

Barak and his Bride

Chapter 1: The Long Road Home

Barak sipped his tea and studied the man sitting across the table. At first glance Penn Sebastian might have looked relaxed, but he wasn't. In fact, he was vibrating with the kind of energy that was more typical of DJ Clayborne. Then there was the way the Paladin had spent the last fifteen minutes staring into the depths of an empty delicate china teacup as if it held the answers to all the questions of this universe.

The evidence was clear. Something was obviously on Penn's mind, and it had the man tied up in knots. Barak was not normally a gambling man, but he would place a wager that whatever it was, it had something to do with him. Which meant it also had to do with the one thing the two men had in common: Lacey, Penn's sister and Barak's lover.

"Do you two need anything else?"

Barak smiled at Tate Justice, Hunter's woman. "I think we're both fine. Hunter and Larem should be back shortly, and then we'll be on our way."

"Are you sure you won't stay for dinner? I made a big pot of vegetable soup and homemade bread."

The offer was tempting, but Lacey was waiting for him. "Thank you, but Lacey's expecting both of us home for dinner."

Penn finally joined the conversation. "Sorry, Tate. Were you speaking to me?"

She patted him on the shoulder. "That's okay, Penn. Barak answered me. But I've gotta say, she must be something special."

"She who?" Penn asked, looking puzzled.

Tate picked up the empty plates and the teapot as she gave him a teasing smile. "I just figured as distracted as you are, it must be a woman."

Penn shot Barak a quick look before answering her. "Sorry, I didn't mean to ignore you, Tate. I've pulled a couple of all-nighters this week, and I'm still feeling the aftereffects."

“That’s okay, I—” she started to say, but then noticed another customer was waiting to check out. “Oops, gotta go. Don’t go so long between visits, you two, and next time bring Lacey with you.”

“We will. Thanks for everything, Tate.”

As he spoke, Barak noticed Penn flexed his sword hand several times, running through the series of stretches that the doctors had recommended he do whenever he had time. Although he could no longer wield a sword as well as he used to, sometimes the Paladins were so shorthanded that their leader Devlin gave in to Penn’s constant nagging and let him fight. Since losing much of the function in his right hand, the only weapon Penn was allowed to use was a gun as he helped with the clean up sweeps through the tunnels, hunting for stray Others who managed to slip past the Paladins at the barrier.

Lacey hated every time her brother fought, but so far she’d refrained from telling him how she felt. She’d grown up knowing her older brother was hardwired to fight the ages old battle between their world and Barak’s. Unlike most humans who remained blissfully unaware of the existence of both the Paladins and their enemies, Lacey had spent far too many hours sitting next to a stainless steel table in the medical labs waiting for her only brother to make the long journey back from death.

Even worse was the horrific injury to Penn suffered to his right hand and wrist. His body had survived the wound, but the knowledge he’d never regain full use of his fighting hand had almost killed his spirit. He was doing better lately, but he still had a long way to go.

After Tate was out of hearing, Barak decided it was time to find out what was going on. “Penn, if you have something to say, I wish you would just do so.”

The Paladin finally looked at Barak directly, his blue eyes so much like his sister’s. “Last night I got caught between two Others in the tunnels. If Lonzo hadn’t showed up when he did, I would’ve been skewered for sure, and maybe even sliced and diced.”

Barak winced at the image. Paladins were difficult to kill permanently but it wasn’t impossible. “I’m glad that didn’t happen.”

“Yeah, me, too.” Penn’s grin came and went in a hurry. “Look, we both know my luck could run out at any time, even though Devlin keeps me on a short leash. I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know, but the point is that I don’t want Lacey to end up alone when my number comes up.”

What did numbers have to do with anything? Even so, Barak understood was Penn was saying—and what he was asking.

“I’m not going anywhere. You can be assured that I will stand by Lacey no matter what happens. Having said that, it is my strongest wish that you live a long and happy life. I love your sister, Penn, but I value your friendship as well.”

“Then prove it, Barak. Marry her.”

Penn had leaned forward as he was talking, but now he slouched back in his chair and went back to staring at his scarred hand. “Lacey might not say anything, but I know that’s what she wants. Hell, when she was little, she used to spend hours staging weddings for her dolls. All through high school and college, she and her friends would hit the mall to look at wedding dresses and dream of their day in the spotlight.”

After a few seconds of silence, he looked up again. “I want that for her, Barak. I won’t always be around, and I need to know she’s taken care of. If you’re not willing to man up, then get the hell out of her life and let her move on.”

If Barak didn’t have some pretty strong protective feelings for his own sister, he might have taken offense. Instead, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box and slid it across the table toward Penn. His friend blinked and then slowly reached out to pick it up. When he flipped open the lid, a huge smile spread across his face.

“Do you want to punch me now or later for questioning your intentions? I should’ve known better. I promise not to retaliate.”

Barak smiled at his friend. “That won’t be necessary, and I don’t blame you for asking. I know that accepting a Kalith warrior as the mate for your only sister cannot be easy for you. However, I would like to think I have your blessing.”

Penn immediately held out his hand. “Yeah, you do. I’d be a fool if I didn’t approve, not after what you did to save Lacey’s life. I told you at the time I was ready to rent a tux. I can’t imagine another man who would do more to make her happy.”

Barak shook hands with the man who would soon be his brother-in-law if all went as he planned. “Thank you, Penn. Your sister has been a true gift in my life.”

“For sure Lacey’s going to love that ring. She’s always preferred sapphires to diamonds.” Penn handed the ring box back to Barak. “When are you going to pop the question?”

Barak opened the box, enjoying the play of sunlight in the stones. “I made reservations at our favorite restaurant for tomorrow night. The owner has become a friend, and he’s going to give us his best table. I’m having a bouquet of her favorite flowers delivered, and he’ll slip the ring box into the middle of it and bring it with dessert.”

He let out a long breath. “Think she will approve?”

Penn laughed. “Oh, yeah. Women just eat that kind of stuff up. She’ll love it.”

When Barak spotted Hunter and Larem walking down the driveway, he slipped the ring box back in his pocket. Before they reached the door, he murmured, "I'd like to keep this just between us for now."

Penn's grin was wicked. "Scared she'll say no and embarrass you?"

"No." Then honesty made Barak admit, "Maybe. I often wonder why she would settle for a man with no home of his own."

"If she's dumb enough to turn you down, she and I will have words. Seriously, I don't see that happening, my man." Penn started for the door. "And you do have a home, Barak. It's with us."

As he followed the Paladin outside to join their friends, Barak played those words over in his head, letting them settled deep inside his heart. It meant a lot that his former enemies had accepted him as one of their own, but that Penn would also entrust the care of his beloved sister to Barak meant the most.

Chapter 2: It All Goes Wrong

To quote one of Lonzo's favorite expressions, the weather sucked big time. Barak glared out at the downpour. What was that other word? Ah, yes, deluge. There was a deluge outside. While Seattle might have a well-deserved reputation for rain, this was absurd. The clouds had started rolling in the middle of the afternoon, gray and angry. As soon as the last bit of blue sky had disappeared, the rain had started and then worsened, and there was still no end in sight.

Lacey joined him at the window, resting her chin on his shoulder. "It's pretty nasty out there. After fighting all that traffic just to get home, do you really want to go back out in it? We've got leftover stew from last night that we can heat up for dinner."

Barak closed his eyes, relishing the warm comfort of Lacey's body pressed close against his back, her arms around his waist. All things considered, it might be smarter to postpone their planned dinner out on the town, but he didn't want to. A quick phone call was all it would take to cancel the reservations at their favorite restaurant, and he could always order a bouquet of flowers to be delivered on another night.

No, it was just that he didn't want to go another day without putting that ring on Lacey's finger, a visible declaration that she was his for all time. She'd given him no reason to doubt her love for him, but that didn't stop the nightmares where she suddenly looked at him and realized that she didn't want to tie her life to an alien. Then there was the very real threat that someday one of his people would end her brother's life permanently. How could she forgive the unforgiveable?

He shoved those fears back deep down inside his soul. "I'd still like to go."

"Okay." She gave him a quick hug. "I'll grab my coat."

Twenty minutes later, they were sitting on the interstate as traffic moved along at a crawl. Barak knew why the two of them were out in this awful weather, but he wished everyone else had chosen to stay home. Of course, here in the Pacific Northwest, people rarely let the rain interfere with their plans no matter how bad it got.

Finally, in that mysterious way of traffic jams, the knot suddenly unraveled, and they were finally making good time. Barring any more problems, they should make it to the restaurant only a few minute past their reservation. They even lucked out and found a parking spot less than a block away. The two of them made a mad dash down the sidewalk to take shelter under the awning in front of the restaurant.

The sign in the front door was turned to “Closed.”

Barak’s mood, not good to begin with, took another tumble. He knocked on the front window, not sure what he was hoping to accomplish considering the whole place was dark. Even if someone came to the door, it was obvious they weren’t going to be eating their favorite pasta and grilled vegetables for dinner tonight.

Lacey peeked through the window. “We should just go, Barak. They must have had some kind of crisis to shut down, even on a night as bad as this one.”

He looked up and down the street, looking for a better option but not seeing one. “I suppose so. I guess leftover soup it is.”

Lacey frowned. “Barak, is something wrong? You’ve been acting a bit off all day.”

He tried to reassure her. “No, I’m fine. I guess I’ve been feeling a little restless and was looking forward to an evening out.”

Before she could respond, the restaurant door opened. Jack, the owner, smiled at them. “Barak, Lacey, I’m so sorry. We had a pipe break late this afternoon, and the plumber didn’t get it fixed until about half an hour ago. I’ve already let most of the staff go home, but I was just about to whip up some dinner for the rest of us. If you don’t mind eating in the kitchen, it wouldn’t be any problem to add a few more veggies to the pot.”

Barak looked to Lacey for her opinion before answering. When she shrugged her shoulders, he nodded to Jack. “We’d love to join you.”

Again, it wasn’t what Barak had planned, but eating with Jack and his staff was more appealing than making the long trip back home hungry and disappointed. He fingered the small box in his pocket.

Maybe the night could be salvaged after all.

Lacey turned down another glass of wine since she'd be driving them back home soon. Not that she was in any hurry. Barak had been in such an odd mood for the past few days, and it was nice to see him looking more relaxed and happy.

Jack had offered to set them a place for two in the corner, but Barak had assured him that they'd be fine eating with him and his staff at the big table. Within a few minutes they were all passing heaping platters some of Jack's specialties and eating by candlelight.

It was rare for Lacey to spend much time with civilians, meaning anyone outside of the Paladin organization, but it felt good to leave that world behind for a few hours. There was something about Jack that made her think that he'd had his own experience with the darker side of life. Maybe it was the tattoos that covered his arms and the scar that slashed across his right cheek. But none of that took away from his warm brown eyes or the way he made everyone who crossed the threshold of his restaurant feel like family.

Right now, he and Barak were whispering over in the corner. What were they up to now? She pretended not to see Barak slip something to Jack. Most likely it was money, even though Jack had told them tonight's meal was on the house. Maybe he'd agreed to accept a tip for his staff. It would be just like Barak to offer and Jack to accept on behalf of his employees. Most were college students with tuition and rent to pay. A night like this one would cost them a lot.

Barak was back. He sat back down beside her, his pale eyes glittering in the dim candlelight. Despite his much improved mood, he now looked a bit nervous. That wasn't like him at all. One of the things she loved best about him was his calm nature, especially after growing up around the often volatile nature of a Paladin father and brother.

To put it simply, Barak q'Young soothed her soul. She loved him with every breath she took and couldn't imagine a life without him at its center.

"Should we be going so Jack can close up?"

Barak shook his head, his eyes shifting toward where Jack had disappeared. "Not quite yet."

Okay, what was going on? Before she could ask, Jack was back, grinning and carrying an enormous bouquet of alstroemeria in a variety of colors. Everyone else at the table fell silent as Jack set them down in front of her. The small lilies were beautiful and her absolute favorite. Feeling the weight of all those eyes watching her, she leaned in to admire the flowers.

"Barak, they're beautiful, but what's the occasion?"

Her lover looked particularly somber. “Look closer.”

This time she saw a small box nestled down among the flowers. A velvet covered box. Her breath caught in her throat as she realized it was a ring box. She picked it up with trembling hands, afraid to open it.

She looked up into her lover’s beautiful pale eyes. “Barak?”

Everything else in the room faded into the distance as Barak slipped off his chair to kneel at her side. He gently pried the box from her fingers and slowly lifted the lid.

He enfolded her left hand in his much bigger one. “Lacey Sebastian, I love you. Would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

Her eyes filled with tears and her heart with joy. “Oh, Barak, yes!”

Then the room filled with cheers and the sound of champagne bottles popping their corks. Barak slipped a stunning ring set with sapphires on her finger. Then he rose to his feet and pulled her into his arms.

Smiling down at her, he whispered, “Thank you for helping me find my way in this world, Lacey. You hold my heart in your hands.”

None of the others in the room had any inkling that Barak was not of this planet, but they understood the sentiment behind his words. She ignored the sting of happy tears in her eyes as she kissed him slowly and with all the love in her heart.

“I love you so much, Barak.”

Then in a surprise move, he picked her up and twirled her around and around, a huge grin on his face. When he finally set her back down, Jack was standing there with a glass of champagne for each of them.

“A toast to two of my favorite customers!”

When everyone had a glass to raise, he smiled at both of them. “May your lives together be long, your children healthy, and the love you share only grow stronger with time!”

When he was finished, there was a chorus of “Cheers!”

After the shouts died away, someone turned on the music and the dancing began.

Chapter 3: The Lady's Surprise

Lacey stared at the restaurant door, willing her friend to appear. Finding a way to meet with Lusahn q'Arc without Barak finding out was tricky. After all, Lusahn was his sister and the two were as close as two siblings could be. Plus Lacey not only lived with Barak, but the two of them also worked together.

All of that added up to very little time when she could safely sneak off to meet with Lusahn alone. In the end, she'd had to get her brother Penn involved. He'd dragged Barak off for a couple of hours of weapons practice with the other Paladins, leaving Lacey free to take a long lunch with her friend.

Lusahn walked in, thankfully alone. That was the other problem. Lusahn had two children and often had one or both with her. Lacey loved both kids dearly, but the purpose of this lunch was secret, and the fewer people who knew about it the better.

She stood up to hug her friend. "Glad you could make it."

Her future sister-in-law grinned at her. "I wouldn't have missed it for anything. Now let's see it!"

Lacey held out her left hand, still not used to seeing the sparkle of sapphires on her ring finger. Barak had proposed to her only a few days ago, the memory of that evening still as bright and shiny as the stones glittering in the silver setting.

"My big brother did well!" Lusahn was smiling big time as they both sat down. "I am so proud of him even if the plans he made for the occasion didn't go quite as planned."

That was true, but the evening had been even more special for all of that. Despite the rain and bad traffic and eating dinner with the wait staff at the restaurant, it had been an incredible evening.

Lacey stared at her hand, the blue stones catching the light from overhead. "None of that mattered. It turned out just perfect anyway. Right up until he presented me with a bouquet of my favorite flowers with the ring box tucked in the middle, I was totally clueless about his plans. I felt bad that everything seemed to go wrong for him. But in the end, it was all wonderful."

The waiter appeared, so their conversation turned to salads and drinks. Like her brother, Lusahn

was a vegetarian, and Lacey was slowly coming around to their way of thinking. Well, except when there was a good steak on the grill.

Once they'd placed their orders, Lusahn leaned back in her chair and gave Lacey a long look. "Have you discussed wedding plans?"

Okay, leave it to her friend to go right for the heart of the matter. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about. Barak is leaving it all up to me. All he asks is that we make it soon. Since neither of us want a huge, fancy affair, it shouldn't take long to set a date and organize everything."

"Then why are you shredding your napkin?"

Lacey looked down at the pile of paper. She hadn't even realized that she'd been doing that. It just showed how totally freaked she was. "I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize. Why don't you just tell me what has you all tied up knots? If my brother has done something to upset you, I'll take my sword to him."

She would, too. Lusahn had served her people as a Sworn Guardian just as Barak had. There weren't many who could best her with a blade, including her brother.

"No, it's not him. It's me. I've been thinking about what kind of wedding I want and realized that I know nothing of Kalith customs. Barak rarely complains of missing how things were done in your world, but I know it bothers him sometimes. Since our marriage is a blend of two worlds, I think the ceremony should reflect that."

She met Lusahn's gaze. "I would like to dress as a Kalith bride would unless you think that would be too painful for you and Barak or even Larem."

Her friend's smile was slow in coming, but then Lacey realized Lusahn was busy blinking away tears. Had she upset her? Damn it, that was exactly what she'd been trying to avoid.

"I'm sorry, Lusahn. It's a bad idea. Please forget that I said anything. We'll just have a small ceremony and keep it simple."

Lusahn dabbed her eyes with her napkin. "No, no, Lacey. I think that's a lovely gesture. It will mean a lot to my brother, and I suspect Larem will be all right with it, too."

"Do you think you can help me design the right kind of outfit? I don't even know what color it should be. I know you all tend to wear dark colors, especially black."

She tried to picture herself walking down the aisle in a traditional wedding dress, but done in all black. The image wouldn't quite come into focus. Luckily their salads came, so she had time to gather her thoughts. But as they finished eating, she described what she'd been imagining. Lusahn responded with laughter.

“Actually, weddings are one of the few times we do sometimes wear dresses, but that’s not the usual custom. Our wedding attire is mostly a fancier version of our tunics and pants. The groom often does wear black, but the bride wears the color associated with the groom’s family. Our family color is royal blue. With the color of your hair and eyes, you should look stunning in it.”

Whew! That was a relief although Lacey didn’t say so. If it would make Barak happy to see her dressed in all black, she would have worn it with a smile on her face.

“Great. Think you can help me design the pattern? I know someone who makes all kinds of costumes for re-enactors. I can have her make the outfits and just tell her is for a costume party.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem.” Lusahn sipped her tea. “Now that we have that settled, what are the men going to wear? I still can’t get over how they all looked at Laurel’s and Brenna’s weddings. ‘Hot’ is the word I think we all settled on.”

The memory of Barak in a tux had Lacey squirming a bit. He’d looked great in the tux—and even better out of it when they’d returned to their hotel room. Lusahn was sporting a rather interesting smile herself. When their eyes met, both of them burst into laughter.

When Lacey could manage a straight face, she decreed, “For the sake of all the women in the crowd, I definitely think tuxedos will be mandatory for all the men in attendance.”

Lusahn held up her teacup in a salute. “I do love the way you think, my sister. And it seems appropriate that the groom should dress in the clothing of your world since you are honoring our people by wearing a Kalith wedding tunic.”

With that settled, the two of them moved on to the other items on Lacey’s list: location, flowers, and food. With the tough decision made, all the other plans seemed to just fall into place.

“I’ve tentatively reserved a hall that is often rented out for weddings. They had a cancellation in five weeks.” She glanced down the list she’d made. “I see no reason we can’t pull all of this together by then.”

“My brother will be pleased.”

Lusahn’s expression turned serious. “At one time I thought my brother was dead, that I had lost him to the light. Even before he disappeared from our world, he was fading and found no joy in his heart or his life. He crossed the barrier in order to end his suffering.”

She stared into the distance, looking into the past, and it wasn’t a happy place. Lacey reached across the table to lay her hand on Lusahn’s. Her friend blinked and then smiled as her eyes once again focused on Lacey.

“Barak found his own way into this world, but it was not an easy journey. Laurel might have healed Barak’s body, but you have healed his soul. For that, I will ever be grateful.”

Lacey could be no less honest. “He has brought me such joy, Lusahn. For so long, it was just me and Penn. Knowing I could lose him at any time wasn’t easy for either of us. He worried a lot about leaving me alone, especially after he was so badly injured. Barak has helped him with that, so I have my brother back again. With you and Cullen and the kids, we’ve got a family again.”

“Indeed we do!”

Then they clinked their cups together and toasted that which was most important to them both.
“To family and men in tuxedos!”

Chapter 4: Boys' Night Out

Barak q'Young followed his future brother-in-law, Penn Sebastian into the bar. The blast of music was an assault on his always sensitive Kalith hearing, but if the Paladins could endure it, he would as well. It was a matter of pride.

Actually, he was more interested in what was going on. It wasn't unusual for the Seattle contingent of the Paladins to invite their Kalith friends along for a cold one. But those tended to be spur of the moment events, not planned out ahead of time with a specific time and date involved. Not to mention the fact that Penn wasn't the only one who'd reminded Barak that they were going out tonight. Over the past three days, he'd gotten calls from Devlin Bane, Cullen Finley, and even D.J. Clayborne.

Penn cruised straight through the main room of the bar without slowing down or even looking around to see if any of their other friends had already arrived. Very odd. Instead, Penn headed toward a narrow hallway, stopping only long enough to make sure Barak was still following. Just as he caught up with Penn, the Paladin took off again, this time stopping at a door at the far end of the hall.

He knocked—five raps followed by two more. A definite pattern. Was it some kind of code? The door opened only far enough so Penn could slip through, leaving Barak to follow on his own.

He wasn't sure he wanted to. What choice did he have? None. Besides he was growing more curious by the second.

Was he supposed to knock or walk right in? He was about to mimic the same rhythm that Penn had used when the door swung open with no warning. It startled him into backing up a step, but Trahern appeared in the doorway. He grabbed Barak by the arm and dragged him into the room.

As soon as he stepped through the doorway, every man in the room shouted, "SURPRISE!" at the top of their lungs. Barak didn't know what to say. The whole scene was so bizarre. The room was festooned with bright colored paper ribbons, balloons, and most of the guys had paper horns they were blowing with great abandon between bouts of laughter and hollering.

He didn't know what to say—or even think. His only frame of reference was the birthday party his sister Lusahn had hosted for her adopted daughter, Shiri. Somehow seeing these battle-tested

warriors wearing cone shaped hats and grinning like fools wasn't at all the same. In fact, it was more than a little bit scary.

Penn rejoined him. "Here, put this on."

Barak stared at the shiny blue hat with silver stars only half a second before he started shaking his head. He never was one for acting the fool, and he wasn't about to start now, especially when D.J. was standing the in corner snapping pictures like crazy.

Devlin walked over, his own hat worn at a jaunty angle. "What's the matter, Barak? Are you too hoity-toity to partake of the party favors we picked out all special for you?"

Barak wasn't familiar with the expression hoity-toity. But if it meant that he had no interest in wearing a hat more suitable for a six-year-old, then he supposed the description fit.

Penn jabbed him in the ribs with his elbow. "Put it on, so the celebration can get started. It's your bachelor party, after all."

He looked around at the men gathered in the room, each with a look of expectancy on his face. All right, if they went to all this much trouble, the least he could do was go along for the ride. He perched the blue hat on his head and pulled the small band of elastic under his chin.

"There. How do I look?"

"Like a fool, but that's only fair since the rest of us do, too." Cullen laughed as he popped the top on a beer and held it out. "Here, I'm guessing after a few these, you won't mind so much."

The beer was Barak's favorite local micro-brew, another sign they'd planned this party with him in mind. He took a long drag off the bottle, savoring the rich malty flavor, as he considered what to do next.

"Cullen?"

"Yeah?"

"What am I supposed to do next?"

His friend shrugged. "How the hell am I supposed to know? It's not like we do this kind of thing often—or even ever."

Okay, then. Barak looked around the room, realizing for the first time that there were a couple of pool tables and an air hockey game over in the corner. He headed for the rack of pool cues on the far wall and picked one that looked straight. He rolled it on the closest table and decided it would do. The whole time he felt every eye in the room following his every move.

“Penn, you’re my partner, so grab another couple beers and get over here.” Then he grinned at his friends. “Whose ass are we going to beat first?”

Trahern and Devlin claimed that honor. As the four of them racked the balls, the others in the room either claimed a game of their own or found a comfortable spot to watch the action.

The guys might be willing to act a bit silly and wear hats and play with helium balloons, but they took pool seriously. The game was close, with Barak and Penn only narrowly escaping defeat at the hands of their opponents. Their last second victory might have had something to do with Barak blowing one of the paper horns just as Devlin was about to make his last shot.

The irate Paladin demanded a rematch, but Lonzo and D.J. had already claimed the next game. After a good bit of grousing on Devlin’s part and accusations of cheating, Trahern yanked him out of the way. “Come on. Remember, revenge is best tasted cold. Let’s go check on the food and the surprise.”

The head Paladin nodded, but he pinned Barak with a hard look. “This isn’t over.”

“What surprise?” Barak asked Penn as he chalked his cue.

His friend rolled his eyes. “If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise, would it?”

True enough. “Fine, be that way. It’s your turn to break.”

As he waited for his turn, he looked around at the men who, against all odds, had become his brothers. Unable to stand the pain of living in his own world, he had crossed the barrier to make his last stand. Instead, he’d found a human woman who needed his protection from one of her own kind. Thanks to Laurel and her lover, Devlin Bane, Barak had been accepted into the tightly knit community of Paladins in Seattle.

He was grateful for the gift of their friendship, although sometimes he hungered for time among his own kind. With that thought, it finally hit him that Larem, the only other Kalith warrior to live among the Paladins, was not to be found. Larem was slowly coming to accept his new life in this world, but unlike Barak, he didn’t live there by choice. In fact, Barak’s decision to remain on the human side of the barrier had directly led to Larem being forced to leave their homeland behind. He hoped eventually the man would find the same joy living in the light that Barak had. After all, here he was, two days away from joining his life to Lacey’s Sebastian’s, the woman of his heart. Truly, it felt like one of those fairy tales that his niece liked him to read to her.

A commotion over by the door drew everyone’s attention. Devlin and Trahern were back. Several waiters followed them in carrying large trays of food they set down on the table in the corner. They quickly arranged all of the platters and dishes and then disappeared.

Almost immediately the door opened again. Hunter Fitzsimon, the Paladin who lived alone north of Seattle walked in. He looked around until he spotted Barak. Grinning, he stepped aside to

reveal Larem standing behind him. So the warrior had come after all. Good. Barak handed Penn his pool cue and started across the room to greet the newcomers.

But when a third man walked in, Barak stumbled to a halt. It was Berk, a Sworn Guardian from Kalithia. He was followed by three more men from Barak's homeworld. His heart pounded in his chest as the crowd parted to let him through to where his countrymen stood looking a bit uncomfortable. Considering the Paladins and their kind were his lifelong enemies, it was to be expected.

Larem's stern mouth quirked up in a small smile. "We thought you might appreciate a few of your friends from home being here for the big occasion."

Barak's eyes burned with the sting of tears as he greeted each man in turn. "This is a gift beyond value."

Once again Devlin took charge. He offered each of the newcomers a bottle of beer. "A toast, everyone!"

There was a brief rush on the drinks, but then silence fell over the room while they waited to hear what the big man had to say.

"Here's to Barak q'Young. I owe him a debt I can never repay. We all do. His first steps in our world saved my wife's life and started all of us on a new path of understanding. To Barak!"

Barak held up his own drink. "To men of honor no matter which side of the barrier they were born on!"

There were shouts of "Here! Here!" and "Damn straight!" from around the room, followed by D.J. yelling, "Can we eat now?"

Penn appeared at Barak's side and handed him a plate. "You're the guest of honor. Go load up on all those veggies you weirdoes insist on eating so the rest of us can chow down on the real food."

After some good-natured pushing and shoving, everyone made it through the food line. Barak joined Berk and his Blademates over in the corner.

Berk watched the Paladins for several seconds before turning his attention to Barak. "Old friend, I am pleased that you have found some peace at last. It is a good thing."

Barak couldn't agree more. "Yes, it is. It also means a lot that you came. You all honor me with your presence."

The Sworn Guardian smiled. "We will be staying here for the wedding as well. It was Larem's idea to invite us. Since your marriage is a joining of both worlds, he thought there should be more than just him and your sister to represent Kalithia."

That came as a surprise, but it was a welcome one. Barak sought Larem in the crowd and spotted him standing with Hunter. Although the Paladin had the most reason to hate their kind, he had formed a close bond with Larem. An odd pairing to be sure, but their friendship was rock solid.

When Larem noticed Barak watching him, Barak raised his drink in a silent toast. The Kalith warrior nodded in understanding. They'd both walked a long path to reach this time and place. Barak knew it wasn't the journey that was important but the people who walked at his side.

And in this room full of warriors, Barak had the best of both worlds.

Chapter 5: A Warrior's Vow

The clothes felt strange, but the moment felt right. Perfect. Overdue. The soft strains of music filtered through the walls, stirring his soul. This was it. The moment he'd been striving for his entire life.

He studied his image, trying to see if the profound nature of what he was about to undertake had left its mark on his face or if the change was only etched in his heart and anchored in his bones.

All things considered, he looked the same even if the man on the inside sure felt so different.

"You look pretty, Barak. Quit hogging the mirror."

Penn Sebastian elbowed him out of the way, making a big deal of straightening his already perfect bow tie.

In turn, Cullen Finley shoved Penn back out of the way. "You're not the star of tonight's festivities, Penn. Barak is. If he wants to make goo-goo eyes at himself in the mirror, let him."

Barak wasn't sure what goo-goo eyes were, but he did know his friends were trying to help him remain calm before the ceremony. He didn't need their assistance, but neither would he deny them the chance to offer it.

Tonight he would publicly claim Lacey Sebastian as his mate although she'd truly belonged to him from the first moment their eyes had met from across that room not long after he'd moved to this world. Tonight was merely the bow on the package as they honored their love for each other with friends and family.

"How are you holding up?"

Barak turned to face Devlin Bane, the Paladin who had once reluctantly stood over Barak's bleeding body against his fellow Paladins, demanding his life be spared. Now they were friends, enemies no more.

"I am fine. These two are so-so." He waggled his hand in the air, showing what he meant. "Still, I think they'll hold it together through the ceremony."

“Hey!” Penn protested. “I’m steady as a rock. Besides, I’m giving the bride away. That’s major. I don’t want to screw things up for my sister. Lacey’s got a temper in case you haven’t noticed.”

Devlin just rolled his eyes, well used to dealing with the antics of his fellow Paladins. “Well, everyone’s in place, so let’s get this show on the road.”

Barak let his friends file out of the small room ahead of him. He paused long enough to glance one more time at the mirror. This time he saw it—the change he’d been looking for. For the first time in years, he was at peace.

* * * * *

Lacey stared at the stranger in the mirror. “Maybe I should have worn a traditional dress.”

Barak’s sister, Lusahn q’ Arc, smiled at Lacey from over her shoulder. “You’re lovely, and my brother will be honored by your gift. The other Kalith in attendance will also understand the symbolism in your choice of wedding clothes.”

She gave Lusahn a quick hug. “Sorry. I know that. It’s just the “OMG I’M GETTING MARRIED IN TEN MINUTES” jitters talking.”

Lacey turned away from the mirror to study the other women in the room, all similarly attired in the traditional wedding style of her future husband’s people. Her own outfit consisted of a tunic length jacket over close fitting pants, both done in a deep royal blue. Her attendants wore a slightly lighter shade in the same tone. Their shoes were ballerina slippers complete with satin ribbons worn crisscrossed up the leg to just below the knee.

She wore matching ribbons twinned through her blond hair. All in all, she was pleased with how she looked. It was Barak’s reaction she was worried about. Thanks to the human tradition of keeping the bride’s dress a secret, he had no idea what she’d done. He wouldn’t get his first hint until the music started and the bridesmaids started down the aisle.

Her brother Penn was acting as father-of-the-bride. Devlin was best man and Laurel was maid-of-honor. The rest of the wedding party included Lusahn, Brenna, and Tate, who were being escorted by Berk, Cullen, and Trahern.

The sound of a knock caught everyone’s attention. Devlin’s deep voice carried through the closed door. “Showtime, ladies.”

Lusahn handed Lacey her bouquet of pale blue alstroemeria. Everyone else would carry white flowers with ribbons that matched their outfits.

Laurel, recently married herself, smiled at her. “You’re beautiful. Barak will be speechless.”

That was probably true. He was by nature a quiet man, but he still managed to communicate quite nicely how he felt about her, with or without words. Especially without words. Her body

flushed hot, anticipating their plans for the night after the wedding and the party following were over. She couldn't wait to strip her man out of that tux he'd be wearing.

Something of what she was thinking must have shown in her expression because Brenna was grinning at her. She also gave Lacey a hug and whispered, "Down, girl. You still have to get through the ceremony and everything before your private party can get started."

Lacey knew she was blushing but that was all right. She met each woman's eyes head on. "Don't tell me none of you have been thinking about all those hunky guys out there wearing tuxedos and looking damn fine."

Tate giggled. "Guilty as charged, but I would hope I don't look like I might just attack Hunter on the way down the aisle as tempting as the thought might be."

Lacey loved the small circle of friends she'd made, all women who loved their warrior mates with such fierce passion.

"Shall we?" she asked, and led the procession out into the hallway and toward the man who held her heart in his hands.

* * * * *

The music soothed Barak's last minute tension. Devlin had asked a couple of Paladins who were also musicians to play for the ceremony. They had all agreed that it would be better that no outsiders be involved. Even the judge who was presiding was a Regent. Barak didn't know how Devlin had convinced the man to perform the ceremony and didn't care. All that mattered that Lacey was getting the wedding she'd always dreamed of.

The musicians brought the piece to a close, immediately segueing into the song that marked the entrance of the first bridesmaid. He was glad. The groomsmen were escorting the ladies down the aisle, which meant he was standing there alone. Some company would be nice.

Tate appeared in the doorway on Sworn Guardian Berk's arm. His old friend looked odd in human clothes, but then no stranger than did Barak himself. It wasn't until the pair was half way down the aisle that Barak saw what Tate was wearing.

His pulse sped up as he recognized the traditional Kalith style. He watched the doorway. Sure enough, Brenna wore the same outfit accompanied by her own husband, Trahern. They were followed by Lusahn walking with Cullen, her mate. When she caught Barak's eye, she smiled and nodded, acknowledging his unasked question.

Devlin led his wife Laurel down the aisle. When they separated, Devlin took his position at Barak's back. Good. He might just need the Paladin's strength to get through this after all.

The music rose in a brief flourish as Penn Sebastian, former enemy and now friend and brother-in-law, stepped into the doorway. He held out his arm to his sister.

Barak's heart swelled to the breaking point as his human lover started down the aisle dressed in the clothes of his people and with her heart in her pretty blue eyes. He had no words for the priceless gift she'd just given him. This was definitely a melding of two people, two cultures, two worlds.

When she reached his side, Penn pressed a quick kiss on his sister's cheek. Then he surprised everyone by hugging Barak as he whispered, "Keep her safe. Make her happy."

He knew her brother lived in terror of dying and leaving his sister alone in this world. That he would entrust her care to Barak was another gift he would cherish always. "I will, my brother. This I so vow."

Then he and Lacey joined hands and then joined their lives.

Barak closed the door and turned the lock, shutting out the world. Both worlds. He was alone with the woman he loved, his wife. He tried out those words again.

Wife. His.

Yeah, he liked the sound of that. Right now Lacey was standing at the floor to ceiling window across the room, staring out into the Seattle night. She was still wearing the blue tunic and trousers that his sister had helped her obtain. Although he thought Lacey looked good in anything she wore—and even better when she wore nothing but that special smile she saved just for him. Seeing her in the traditional wedding clothes had been driving him crazy for hours.

If he didn't know better, he would have suspected that his rented tux had grown two sizes smaller over the course of the evening. That was the only possible explanation why everything felt too tight, too constricting. Or it could be the way his body reacted every time he looked at his wife and imagined unlacing those ribbons that wound their way up her lovely legs.

From there, he'd peel down those trousers and then tug off her tunic . . .

As if sensing the direction of his thoughts, Lacey turned to face him. "Got something on your mind?"

He managed to nod. "I've been thinking about how much I was going to enjoy stripping you out of that outfit, starting with those ribbons. Then I plan on showing you how a Kalith warrior takes his lover to new heights."

She started toward him with that swagger a woman had when she knew her man wanted her. "That sounds nice, husband. However, I have a few plans of my own, starting with ripping that tuxedo off of you and having my wicked, wicked way with you."

He actually backed up a step. “The tux is a rental. We’ll have to pay for any damage.”

“Fine with me.”

She kept coming until only inches separated them. “I guess we’ll have to toss a coin to see whose fantasy comes true.”

“Better yet.” Barak snatched the coin out of the air. “How about I go first? I promise you won’t regret it. And then—“

He leaned forward to brush his lips across hers. “I’ll put the tux back on, and we’ll start all over again.”

His lady’s smile intensified. “I do love a man with a plan.”

Lacey reached up to loosen his tie and used it to pull him toward the enormous bed in the center of the room. Then she sat down and held out her right foot. “You said something about untying these.”

“I did, didn’t I?”

He smiled as he knelt down at her feet and reached for the first ribbon.