock to see the art, the dresses, the jewels and other items and learn more about the highly reclusive empire.

Jaine was possibly even more excited about the idea than Dmitri and Marushka.

Another surprise had happened just this past week when a dapper gentleman from the Bank of New Switzerland showed up at the House and requested a meeting with Marushka and Dmitri.

Elara had allowed him to borrow her office and about an hour later when the man departed as mysteriously as he'd arrived, Marushka and Dmitri informed the others in the inner Badari circle an anonymous person had set up an account for each of them at the bank and deposited ten million credits apiece.

The bank rep had assured them there was no way to ascertain the person behind the generous gift but he winked and doodled an imperial crown on a sheet of paper while he was talking.

For now Marushka was allowing the funds to sit and draw interest. Benet wanted her

to use them for herself and their children, if they were fortunate enough to have a family.

She was considering donating some to charity and Elara was identifying options for her.

Whatever his mate decided was fine with Benet.

He was wealthy in his own right as a gladiator who won top prizes routinely and then there was also his salary from Kyden for the work he did as the second in command.

Elara was also planning a wedding for Benet and Marushka, to take place at her family's vast estate in two months.

Being Claimed mates was the ultimate bond for a Badari but Benet had always wanted the human ceremony to tie Marushka to him as well and she was enthusiastic about having a wedding among her new friends and family.

He'd enlisted Elara and Jaine to find out from Marushka what kind of engagement ring she wanted, thankfully not a stone as big and flashy as Vasili had given her, and had proposed to her in the garden at the House not long ago.

Heart full of gratitude for all the good things which had come his way since he last stood in the arena, Benet thought about last night, when he'd gone to the grove of the Great Mother which Kyden had created on the grounds of the House.

The area was off-limits to anyone but the Badari and their mates but Benet had been given access as soon as he returned to his home.

He'd gone to thank the goddess for bringing him and Marushka to safety and a happy outcome, and Dmitri as well.

The grove was unaccountably peaceful and he'd fallen asleep.

When he woke after a few hours, he couldn't remember any dreams or visions of the Great Mother but he felt tranquil and settled, as he hadn't truly done since he'd been a free man before, fighting for his original home worlds.

He'd found everything he'd been looking for and more and Benet was eager to experience the new adventures of being mated and being a Badari Gladiator in more than just name.

The spectacle had ended. Dmitri summoned his horses and did a flashy mount to their backs, thundering out of the arena much as he'd entered.

The applause was thunderous. The ten men he'd 'vanquished' rose to their feet and bowed and Dmitri drove his chariot into the arena for a final wave to the crowd.

Benet was more than satisfied with the performance and the way the audience received it. He had a few mental notes but nothing major.

Attendants raked the sand hastily and then the trumpet sounded again, with the official fanfare for the march of the gladiators.

Benet stepped out of the tunnel and onto the sands, leading the House of Badari to the ruler's box for the oath.

Prince Pargen sat there today and Benet would gladly swear allegiance to him.

There was to be a private dinner later that evening for the prince and the inner circle of Badari and mates at the Vasclavian estate and Benet was keenly anticipating his chance to thank the royal for his behind the scenes help in obtaining Benet's freedom from Outlier.

But for now he was going to fight for the honor of the House of Badari and to show off for his mate, if the truth be told. Marushka sent him a pulse of love through the mate bond as he lifted his sword to recite the gladiators' oath along with all the other men and women on the sands today.

As he marched to his starting position for the first round of non-lethal fights on the program, Benet knew himself to be unbeatable and content with his life.

Soon enough he'd resign from the arena life as Kyden had and spend all his time on his duties running the portions of the House of Badari which were his domain, but he intended to give his best efforts at every opportunity until then.

He raised his shield and pointed his sword at the highly ranked opponent facing him, who did likewise. The men nodded a greeting to each other and then as the horns blew, they stepped into the ritualized violence that was their stock in trade, their expertise and the audience's passion.

Benet the Badari Gladiator was home.

Thank you for reading BENET!