

"Ms. Zimlich is . . . stellar! 4 1/2 stars!" —Romantic Times on Heart's Prey

A saft gasp of surprice escaped. Alexandris lines t as her new has bands mouth followed fielder ward during of his finger. For a timeless moment, she reveled in the flow of sensations and allowed his tender middenations to continue, although she knew it was insandty to the so. She jerked away sudde ly. This man's soft lips and gentle fingers weren't going to stop her from reaching her goar. She wouldn't spend the rest of her days tied to a man such as him—or to any man for that matter.

She pushed Lucien onto his back with a suddenness that startled them both, then rolled, maneuvering herself so that she was stretched full-length atop him. Her braids fell forward, twining about his face and shoulders.

Lucien stared up at her in surprise and struggled to catch his breath. "Is something wrong?"

She smiled. They were near the head of the bed now, close enough for her to reach the small side table. "Absolutely nothing, husband." She shook her head so that more of her thick braids draped around his face, veiling his view. Unseen, her hand crept across the coverlet until her fingers found something heavy. Her teeth flashed white against her olive skin. "At least, not anymore."





For my parents, Jim and Helen Nelson, who taught me all about heroes and heroines.

A LOVE SPELL BOOK®

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Chapter One

"To us." The soft tinkle of crystal striking crystal echoed briefly in the cavernous drawing room. Theodore Fallon lifted the gold-rimmed glass to his lips and gulped down the sparkling blue wine, then signaled a lackey to pour him more. He raised his goblet toward Charbonneau Castle's bland gray ceiling. "And to the future. May their union produce fifty brats, all sons with strong limbs and courageous hearts."

Baron Renaud Charbonneau inclined his head in response and took a minuscule sip, allowing only a trace of wine to slip past his tongue. The mere taste caused the corners of his mouth to twitch in a grimace that he was careful to suppress. Wine and women were the root of all the evils that afflicted humankind, but it would be bad form not to join his guest in a celebratory toast.

He cleared his throat, more from a desire to cleanse himself of the sickening aftertaste than

necessity, and gave his newfound ally a prim, manufactured smile. A smile was expected at times such as these, a meager price to pay considering the power the new alliance would soon

bring his clan.

"Truly a momentous occasion," Charbonneau said quietly, the smile so firmly entrenched now that the flesh of his cheeks was beginning to ache. His clan was now permanently allied with the doltish Fallons, a merger purchased with trade concessions and an outrageous outlay of credit chits. But what he had gained today far outweighed the expense—and risk. And the treaty would soon be sealed in blood, a tradition practiced for over two thousand years among the Dominion clans. In a month's time, his bastard son would be wed to a minor member of the Fallon clan, sealing the alliance forever. Still a small part of him hoped he hadn't made a mistake.

His gaze flicked over the sheaf of parchment stacked so neatly at the center of the antique conference table, the thin paper a glaring yellow-white against the reddish hues of polished mahogany. The treaty had been signed, the cover page witnessed and stamped with the ornate seals of Clan Charbonneau and Clan Fallon. It was too late for either of them to back out now.

Charbonneau's eyes turned a deep, flinty gray as his gaze drifted over the nobleman seated across from him, searching for signs of deceit or treachery in every twitch, every tiny movement that Fallon made. But there was nothing. Nothing visible, at least. Theodore Fallon was a coarse-faced bear of a man, an arrogant brute with thickset shoulders and huge hands that would have been more comfortable clutching the stock of a laser rifle than the fragile stem of heirloom crystal. His robe was rumpled and

unkempt, and his gray-splotched hair was tied in a profusion of shoulder-length braids, an unsightly style favored on Lochlain, the Fallon homeworld. But such coarseness wasn't entirely unexpected. Through the centuries, the Fallons had made their mark as a warrior clan, fierce soldiers whose sword arms were available for hire to anyone who could meet their price.

Charbonneau's graying brows pulled together. There was something vaguely disquieting about Lord Fallon, a veiled slyness that seemed to glimmer beneath the dark surface of his eyes, much like a shoal-shark's fin flitting through muddy

water.

Then again, many things within the Dominion were not exactly what they seemed, especially among the elite. The corners of Charbonneau's mouth lifted a fraction higher, and for one brief instant, his smile was almost eager, as close to genuine as he'd managed in many a year. His so-called son would be married off to Fallon's niece, and a miserable chapter of his life would finally be laid to an uneasy rest. Lucien would be the Fallons' problem thereafter, and Charbonneau would finally be free—free of the shame that had followed him through life like a malevolent shadow, the fear that someday, someone would discover the truth.

Charbonneau frowned suddenly. Of course, if the union remained unconsummated or failed to produce the required heir within a standard year, the alliance would automatically disintegrate. In that event, the treaty and the marriage would be annulled, and Lucien would become a thorn in his father's side once again. "Perhaps it would be wise if we discussed the treaty's full implementation before you depart, Lord Fallon."

Fallon's shoulders rose in a diffident shrug.

"What's left to discuss? The nuptial ceremony will take place in thirty standard days, as agreed, and the first stage of the treaty's implementation will follow immediately after."

Charbonneau remained silent, busying himself by clearing his throat and glancing around the empty expanse of his castle's austere drawing room.

The baron's nervous silence caused a niggle of doubt to inch its way through Fallon's winedulled brain. "Is there a problem I'm unaware of, Baron?"

Charbonneau reddened and cleared his throat again, then smoothed the starched white lace at the end of his sleeve. "I was speaking of a different kind of implementation.... The sort that might occur between man and wife after they are legally wed."

A flash of amusement passed through Fallon's eyes as he swigged down the contents of his glass. "I assumed that they'd just frack each other in the

usual way."

Embarrassment stained Charbonneau's cheeks even redder. "I simply think we should agree beforehand whether their offspring are to be produced naturally or with some . . . assistance."

Fallon shrugged and motioned for the lackey to fill his glass again. "I am Alexandra's liege lord. She will agree either way because she will have no choice." His eyes narrowed suddenly, and he gave his newfound ally a suspicious look. "Your son's not a man-lover, is he?" Fallon spies had determined that Lucien Charbonneau was a bit effete, a frilly-clothed weakling who seemed to relish his position as a court hanger-on.

Charbonneau sniffed and tilted his chin to an indignant angle. "No, Lord Fallon. My son is not

a man-lover," he insisted, hoping that what he said was true.

"Good." Fallon sipped his wine, and a dangerous glint entered his eyes.

"And your niece?" Charbonneau watched his face intently. "What of her?"

"I don't anticipate any problems with Alexandra." At the mention of his niece, Fallon swallowed, but otherwise he appeared calm.

"The girl will do what she's told."

"As will my son." Charbonneau lifted his gaze toward the ceiling and prayed that he wouldn't be damned to hell for uttering such a lie.

Chapter Two

The exterior of Charbonneau Castle was as uninspired and austere as its master, a dull gray edifice carved block by block from plain native stone less than fifty years before. No turrets or buttresses graced the upper reaches, no spires soared toward the thin shroud of clouds scudding across New France's midday sky. The castle was no more than a series of rectangular buildings sprawled atop a wind-whipped hill. Stark, uninviting, and broodingly ugly, it was one man's monument to himself.

Lucien Charbonneau paused at the base of the stone steps and stared at the wooden entry doors. This castle was home, the place where he'd been born. His mouth flattened, and his gaze turned hard. It was also the place where he had learned the true meaning of hatred.

And nothing had changed in the past five years, not in the castle's appearance or his feelings. The last time he'd seen the keep, the tall armored

doors had been tightly sealed, the windows draped, preventing any trace of light or warmth from the planet's suns from reaching the castle's gloomy interior. It was still that way, just as his father preferred.

He wondered absently why he had agreed to come back to New France at all. Curiosity? To witness firsthand what sort of toll the passage of years had wrought upon his father? Or was it simply a matter of filial obedience? Old habits died hard, after all. His father had sent a message ordering him to come home, and he had succumbed, regardless of the past or what awaited him inside.

Beside him, Tay Molvan shifted slightly, more an uneasy twitch of the shoulders than an actual movement. Lucien understood his friend's reaction intuitively. The castle's glum facade was enough to make a seasoned warrior shiver with dread.

Lucien lifted a blond brow and threw Tay a

sidelong look. "So, what do you think?"

"Truthfully?" A line of gooseflesh rose along the nape of Tay's massive neck. "I think I'd rather eat a ground-toad than go in there." A chill ran up his neck. How had Lucien survived childhood in a place like this? "I've got a bad feeling, Lucien. Why don't we just turn around and go back to the transport ship before it's too late."

Lucien grasped Tay's arm lightly, mindful that there were probably a dozen spies watching their every move, and shook his head slowly. "I have to see him, Tay, just long enough to find out what's on his mind. An hour or so, no more. I owe him that much, I suppose."

Tay nodded in acceptance and huffed out a nervous breath. "Okay, just hurry it up so I can get out of these ridiculous clothes." His hands

moved unconsciously to the folds of red material, smoothing and adjusting the long, heavy robe. "I

look like a court fop."

Lucien eyed his friend in amusement. "Not quite." The robe was simple and unadorned. Serviceable, no more. He flicked at a bit of dust clinging to the sleeve of his own silken robe, the costly fabric rustling as he moved. "You look like the servant to a fop."

"Thanks a lot."

"Just remember to act the part. Stay three steps behind me at all times and keep your eyes on the floor. Wait outside the door while I have the interview with my father, and don't speak to anyone in the castle unless they speak to you first." His gaze bored into Tay's broad face for a long moment. "And if anything goes wrong, get off the planet any way you can and follow the prearranged plan."

"Okay."

"Let's go then." Lucien climbed the staircase slowly, lifting the hem of his robe high to avoid mussing the delicate blue material. The castle doors swung inward as he reached the top, Tay the required three steps behind.

"Master Lucien." A sour-faced servant dipped his head slightly, the only show of respect due the

baron's bastard son.

"Ah, Ludwig, how good it is to see you again. It's been quite a while, hasn't it?" Lucien fussed with the line of jeweled buttons running down the front of his robe, repositioning the one at his waist several times. "Would you be so kind as to inform my father that I have arrived?"

Ludwig dipped his head forward, again just the barest of movements, then moved deeper into the shadowy entry hall. "The baron has been expect-

ing you for more than two weeks."

The gloomy twilight of the place, settled over them as Lucien followed the servant down a corridor, the only sounds the hushed tap of their footsteps against the bare stone floors. Memories from his childhood drifted down the corridor, whispering to him like musty ghosts flitting through the castle's shadows as he passed a familiar door or room: the words of half-forgotten conversations, the squeal of childish laughter. Happy times. Times that had been buried along with his mother.

Lucien's fists clenched as he paused for a split second and stared at a familiar section of wall. The portrait of his mother was long gone, burned, most probably. The only sign that it had ever existed was the darkened outline of the frame against the blank gray stone.

The servant pushed open a dark wood door, and Lucien stepped inside, ghostlike memories shouting a warning as he entered his father's domain. The musty-smelling room his father used as a study was just as he remembered: dark, dreary, and threatening. The drapes were tightly drawn against the warmth of New France's twin suns. A trail of dust motes crawled along a weak shaft of sunlight that had found its way through the draperies, the only trace of natural light to penetrate the gloom.

Lucien sucked in a breath to steady himself and forced his fingers to unclench. The thin line of sunlight faded into nothingness just shy of his father's simple wooden desk, as though it lacked the courage to intrude upon the black-robed man seated there.

The door clicked shut, and Renaud glanced up from the stack of parchment spread before him, his steel-hard gaze drifting over the lanky young man standing directly in front of his desk.

Renaud studied him for long seconds, his mouth a tight white line as he glanced at his third-born son's extravagant attire. "You're late," he said gruffly. "I expected you to answer my summons weeks ago."

Lucien took another breath, fighting the urge to turn and walk out of the room, to walk away from New France forever. His father's stony eyes were riveted on him, their cold gray depths filled with hatred and contempt. Five years had wrought no discernible change, either in his father's somber appearance or his chilly demeanor. "Did you think that I wouldn't come?"

"The thought crossed my mind." A jeweled button winked in the half-light, and the set to the baron's mouth hardened even more. Lucien's buttons alone must have cost at least a thousand chits. "But then I discarded the notion. If you hadn't come, you knew I would cut off your funds, and then who would pay for those costly robes?"

For a tiny instant, a flash of anger lit Lucien's eyes, but the moment passed, and his rage vanished as swiftly as it had risen. His body went still, very still, the lack of movement veiling the hostility he kept hidden inside. "Is there a point to this interview, Father?" He forced his lips to curl in an indifferent smile. "If not, I think I'll be on my way. I'm days overdue for a revel at the archduke's summer castle."

Renaud's expression darkened. "You will stay until you are granted permission to leave. We have important matters to discuss, your future uppermost." Lucien still had the look of his mother about him, from the sculpted lines of his face to the pale blond hair that fell carelessly to his shoulders. But in the past five years, he had