

Excerpt - Chapter 1: Gehenna

Skin. It hides everything. The new prisoner had a pretty pelt, nicely plump in a sea of skeletons. If I'd had the energy to lust after the girl, I would have edged closer and brushed against her softness, inhaled her fresh scent before it was gone.

I didn't try. I was one of the sea of skeletons, one of the wretched waiting to die.

Until I ended up on Gehenna Prison Planet, I had known only luxury and fawning from the time I cried my first tears, every wish filled as easily as a cup of milk, or as the years elapsed, a goblet of wine. In recall, such times had been lived by a man I was no more—a man who had not guarded his realm with the care it deserved. I paid the price now, for this man whose skin I wore, stretched taut over a pitiful collection of bones and decorated with scars, my person as withered as the power I once assumed I had every right to abuse.

Skin hides everything. To this day, it hid the identity of my betrayer, but in my mind, I had narrowed it down to two—one I loved and one I hated. Or perhaps they had worked together to make me vanish from the Ice Planet and awaken in hell, robbed of all things, even my illustrious name.

The plump girl moved closer, gracefully up the side of the mine pit, watched by hollow sunken eyes on all sides.

The third and hottest of the three afternoon suns edged overhead, searing down with stinging cruelty, sending inmates scuttling into the pockets of shallow caves where they would be trapped until that mean sun slid away, four long hours later.

I limped for the nearest shelter, dragging a twisted useless leg. One cave was as good as another. My only desire in a cave was its solitude; too many new prisoners enjoyed inflicting pain on a ruined man while they still had the energy to do so.

The girl followed.

Coincidence surely, but my heart beat faster—it didn't take much these days. And she drew closer still, purpose in her step. Perhaps not coincidence. An assassin? Unlikely—I was no threat to anyone now. My betrayer had hidden me here to suffer rather than die, and there is nothing like imposing a sentence of prolonged suffering to satisfy a vengeful heart.

I entered the cave and leaned against the rough stone, attending the entrance. She strode inside without hesitation and her dark eyes examined every inch of my face. Those fierce eyes were not the eyes of a prisoner even though she walked the same burning sand as me. Her skin was so plump and smooth, and her hair so glossy it gleamed. I longed to touch it, stroke it, smell it. She was the antithesis of Gehenna and my mouth watered.

Skin. I was ashamed of mine. All of it: the gauntness, the stench, the unsightly scars, the man I was now. I lowered my eyes to stare at the ground.

“Megal? Is it you?” Even her musical voice caused pleasure, but that name! It was a name from another time and place.

I lifted my gaze and squinted in the dim light. If I knew this girl, I could not recall. “I was Megal once. Who asks for me by name?”

“I do, for another.” She glanced warily over her shoulder, but none could enter the cave now. The suns would have cooked their skin. We would not be interrupted for hours.

“Who?” I rasped.

“Kyar.”

That name caused more pain than being branded a prisoner with a redhot iron, a scar that will never fade. The brand on her shoulder was still blistered and raw. “Kyar?” For the first time in years, I spoke the name of the brother who might have betrayed me to claim my planets and stand in my stead. If his envy had driven him to such action, I missed him regardless. “Kyar, how is he?”

“Well enough. Megal, it is you?”

I nodded. She looked at me directly, then looked away. I couldn't blame her for avoiding the sight.

“Kyar has searched three years to find you. And you've been here, all along?”

Surely it was plain on my face. “Three years. It felt ... longer.”

“It must have seemed an eternity. Now that we have found you, we will free you from this place.” She stepped closer. I could smell her now, still clean and healthy. I motioned her nearer still. I was surprised when she came close enough to touch, but perhaps she had a dagger hidden within the folds of her flesh. I didn't care.

She reached out to touch my arm and the light brush of her fingers hurt. Everything hurt these days. And days were all I had left; I knew death shadowed me closely, creeping up to sweetly lick my skin at idle moments.

I laid my head on her shoulder and remembered Kyar. Three years. My little brother would be a man of twenty-one now. Her skin felt like a velvet pillow. I started to sob without shame. I had lost my pride so long ago, I couldn't remember having it.

She touched my patchy skull and murmured words I could barely take in, soothing me like a child. “It will not be long now. I have come to help you. Your home planet needs you, Megal. It has suffered these three years. Kyar has done what he can, but he has had to act in secret. Soon you will be free and together we can put things right.”

Her words made no sense to me, but all I asked was, “Who are you?”

“No-one of import.”

I dried my eyes, pressing them against her rough tunic. Then I kissed her neck with lips as cracked and rough as the stone that surrounded us, and my tongue tasted the salty sweetness of her skin. She shuddered. Needless to say, it was not with pleasure, but revulsion. Following a hunch, I took her hand and turned the palm up. She bore a slave's tattoo, but the mark was not one I recognized. My family did not own her.

“What shall I call you?” I asked.

“Whatever you wish.”

I had not been a master for three years; I had been a slave to the prison. I saw now with a slave's eyes and felt with a slave's heart. “I would rather know your true name.”

She gave me her beautiful name. “Sephine.”

I should have asked about the plan to take me from this place. I was too distracted by the girl. My shaking hand stroked down her neck. Three fingers and a stump snuggled between her cleavage. I simply could not resist the temptation of such luxurious beauty. “Sephine,” I whispered.

She stepped back, unable to hide her distaste.

“Please,” I begged. In the past, it would have been an arrogant order and she would have done exactly as I wished. I no longer believed I had that right, nor did any man. She watched me impassively and held her ground. My lame leg had supported me for as long as it was able. I lowered, scraping against the rock wall.

The girl crouched too, close, but not too close. “Your brother sent me. I will see you off this planet.”

“How?”

“It is better if you don’t know. I am but a vessel to serve you, Nomad Megal.” Her voice mocked a touch, which was no more than I deserved, crouched like a filthy animal in prisoner’s waste.

The title caught me off-guard. Nomad—the ruler, and a ruler must always stand alone and apart. He does not belong amongst his people, but ahead of them, leading them. He shoulders the weighty responsibility of making the decisions that impact countless lives. And with his mantle of power comes isolation, and the inevitable loneliness that is just one more burden for him to bear. Yet men still crave the position of ruler for all the power that it grants them.

The title was mine no longer, it belonged to whoever ruled my planets in my place. And from the girl’s words, that person was not my brother. I had thought him my betrayer, seduced by his jealousy and benefiting the most from my disappearance, but if he was not ruling and had sent Sephine to save me, I was wrong.

“Tell me, what has happened on the Ice Planet?” My neck gave out and my head lolled back, banging rock. Lacking the energy to raise it, I left it there.

Sephine didn’t answer. She edged closer, opened her mouth wide, and exposed viper’s fangs. Before I could move, she sank them deep into my neck. She was definitely not full-human and she was an assassin after all. I finally had my answer, my brother must be laughing his head off right now for what he had subjected me to—three years of unimaginable suffering on the hell planet before he killed me off. And the woman ... he had chosen well. Her skin was pure human, it hid the other completely.