

Dark Emperor Vitarius felt the giant armored war pig beneath him shudder in rage. For the sixth time in as many minutes the Emperor jabbed his large spurs into sides of the beast and jerked mightily on the reins. The porcine creature had been reared since birth by *Vitarius*. It usually answered to the first pull of his master's reins, but the steed was feeding off the nervous energy of the hundred thousand troops nearby and was caught in the battle fury known as Kind Fever. The species was considered by most people to be untamable. But *Vitarius* heeded no rules or laws or customs. He was not most people.

"Down *Pumbaa*." He commanded and reached in a saddle bag to pull out a large piece of dried meercat leaning over to stuff it into his mount's tusk laden maw. "Hold your wrath until we face the enemy." The Emperor look around and smiled in pride at the ranks of his legions. Eight years of war had brought him and his army to this day. Before them a mile away could be seen the last remaining citadel of freedom on the continent. The Barony had fought with spirit and intelligence but, like all the others he had conquered over the years, nothing could stop his march. Nothing. The Niche was doomed.

Earlier he had sent away his favorite trained concubines *A-xel* and *Rey-Beaumont*. As comforting and talented as they both were the pleasures of the flesh had to wait. Their painted, tattooed, and soft beauty had long ago enough earned each the coveted hyphen to their names signifying, as the School of Love promised, "They know their stuff." Indeed, they do. Oh yes.

Vitarius set aside such whimsy preparing himself for the command to begin the charge that only end inside the walls of this last enemy.

"Most Imperious One! I have a message from the citadel! It is from *The Baroness Arielle herself!*" The *Lord DurHam*, his treasured Seneschal, ran up. *DurHam*, considered by many to be the Devil himself when it came to negotiations and the use of a never dull wit, held up a scroll.

"Haw! Perhaps they wish to surrender. Fools! As if I would deny my troops their much-deserved playtime." *Vitarius* took the scroll quickly breaking the seal and read the heavily glittered and scented letters therein.

Dear Emperor Person.

You are hereby invited, depending of course on whether our lands still exist, to the Famous, Fabulous, and Frightfully Friendly Grey Niche Christmas Party. The Baron Guillermo and I promise it will be entertaining. Remember the date! December 8th!

In Service to the Cuts and whatever else besides.

Arielle,

Fabulous Red Headed Baroness of Grey Niche.

The date! The date at the bottom for the soiree was one week from this very day. The agony! Few things were left in the Dark Emperor's life left to be done. The first was conquer the world. The second was to snag an invitation to the Grey Niche Christmas Party. Damn!

"Take a letter *DurHam!*" The Seneschal pulled out his trusty notebook and quill and ink set leaning against the side of *Pumbass* ignoring the huge pig's snort of disgust. "Ask the Baroness if I can RSVP three. Myself, *A-xel*, and *Rey-Beaumont*." He saw the sad and pouty look appear on his prized servant's face. "Hell, make it four then!"

It appeared the world would simply have to wait.