

CHARON'S DILEMMA



ELOREEN MOON

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

CHARON'S DILEMMA

By Eloreen Moon

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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Photo Description

Photo 1: A tall man with short, dark brown, roman-cut hair, piercing eyes of indeterminate color, and high cheekbones in an oval, masculine face with pouty lips is walking towards the viewer. He wears a tilted gold crown with two red stones visible on front. He has a brown, thigh-length fur coat with a black fur collar, a dark brown scarf, and leopard-patterned gloves. His long black pants partially cover the top of his silver-studded black boots.

Photo 2: A golden-tanned man with black pants hanging hip level and a muscular, shirtless back is facing away from the viewer with a black background. He has short, straight, ginger hair with brown and gold highlights. His left hand grasps a long silver sword at the hilt near the left side of his head, across his broad shoulders, and cut off from the picture to his right with his right arm hanging down.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

As Crown Prince to the human nation, I could have anyone I choose but to end the war between the humans and the griffons, I must marry the youngest son of the Griffon King. The night before I'm to be married, I meet a man who captures my attention at first glance but before I can talk to him, he disappears. How am I supposed to marry someone I've never met when I've finally found someone who's captured my interest? But I suppose it's for the best because no matter what, I'm determined to end this war... I just hope my betrothed is someone I can grow fond of...

Sincerely,

Nikyta

P.S. I want this to be similar to a classic fairy tale (without the evil woman trope) in a historical fantasy setting with shapeshifters that turn into griffons and where arranged marriage of same-sex couples is the norm. Sweet but no sex, although sexual tension is allowed. That means kisses are okay but no frottage, BJs, hand-jobs, etc. No cheating, sharing, ménage or open

relationships and please don't make the Crown Prince a slut! I would like him to be standoffish and uninterested in every man but his love interest. HEA is a must. Thank you for putting up with my demands!! ^_^

Story Info

Genre: fantasy, paranormal, science fiction

Tags: royalty, sweet/no sex, shifters non-wolf/cat, interspecies, magic, arranged marriage, mates/bonded

Word Count: 16,667

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this story as a thank you to everyone who works tirelessly on these annual events: The M/M Romance group mods, editors, and proofreaders. Without them, my story wouldn't exist. A special dedication goes to Kathleen Hayes, my M/M Romance editor for this story. Thank you for putting up with me... and my Word issues. ☺

Acknowledgement

A big thank you to Nikyta for the wonderful prompt. Finally to my beta readers: thank you from the bottom of my heart for helping me along this journey. You know who you are. 😊

CHARON'S DILEMMA

By Eloreen Moon

King Varick's Personal Study

Hoomun Nation Castle

Planet Prenides

366 Sun Cycles after founding (702 Earth Standard Years)

"I'm sorry, son. I would have put this off as long as I could but the laws are clear. You have to marry by your twenty-fifth sun cycle day, or the Senate will choose another Crown Prince. Think of this as an... opportunity to—" King Varick of the Hoomun nation started telling his son, Crown Prince Charon, when said son interrupted him.

"No, Father. I can't have this. The day of my birth is only a moon cycle away. How am I supposed to choose someone in such a short amount of time? I thought the Senate was postponing this farce of a marriage because of Mother's death?"

King Varick thought Charon would snap something in his spine when his son sat up in his favorite chair. He looked taller than his previous bearing of straight as a rod when this conversation had started. Not that it was perceptible to most people since Charon usually looked like he had a stick up his ass. Sometimes Varick wished he had been alive when his ancestors had crash-landed on Prenides. He could have stopped some of these ridiculous laws the starting Senate had created in the face of failing technology and what they perceived as a top-heavy power distribution. Then maybe the Hoomun society would not be as strait-laced as it was today.

Charon is a haughty, asinine relic of a long-gone society that was light-years from this planet in a galaxy forgotten over time. One shouldn't think like that of their only son. Never mind that the Hoomun nation was a direct descendant of that ancient "Human" race and their petty differences.

Varick wanted to think that their current society was better than it had been in those long ago times. Charon did have a point though.

"They were going to when the recent ceasefire with the Gryphuns was suddenly... no longer, after your sister threw her rather pointed shoe at the

Gryphun Crown Prince Seneca's head. After a long minute of shock on both sides, he took offense and angrily stomped off shouting to be ready at dawn."

"I bet that stuck in his craw." Charon smirked with a suspicious twinkle in his eyes.

"Did you have something to do with it?" Varick asked mildly, quirking his eyebrows upwards, resigned to knowing the answer.

"Who? Me?" Charon said with feigned innocence in his seat.

Well, mostly feigned. Charon did still have an innocent air about him despite his twenty-four sun cycles—something that Varick thought he might contemplate later. He closed his eyes, a pained expression on his handsome face as he ran his rough hand over his bald head, grimaced, and wished he still had hair to pull out. His son would be the death of him.

"You do realize, son of my loins, that if this war is not stopped, our nation will be wiped out within a generation?"

Shocked to speechlessness, Charon stood at his father's direct statement and looked at his father's countenance. Really looked at the man, not the embodiment of Duty he had come to know and take on like a mantle to shield him from the rest of the planet. The man—not the King—who had helped him throughout the sun cycles and felt regret for the first time at his involvement in the squabble between Bethany, the younger sister in question, and Seneca. It was his suggestion that she should do something to make Seneca see her—since she liked him. He hadn't realized what she would do to get his attention and that it would restart the war with the Gryphuns.

"I... I... I'm sorry. Bethany likes Seneca. She wanted him to notice her. I didn't realize... I never intended for that to happen," Charon abruptly sat down into his father's velvet chair, allowing his earlier stiff demeanor to melt away since they were in Varick's private chambers and not in the throne room. As he felt the soft "velvet" covering the chair he sat in—velvet they no longer had the ability to create—Charon distantly wished old Earth technology could function on Prenides. It would have made acclimating to their home a bit easier. While those with magic abilities could reproduce, or substitute, most things lost to them from the breakdown of technology, it wasn't the same.

"I know, son." Varick took another deep breath and let go of his anger, sighing. "I know. This is why we need to get your marriage arranged so your

sister can just go up to him and ask. You know the laws prevent her from marrying until you are married.” Charon growled. “Yes, yes. I know. They are antiquated laws and I’m working on changing them but they were all we had when we settled on Prenides. You can only go so fast with the Senate. They are like their Roman counterparts in ancient Rome on old Earth in the Milky Way Galaxy before space travel...”

“Stop right there, Father. I know the little bit of history we have left, too. I KNOW—” Charon stopped before his temper got the best of him and took a couple deep breaths himself. “I understand that they are slow but—” He sighed, pained. “I wanted to find someone that I actually care for and not have an arranged marriage,” he said more softly, almost pleadingly.

Charon watched Varick’s face soften. Varick walked over to the wing-backed chair Charon favored and knelt in front of him. Charon watched as his father reached and touched his Earth Roman styled hair reverently with a slightly pained expression on his face. Then he lightly grazed over his high cheekbones, sadness and loss in Varick’s eyes.

“I know, Father.” Charon whispered, knowing his own pain reflected on his face. They hadn’t been physically affectionate since Mother’s death, even in private. “I miss her too.” He took a deep breath, clasping his father’s hand and continued his plea. “Despite the fact that you only knew her for a few moon cycles before you married her, I know you cared for her. I saw that she did too. Even after the few moon cycles since her death, I see you sometimes stare off looking at nothing and know that you are thinking of her. Even though your marriage was arranged, you had time to get to know and care for her. And that, more than anything, is what I want. ”

“I understand, son.” Varick closed his eyes briefly, took a couple of calming breaths, then opened them looking more settled than usual. “Do you have anyone in mind?”

“No one has caught my eye. I haven’t been interested in anyone. The only preference I have is that the person must be male,” Charon replied quietly, his own pain from the loss of his mother morphing to the simmering temper that seemed to sizzle under his skin most of the time recently. Temper in check for the moment, Charon wondered about this need that never seemed to go away. *It is getting worse. I need to work on that more.*

Charon looked up to see Varick with a contemplative expression on his face before Varick removed his hand from Charon’s face. Charon let go and blew

out the breath he hadn't known he had been holding, waiting for his father to speak.

"It will be done. I know the timing of this is not ideal, but we need to make the most of it."

"That is why I wanted to find someone on my own. Someone to—dare I say it—love like you and Mother did." Charon said with a mixture of hope on his despondent face, not realizing how vulnerable his eyes looked.

Charon's gaze followed Varick as he sat back in his chair, a gleam of knowledge in his eyes that Charon hadn't seen before. Charon knew that look. A mixture of innocence and amusement that he just knew meant he wasn't going to like it. *Like father, like son.* Charon sighed. *I did learn from the best.*

"You are up to something, aren't you?" Charon accused his father, resignedly.

Varick smirked as he hinted. "Let's just say that I have plans in motion that should benefit all of us."

The following quarter moon cycle—Eight day cycles later. Also called a quarm.

"You summoned me, sire?" Charon announced himself as he walked into the throne room, noticing the formal attire of the two men within. He continued through the big wooden doors in the stone walls, toward his father and a man he had only met a couple of times at parlays, and usually across a cease fire. He slapped his riding gloves on his thighs as he walked in—the only sign of his impatience. The man in question was tall—a trait he had noticed many of the Gryphun royals shared while watching the negotiations at the various intervals since his involvement in this long war. He had dark copper hair that almost glowed as natural light from some of the windows made in the stone walls reflected off the man's head. It was cut short like most royalty had, Charon included, but he sported sideburns to his chin and no mustache. He had a small circlet with a variety of multi-colored stones Charon knew could be found in the local countryside. He was wearing the red-gold robes of the Gryphun royal house with hints of chain mail under the robes. He looked familiar, but Charon couldn't place him.

Charon watched as his father, also in full regalia robes including his own crown, turned from the conversation with the man and looked at Charon thoughtfully. Charon felt a little small since he was somewhat underdressed in

his usual attire of black pants, black shirt suitable for the fighting training grounds, and a small purple cape with his initials embroidered on it. Considering he had not been told this would be a formal meeting, he continued towards them head held high despite his lack of meeting attire.

“Yes, Prince Charon. I would like you to meet the His Royal Majesty, King, Alder of the Gryphon Nation.”

Charon only stumbled slightly at the name of Varick's guest. It was slight enough that only Varick would have noticed it. He smoothly walked up to the pair from the door and gave the warrior greeting to the Kings—a slight bow as he held his fist over his heart with his elbow pointing to his hip. The filtered light through stained-glass windows bathed Charon with colored, dancing lights.

“Welcome to the Hoomun nation, King Alder,” Charon said steadily. “Was not your father the Gryphon King when we last met, several sun cycles ago?”

“I'm glad to be here. You may call me Alder,” King Alder returned the greeting with a Gryphon warrior greeting of both crossed arms over the heart. “Yes, young Charon, my father, the prior Gryphon King Nebual, went to the Gryphon sky lands and left the leadership to me about three moon cycles ago. Your mother had just passed when I was crowned a moon cycle later, so your father and I decided not to tell you until your mourning period was over.”

“Ah.” understanding sympathy passed over Charon's face as the mourning period in question was not yet complete. *This is why I didn't know.* “I am sorry for your loss. I would have given my respects if I had known. You were always fair at the parlays.” Charon grimaced. “Your father, on the other hand, was not.”

“Yes, I understand. My Seneca is much like his grandfather.” Alder smirked. “I heard Seneca shouting when he returned from... meeting your sister.”

Charon looked pained and was about to apologize when Alder continued.

“It's fine. I stopped him from breaking the cease fire on such a little thing as a shoe to his face,” Alder grinned fully, showing his white teeth and a glimmer of amusement in his gold eyes. “It was interesting when I enlightened him as to *why* he got the shoe thrown at him. He was better once that was explained. Stubborn goat. I was mildly amused when he related the tale, but he was not. Not surprising since he doesn't have a humorous bone in his body. He plans on apologizing to her about getting mad so easily. But, I digress.”

“Yes.” Varick rolled his eyes towards the heavens, glad that war had not broken out from such a petty thing. Hopefully, the current cease fire would be of a more permanent thing shortly. “Let’s go to my chambers. This is best discussed outside of the presence of listening ears,” Varick ushered them to his chambers in the back of the throne room.

“Indeed,” Alder raised an eyebrow, looked at Charon as they moved to the door of the chambers and noticed Charon looking back with an I-have-no-idea look. “He doesn’t know?” he asked looking back at Varick.

“No.”

“I see,” Alder responded, and the other eyebrow joined the first. “It has been a quarm,” Alder said mildly with a hint of humor and a little bit of a question.

“I’m aware,” Varick said tightly, looking like had bitten something sour.

Charon looked between the two Kings, shook his head, and opened the door to his father’s chambers holding it for them to walk through.

“He will tell me when he is ready,” Charon answered calmly to the unspoken question the Gryphun King had implied.

“Which will be now,” Varick stated flatly as he turned to Charon. “Please close the doors. Alder, would you do me the honor of protecting this chamber with a silence spell?”

“Certainly, Varick,” Alder said with a smile as he closed his eyes, clapped his hands together, and a palpable presence was felt around the small room.

Varick mused on the nature of the magic on Prenides when the Human technology they had brought slowly failed while watching Alder create the shield to prevent what was said from being heard by listening ears. The experiments of his ancestors on Alder’s ancestors—which were logged by the former captains—the surviving logs of which he had in his possession these many centuries later detailed how his ancestors who hadn’t understood anything different from themselves had become complete bastards. *I wonder if that is why Humans and the shifters that became the Gryphuns were at war? It would certainly make sense that Humans would fear new things and as the generations passed, Hoomuns forgot the real reason and just perpetuated the same war.*

“Is that necessary, Father?” Charon asked, concerned.

Varick came out of his thoughts and started his answer, “Yes—”

The Gryphun King interrupted Varick. “We are doing this because there are factions within my court that would kill me and my family if the information he is about to tell you gets out too soon.”

“What is going on?” Charon demanded.

Varick sighed, heavily and long.

“Do you remember your request to me last quarm?” Varick asked, looking older than his sixty sun cycles.

“Yes...” Charon drew the word out with confusion, thinking about that day cycle when he had broken down in front of his father. Despite the emotional upheaval, it had gotten his heart’s desire out—to be with a man, finally. Not at all happy with arranged marriages in general, he understood the nature of them well. Ancient Humans were willy-nilly about their partners. While love existed here on Prenides, it was not the norm. Love from an arranged marriage was almost unheard of—but not impossible. This was why he wanted to have what his parents had and to buck the norm by choosing his own partner before the contracts were signed. He would have had a better chance of finding someone to love. Thank the gods the sex of the partner didn’t matter, unlike those ancient Humans. Children could be had in any number of ways, so it didn’t matter what sex your partner was—or who your parent, or guardian, arranged for you. At least Father was working on that with the Senate. Having a choice would be nice.

“Well, I knew exactly who to request for you and, luckily, King Alder agreed,” Varick continued.

“Why would he have to agree?” Charon was more confused than before.

Alder answered with a smile, “Because, you will be marrying my youngest son, Reddington... in two day cycles.”

Charon stilled with an expression of pain on his face, instantly realizing that this is what his father knew when he left that fateful day.

“WHAT!! Father, how *could* you? I understand making arrangements but to have it in such a short time—” Charon continued to rant and curse the gods for several minutes, starting out under his breath, but then his barely controlled temper exploded in a rather vocal way.

Varick saw Alder looking at him, shocked silent at the outburst from the young man—something he knew Alder had never seen any of the royal Hoomuns do.

“And that is why I hadn't told him yet,” Varick said, resigned, while listening to his son blow off steam as he paced around the room several paces away. He smirked at Alder and then sighed, continuing his explanation while Charon ranted in the background.

“What most people don't know—hell and damnation, the entire planet doesn't know—is that we Hoomun royals have a terribly short fuse. It's nothing to worry about, just means we are passionate people, but the simmering tension must be siphoned or it boils over. Because of life here we had to hide it, especially from the Gryphuns, so as not to give you any more ammunition in this war. Part of the reason I had you here was so that you would understand and keep our secret.”

Varick winced at a particularly creative string of expletives that came out of Charon's mouth while he explained their secret to Alder. He hadn't known his son knew that many curse words.

“What we are about to do with this marriage arrangement is basically unheard of. No one in the Hoomun generations prior to me ever thought to make a marriage contract to stop the war. My guess is that, for reasons I will never know or fully understand, they wanted to keep the war going. Perhaps out of fear of your abilities such as the magic we discovered after our technology failed. Whatever the reason—that decision has almost led to genocide of our race.”

“Genocide!” The Gryphon King sputtered, shocked again at the statement being said so matter-of-factly. He was having a hard time reconciling the King in front of him now and the King he had known about for the last ten sun cycles. He sat down on the nearest chair. “Your people have lost so much?”

Varick sat down heavily with a tired air behind the large wooden desk that was a relic from their ancestors' furniture-making skills and trees planted when they had arrived. Most of the technology and some of the skills and plants were lost over the 366 sun cycles since the founding of the Hoomun nation, but there were some who could still make decent furniture with the native hardwoods that was very pretty. He just preferred the style and wood from the Humans. Luckily, it had lasted a long time in this environment. *Sometimes, I wondered about that.* Mentally pulling himself back to the conversation at hand, he continued.

“Yes, we have, unfortunately. The death rate has risen enough in the last few sun cycles that it is out-pacing our birth rate. With some of the population

not marrying other species; hell, not even outside our own nation let alone our own race, we have become inbred mostly due to the lack of new population. The royal family more so since our ruling body, the Senate, has required the royal Hoomuns to marry other Hoomuns. I got that overturned last sun cycle, shortly before his mother took sick.”

Varick grinned at that last statement. Not hearing as much cursing, he looked over at Charon and noticed that he was winding down from his rage. He must have built it up quite a bit since the last time he had vented in the previous quarm. A good partnership could help with the ever-present tension that seemed to always be there. Hopefully, this marriage he had contracted would rectify that soon, and stop the war, too. The need to release the ever-present tension in Hoomun royals did not necessarily express in anger but could manifest in sudden melancholy, as Charon had expressed somewhat just a quarm before. Positive outlets were better, and sex was the one outlet that helped the most. He had a strong suspicion on that concerning his only son. Varick was just now realizing Charon had not taken his advice when he came of age to learn the ropes, so to speak. His son could be called a throwback. Shaking his head at his thoughts, he called over to his son.

“Son, you need to take a meditative breath and come over to discuss matters at hand. Why have you not released your tension before now?” Varick used his deep voice as he called out to Charon to gently prod his offspring out of the temper he was in as he had done periodically in Charon’s life.

Charon awakened from his rage at his father’s calm voice and looked up from his hands, realizing he was kneeling on the floor and had no idea how he got there. He stood up, took a few meditative breaths as suggested, and took a seat next to Alder and across from his father.

“I was on my way to the training grounds when I got your message.” Charon was much better as he sat there just breathing.

“Did you not do that two day cycles ago? And every day cycle for the prior six day cycles before that?”

“Yes,” Charon took a last calming breath. “It has not helped. I have been restless since that talk last quarm. Training takes the edge off but—”

“Why haven’t you had sex yet, Charon?” Varick asked with a piercing gaze at his son.

Charon blushed furiously. And that, by itself, answered Varick’s question.

Both Charon and Varick were focused on each other so much so that they were effectively ignoring the rather large man sitting there with them. King Alder was tall, even sitting, and a good head taller than Varick or Charon. The slight sound of chainmail catching reminded Alder of the protection he wore as he shifted slightly, watching the by-play of father and son. Of course, he could change into his Gryphon form to protect himself, but why subject his Gryphon to tight quarters if a little planning while walking as a man would be just as effective. He continued to watch, mouth hanging open slightly in his surprise because they were so... direct. Gryphons, especially the royal house, did not talk about sex, or the lack of it, like it was a common place occurrence. And here he thought the Crown Prince and his father were prudish. Charon's voice pulled him out of his musings.

"Because there has not been anyone I've been interested in doing *that* with. So, I train, I fight, and I do other things..." Charon said flushing even more and squirming slightly.

"You know sex will help more than training... and the other things," Varick said uncomfortably.

Well, maybe they are a bit straitlaced, Alder mused at the conversation. Good. I didn't want all of my illusions shattered. Hmm, I think I might not tell Reddington about this. I think he needs to find out about his intended for himself.

Alder cleared his throat.

Varick and Charon startled. Together, they turned to look at him, realization dawning on their faces that they had ignored him for the last quarter hour.

"I apologize, Your Majesty," Charon started his apology before his father, bowing slightly in his chair.

Varick continued, "I am sorry about that, Alder. When we are out of range of prying eyes and listening ears, we tend to let loose," he said wryly, grinning slightly with a twinkle in his eyes.

Alder nodded in comprehension once. "I believe I understand. We, too, have our own secrets that we have to keep for peace among ourselves. I've been sitting here fascinated. This is a new side to both of you that I had not seen—or heard—before."

"There is a reason that Father calls me an asinine prick on occasion," Charon told the Gryphon King quietly.

Alder quirked one eyebrow at Charon's bold statement in inquiry.

"You heard that at the last formal ball, didn't you?" Varick asked sardonically. "Damnation, I was hoping you hadn't."

"The fact that you two speak your mind about these things and understand each other so well... well, it's mind boggling." Alder continued to look a little dazed, "I mean... Charon, you always seem so... haughty and above everyone. I guess with this revelation, the reservations I had when Varick proposed this arrangement to me are gone. I had definite concerns when he suggested the timing, but seeing you like this gives me hope that you are more approachable than I had known. Gryphuns are fervent people. We have to be because our animal counterparts are fairly avid and enthusiastic, and must be free to shift on a regular basis, especially when we are hatchlings. Therefore, our partners need to be able to not only stand up to us but allow physical contact as well. I am pleased." Alder concluded his speech with a little awe and reassurance in his voice.

"We had to have proper demeanor or we would have been lynched in the beginning. While the Humans who were shipped to this sector to settle somewhere that would host them had more liberal leanings than their Earth-bound counterparts, they were still all about not showing emotions and having as much control as possible, potentially because of their own circumstances. If the ship leaders, called 'Captains', hadn't, the people on board would have panicked when the ship carrying them developed a mechanical malfunction and crash landed here. The members of the royal house of Hoomuns are direct descendants of those ship leaders. That crash landing directly affected everyone nearby." Varick looked directly at Alder, "The largest transformation was the beginning of the Gryphuns."

Alder and Charon's jaws dropped completely and they gasped simultaneously in surprise. They looked at each other, realized neither knew, and looked back to Varick.

"Explain," Alder demanded. "We know nothing of our Gryphon origins. Only that there was a Change and it was forevermore called that. No details were given, not even to the royal family."

Varick took a deep breath and continued the story.

"An accident caused the containers for the genetic material for the eagle and the lion, the two animals your Gryphuns are made from, and the environment's magic to mix and cause the sentient full shapeshifters indigenous to this planet

to change and become Griffin shifters. Griffin was the name of an eagle-lion hybrid and was a being of myth on ancient Earth. Over the years the name morphed and became Gryphun while Hoomuns evolved from Humans, the race name of the people on the ship that caused your Change. There are notes and logs as both races evolved from that fateful day.”

Alder was flabbergasted after Varick finished.

“You mean our ancestors could shift to anything? That would make my Gryphun a different entity and explains why I can feel him inside me. We share the body regardless of the Gryphun form or the man form. I never knew... That explains much. In some ways, I'm glad we only have the two forms to change between. I'm not sure what I would do with myself if I could change into any form. May I have a copy of any notes and logs to take back to my scribes so we may understand our history?”

“Of course. Our scribes are making copies of the relevant materials and they should be ready any time after the marriage,” Varick answered with a smile.

Charon cleared his throat.

Varick and Alder turned towards him.

“I have a question,” Charon said as he leaned back in the chair, head tilted back, hoping to glean enough strength to continue. “Why two day cycles, Father? I understand about Alder's side having issues, but why did you agree to it so soon? Usually, these things take moon cycles and the gods forbid if the Royal Chatelaine is given anything to plan for the palace without a quarm warning.”

“I have a confession, son,” Varick said with a look of apology. “I have been talking to Alder for a few moon cycles and so informed Chester last quarm. Yes, the time was pushed up because of Alder's people, but it was done mostly because of you.”

“I knew you had something... wait... me!?” Charon exclaimed as he sat up in the chair ramrod straight with his usual stick up his ass. Haughty Charon had returned.

I know that he doesn't like the spotlight but I had hoped that Charon would be more... flexible.

Varick continued, “Because I knew that you needed someone sooner rather than later and I gleaned, correctly I might add, that you would prefer male to

female when you came of age. Although, the fact that you didn't take my advice—”

“Stop, Father. Don't say another word. As I said, I wasn't interested in anyone, which is why I hadn't done anything about it.”

Charon flowed to his feet, stiffening to formal protocol and gave the warrior's greeting in reverse.

“By your leave?”

“Do you wish to see the contract?” Varick asked concerned at Charon's stiff demeanor.

“No, sir. I trust you.”

Charon looked his father with haunted and pain-filled eyes, but his demeanor and voice were steady as a rock.

“I will go to the training grounds and... practice tonight and tomorrow morning. Please let me know of any pertinent information that I will need before the marriage in two day cycles at the appointed hour.

Charon executed a perfect bow to both kings, spun around fluidly with his cape falling exactly so, and left the chambers, closing the door quietly behind him.

Varick leaned back in his chair, noticing before closing his eyes that Alder had watched the entire exchange with a slightly shocked expression, again.

“What just happened, Varick?”

Varick kept his eyes closed, exhaustion showing on his rugged face.

“What you missed was the look he gave me before he left. What you don't know was that he was looking forward to choosing his own partner, but the Senate nixed that after the Seneca and Bethany incident. They were willing to postpone the twenty-five sun cycle requirement for marriage for another six moon cycles because of his mother's death so close to his birth sun cycle day. He was going to use the extra time to quietly find someone, present said person to me, and then I would draw up the marriage like it was arranged so none would be the wiser. However, his off-handed comment and Bethany's own spirit created the incident with Seneca and the cease fire. Although nothing really happened, the Senate insisted that Charon marry by his birth sun cycle day or they would find another Crown Prince. I presented it to him last quarm. Since you and I had the contract in place and were already working on the

marriage preparation, it seemed like a simple thing to change things when I saw him at the brink of falling apart at that meeting. Your political unrest was just the thing to step up the timing and here we are, two days from a marriage that would be beneficial to everyone and my son will be locked into something he absolutely loathes.”

Varick opened his eyes and watched Alder open his mouth looking stunned and having a million questions running through his eyes. Alder realized he couldn't get anything out; he closed it, thought for a minute and then tried again. “Loathes?” At the slightly higher pitch, Alder cleared his throat briefly and continued in his normal voice, “How can he loathe someone he's never met?”

Varick continued with slight smirk on his face.

“Of course he doesn't loathe the person. You are correct, he has never met Reddington, but he does loathe that he doesn't get to choose the person. It is against his nature that he does not have a choice, which is why I'm slowly changing the laws with the Senate so that it matters not who, what, where, or when you marry. Or even, if you marry at all. Not even if you have tri-marriage or a quad-marriage—”

“You have those?” Alder interrupted, inquiringly. “We sometimes mate with more than one person, but it is rare.”

“Yes, we do have multiple-partner marriages.” Varick sat up, amused at the turn in the conversation. “According to the records from the ship I mentioned earlier, Humans persecuted their own kind for having those kinds of relationships, even as they started to allow same-sex marriages. They even persecuted those Humans that wanted both sexes. We have all of these types now and there are some that go for a multiple partnership because they find two people they want to be with at the same time. While rare, it's more common than having more than two of the same sex. If you like, I'll add those notes in with your history I'm having compiled. Not as much information, but might be useful. Most of the information I have back then was from personal logs and diaries of the ship leaders so I don't know the accuracy. But it does make interesting reading.” Then Varick thought about his son and lost the smile.

“As for Charon, he'll come around but it will be hard for him. I'm not sure how much you'll want tell Reddington but you probably need to prepare him somehow.” Varick looked over at Alder with a hopeful expression. “Unfortunately, Charon knows the contract is signed since he did not want to see it but maybe we should arrange a meeting between them?”

Alder sat forward himself and then decided to stand. Varick stood with him. Alder clasped Varick's left elbow with his right hand and Varick did the same, a question in his eyes with the sudden farewell greeting between equals.

"That will not be possible as no one knows he is near and I would like to keep it that way." Alder thought for a moment. "He could come to the training grounds in his Gryphon form. Charon did say he would be there tomorrow morning. It is large enough to accommodate his large shifted size. Your people will not recognize him and your people have interacted with some of my Gryphon soldiers before. While he has distinctive red-gold plumage, he can meet Charon and no one will be the wiser. Either he or I might be able to conceal the meeting somewhat with magic. I would not tell Charon what will happen in case it does not go as planned, but it will give them the opportunity to meet before the wedding and no one will be the wiser."

Varick's face fell at Alder's initial denial of a meeting, but then grew in hope as Alder continued his idea.

"I like that idea." Varick shook Alder's arm as per protocol, and they separated, smiles on their faces at the plan they had just come up with to help their children along in this trying time.

Charon slid down the door, eyes closed, after he had closed his father's chamber doors, pain and want bubbling while he did something not in the mien of a royal. No control. Luckily the guards were not there but at the throne room entrance. There were no other entrances to the chambers except for the secret passage that only the royal family knew about in case they needed to escape the palace. So, no one was around to see him break down.

Reddington. That is a fine, strong name. Gods, I wanted to pick my own partner, a husband, a mate. I like the sound of mate. I wonder what Gryphuns have? I'll have to ask my future husband or Alder. If the political unrest is as Alder says, I probably won't meet him until we are at the altar.

Charon sighed at the last thought and opened his green-brown eyes, a little calmer, but still bursting with the unfairness of it all. His tension was getting harder to handle.

Maybe I should have done something about sex before now. Oh well. I will not do that to my husband-to-be at this late date. I will just have to train harder. The other thing will have to wait too. It's not as satisfying and I don't really want to take the time. Maybe I'll sleep this time.

With that in mind, he stood up, brushed his immaculate clothing and continued towards the throne room door and the training grounds.

The next morning—one day cycle before the wedding—Charon could see the preparations as palace staff were running around him while he was walking out of his sleeping chambers toward the side doors. Unfortunately, no one but himself, his father, the Chatelaine of the palace, and his groom-to-be's immediate family knew what was going to happen. Everyone else—staff, guards, and villagers—were told that we were hosting the royal Gryphuns as dignitaries and it was to be a political party for a potential treaty. Well, there would be a treaty, just not as most treaties come—complete with exchanging of vows and a hand fasting.

He was dressed for his morning training session in his typical black ensemble but without his cape. He felt last night's endeavor—enough that he hoped he would be able to do this practice without falling on his face. He didn't get to be one of the fastest swordsmen in the history of the Hoomun nation by not keeping up. He continued to walk out the side doors of the palace and turned towards the stables and the training ground. As he passed the food and herb gardens that led to the grounds in the back, he saw a glimpse of the big tent that was going up there.

That will be a lovely setting.

He imagined the grounds decked out with the decorations for the wedding, chairs arranged in a circle around the main alter so that all could see. The alter circle for ceremonies would be enclosed by a wood and canvas tent. He did like flowers. He might stop by after training to see everything and confirm it would be like he imagined.

He continued past the herb and vegetable gardens and the formal flower garden to the left and towards the front of the palace. A circular packed road in front of the palace doors led off down to the main road. The palace doors opened to the entrance way of the palace and the formal spaces open to the public. The throne room and chambers were situated on the left of the entrance and the formal dining room for receptions on the right. A carriage house was on the right side of the palace for the guests' transportation and their horseflesh.

After passing the formal gardens, the training grounds were at the end of the walkway with the stables attached. Since mounted training was a necessity, the

stables for the guards and royal family were kept in the same area. There were other areas for the mages' training and even a wide area ready for the Gryphuns if they choose to set up training there. Considering his father's plans to become allies with the Gryphuns, it was not surprising that he had cleared a space for them to build upon later.

Charon decided to go to the stables and train with his mount, Horse, instead of returning to hand-to-hand combat he had done yesterday. He liked the name, even though it was Human English. He knew it was a name to label a common type of animal but it seemed to fit his charger. The horses on Prenides stayed pretty true to form despite the magic of the land changing most of the inhabitants and any technology.

It was interesting history, about the Gryphuns, Charon continued to muse, while walking.

When he had found out that Humans were the source of the Gryphuns' Change, he had researched what he could in the royal library—housed near the royal family's quarters and where his family kept all of the papers, journals, and books that were salvaged from the original landing. The other library in the palace kept the common scrolls and books that had been made here on Prenides. His father had kept the personal journals of the ship's "captain" in his bed chambers and had given them to him when he had returned from training the previous night.

I'm glad he understood me so well that he gave me the information without prompting, or a word of what had happened prior to me leaving Father's throne room chambers. I'm so very thankful not to dwell on the subject with him.

He arrived at Horse's stall and started the preparation of saddling Horse for his next bout of training.

"Doing well, Horse?"

Horse tossed his head and snorted like he was answering "yes" to Charon's question.

Charon continued the ritual as if he was having a conversation with Horse directly.

"Good, good. Well, we are about to do some work today," Charon said as he finished and started to mount. He was interrupted when a stable boy rushed in, babbling almost incoherently.

Charon turned around and looked at the boy, Ned, who served him and his house, but Ned was also special.

“What is it Ned? You need to slow down if you want me to understand.”

“Y-y-your, Maj-j-esty!” Ned stuttered looking panicked. “T-there’s a-a-b-b-big—”

“Spit it out, son. I know you have trouble talking when you are upset but you need to take a deep breath and say it firmly like we talked about.” Charon looked at Ned concerned—he hadn’t stuttered in moon cycles. It must have been something fairly scary for him to revert to how he had spoken before they had started the sessions to correct his stutter.

Ned took several deep breaths like Charon had taught him over the moon cycles they had worked together so far and calmed down enough to get out what had happened. Charon was starting to hear a commotion outside so he knew time was of the essence.

“I’m sorry, Y-your Highness,” Ned spoke more normally. “There is a rather large red-gold Gryphun on the training fields, sir. He... just appeared. No warning.” Ned took another deep breath, calming further and on the exhale said, “The quartermaster sent me to get you. He got the Marshall of the Guard there with the guards but the Gryphun is just sitting there. He hasn’t done anything yet.”

“I’m glad the guards didn’t attack first and ask questions later. That would have been grounds to end the ceasefire we have.” Charon handed the reins of Horse to Ned.

“Go ahead and finish checking Horse here and I will go see what is going on. You can calm down and come out when you are ready. You haven’t seen a Gryphun before, have you?” Charon was glad that the wedding had not been announced yet. The stable boys probably would have had stars in their eyes if they realized that this was one of the royal Gryphuns. The only royals he had seen in their Gryphun form were Alder and Seneca—and while they had a little red in their feathers and fur, he believed they were mostly gold and white. He had never seen a red-gold one before. All royal Gryphuns had gold in their Gryphun form. The other color depended mostly on something that he was not privy too—yet another thing to find out once everything settled out with the marriage.

“No, sire.” Ned interrupted his reflections as he reached the stable door.

“This is a royal Gryphun, son. There is nothing to worry about. I’ll go find out what is going on and then I will be back to train with Horse.”

“Yessir.” Ned bowed, appearing relieved he didn’t have to go back out. “That was the biggest thing I’ve ever seen, sire.” He grinned cheekily now that he was done with his fright.

Charon gave Ned one of his rare smiles.

“I would guess I would panic if a Gryphun arrived suddenly too.”

With that, Charon turned around and walked out of the stables to find chaos.

And what chaos he found. The Marshall and his guards were about to attack, the stable lads were cowering near the entrance of the stables, and the other fighters were already suited in their armor and ready with swords to attack one Gryphun that, as Ned had said, just sat there on his lion hind legs.

He took a moment and looked at the majestic creature as he sat in the training fields like he owned it. The Gryphun was easily nine feet tall, sitting. He didn’t want to contemplate how tall he would stand if he stood on his hind legs. Charon could certainly understand Ned’s fear of the large being taking up a good quarter of the field for mounted training. *Beautiful creature.* The head was a red-gold eagle head that looked piercingly at the men around him. His feathers were glistening in the morning day cycle sunlight and continued to his eagle front legs which he seemed to be kneading in the ground like the baker would with his bread dough. *I wonder if he is as nervous as the men?*

Charon continued to peruse the magnificent specimen of Gryphun in front of him as he cautiously walked forward towards the tableau before him. The eagle wings on the Gryphun’s back blended perfectly with the lion portion he was sitting upon and was also shining red-gold in the sunlight. He could see the muscular definition in the wings, chest, and back as the Gryphun moved his wings a bit. Before he knew it, the Gryphun was on his paws and claws with his wings fully extended to what looked like a fifteen- or sixteen-foot wingspan.

Wow. He’s mucking huge! Oh boy, I better get in there before he takes out a man... or two.

Charon stuck his pinky fingers into his mouth and whistled the royal stop trill. The people stopped instantly, with the exception of the Gryphun who reared up, and started his own Gryphun noises of alarm.

“Whoa, WHOA!” Charon yelled towards the Gryphun as he ran up in front of him to stop the panic he could see in the gold eyes. “You are fine. I just

whistled for them to stop what they were doing so they didn't do something stupid and attack you." Charon continued to explain and say soothing nonsense words towards this beautiful creature, hoping his horse-calming techniques worked. Slowly, the Gryphun settled down and returned to his original sitting position, towering over Charon, beak open and gulping air. He blinked and then did something Charon was not expecting.

"I apologize, Royal Hoomun Prince Charon," the Gryphun said in a deep, throaty, and melodic voice with long vowels that nearly sizzled Charon's nerve endings, causing him to purr himself.

Wow. Didn't know they could speak.

The few times he had seen other Gryphuns in their Gryphun form, they hadn't spoken. The royals always talked to Father in bipedal form. He mentally shook his head as the Gryphun bowed slightly to him.

Charon answered the bow with one of his own.

"I did not realize you could speak in this form. I apologize if I am a little stunned at this knowledge. To whom do I speak?"

"It is best that I not answer that question. Let me just say that I'm one of the royal Gryphuns here on an ambassadorship between our peoples in the hopes that the ceasefire will be made permanent."

Father must have told the royal Gryphuns what to say if we met in public. He's probably one of the brothers of my intended.

"Welcome to the palace. Would you like to change to meet with King Varick?"

"That will be unnecessary, Prince Charon. I will leave here shortly. I misjudged my arrival and interrupted your training schedule. I shall leave and return to meet the royal family as a man on the morrow's day cycle. It is easier to travel in Gryphun form when no bags are needed."

So, he is not staying after the wedding.

Charon was a little disappointed. He dismissed his slight sadness at that thought and continued to make nice.

"Then I will see you on the morrow," Charon bowed again, and the unnamed Gryphun took flight with his powerful red-gold wings beating higher into the air. Charon watched in wonderment and hoped that the man the creature would become would be at the wedding at the next day cycle. After

the Gryphun climbed high enough not to see details, Charon raised his hand to shield his eyes from the sun as he watched him fly away.

“All is well. Get back to what you were doing.” Charon yelled for Arken, the Marshall of the guards. “Marshall!”

“Yes, sire.” Marshall Arken stood at attention in front of Charon.

“Please do not attack any Gryphuns that come on to the grounds. A permanent cease fire is in the works and all will be announced on the morrow. Please see that everyone understands to welcome them to the palace.”

“Will do, sire.” The Marshall bowed and walked off shouting orders.

Later that day-cycle.

Charon walked into the sitting room attached to his bedroom area and past the guards that stood outside it. Night was upon the lands, and there were shadows everywhere. He had a couple of candles and a few blue magic orbs the mages had anchored in his room.

He felt something—a connection, a knowledge that was instantaneous—he couldn't name the feeling or the surety. He looked into the far corner of his room and knew there was someone there.

“Who goes there?” Charon spoke cautiously—intently staring at what he thought was a man.

The most beautiful man Charon had ever seen quietly walked out of the shadows. He was tall—taller than his own six feet. He stared at the golden skin with muscles moving gracefully underneath it. The man wore black pants and black boots, with straight, short hair that glowed a slightly reddish gold tint in the low light. His hair looked like it could flame at any moment.

I wonder if it is soft.

Charon was so intent on drinking the man in that his brain never engaged to wonder how the man could be in his outer chamber, undetected. He was a stunning man, and yet he felt safe. He knew this man would not harm him. He didn't understand how he knew, but he never even considered raising the alarm.

The gorgeous stranger stepped forward, and Charon was helpless in his own body. The man quietly touched his hand to Charon's cheek and closed the space between them until there was barely room for a breath of air. Charon felt the

man press his lips against his, and sensations exploded in him as he touched the softest flesh he had ever encountered.

They both moaned. Charon muttered something even he did not really understand, let alone think about, and the man pulled him closer.

Following the man's lead, Charon began to nibble on the exquisite lips that tasted like honey and berries. Charon melted into this wonderful man getting lost in the fiery kiss, and he knew that his dream had come true. He had found the man he could connect to and possibly could love.

So lost into the sensations he experienced, Charon never heard the interruption that signaled the end of his first kiss.

Reddington, or Red, as he preferred to be called looked out from the darkened corner of the sitting room at his intended. Thank the gods of foolish Gryphuns that he had this ability to teleport and cloak at will. It was nice to see Charon up close before the marriage tomorrow. At 106 sun cycles, this long war had been his life since he was a very small hatchling. *It is a good thing, this arranged marriage. This war has gone on too long.* He continued to muse as he remembered the meeting with Charon earlier in the day, not paying attention to his stealth.

Red flew in his Gryphun form towards the Hoomun's royal palace from his home at the edge of the forest near his own royal seat many leagues away. He closed his eyes slightly, his face feeling the wind and the sun, hopeful that this first meeting with his intended would go well. He was a little annoyed with his father gleefully telling him nothing about Prince Charon when he returned from meeting the Hoomun royals, other than his belief that it was a perfect match and instructions on where his intended would be this morn. He shook his red-golden eagle head at that thought, snorted, opened his eyes, and looked for a place to land.

Ah, the training fields. Not too many people and I know Charon will be there.

He banked and headed towards the training fields, cloaking as he went so as not to startle people by flying overhead.

Courtesy of his father's caution, he would meet his intended in Gryphun form so as to be prepared if something tried to attack him. And he would have the added bonus of meeting his soon-to-be husband without anyone knowing.

Not many had seen him in his Gryphun form outside of the Gryphun nation. That would change once this marriage was completed.

Red noticed as he was flying low towards the main complex that there were several men training in one area, some mounted men training well away from the foot soldiers in another area, and yet another area with a mage tower that must be where the mages trained . *Well, look at this? An empty area sitting fallow separate but connected to the compound? How interesting... It looks to be large enough to setup a Gryphun training facility. Hmm. I wonder how long my Father and the King of the Hoomuns have been planning this marriage. I think Father has been holding back.*

He mentally grinned and continued towards the mounted training grounds, as that was where Charon would likely be this morn—according his source. He settled in an open area away from the training men so as not to startle them, dropping his magical cloak as soon as he landed.

Ah, damnation.

Too late, Red realized that he should not have been cloaked once he was over the palace lands. As soon as he landed and the men noticed him suddenly appear out of nowhere, all hell broke loose and chaos reigned. Men drew swords all around him with what looked like a captain in his distinctive attire shouting orders. A burly man near the armory motioned to a lad in a royal squire's attire spoke briefly to him. It was too loud to hear, but he thought the lad was being sent to get someone. Since he was in royal livery, he assumed someone from the royal house. Hopefully, his intended. The lad, looking a little pale and scared, broke away from the burly man as soon as he was done talking and took off to a separate horse stable like he was on fire. There were some mounted soldiers in armor coming up from the far side too.

Great! I am such an idiot sometimes. I forgot that some Hoomun people haven't seen a Gryphun before.

If he'd had hands, he would have knocked some sense into himself. Instead, he kneaded the ground in front him in a display of nerves his Gryphun used. He sat there holding himself as still as he could, looking around at the people, hoping someone would stop the royal guards.

His roaming gaze alighted upon a man coming out of the stables the lad had run into moments before, and he stopped looking further. He was dressed in all black with armor and looked like he was about to start training himself. Red judged that he was shorter than he, but not by much, with dark brown hair,

sharp cheekbones, and an oval face. The man's gaze was arresting with brilliant green-brown eyes staring at him in wonder. He was very thankful that Gryphuns had very sharp eyesight in this form as it helped him see minute details even while in the air and flying high over the land. He drank in his intended's visage and was so excited to be meeting him that he stood upon claws and paws and he extended his wings to their full sixteen-foot wing span, causing all the men around him to go into attack preparation mode.

PHREEETTT!

The piercing trill of a loud whistle startled Red so badly that he barely had time to see everyone stop instantly before his Gryphun reared in panic and he had to force his attention inward to try to calm himself.

Red vaguely heard a strong, commanding but gentle, voice say "Whoa, WHOA!" Words blended together as his Gryphun calmed faster than expected and he heard the voice apologize for startling him and explained what was going on. Gradually, his Gryphun settled, panting slightly, and he sat back down on his red-gold hind legs looking at what must be the Crown Prince of Hoomun, his future husband.

"I apologize, Royal Hoomun Prince Charon," Red said in his Gryphun voice, which was full of many notes and vowels that most humans would not hear, and bowed his head in a gesture of respect between royals.

Charon looked a little shocked at his speech but answered with his own royal bow calmly.

"I did not realize you could speak in this form. I apologize if I'm a little stunned at this knowledge. To whom do I speak?"

"It is best that I not answer that question. Let me just say that I'm one of the royal Gryphuns here on an ambassadorship between our peoples in the hopes that the ceasefire will be made permanent." *Father did say that I would be an ambassador to the Hoomuns after the marriage, so not entirely a lie, but also not the whole truth.*

"Welcome to the palace. Would you like to change to meet with King Varick?"

"That will be unnecessary, Prince Charon. I will leave here shortly. I misjudged my arrival and interrupted your training schedule. I shall leave and return to meet the royal family as a man on the morrow's day cycle. It is easier to travel in Gryphun form when no bags are needed."

Meeting the King would have been good, but I don't want to chance it.

Red's bags should be here later today so he wouldn't have to figure out how to carry them while flying. Thank the gods his majordomo took care of that detail or he would have had nothing once he and Charon traveled on their honeymoon.

"Then I will see you on the morrow." Charon said as he bowed again.

Red turned and spread his wings, the red-gold of his coat glistening in the morning sun. With a jump he was back in the air, careful to leave his cloaking off so as not to suddenly disappear and really upset people. He felt eyes on him long into the air, and so he traveled until he was sure he was out of sight and then teleported directly into bipedal form at the side of the palace out of sight of everyone this time. As long as he could see where he was going, he could teleport to it. He was the only one with this ability, and he hoped to keep that knowledge from those that would seek to harm him as long as possible.

The Hoomun King and Charon would be the first to know after the wedding since their lives would depend upon that knowledge.

"Who goes there?"

Charon's voice startled Red out of his thoughts, returning him to the present to see Charon looking straight at him despite his being hidden in the shadows of the room.

How did he know I was here?

Red walked up to Charon, seeing the haughty but cautiously curious expression on his masculine face, and stood in front of the proud man. He was right that his intended was shorter, but he was actually shorter than expected when he only came up to Red's nose. At six foot five, there were not many who were taller, except a couple of his brothers. Charon was smaller, but hints of muscle beneath his attire gave Red some ideas for later.

Throwing caution into the wind, Red stepped closer until Charon and Red were barely touching, with only the clothes between them. He reached out to Charon's face and cradled it in his battle-scarred hands. Rubbing thumbs lightly over Charon's high cheekbones, Red saw the slightly glazed look in his Crown Prince's eyes as he lowered his lips to the pouty red ones that had been calling to him ever since seeing him while in Gryphun form.

They both moaned into the kiss when their lips touched. Heat rolled between and burned them both as Red intensified the kiss, pulling on Charon's lips with his teeth, never taking it further than closed mouths.

But the sparks! Charon murmured something unintelligible, and Red lost himself as he wrapped himself around this fascinating man. Red grabbed the back of Charon's head with one hand and placed his other arm around Charon's back at the waist, pressing them together.

The kiss grew to scorching as it deepened, and they both nibbled and tasted each other's mouths. Charon's stiff continence slowly melted, and Red vaguely noticed that they fit perfectly together.

Both were so lost in the kiss they probably would have missed a fireball whizzing past. Nevertheless, reality managed to intrude into Red's consciousness when an unidentified sound reached his ears. Red took a step apart from Charon and gazed into his face with wonder in his heart. He noticed Charon's eyes were still closed, still lost in the kiss with a look of wonderment of his own. Taking advantage, Red caressed Charon's face briefly before using his ability to teleport before someone caught him where he was not supposed to be.

Charon slowly awakened as he felt a slight caress on his face. Then there was nothing. He blinked his eyes rapidly to find that the man who was everything he'd dreamed about was gone.

Whaat?! He's gone!

Looking around frantically, he realized he was alone—more alone and despondent than he realized before the marriage was contracted.

I found him. I found the man that captures all the qualities I want. He's bolder than I, he's handsome, and he has muscles. Don't forget the muscles... Ah crap. I sound like a girl swooning at her suitor. Except that I'm not a girl. And this mystery man is not my suitor. Where did he disappear to? How did he do that?

Charon gave himself a mental shake to stop dawdling and get back to the real world. While he wanted to be with this mystery man, he must do his duty and marry the Gryphon Prince tomorrow. Without duty, he would be nothing and the King would be disappointed. This war must be stopped once and for all.

Saddened, Charon gathered together his things before going to the baths at the other side of his wing.

It was too bad that technology didn't work on this world. Reading about the long-ago Human settlers of Earth where they had "bathrooms" within what had

been called a “bedroom suite” would be nice. Since the magic of the planet kept the baths warm sun cycle-round, renewing the spells in one area was easier for the mages than individual bathing rooms within each set of sleeping chambers.

Pity though. I guess it's a good thing that I don't have a modest bone in my body. Then again, Charon smirked to himself, rank has its privileges.

Charon walked up to bathing area doorway. Two soldiers on either side stood at attention and gave the warrior greeting.

“Soldiers, please ensure that the bathing room is cleared so that I may bathe in peace... alone.”

“Yes, sire,” they answered at once in unison.

Charon quirked his eyebrows at the synchrony, amused. The soldier to the right, Quess—Charon believed his name to be—nodded once and went inside to carry out his orders. A little steam escaped the curtained doorway as it fluttered closed. Within minutes, a couple of gentleman of the court with a lady between them exited the bathing room, bowing to him as his rank demanded—the men protectively hovering around the lady as they left. Charon gave a distracted nod of acknowledgement, vaguely amused at some of the inhabitants but thinking of the kiss more as he waited for them to pass. Quess returned to his post a few moments later.

“It is all clear, Milord.”

“Thank you, Quess. Please see that I am not disturbed.”

“Yes, sire,” Both soldiers answered in concert.

The morning of the wedding

Charon awoke to the light filtering through the curtains on the windows in his chambers. He blinked the grit from his eyes, feeling a little fuzzy from the night of sleep. *Sleep? Wait... I slept? All night?*

He scrambled out of the bed alarmed and looked around with new eyes. His sleeping area looked fine. More than fine. He didn't think he spent all that much time in here because it haunted him when he couldn't sleep.

How did I sleep? I haven't slept but for a few hours each night for quarms, maybe even a couple moon cycles. I know the temper and tension problems were a part of it, but I thought it wouldn't get better until I could release the tension with sex.

Charon shook his head, still a little bleary and unfocused, standing in a fight-ready position he automatically assumed when he leaped out of the bed. He slowly started to notice things. He saw that the bed coverings were slightly damp. Then he realized that he felt something, something sticky on his chest and abdomen. He looked down and saw dried trails of white trailing to his...

Understanding dawned and Charon blushed... hard. So embarrassed, he felt on fire despite being alone. He thought that his whole body was the color of those deep red beets he had read about in one of the agricultural journals that had survived. He realized that he was next to his full-length mirror, looked askance at it briefly, and then snapped straight ahead seeing the flush over his entire body.

Yes, yes, I am. He sighed and shook his head a little to lift the last of the grogginess. *I guess I need to bathe... again. I wonder what I dreamed about... oh yeah, that gorgeous guy who kissed me last night. Well, I guess I know what happened when I slept.*

Charon's thoughts continued to race while he grabbed his things for bathing, including what he needed for the wedding in a few hours and walked towards the door to head the bathing room. He walked out of his chambers, looking around quickly and noticed that no one was around at this early hour. He quickly walked to the bathing rooms he had been to last night. At least, he was pretty sure he had gone to them last night. He must have gone to his chambers at some point since he did not remember past the walking in after the trio had left.

He put on his blank face and walked up to the guards. To their credit, they didn't blink at his lack of attire or the mess on him. They were very well trained indeed. They were a different pair than last night, and he didn't know their names.

"Please see that the chambers are clear. I have preparations to make."

The guard on the left nodded in acknowledgment and walked into the room. A few minutes later, he exited the chambers.

"It is all clear, Your Highness." The guard went back to his position.

"Please see that I am not disturbed. I will be done within the hour." They both bowed in understanding.

Charon walked through the archway and let the curtain settle behind him.

He exhaled, slowly, relaxing some as he felt the steam from the baths seep into his pores. It was a fairly large room with several smaller, partially enclosed

areas for semi-privacy and one that was completely enclosed for the modest among his people. There were not many—only a few here and there, but the ruling body tried to accommodate them. He walked straight to the large main bath in front and set his things aside on the bench closest. The benches surrounded the circular baths with small walkways in between for people to enter and exit the steps that led into the baths. They were fed by springs under the palace and the heat was maintained by mage spells.

Charon quickly walked into the nearest entrance and efficiently cleaned off the residue he had found upon waking. He went through and cleaned every crevice since he did not know what would happen later tonight. It will be his first night as a married man.

What a scary thought. I will be married in a few hours to someone I will meet at the altar. I wish this could have been avoided, but the Senate had spoken and Father had found someone who would take me. I don't feel like a prime catch in the marriage market. If nothing else, I will not have to worry about it anymore. It's out of my hands now.

He sighed and continued his cleaning preparations. After he finished, he went to his things and gathered the anointing oils all of the royals used for their pre-wedding rituals. They smelled heavenly, and he quickly applied them to his skin, beginning his meditation on what was to come.

He breathed in and out the traditional five times, each breath slowly sinking him into a calm state. He let the peace fill his mind and he noticed little nuances. He could hear the humming of small insects outside. The water flowed over his skin as it mingled with the oils, settling his inner thoughts further. He could feel the slight breeze through the windows lightly caressing his skin. He felt refreshed and ready to accept this marriage, and joy began to fill him once he had let go of the tension he had accumulated about the marriage. He felt like a large weight had been lifted and he was at peace with the direction his life was going towards.

No wonder these rituals were created. I feel better.

After he completed his pre-wedding meditation, Charon exited the bath and retrieved the clothing his father had specially made for this occasion. They were dark purple robes, so dark, they were almost black. Trimmed in grey fur, the robes shimmered in the sun coming in from the windows. He dried himself off and put on the robes. There were some human fabrics called silk preserved by some early magic in a chamber made for those artifacts. His robes felt just

like those fabrics. He placed the hood over his head after quickly combing his fingers through his hair.

Luckily, I kept my hair short.

After making sure he was presentable, Charon gathered his bathing things and walked out of the chambers. As the curtain closed and he was preparing to leave, one of the guards gasped in surprise.

“Sire?”

Charon turned around, eyes hard and completely green, and found both guards staring at him in shock. Since the robes he wore were only worn when a royal was getting married, the guards knew—at a glance—what was about to happen. What Charon didn't know was that his eyes were glowing slightly, too.

“Yes,” he answered their unspoken question. “And you are not to say anything until it is done. No one is supposed to know what will be happening under the large canvas tent in the rear of the palace until they get there. Do not disclose it.”

Charon looked hard at both of them and then looked individually in each guard's eyes. They both swallowed loudly, and looked away from Charon's piercing gaze. Responding quickly, they said “Yes, sire” as they returned to their posts and stood at stark attention. Charon turned again and walked towards his chambers, thankful that his side of the palace was still clear.

While I understand the need for secrecy, surely the staff and guards should know. I wonder why they acted like they were afraid of me. I wasn't that hard on them, was I?

He shrugged away the thought, not worrying about it as he had other things to do. He walked into his chambers and put away his bathing things. After he was done, he walked into a side chamber and out the hidden door towards the back of the chambers. It led to a tunnel to his father's chambers where he was to meet him prior to officially arriving at the altar in the less than two hours under said tent.

I better hop to it then.

Quickly finding the end of the secret passage, he knocked on his father's door and it opened. Varick himself opened the door. Charon mused that would make sense since the staff did not know what form the political treaty was taking.

“Greetings and salutations, Father.”

“Greetings to you as well, my son. Did you sleep well last night? You seem... rested,” Varick said, smiling knowingly.

Charon stilled, closed his eyes and clench his fingers into fists, and then his blush from earlier came back in full force.

“Father, do you know something about last night? I confess that I do not remember it past walking into the bathing chambers for my nightly soak. I woke up this morning... *covered*.” He whispered the last word, knowing Varick would understand. While not modest about his body, as earlier proved, he was very strait-laced when it came to the act of sex itself. It did not matter that he was alone. Self-sex was still sex in his eyes even when his body was acting upon it without his knowledge.

Both of Varick's eyebrows shot up at his son's blush and the implications.

“You had a wet dream? And what do you mean by knowing something about last night?”

Charon blushed harder on his moderately light skin. He noticed that his father took notice of his rosy complexion.

“Yes... it appears that I did.” Charon continued to clench his fist but opened his eyes and tried to look anywhere but his father. “In fact, I deduced that I had the—*wet dream*,” he whispered hoarsely. He took a moment to clear his throat and continued in a more normal voice, “Because there was ejaculate on the front of my body.” *There, I said it. Almost twenty-five sun cycles old and I still have trouble talking to my father about anything dealing with sex.* He took a deep breath and faced his father. “I do not recall anything from the time I had entered the bathing rooms until I awoke early this morning. I felt like I had slept, and that was strange by itself. I haven't slept more than two, or maybe four hours at most, for most of the last moon cycle.”

Varick stared into his eyes stunned, not saying anything as he stared into his son's eyes.

Charon noticed his father's expression was eerily similar to the one the guards had given him earlier that morning. “What?!”

“Son, I don't know how to say this but... your eyes... they are this brilliant deep green, and they are glowing slightly.”

“Green? But I have green and brown eyes... glowing... they're really glowing?” Charon said faintly. *What in all of the gods' hells is going on! It had to have happened last night during that blank space of time.* He couldn't

remember anything. He never forgot how he went to bed before. Even when drinking ale, heavily.

“I don’t know, son. I’ll have someone research in the archives and revisit this after you return from your honeymoon. Shall we go?” Varick shook himself out of his shock. “We have only a few moments before it’s time.”

Charon closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. Strangely enough, he didn’t feel the tension he had been battling for the last moon cycle. It was surprisingly absent. For some reason, he was concerned with its absence. That surprised him somewhat. He shrugged and felt that his shoulders seemed to be fairly loose as well. He chalked it up to the strangeness that had been his morning, and looked at his father.

“I’m ready.”

Charon met his father’s eyes for a long moment. In a little more than an hour, their relationship would never be the same. Charon knew he would be embarking on a new life as a married man and his father would have to learn to let someone else take care of him. It was a heavy thought, but he knew that he would still have his father when he needed him. *This is it*. Despite duty, despite that it was not his choice, Charon had a small flame of hope in his breast. He knew not how, or from where, but the light of a brand new day cycle had dawned and with it, maybe his wishes could come true.

Almost as one, they both turned and walked towards the passage that Charon had just walked out of and continued the journey to the back of the palace via hidden passages so Charon would not be seen before it was time.

Charon’s only regret as he followed his father to his awaiting husband-to-be was that the lovely man who had kissed him would not be the one he would face in less than an hour at the marriage altar.

They arrived at the small enclosure attached to the big canvas tent constructed for this event without anyone seeing them. There was an identical enclosure on the opposite side of the rather large circular tent, built for Reddington. The location was important because it was part of the ritual Charon and Reddington were about to embark upon. Charon only hoped someone had coached his intended well. The gods were not forgiving of any deviation from the ritual.

Varick walked to the center of the staging tent that was empty with the exception of a mat on the floor—at which, they stopped. Charon placed himself

in full meditation position on the mat, kneeling and completely naked under his dark robes, as tradition dictated. He performed his full prayer and meditation to the gods as he respected their presence and wished them to aid him in this new endeavor.

After what seemed like hours but was likely only several moments, the gong signaled the beginning of the ritual. Charon gathered himself, got up in one fluid motion, and walked sedately in time, almost trancelike, to the low music that had started immediately after the gong had sounded. He left the smaller tent and walked down the aisle towards the central circular altar. As he passed the rows of seats aligned to the aisles and with the main alter like the spokes on a wheel, he heard his side of the tent sound an almost unanimous gasp as the Hoomuns saw what he was wearing, most understanding what the robes meant. They quickly quieted, and the music flowed from the players almost like the gods themselves saw fit to bless this union directly.

Charon saw a tall figure across from him matching his pace as they almost danced towards the central altar. As he drew closer, he noticed that the man staring back at him, and the hope bloomed full force in his chest as he saw the familiar form of the man he had kissed the night before.

My mystery man is Reddington! Oh happy days! My desire has been granted!

None of these thoughts ever showed on Charon's stony face. But his now green eyes brightened further, starting a steady change from bright green to green-amber as he continued the ritual walk towards Reddington.

Red noticed the change in color of Charon's eyes, his Gryphon stilling inside him suddenly. He felt a communication from him that nearly stopped his own steady walk towards the altar that he had been coached to perform.

::Be prepared. Another will be made::

Red heard mentally this cryptic remark from his Gryphon and tried to get more information out of him while he finished walking to the altar. Communication with your Gryphon didn't happen often, or as clearly as this one was, but a Gryphon speaking to their cohabitant in thought and pictures was not unheard of. His Gryphon apparently knew something was going to happen, and Red knew to listen. With this in mind, Red braced himself for anything and continued the slow circle opposite Charon and around the main

altar in between them, going slightly faster now, as he had been instructed, so they would meet at north side of the altar at the right time.

They both finished their circuits and arrived at the north steps that led to the platform where their respective fathers awaited. Beside King Alder was his lovely mother standing at the south end facing them.

They joined hands, and both of them felt a slight jolt when their hands clasped together. They looked into each other's eyes with acknowledgement of the connection, and turned back towards the steps. Hand in hand, they continued the same sedate pace they had previously displayed, only stopping once they were at the small table in the very center of the platform.

King Varick stepped towards them, placing the small table between himself and Charon, while King Alder, with his wife, stood in front of Reddington. Varick picked a purple cord and Alder picked up a gold one. In unison, they turned with the cords, bowed to each other, and returned to their respective sons.

"Do you, Crown Prince Charon of the Hoomun nation take Prince Reddington of the Gryphon nation, as your bonded husband?" Varick asked Charon.

"I do." *The word change from lawful to bonded must be a Gryphon request,* Charon thought as he answered.

Alder continued the challenge.

"Do you, Prince Reddington of the Gryphon nation take Crown Prince Charon of the Hoomun nation as your bonded husband?" Alder asked Red.

"I do."

"Challenge has been asked and accepted. As officiant of this wedding ritual, I bind these two in everlasting matrimony and bless this union. May the gods bring you joy and love." Varick finished his speech while taking Charon and Reddington's clasped hands into his and wrapped the purple cord around their wrists.

Alder continued the ritual, "As the leader of the Gryphon nation, I bind these two in everlasting matrimony and bless this union. May your bond grow wondrous and solid so you always know your mate's devotion and well-being." Alder finished his blessing as he tied the gold cord in his hands around their wrists next to, and over, the purple cord.

Mates. Well, that answered one of my questions. Charon thought when he heard his new father-in-law's blessing.

Alder finished the ritual.

“By the powers bestowed upon me and the blessing of the gods, I pronounce you bonded and married. You may kiss to complete your bond.”

Charon noticed the addition to the finale of the binding words as he turned toward his husband. He leaned in towards him moving their bound hands aside while their free hands grasped each other's heads for their first kiss as a married couple. A second jolt of energy traveled their arms as they connected hand to head.

Charon looked up into Reddington's golden eyes as he prepared to kiss him.

::Red. I prefer Red.::

Charon stilled, a little surprised but willing to go with this new development. Cautiously, he answered in the same way.

::Did you just ask me to call you Red? Without speaking?::

::Yes::

::The bond is literal.:: Charon stated faintly.

::Yes, my mate. Gryphuns form telepathic bonds with their mates. When we kissed last night, it started the process. Although, I didn't realize it had started or I would have warned you. I also didn't realize that the bonding ritual would allow us to mind to mind speak instantaneously.::

::It usually doesn't happen this fast?::

::No. It usually starts upon the first kiss as a married couple, but since we briefly kissed last night, I would assume it started then.::

::What's going to happen when we kiss now?::

::I have no idea. Shall we find out?:: Red twitched the corner of his mouth at the last thought, eyes dancing and inviting.

Charon smirked a little as well. ::Let's do it.::

::Good mate. I think I could love you dearly.:: Red closed his eyes and bent down, ready to take those soft lips he remembered from last night.

Charon's eyes glowed more as they slowly bled from green to full amber. He closed them, anticipation rising within.

Their lips met and white hot fire exploded between them. Red vaguely heard from his Gryphun.

::He comes, hold him.::

Except he didn't just feel desire as he thought he would. Red opened his eyes slightly and noticed immediately a partially transparent white fire tinged with green and gold bursting from Charon. Red saw it rise and reacted instantly locking his free hand and arm around one side of Charon's body. He continued his hold by resting their bonded arms at Charon's lower back. Red tightened his grip on Charon now firmly holding his bonded as his Gryphun had instructed.

Red reached to his parents with his mind, since he was lip-locked with Charon.

::Get everyone away from here!::

At the silent command of their son, Alder and Celine moved quickly to get the stock-still Varick to move away from the altar. Varick was still as he watched the white-gold-green flames surrounding Reddington and Charon, and then he finally heard the commotion around him and the Gryphun royal's urgent calls. He shook off his daze and started to help get the people closest to the altar away from whatever was about to happen. He glanced up, checking on the couple a few more times as he ushered people out hoping he would not lose one son on the brink of gaining another.

Red continued to hold a flaming Charon, vaguely curious as to why he didn't feel more heat than he was feeling.

::I have you, mate. Charon, I have you. I am going to stop kissing you now but I will continue to hold you.::

::I feel so hot. What is happening to me, Red?::

::I believe you are about to change, my bonded. My Gryphun warned me that something new would be made when we saw your eyes glowing green-amber when we walked in.::

::Made?:: Charon alternated shivering and sweating in Red's arms.

::Yes. I believe you are about to shift into an animal form. I don't know what your form will be as Gryphuns usually have a gold shimmer when we first change as hatchlings. Over the years, it becomes almost a blur. I've never seen white with green-amber in a change aura before.::

::I fear it.::

::Do not fear for I am with you, now and always.::

::I feel you.::

::Then relax and let it happen.:: Red slowly ended the kiss and pulled away. He opened his eyes further to see what would happen next.

Charon slowly opened his eyes when the kiss broke, and Red saw that they were full amber now looking through the translucent white flames. That was a sure sign of a change being eminent. Gryphuns' eyes glowed gold. Red wondered what glowing green then amber meant. He guessed he would find out soon enough. *Let's get through this one first.*

::I feel something changing, Red!::

::Don't panic, Charon. I still have you. Let it change.::

::But... the bonding cords....::

::I will take care of them. Relax and let it happen.::

::Alright... my mate.:: Red's heart warmed at those words from Charon, seeing him visibly relax. Charon's man form began to disappear as the flames bled to a solid white. He quickly took the cords away from their hands with only a thought, pulling them off just before the white fire went solid and surround them both. *The fire should hide that little trick.*

While Red still felt a solid mass, he was unable to see past the white fire wall that had engulfed them. It flamed higher, and he felt a difference in its presence and Red latched onto it with both hands and arms now that they were free. He closed his eyes as the brightness of the fire hurt them. He held on tight as the change took hold of what he thought was his Hoomun-only mate. His kind had experienced this in the last three hundred years, give or take a few decades. It should be interesting to see what Charon would become.

Then Charon yelled, loud and long. In the midst of the yell, it changed to a loud bird cry mixed with what sounded like a Gryphon hatchling cry. The previously solid white fire slowly went transparent, and then faded to nothing leaving a fairly large bird-like form in Red's arms. He opened his eyes and looked into the amber-green eyes of his mate.

"You are beautiful, my mate," Red said, awe-struck at the amber and green plumage of a bird creature he had never seen before. He was larger than most birds on the planet except Gryphuns, and they were not birds in the strictest sense. His feathers had a green-amber sheen to them and shimmered like flame. "I do not know your type, but you look wonderful."

"I know what he has changed into." King Varick stepped towards them once the wall of white was gone. "Liked the Gryphuns before, and with their Change, it appears that Charon has become a shifter with animal characteristics. There were hints that our ancestors were affected by the Change that affected Gryphuns but not how it was to express. I believe this is potentially a manifestation of some of the by-products of the evolution of magic triggered by our old technology."

Both Red and the Charon-bird turned towards the Hoomun King.

CAW! CA-CAW! CAW?

"Shush, my mate. All is well. Don't try to speak. Speaking develops later," Red answered Charon's bird talk. "Just think your questions to me and I will translate."

"You have bonded that much?" Red's father approached with his mother.

"Yes. It appears the bond started when I kissed him last night."

King Alder quirked his eyebrows at him. "Really?"

"Yes, Father. Wait... Charon is trying to tell me something." Red looked towards Charon's bird form and concentrated on hearing his bonded.

::Ask my father what he knows. This is a bit strange. I think I know as well but I want him to confirm.::

Red turned to Varick and repeated the questions.

"He is a Phoenix. Like the Griffins of ancient Earth, they too, were a myth. It appears that the magic of the planet has evolved us as it did the Gryphuns, albeit at a slower pace, and now here is another shifter," Varick answered. "Although, they are usually depicted as having red flames from the feathers, having healing properties in their tears, and they could be reborn." He frowned at the last statement. "I'm not sure if I believe the stories but it appears the flaming is right, just different colors. As for the rest, time will tell. I will have to see if there is anything more in the archive."

::I had read about them. That is what I thought.:: Charon's brilliant green and amber eyes turned towards Red, and he knew to repeat Charon's comment. Red continued staring into his bonded's eyes and knew he could come to love this man. *He is amazing. He's handling this so well.*

"I want to kiss you again." Red's eyes started to glow a warm gold.

::Are you sure? Look what happened the last time...:: Charon thought to him mentally chuckling. He contemplated about it a little more and continued. ::I would rather be a man again.::

“Then return. Just think about being a man, kissing me, and you should change back.”

Green eyes twinkled and Charon returned to his man form, robe still on as if nothing had happened. When the change was complete, Red bent down and took that kiss he had promised. This time, Charon was not consumed in the process.

The End... or is it?

Author Bio

Eloreen Moon is a pen name for a writer, reviewer, beta reader/editor, and reader of all things romance, including alternative lifestyle (LGBT) stories and novels. Inspiration is all around and life will not limit her to one particular topic. She likes to read and write a blend of science fiction, fantasy, historical, and paranormal—sometimes more than one together, especially if romance is involved. However, cowboys, lawmen, and contemporary times are fun, too.

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