

To Reign in Revalmor

"You know, I've heard you talk about White Falls for years, but I admit I never really believed there was such a place."

Brianna Taylor looked up through the cell bars at her friend. "And now you know there really isn't. God, Marnee, what's happening? I never punched anyone in my life." Never been in jail, she thought miserably, never been in a bar fight before, either, much less started one. "I'm really glad you're here."

"They're not going to let me stay much longer," Marnee said. "I'll be back first thing in the morning, and bail you out of here."

"Thanks, Marnee."

The sound of her friend's retreating footsteps nearly broke her.

It was all too crazy. An unspecified mechanical issue with the plane, an unscheduled stopover in Spokane, the realization she was only a couple of hours drive from her home-town, a sudden sentimental decision to pay a visit--her first in nearly ten years.

The drive across the narrow panhandle of Northern Idaho and up into Northwestern Montana had been every bit as gorgeous as she remembered. Beneath soaring mountains capped in thick forests of ponderosa and lodge pole, she felt her spirit expand with the exultation mountain air always aroused in her, and she wondered if she'd ever stop smiling.

Well, she'd stopped smiling now. The first sight of White Falls had been a shock. The town had changed so much, there was almost nothing left that she recognized. The ranches and summer homes on the outskirts were all eerily unfamiliar. More unsettling still, many of them were obviously really old--sprawling Craftsman farmhouses that had to date from the early 1920's. Trailers that had obviously been deteriorating longer

than she had been away sat in the middle of huge horse-paddocks she had never seen before.

She breathed a little easier as they pulled into the town itself--at least that hadn't changed, or not that much. White Falls's frontier origins showed in its high-fronted buildings on Main Street, looking more like a set for a Western than a town in modern America. The courthouse still sat enthroned in full a square block of manicured lawn. The blue hydrangea bushes she remembered were gone, replaced by ordered beds of red salvia, blue lobelia and white sweet alyssum--a charming patriotic display for the upcoming Fourth of July.

"Wow," Marnee said with a low whistle, "right out of a Ron Howard movie."

Brianna pulled into a diagonal parking spot a block from Courthouse Square. "There used to be a statue over there," she said, pointing at a corner of the lawn where a softball game was in progress. "Colonel Mark Tessman, Hero of White Falls. Only he wasn't a colonel, and he wasn't a hero--just a macho jerk whose contribution to settling the West was to kill a couple dozen Indians back in 1868." She quirked an eyebrow and lifted one corner of her mouth in a cynical little smile. "Of course, we didn't find out about that until we were seniors in high school..." her voice trailed off and she began to worry her lower lip.

"What's wrong, Brianna?" Marnee looked concerned.

"It's just--I know I've been away awhile, but I haven't seen one person that looks familiar. Not one. And the stores are all wrong. The businesses. Nothing's where it should be, except the courthouse."

"Look, this was probably a bad idea. We could be back at that Hot Springs Resort in an hour, sipping margaritas in a steaming hot tub and getting a couple of killer massages. What do you say?"

Instead of answering, Brianna backed out and began weaving through the small streets. Okay. Okay. This was familiar. This she knew. Her street, her block--

Her house wasn't there. A large empty lot stood between the Devereaux's house and the Collins's orchard where she'd snatched many apples and dreamed of love under the heady May blossoms.

"They tore our house down? How could they do that?"

"Brianna--"

But Brianna was out of the car, striding up the walk and protesting as she went. "That house was built in 1929, and Grampa kept it in perfect condition. Why would anyone want to tear it down?"

She pressed the doorbell with a frustrated jab.

A stranger answered. A woman about fifty, her smile friendly and questioning.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked kindly.

"I'm sorry," Brianna said, "I was looking for Mrs. Devereaux. My name is Brianna Taylor. I grew up in the house next door, and I wondered-- "

"Devereaux? I'm afraid you're mistaken, Dear. Our name is Henderson. There aren't any Devereaux in White Falls."

"I'm sorry, but of course there are. Or there were. They lived right here. I played with their kids. Please,"

The woman straightened slightly. "We've lived in this house longer than you've been alive, I suspect." Her tone grew sharper. "We've owned that vacant lot just as long, and there's never been a house on it." She must have seen something in Brianna's face, because her expression softened again. "Are you sure you're not thinking of Green River? or Whitefish?"

Brianna backed away, swallowed hard and bolted for the car.

"This is insane," she said, drawing her seatbelt across as she thought. "It's got to be some kind of land deal. They found--I don't know, uranium or something, and everyone's hushing it up. It's got to be something like that."

"Now what?" Marnee asked.

"How long have we been friends?"

"Eight years. Less a few months. Since you started to work at Morris and Elpert."

"Best friends?"

"Okay--nearly that long. What are you getting at?"

"Do I strike you as a Looney Toon? Delusional?"

"Not until today." Marnee laughed, but Brianna didn't respond. "Okay. Bad joke. No. You're maybe a little flakey around the edges, but definitely not ready for medication."

Brianna turned the key in the ignition and pulled away from the curb a little too fast.

"Where are we going?"

"The county library. I'm going to get to the bottom of this."

"Okay, but first, I need to eat. I need to pee. And I'd like to change out of all these clothes into some shorts. It's got to be ninety degrees outside, in case you haven't noticed."

"Drop me at the library -- I should be finished by the time you get back."

"Right. There was a motel back on the way into town. They probably don't have massages and a spa--it didn't look like they even had an elevator--but I think we should get rooms for tonight. We're still heading back to Atlanta tomorrow, right?"

"Sure."

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"Sorry," Marnee said when she rushed into the library two hours later. "I actually fell asleep while I was getting ready to change. All this fresh air, I guess. How did it go?"

"I checked the county records. No Devereaux, just as Ms. Henderson said. And her family has owned that whole end of the block since the 40's. The orchard, too.

There were no Collinses, that I can find. And no Taylors. Ever." She looked up at Marnee, fighting tears. She shook her head to clear it and closed her laptop. An hour's searching on-line had failed to turn up her parents' obituaries. No listing of her name at high school graduation. The pictures, the articles--an entire small-town life recorded in the local paper and lovingly pasted into her scrapbook --erased. Vanished, as if they'd never been. As if she'd never been. But more than a few pieces of newsprint, she *remembered* it all. Her mother's gentle laughter. She had Mom's gray eyes and curly black hair, but not her sweet disposition. Dad so handsome in his Navy Commander's uniform. The place on Lake MacDonald where they'd spent nearly every summer, and the big water meadow behind the house where she'd broken her wrist playing softball when she was ten. Old Mrs. Baldwin who lived two streets over had made popcorn balls every Halloween. Her friends through school. Her first date--her first kiss at the county fair. She still remembered Tyler Davis's shy smile, the way he'd held her hand so carefully in his sweaty one, the way his breath had smelled of the cotton candy they'd shared a few minutes before.

"I don't know what's going on, but I think you need a drink," Marnee declared. "There's got to be a bar around here, somewhere."

There was. They bypassed the Elk Horn Saloon as being a little too picturesque, but Sam's Place across the street had better lighting, and no dead animals snarling from the walls. The music was soft jazz, and the Happy Hour martinis came in huge glasses with four olives.

She'd never hit anyone before--well, not since she was a kid, anyway. The four martinis hadn't helped, but four martinis should have put her on her lips, not turned her into Catwoman.

She never would have hit that yahoo-- if he hadn't grabbed her shoulder and tried to force her to dance. That had to be self-defense. Right? And he was a really hot yahoo--or had been before she broke his nose with an open-hand, heel-of-the-palm

move she hadn't known she knew how to do

There it was again. *Shit!* Nothing was making sense.

Briana stood up at the scrape-clang of the gate and purposeful footsteps coming toward her cell. Maybe it had all been a mistake. A dream. Maybe by some fluke of fate, Tyler Davis still lived in White Falls. Or was back here on a visit. And then they could straighten all this out.

But the three men who stopped in front of her cell door were strangers.

"Military" she thought, although they wore business casual clothing. Something about them--they all had gray eyes, like hers. Now, that was weird. Gray eyes she knew were a super-recessive, and the odds of all four people in this small space...all this went on in one part of her thoughts while the front of her mind tried to deal with her disappointment at not recognizing them.

"Sil ware na veen!" the oldest man muttered. He stood in front of the other two and seemed to be in charge.

Brianna backed up a step. "Who are you?"

At her question, a strange look flickered over his face, almost like pain, she thought, before his expression went cool and formal again.

"I am Hallen, my Lady," he said with a stiff little bow.

My Lady? She took another step back. On top of everything else, she'd become a nut magnet. *Swell.*

"We are here to take you home."

"I don't think so. Who are you people? Guard!"

"Forgive me, Bria," the man said with what sounded like real regret as he lifted his hand toward her, revealing the small black fob of an automatic car door opener.

"We must be quick. The Morghai know you are here. We are only minutes ahead of them."

She pressed herself against the back wall, and the key fob blinked. The last thing

she remembered as the darkness closed in was the cell door swinging open without a sound or sign of friction.

She mumbled out of heavy dreams with flashes of memory flying back into her mind like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, only they formed an incomprehensible pattern that she couldn't get her brain around.

She lifted her arm under her head and bumped her elbow on the cell wall. It felt different in the darkness--not what she'd expected. She'd have thought the bilious green concrete block would be cold, a little rough, maybe. But it was lukewarm to the touch, and very smooth, almost polished. Maybe that was why her cell wasn't quite dark. She could see masses of shadow farther away than they should have been. She shook her head.

Someone must have cleaned while she was asleep. The air smelled better, too, with some scent she almost recognized. She was a light sleeper, as a rule, but as a rule, she didn't have the assistance of a series of martinis. Her mind spun away into a brief consideration of the proper collective for 'martini.' If it was an 'exaltation of larks,' a 'gaggle of geese,' a 'pride of lions,' what would one use for martinis? A 'drunk,' she decided. That's what the collective should be.

Deep breath, Bree. Pull it together. Whatever they had used as a deodorizer, it was a definite improvement over the stress-sweat, urine and vomit that had underlain the atmosphere in the cells last night. She decided to sit up, reaching into the darkness above her so she wouldn't hit her head on the upper bunk. Her hand found only empty space. She tried to sit, but her head spun nauseatingly and she lay back down, curling around an inner core of sickness, willing it to subside, along with the pounding in her temples. The rhythmic throbbing echoed a deeper pulsing throughout her body. Deep, comforting, almost subliminal, like a subtle version of the engines beating in the sound track of *Titanic*--

That snapped her fully awake as images of the three men in her cell elbowed each other for space in her attention. The strange language. The little flashing light--that son of a bitch had knocked her out! And now she was on a ship, headed God-knows where. She'd read about American women kidnapped and sold into slavery or prostitution in the Third World. Her heart rate leapt and her mouth went dry with terror. No one--not a soul on earth--knew where she was, or what had happened to her. Even in a little town like Green Falls, the police would never have let three strangers kidnap a prisoner right out of the jail. Not if they'd been able to stop them.

Oh, my God, she thought, what did they do? What had happened while she was unconscious? There had been a desk sergeant and a couple of guards there. Had the men killed them? Were they going to kill her, now, too, if she didn't cooperate? Would that be better than being a sex slave in some harem--if she was lucky, or a back-alley whore house if she wasn't.

The light brightened to nearly normal, and she swung her legs out of the bed and stood up as she got the first look at her new cell. She supposed 'stateroom' was the right term, but why pretty it up? A cell is a cell, on land or afloat.

This one was decorated in cream and pearl gray, with almost no furniture. As she watched, the bed slid back into the wall behind her, and she was left with nowhere to sit but the floor. There seemed to be no bathroom, either, which was about to become a real issue.

A door slid open in the far wall and the man who'd called himself Hallen stepped into the room. She could see one of the men from last night--she was still going on the assumption that it was just last night--standing in the hallway behind him. No way she could get past both of them--even if she were feeling at her best. They were both wearing one-piece jumpsuits that looked practical and much more comfortable than the slept-in skirt and sweater she'd been wearing since yesterday. Only yesterday. The realization dropped her stomach like a rock.

Hallen smiled. "I'm glad to see you're awake. Are you comfortable?"

"Does it look comfortable in here to you? I'd like a place to sit down. And a bathroom--do you call it a 'head' on a ship like this?"

His smile became a grin, and she realized he had probably been a handsome man in his younger years. She estimated his age at around fifty. He was still in great physical shape, though, and looked as if he had about three percent body fat.

"Actually, we call it a *shleroige*, but 'head' will do for now." Still smiling, he walked to the side wall and touched a small symbol. Another door slid silently into the thickness of the bulkhead, revealing a smaller room with fixtures she didn't recognize. "Allow me to show you how to use the appointments," he said, with that curious formality she'd noted before. "And please, don't think you can escape while I'm in here. Rolif is very good at his job."

The explanation took only a couple of minutes, and Brianna found herself alone again in the strange little room. She grazed her fingertips over the whorls and lines along one wall, and a sink--of sorts--opened out. A pass of her hand turned on the water. She was familiar with that technology, at least. She smiled at the memory of an old woman in the theater lavatory in Atlanta muttering and crossing herself as she watched the dispenser spew out paper towels at the wave of a hand. It must have seemed like magic.

Brianna knew the Japanese were technologically far advanced over the US, but she'd had no idea they'd progressed this far. Or that she was so far out of the stream of--*Oh, for Pete's sake, Bree!* she chided herself. You've been drugged, kidnapped, shanghaied, and you're more worried about being ignorant than being in danger? Sure, Hallen was reassuring, and he didn't look like a mad rapist, or white slaver, but then, he probably wouldn't.

Brianna brushed her fingers over the various symbols as she'd seen Hallen do, and set to work getting herself cleaned up. A jumpsuit similar to the ones Hallen and

Rolif were wearing materialized out of a drawer when she was ready to dress. It was just as comfortable as she'd thought it would be, in shades of silver and gray that flattered her coloring and lifted her spirits a micron or two..

Hallen was waiting for her when she emerged, sitting in a kind of chair that had apparently detached itself from some wall or other. He stood as she entered the room, and offered her the chair.

She shook her head. She could think better on her feet.

"You look much better, my Lady," he said.

"Why do you keep calling me that?"

"Habit, I suppose. Old habit."

"I've never seen you before last night."

His smile this time was grim. "You have. You've known me all your life. You just don't remember."

Briana backed up a step. "Believe me, I'd remember you."

He tipped his head. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"Don't. What are you going to do with me?"

"I'm taking you home."

"Your home? Where's that?"

"Your home. The Imperial Summer Palace at Tarjya." He must have realized the name meant nothing to her, because he added, "On the seventh planet of Deneb."

Cold washed over her. The man was a lunatic. A handsome, well-mannered, well-spoken lunatic, but crazy, nonetheless. He was looking at her, searching for some flicker of--she supposed--recognition, maybe? A secret hand-signal? A password? She wanted to giggle and give him her best Vulcan greeting. This was all so far beyond her experience and training that her knees began to tremble. She knew she had to say something. Soothe him, humor him.

"You're crazy," she blurted, and backed up all the way to the wall.

His face darkened, and he spoke a sentence she didn't understand.

"Look, I don't speak Elvish, or Klingon, or Vagon, or whatever the hell that is. I want out of here. I want out of here, now! Let me go, or I'm going to start screaming. Do you hear me?" Her voice rose and took on a shrill note of panic as terror closed her throat.

"That would be a serious mistake, my Lady. The men outside, with the exception of Rolif and Viorst, whose loyalty is beyond question, all believe I have restored your memory, and that I am tending you in these quarters while you recover from the shock of it. If they learn the truth, they will kill us all without hesitation. The situation in the Empire has grown too unstable to tolerate the possibility of a pretender."

"You clearly believe all this," she began.

"And you had better start believing it, or we're all dead."

She decided to try one more time to get a rational answer out of him. "Where are we? What ship is this? White Falls is a thousand miles from the coast--two thousand miles from the East Coast, or nearly. I'm assuming we're heading for Asia?"

"We're aboard the Imperial Cruiser Starwind, on our way to the Rhadax Sector. The journey is a long one, and you will have about three weeks to learn all you need to know when we arrive at the Summer Palace."

"What happens there?" She pressed her lips together to keep her teeth from chattering.

"You'll take your proper position as Empress, and we will drive the usurpers into the Void."

Brianna bit down on a giggle. He was completely serious, but it was too ludicrous. She knew she was on the edge of hysteria.

"You still think I'm insane, don't you?" he asked.

She stared at him, trying for hauteur but sure she was failing.

He walked to the wall near where her bed had disappeared, and touched another

symbol. This time the opaque panel slid back to reveal a scene of mind-breaking beauty. A panorama of stars, untarnished by planetary atmosphere, spread itself across the vibrant black velvet of the cosmos. Stars gleamed in every color known to man, and many that human eyes had never seen. Great clusters glowed with turbulent incandescence; veils of light and huge black clouds of cosmic dust punctuated the radiance of whole sectors of space.

Her mind reeled, unwilling to grasp what she saw before her. She reached out to touch the clear surface of the port, and slid silently into a sitting position on the floor. *Shit, she thought, either that the best video monitor I've ever seen or this is real. I'm hoping for video monitor. I think.*

Hallen touched something on the wall and the panel slid closed again, leaving Brianna with a sharp sense of loss.

"It's beautiful," she said, her throat dry and tight. "It's real."

Hallen nodded once and looked satisfied. "Good. Now that you accept the reality of our physical situation, are you ready to begin?"

"Begin what?"

"To learn again," he said with a smile, "just as when you were a little girl. We haven't much time."

They began with language. At first, the words for objects in the room, for 'ship' and 'star' and 'Emperor' and 'Empress,' and simple phrases like, "I'm hungry," for everyday needs. She learned quickly. Too quickly. It was as if the words were already there, hovering in her mind, only waiting until he reminded her. Her own ears told her she was reproducing Hallen's accent perfectly, and even when the grammar became more complex, she rarely made an error.

He kept at her, expanding the scope of the lesson, giving her no time to think about the ramifications of what she was hearing, until she abruptly grew still. "I'm afraid," she said bleakly. "Hallen, I'm so afraid." It was a second or two before she

realized she hadn't said it in English.