

READING SAMPLE

*To Steal a Moon*

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The *Korda* hung in suspension above Darban, the massive primary world around Thuban at the heart of the Draco Expanse. Bálok stood at the window of his well-appointed private quarters watching the gray-brown banded planet beneath the long transport vessel and his allotted escort of ten warships. For thousands of years, Darban had been the seat of power for the deteriorating Drahkian Empire, home to Emperor Tashek and the ruling house of Goran Drahks as well as the billions from other reptilian races who served them.

Bálok shifted his gaze out across Darban's upper atmosphere where he spotted dozens of luxury transports and warship discs holding orbital positions designated by the Emperor's ground personnel. Above the *Korda* just within sight hovered one of several small imperial dish destroyers deployed around the planet to ensure the temporary truce between the numerous hostile houses attending the Emperor's Tournament. And in orbit out beyond the rim of the planet's faint rings loomed one of the last moon-sized destroyers in the Emperor's fleet as a pointed reminder of exactly who held absolute supremacy over all of them.

The reptilian nobleman let out a long, disgusted sigh. He had little desire to be here. As head of one of the largest elite houses of crested, lizard-like Ka Drahks, subservient only to the diminishing numbers of short-horned, whitish brown-skinned Goran Drahks in the Empire, Bálok had more important matters to attend to than satisfying the whim of a bored, bloodthirsty ruler. Since his father and older brothers had perished in bitter conflict with other houses, he had taken firm hold of the reins over the entire Eltanan system which his family had controlled for several long-lived generations, steering his

house and lucrative warship and arms businesses around a long list of potential enemies through skillful coercion, manipulation, and, when necessary, strategic military force. With multiple situations back home on Sakkara desperately needing his attention, he had no time for this capricious command performance on Darban.

Unfortunately, his wide-spread acclaim for hand-to-hand combat and bloody kills in the ring must have caught Tashek's attention when these ill-conceived games were arranged. The imperial orders were clear: the best noble fighter, along with one highborn hostage to ensure non-aggression against the crown, were to be provided by each of the top hundred ranking houses within the Empire for Tashek's entertainment, all hostilities suspended. His personal appearance in the lists had been "strongly advised."

Bálok held no illusions about the "non-violent" nature of these games—quite the contrary. The warring factions would each see this as an outrageous opportunity to flaunt, scheme, insult, and murder each other, and their jaded ruler had undoubtedly contrived the entire event in order to stir the ever-volatile pot purely for perverse personal pleasure. Bálok wondered idly how many of Tashek's subjects would leave Darban in one piece.

It was not a battlefield to his liking, but he would make it work to his favor in order to strengthen his position with Tashek and within the Empire. There were a good number of houses already terrified of his armies and quite a few more he could pressure through business, not to mention that his size and fighting skills in the ring were paralleled by few. He fully intended to win the tournament by whatever means necessary. It was rumored that the prize was to be the use of one of Tashek's powerful dish destroyers for an unspecified amount of time, a strategic asset which he could very well make use of and, more importantly, needed to keep out of the hands of the worst warmongers as well as the enemies of his house.

But the far more tantalizing lure of the Emperor's Tournament was deeply personal, the secret of which he carefully kept private. He was certain that the one man he needed to kill would either be in the lists or attending the games. He had waited centuries for the opportunity to get close to his nemesis without waging full-scale war. He had been more than patient, methodically eliminating any rival who interfered with the extensive business of his house, biding his time, watching for the most favorable moment to

strike. By ordering Bálók's presence on Darban, Tashek just may have handed him the opening he craved to sink his claws into the flesh of the vile man who had robbed him of reason.

"We have clearance through Darban's prime portal in ten minutes, Lord," a quiet voice called from the doorway. "Your shuttle is waiting."

"Good. And the rest?"

"The shuttles for the five hundred spectators you approved from the *Korda* and ten warships will descend within the hour. Commander Zirik will be in charge of the large group of Eltanin officers while we're on the surface. Everyone else aboard the orbiting ships will be able to watch the tournament on screen in the commons and the *Korda* will relay the signal back to the seven worlds in Eltanin."

Bálók turned toward the lead captain of his personal guard who stood just inside the doorway with his eyes deferentially lowered. "Keep everyone on tight reins while we're down there, Jimat. You're in charge of security for this whole affair. I don't want to hear of a single incident caused by my people."

"Understood. It's going to be a tinder box, Lord. All the ranking nobility in one place. They've limited our numbers, but allowed weapons," the captain grumbled in frustration. "Violence between houses is a given."

"I know—we've all been set up. That's why I kept any hotheads off the list to attend in person. Spread my orders to Zirik and the other commanders to keep well away from Nakkár's people or anyone else we've tangled with recently."

Jimat nodded, his crest flexing automatically at the mention of Nakkár's inept but irritating raids on the Eltanin trade routes a decade prior. "As you wish, Lord."

"Needless to say, keep the shuttles manned with pilots and my best surgeon, and heavily guarded at all times. We need to be ready to get out quickly if we have to."

Bálók walked across the room and paused in front of his most loyal officer. "I want *you* near me at all times, Jimat," he said softly, "as far as it's permitted. Make sure you ferret out where the hostages will be held. Your primary orders are to take care of Shim—find him and get him out—no matter what I do."

Jimat stared at the floor, aware of the unspoken meaning in Bálók's words. "I understand, Lord," he replied, bowing his head as Bálók strode past him into the hall.

With Jimat at his back, Bálók stopped at the next suite and opened the door. "Shim!"

Pulling on a finely-cut dark blue jacket, Bálók's only legitimate son hurried from the bedchamber and halted in front of him with his eyes lowered. "I'm ready, Lord."

*I'm sure you're anything but*, Bálók thought to himself as he sent a quick glance over Shim's expensive clothing, gold rings, and soft physique. It was his fault that his son was so weak, so unprepared to face the harsh realities of Drahkian rule. He'd never pushed him into the ring or the ranks of his armies like he had his numerous bastard sons. Instead, he'd kept him sequestered, mated him with his own half-sister Rayza to produce legal heirs, and indulged him with any kind of entertainment the man wanted—drugs, women, slaves, fancy technology—just to keep him safe. It was completely irrational and exceedingly foolish.

And now on the brink of being handed over as a hostage in a high-stakes political face-off, his son radiated fear, with good reason. The mongrels on Darban would feast well off of someone so easily intimidated, and if anything happened to Bálók, in the ring or out, Shim wouldn't live to see the end of the day.

"Shim, listen carefully," he began. "The Emperor has no reason to harm you and I have no intention of giving him one, but at any point, if Jimat comes for you, do exactly what he tells you. Understood?"

Shim glanced nervously at the captain of the elite guard and dropped his eyes again, his gray skin taking on an ashen cast. "Yes, Lord."

"Let's go." Bálók led the way to the lift and descended to the lower flight deck where his personal shuttle stood open and waiting. The nine best of Jimat's elite guards in dark green trousers and sleeveless shirts bearing Bálók's insignia stood at attention with eyes lowered and crests splayed. Unlike his son, Bálók cared nothing for lavish clothing and was dressed in the same garb as his officers, the grayish-green of his finely pebbled skin set off only by the serpentine gold bands on his upper arms.

The Eltanin lord climbed aboard the sleek white vessel and seated himself in the forward private cabin with Shim and Jimat while the guardsmen boarded to the rear. Within minutes, the shuttle and its escort of four heavy fighters disembarked from the *Korda* and skimmed above Darban's upper atmosphere, heading for the wide expanse of the prime portal which would allow passage through the planet's complex energy grid.

Dropping through the portal, the party descended in a sweeping arc until it reached the heavily polluted lower atmosphere through which the geometric patchwork of

Darban's worn and depleted land mass could barely be made out stretching from horizon to horizon. If it weren't for the extensive underground network of tunnels, cities, and waterworks lacing the interior of the planet, Bállok doubted that the crowded, crumbling metropolises covering most of the surface could sustain themselves for long.

Directly below, the structures and roadways of the sprawling capitol of Kish became visible through the haze, and within a heavily fortified, walled sector, Bállok's eyes scanned over the palace towers, halls, living quarters, extensive forested grounds, numerous high-rise guest facilities, stockades, military garrisons, arena, and private landing field of the vast imperial district.

The broad expanse of the airfield was already dotted with hundreds of shuttles and fighters brandishing the distinctive marks of the Drahkian noble houses. Vehicles and ground crews swarmed the pavement around them while the dark hulks of a number of Tashek's warships perched like silent guard dogs on the outer perimeter.

Bállok's shuttle and escort were guided into a designated position where two vehicles and an armed party of Ka Drahks in the Emperor's colors stood waiting at attention. As Bállok and his party descended the ramp from the shuttle, a man in a richly tailored royal purple dress coat stepped forward with his eyes respectfully lowered. At nine plus feet in height, Bállok towered over everyone around him by six or more inches and a subtle ripple of reaction spread through the Emperor's soldiers.

"Lord Bállok, the Emperor extends his hospitality and welcome to you and your men," the emissary began.

Bállok gave him the barest of nods in acknowledgment and waited for the man to continue.

"You and your personal guard will be housed in the palace. The remainder of the Eltanin attendees will be allotted quarters in the arena district after they arrive. And your hostage—" The man paused, waiting for the nobleman to provide the information he sought.

"My son, Shim, will serve for my house," Bállok responded flatly.

"Yes, Lord," the emissary replied, turning his bowed head toward the younger man behind Bállok. "Lord Shim, these men will escort you to your private suite," he said with a wave of his hand as four soldiers stepped forward.

Bálok stole a sidelong look at his son and saw, to his credit, that Shim's face was a mask of stony aloofness. The soldiers led him to one of the waiting vehicles, hoisted his bag into the trunk, and sped out of sight. Bálok sent a quick glance to Jimat who was carefully scrutinizing the direction the vehicle had taken.

"If you would come this way, Lord Bálok," the emissary directed, motioning toward a long black luxury vehicle, "we will take you to your quarters. Your guard will—"

"I'll ride with my men," Bálok countered bluntly, walking straight through the stunned group of soldiers toward the large transport parked behind the black sedan.

"As you wish, Lord," the startled emissary muttered behind him.

"Bring the bags and provisions—now," Bálok called out as he reached the transport. As soon as the baggage and crates from the shuttles were loaded into the black sedan and transport, he climbed into the back of the heavy open vehicle, followed by Jimat and his guardsmen.

The party drove off the landing field and headed down an avenue leading around the enormous arena to the walled grounds of the sprawling palace directly adjacent. Stopping outside one of the heavily guarded side entrances for clearance, the party was quickly waved through the checkpoint and moved on past the scores of troops and vehicles stationed in clusters along the outer palace wall.

The transport drove into the palace complex of low-slung buildings and came to a halt in front of an ornately decorated entrance. The emissary appeared at the back of the transport and waited patiently for the Eltanin party to climb out before bowing and motioning for Bálok to follow him into the building past the armed sentries. The short hallway leading in from the entrance joined a central corridor where the man paused in front of an open door.

"Lord Bálok, the corridor to your left leads to a secure underground passage into the arena. Down toward the right past several suites is the entrance to a large courtyard which borders a wide hallway leading into the central palace. If you continue straight down this corridor, you will come to a hallway leading out to the hunting grounds."

The man turned to hand a small device to Jimat. "You may reprogram the security codes for your suite to your own requirements. This way," he motioned, leading Bálok through the door into a comfortably appointed lounging area. Six small female reptilian servants in plain uniforms stood to the side with heads lowered.

“The front chambers off of this lounge will serve your personal guard. Those at the rear are for your private use, Lord.” Stepping through a door at the back of the lounge, Bálok was shown into a sumptuous set of open rooms which surrounded a high-walled garden with a long bathing pool.

The emissary walked to a locked side room and brought out a dozen scantily clad female Ka Drahk, human, and feline adults and girls to stand in a line with downcast eyes for the nobleman’s inspection. “For your pleasure, consumption, or anything else you may desire, Lord. If you prefer males, or any other species—”

Bálok glanced at the trembling figures. “These will do,” he acknowledged with a curt nod before he turned and walked back into the front room. Behind him, the emissary herded the females back into the locked chamber before he reappeared and headed for the outer door where he paused with a bowed head.

“The Emperor requires your attendance this evening in the primary throne room, Lord Bálok. The schedule for the games and nightly pleasures is included on the device with the security codes. Is there anything else I can do for you or your men?”

“No, that will be all.”

As soon as the door latched, Bálok nodded to Jimat. With silent hand signals, the captain and his officers moved through the suite, scouring every inch of the rooms for hidden entrances, traps, listening devices, cameras, or any other possible security threat. After disabling several hidden sensors and transmitters, one of the officers set up a small, localized scanner and disruption device while the rest of the guardsmen busied themselves with the bags and gear.

“All clear, Lord,” Jimat confirmed with a single nod.

“Good. All of you, be ready to accompany me to the Emperor’s ‘festivities’ in four hours,” Bálok ordered as he withdrew to his private chambers. Closing the door and leaning back heavily against it, he let out a slow, even breath, working to dispel the cloud of foreboding that hovered at the edge of his awareness. The next three days of fighting and pandering to the Emperor would sorely test his wits as well as his patience, but he felt reasonably certain that as long as he kept a level head, he ought to be able to dance around the pitfalls of Tashek’s odious extravaganza, find and kill his nemesis, and get them all out of this hive of hornets alive.

Shaking off his pensive thoughts, he turned his attention to his personal rituals in order to prepare himself for the evening's dramatics. After thoroughly sating himself with the most voluptuous of the females provided, he soaked in the bathing pool and took a long, drenching shower, followed by a languid doze under the heat lamps on the high recliner in the bedchamber.

When he awoke, he dressed and rearmed before opening a small vial of aurum, inhaling a carefully measured dose of the expensive powdered gold in order to keep his flesh in peak receptivity over the next several days. The opportunities to feed off of spikes of fear and bloodlust in the arena would be plentiful and he would need all the sustenance he could garner to keep his edge under the harsh demands of the ring.

Reemerging from his quarters, he strode through the outer chamber issuing orders to two of the guards who would remain behind on duty in the suite. "Answer the door to no one and have the servants clean my chambers while I'm out." Jimat and the seven other guards joined him in the corridor and fell into step behind him as he headed for the main palace. The halls were teeming with well-dressed noblemen and armed escorts as well as servants and imperial soldiers who gave the towering Eltanin lord and his guard a wide berth. The tingling in Bálok's sensitized skin told him the level of tension in the air was already running dangerously high.

The party turned the corner into the open courtyard just as a group of eight bulky figures in billowing navy blue capes and jackets entered the far side from the direction of the palace. Bálok recognized the charcoal gray skin and elaborate crest of Tirgal, ruler of the Aldhiba, Aldhibain, and Dziban systems whose clans carried traces of old Sirian wolf blood. Tirgal's bearing was guarded, but he adjusted his path to approach Bálok as soon as he saw him.

The nobleman greeted him with a slight nod as he brought his party to a halt in the middle of the courtyard. "Lord Bálok."

"Lord Tirgal," Bálok acknowledged. His business dealings with the Aldhiban leader had always been direct and seamless, but he kept his mask of reserve in place while he gauged the man's intent.

"You fight in the ring tomorrow," Tirgal stated. "Your formidable reputation precedes you, Bálok."

"I'm here," he answered noncommittally.



“The winner of this tournament will walk away with a decided edge over adversaries.”

“All the more reason to make sure the edge stays out of the wrong hands,” Bálók replied coolly.

“My thoughts exactly,” Tirgal nodded, apparently satisfied with Bálók’s answer. “The Emperor passes out weapons of mass destruction as if they were toys,” he declared with barely restrained contempt. “If one of his twisted cronies wins the destroyer, the rest of us might as well start counting our days.”

“I have no intention of allowing that to happen.”

Tirgal’s light gray eyes appraised him carefully for several moments. “Have you seen Izar?”

Bálók shook his head. “Not yet,” he replied, wondering if there was something significant behind Tirgal’s reference to the powerful Lord of Rastaban whose house was easily the largest and most extensively connected of all the Ka houses within the Empire. Izar’s standing as a top fighter was widely known, making him the most likely candidate to represent his vast house, but it was also common knowledge that Tashek despised him and considered him a dangerous threat to his power.

“The Emperor may have kept him out on purpose,” Tirgal muttered, letting out a long, disgruntled breath before waving a hand toward the man next to him. “Daga, my grandson, will stand for our clans. He’s a skilled fighter and strong leader—and a man worthy of staying alive,” he finished pointedly.

Bálók shifted his yellow eyes to the younger man who was regarding him with avid interest. “Daga,” he acknowledged, nodding briefly.

The sound of a factious voice broke across the courtyard from the palace hallway. A tall Ka Drahk with salmon skin flanked by four guardsmen had come to a halt as a scrawny, foppishly dressed Goran walked past them, laughing mockingly. The crests of the Ka party bristled with indignation as the smaller man hurled barbed words in their direction. Two of the bodyguards growled and lurched toward the sneering Goran, but the nobleman held up a hand to stay them as a group of palace guards rushed forward to surround the dandy.

“Lom,” Tirgal snarled in a low voice, “one of Tashek’s great-grandsons and about as stable as his grandsire.”

“And the Ka?” Bálok inquired softly.

“Ushak, head of a small but strong house that holds the single world around Kovara. I believe he joined the Altain Collective who answer to Shahr of Altais.”

Bálok nodded at the mention of the unsanctioned group of smaller houses sprinkled throughout Draco that Shahr had gathered under his wing. “Fighter?”

“Yes, a damned good one. He’ll be in the games with you tomorrow.”

The Ka lord walked silently away down the hall with his men while Lom screeched insults at them long after the group had disappeared from sight. The Goran prince sniffed several times and blinked rapidly, his glazed eyes not quite focused on anything around him as he was subtly nudged into motion by the purple-clad soldiers in the direction of the palace.

Tirgal returned his gaze to Bálok. “So it begins,” he murmured. “Are you headed for the throne room?”

At Bálok’s nod, the Aldhiban lord shook his head with a weary sigh. “Watch your back, Bálok. Make sure you know who’s behind you.” As Tirgal moved away, Daga tipped his head and followed his grandfather and guards on through the courtyard toward their private quarters.

Bálok exchanged a long look with Jimat and started off toward the wide hallway, turning and taking it all the way into the heart of the palace. When they reached the primary artery running across the front of the building, they followed the stream of richly dressed gentry and military personnel swarming down the marble corridor into a high-ceilinged vestibule which opened onto Tashek’s court. Having little patience for crowds or inane conversation, Bálok stalked directly through the milling throng toward the high, open double doors of the throne room, forcing anyone in front of him to step aside to avoid an encounter with the forbidding lord.

Bálok paused at the doors and glanced over his shoulder at Jimat whose eyes clouded with confusion and a touch of apprehension. A high corridor leading off to the left was apparently the only way to gain entry into the throne room within.

“It’s a maze,” Bálok commented dryly.

“For security or entertainment?” Jimat wondered aloud as he scanned the crowded passage in front of them.

“Both. I was here eons ago with my father, but I’m sure the pattern has been altered many times since then. Stay sharp.”

Bálok headed into the corridor, winding his way around walls and people until he reached the first of what he knew would be many rooms along the route offering every distraction imaginable—wine, a wide assortment of drugs, painted courtesans, pens of non-reptilian children. Along the walls and in the dimly lit side chambers were heated recliners and tables, covered with copulating pairs or groups, or utilized by those feeding on live flesh. Naked slaves of all ages from many races moved through the crowds offering trays of consumables or sexual pleasure to each of the Emperor’s guests, while plain-clothed servants quietly carried away the bodies or remains of any who had been dismembered or discarded.

The noise and debauchery of the feasting nobles increased dramatically the further they traveled—and so did the stench. Bálok avoided eye contact with anyone who approached him, ignoring solicitations or offerings as he moved methodically through the maze. Only once did an obstreperous pair of hopped-up Gorans threaten to get close to him, but two quick, well-aimed jabs from Jimat dropped both men unconscious to the floor.

In the last of the feasting rooms, Bálok’s eyes landed on a familiar figure coming out of one of the back rooms zipping up his pants. At a quick signal, two of his men headed off to round up the minor lord while Bálok moved on into the crowded corridor to wait. Seconds later, the quivering Ka nobleman appeared in front of him, flanked by the Eltanin guards.

Bálok peered down at the man for several long moments and soaked up his fear before addressing him. “Erchek,” he began smoothly. “How are the battles with your cousin progressing?”

“Uh, very well, Lord Bálok. Your warships are superb! The insurgence has nearly been eradicated,” the man stammered, eager to please the looming Eltanin lord.

Bálok knew quite the opposite was true since he was also supplying Erchek’s cousin with ships. “Good. If you ever want any more of my stock, Erchek, I strongly suggest that you are not late with your payments.” It was widely known that Bálok had little tolerance for deviations from business agreements and backed up his interests with swift recourse.

The nobleman nodded, his anxious trembling rising dramatically. “Yes, Lord Bálók, of course.”

“Do you have a fighter in the games?” he asked with veiled courtesy.

“My nephew—he’s very good, but I’m sure he’ll be no threat to you, Lord Bálók!”

“Excellent—see that he isn’t. I’m sure we’ll do business again, Erchek.”

“Yes, indeed, Lord Bálók!” As the nobleman bowed deeply in front of him, Bálók turned away and walked on through the corridor, confident that he now had one less opponent to bog him down in the games.

Crossing the threshold into the throne room, Bálók took one look at the dense throng of velveted noblemen and turned to his guardsmen. “Jimat, come with me. The rest of you wait back here along the wall until I’m finished.” Moving forward past a party on its way out, he stepped quickly aside into the shadow of a marble column to scan the sea of faces. The vast chamber was packed with courtiers and the highest ranking Goran officials within Tashek’s extensive house, each draped with opulent clothing and enough jewels to finance a small invasion.

To his left a short distance from where he stood, the abrasive voice of Majah, grand-nephew of Tashek and Lord of the Tyl binary system, rose above the group clustered around him. Easily the most vicious of the Goran royalty, Majah’s history of wiping out entire houses on the smallest whim made him dangerous to anyone who displeased him, and by the sound of it, he was busy cementing that reputation with anyone who would listen.

Several Ka nobles Bálók recognized were scattered throughout the room, standing in clusters with their bodyguards, casting furtive looks at rivals or sizing up potential opponents. Most he’d had business dealings with and some he wished to avoid altogether. He searched carefully for the face of one man in particular, but the distinctive features of his bitter enemy were nowhere to be found.

Bálók stifled a shudder as the unmistakable sensation of being watched himself ran up his spine. With a subtle hand gesture, he signaled Jimat to be on alert and sent his eyes darting into the shadows on the outskirts of the room, but as quickly as it had come, the sensation disappeared. With a grimace of exasperation, he moved out into the crowd in order to fulfill his command appearance before the Emperor so he could leave and return to his quarters. From the instant he became visible, the sound of Majah’s

braying followed and paced him as he made his way toward the wide, stepped dais at the back of the lofty central aisle.

The Emperor's beady gray eyes locked onto him with a feverish gleam long before he made it to the front. Tashek was draped over his golden throne, clothed in a richly tailored dark purple dress coat splattered with dried blood. Stray pieces of flesh littered the dais around the base of the throne and his bejeweled hand clutched a goblet containing what was most certainly not wine. Not a large man, Tashek's stubby horns and coarsely pebbled skin were grayish white, marking him as the highest of the elite Gorans—the last of an inbred, dying breed of depraved, misogynist blood drinkers. Bálok noted with inward surprise that the Drahk who had ruled them all for the past three thousand Darbanian years was starting to age, his tissue apparently unable to fight off decrepitude, in spite of the high amount of aurum in his system.

With a raise of his hand, Bálok signaled for Jimat to wait at the front of the crowd while he stepped forward into the empty space at the foot of the steps below the dais. A buzz went through the Drahks in the immediate vicinity as he knelt on one knee, bowed his crested head, and waited to be acknowledged. Tashek sat and watched him in silence for several moments.

“It's been a long time, Bálok.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Your father provided me with many fine ships. Too bad he had such a hot temper and got himself blown to bits,” the Emperor scoffed. “I hear you have a far more level head than your father and two brothers.”

“I'm still alive, Your Majesty.”

“Yes, indeed, Bálok, but you have no wife and only one heir—very precarious for such a powerful house. Let's hope nothing happens to your son while you're here. It would be most disastrous for your line.”

Bálok chafed inwardly at the open taunt, but he prudently swallowed his pride and fed Tashek what he wanted to hear. “I'm here to please you, Your Majesty.”

“Indeed,” Tashek hissed with an audible exhale of breath. The Emperor's clothing rustled as he rose, set his goblet aside, and walked forward to the edge of the dais.

“I also hear that you are quite the bloody beast in the ring, Bálok,” he said with a quavering voice as he began a slow descent of the steps. “Perhaps we will be fortunate

enough to witness a demonstration of your highly lauded rending abilities—that is, if anyone besides me is foolish enough to goad you,” he quipped mockingly as laughter fluttered through the bystanders. He paused halfway down the steps regarding his kneeling subject. “You may rise. I want to look at you.”

Bálok came to his feet and stood with his arms loose, his boots shoulder-width apart. He kept his eyes lowered as the Emperor descended the rest of the way down to the floor for a leisurely perusal of his muscular form.

“Mmmm, prime physique ... quite a feast for the eyes,” Tashek murmured silkily as he circled, inspecting every inch of the Eltanin lord with calculated appreciation. “And so controlled. I wonder—what would it take to break the great Bálok’s infamous composure?” he wheedled, deliberately grazing his fingertips down Bálok’s chest and stomach as he came to a stop in front of him.

“If you’re as skilled as you are well-formed, any man in the ring will have a difficult time standing up to you. Majah!” he screeched loudly without taking his eyes from Bálok. “Do you see this? You have your work cut out for you if you want that destroyer,” he shouted, laughing maliciously as he turned and walked up several steps. “And so will Bardur, my great-grandson who will fight for my house,” he said with a casual wave at a brawny man standing with a cluster of other Gorans at the far side of the steps.

“As for you, Bálok,” he mused, turning around to peer down at him again from a higher position on the steps, “if you win my tournament, you’ll get to know my cousin Ulgeb quite well. Rall, where’s your father?” he asked a burly man with a haughty expression near the front of the courtiers to Bálok’s left.

“Over there somewhere,” the man answered with a wave toward the side of the hall.

“Ulgeb, where are you?” Tashek called over the crowd.

A grunt came from the direction of one of the columns. “I’m here—what?”

“Get over here,” Tashek snapped irritably and waited impatiently as a corpulent man of moderate height made his way through the velveteed gentry dragging a bleeding human boy by the wrist. Unperturbed by the Emperor’s waspishness, Ulgeb paused at the base of the steps and looked over at Bálok, raking him with his eyes while a twisted smile formed on his face.

“Yes, I thought you might enjoy this,” Tashek muttered and shifted his gaze back to Bálok. “My cousin, Lord of Edasich, is Grand Admiral of the destroyer fleet and will be

in charge of deploying the prize for whoever wins. Curry his favor and I'm sure he'll make it worth your while—whether you win or not,” he added with a short laugh.

Clamping down tightly on his personal revulsion, Bálok tipped his head slightly in Ulgeb's direction. “Understood, Your Majesty,” he stated without inflection.

“Good, good,” the Emperor muttered and ascended the last few steps to the top of the dais, seating himself once more on his cushioned throne. Picking up his goblet, he took several long draws before licking his teeth and lips, all the while contemplating the Eltanin lord with avid speculation.

“The real question, Bálok, is this,” he purred in a silky voice. “What exactly would you do with a destroyer if you win?”

Since he had no intention of providing his true objectives, Bálok remained silent with his eyes lowered until he knew where Tashek's thoughts were headed.

“What is the mighty Bálok after?” the Emperor mused. “More territory? Wealth? Power? Do you have enemies you wish to eliminate?”

“All of the above, Your Majesty,” he replied, providing a response that any nobleman in the Empire might give.

Tashek laughed low in his throat. “You're not going to answer me, are you? Well then, I'll just have to wait and see how you play out your hand. It should be just as stimulating as watching you fight. Make sure I'm entertained, Lord Bálok. You may go.”

With a curt bow, Bálok turned on his heel and walked toward Jimat who fell into step behind him as he plowed into the throng, pointedly ignoring the rise of voices on all sides. He could still feel the Emperor's cloying eyes on the back of his skull and he wanted nothing more than to be gone from this whole stinking affair as quickly as possible.

He had nearly reached his guards waiting near the exit when a tall Goran nobleman in crimson velvet and heavy gold chains stepped carefully into his path. “A word, Lord Bálok?”

With an audible sigh, Bálok came to a halt and looked into the pale, watering eyes of the man in charge of all aurum production on the sequestered worlds of Alrakis. He was surprised by the emanations of fear rolling off of one of the most powerful magnates in the Empire, especially since legions of Tashek's forces were stationed all over the Alrakis

territory to protect the mandated monopoly on the addictive drug used by the entire Drahkian elite caste.

“Lord Burdek,” he acknowledged, readily taking in the man’s trepidation as he waited for an explanation.

Burdek blinked repeatedly, quite obviously addicted to other substances besides aurum. “As one of the Emperor’s favorites, you stand a good chance of winning the games,” he began in hushed tones. “I need to know if I’ve ever offended you in any way.”

Baffled by the odd query, Bálók quietly replied, “I have no quarrel with you, Burdek.”

“Excellent,” the nervous lord declared. “Then I have a proposition to discuss with you. I—”

Burdek’s gaze shifted to a point somewhere behind Bálók just as Majah’s oily voice shouted above the noise of the room. “Lord Bálók!”

The tremors of fear from Burdek spiked sharply. “Another time—I’ll find you,” he hissed and turned to disappear quickly into the crowd.

Reluctantly, Bálók remained where he was without turning around. To his right, Jimat stood loose and ready, watching the approach of the Goran lord and his bodyguards through narrowed lids.

Majah moved deliberately around Bálók’s left side as the nearest bystanders backed away. At the slight touch of fingers grazing across his bare bicep, Bálók’s hand shot up to snare Majah’s wrist, holding it fast as he locked his eyes coldly onto the Goran’s rough features.

“So you do have your limits,” Majah laughed, waiting patiently until Bálók released his grip. “Good to know,” he preened, stepping back a pace and cocking his head to one side. He glanced pointedly at his hand and rubbed his thumb over his fingertips before looking back up. “Apparently you don’t like men touching you—too bad for poor Ulgeb. I’ve heard you have an insatiable taste for *women*,” he sneered derisively. “I hope they’ve provided a plentiful supply in your quarters. Try the Sirian females—they’re particularly delicious, especially the young ones.”

At Bálók’s impassive silence, Majah’s eye ridges rose in mock surprise. “Ah, that’s right, Ka’s don’t share our appetite for consuming flesh—a pity. Humans are quite delectable, and Ka flesh is so ... biting,” he taunted with a twisted smile as laughter fluttered through the Goran onlookers. “You Ka’s prefer the purity of terror—slice and



dice, or hunt them down and siphon it off. Do you even digest anything anymore? By the look of you, you feed well, Bálok,” he gibed loudly.

“I don’t have time for this,” Bálok stated curtly and took a step toward the exit, but Majah planted a heavy boot in front of him to block his way and leaned in menacingly close, speaking in low, clipped tones for his hearing alone.

“Don’t cross me, Bálok. My uncle is impressed with you, but it’ll take more than brawn and a pretty form to beat me. I take down whom I want, when I want. That destroyer is mine.” With an odd jerk of his head, Majah turned brusquely and stalked off through the ocean of bodies.

Bálok stood still for several moments to get a firm grip on his annoyance. Before he started for the door, the elusive watcher found him again, but this time he didn’t bother to scan for the invasive set of eyes.

“Let’s get out of here, Jimat. I need a bath.”