

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Kate Hill



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Mica

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***KNIGHTS OF THE RUBY ORDER:***

***MICA***

Kate Hill

## **Prologue**

Dame Sun drew a deep breath and tilted her face toward the dusky sky. Rain pelted her flesh and moistened her lips, but it felt good after so many weeks of hard work. First had been the battles to defend the small farming village against an attack from a group of rogue Zaltanians who were trying to keep the war on. Then there had been the repairs. As a Dame of the Opal Order, a group of warriors and healers dedicated to aiding those in need, she'd been among those sent to help GreenTown through its crisis.

She'd spent the day helping to build a new wall around the village square and instructing farmers on the basics of defense.

In the morning a new group of Dames and Knights were scheduled to relieve Sun and the others who had secured the village. Then she could return to the Order where she spent most of her time training foot soldiers.

Sun loved her work. She enjoyed helping others and even liked fighting. At least it was a way to vent some of the anger boiling inside her since her village had been destroyed ten years ago.

Removing the strip of rope binding her heavy blonde hair at her nape, Sun shook out the rain-drenched tresses and thought how marvelous a long soak in warm water would feel.

She mounted her horse and cantered off to the hot spring caves located in the forest just outside the village. Moments later she arrived at her destination.

Hollows had been carved into the walls where torches rested. She lit them, bathing the cave in soothing firelight. Heat and moisture from the spring water warmed the air. Sun removed her armor and piled it in a corner of the cave. Her white linen shirt clung to her perspiring body, molding to the generous curves of her firm breasts and fitting like second skin to her abdomen, back and arms. She peeled off the shirt and tugged off her trousers then placed them atop her armor. Sun was about to remove her fitted leather loincloth when a sound from outside the cave startled her. Instinctively, she reached for her sword.

"Show yourself."

"Dame Sun?" a deep, masculine voice called.

One of the villagers, a tall, brawny young man with a wealth of curly blond hair, stepped inside. His handsome, smooth-shaven face appeared rather innocent in spite of how his blue eyes gazed at her with longing. "I didn't mean to startle you."

She lowered her weapon. "What do you want?"

He licked his lips and she could almost sense his nervousness. Sun nearly smiled. She knew this man. He was from one of the village's best families and promised to

marry a merchant's daughter in autumn. This particular village took pride in keeping its men honorable until after marriage, so she had no doubts about this youth's virginity. Still, lust gleamed in his eyes, hinting at what he'd come for.

"I wanted to thank you for all you've done for our village." He stepped closer, his broad shoulders nearly filling the cave's entrance. His chest rose and fell with excited breathing. "I've never known women like you Dames of the Opal Order."

"There are few enough like us, that's for sure." She grinned, placing her sword aside and approaching him.

"I appreciate all the work you've done. The way you defended us against the Zaltanians was admirable."

"You're welcome."

"I..."

"Yes?" She stood so close that her nipples brushed his broad chest. His cock swelled, poking her hip. A pulse beat madly at the side of his neck. This boy was going to be easy. So easy. Perhaps such a big, strong youth was just what she needed. Few women wouldn't find satisfaction with a stud of this caliber.

Sun placed a hand on his bare chest, relishing the thickness of his muscles beneath the dusting of honey-colored hair.

"I want you, Dame Sun," he breathed, resting his hands on her hips, his thumbs stroking her flesh. "I want you so badly I feel as if I'm being ripped apart from the inside out."

A slight smile curved her lips. Running her fingertips down his flat stomach, she felt the muscles twitch. Her hand slid down the front of his loose trousers and stopped just short of grasping his cock.

Panting softly, he gazed at her, his eyes dark with desire.

"You're a promised man, Nicolý." She tilted her face upward, her lips almost touching his. "I know the laws of your village. For us to do this would be wrong."

"I don't care, Dame Sun." He grasped her upper arms and pressed his face against her neck. "Everyone knows my marriage has been arranged. I'll spend the rest of my life with a woman I don't want. Just once I will have a woman who excites me."

Sun stared at him until she saw the fear of her rejection slip into his eyes. It wasn't as if she was forcing him, and vows of chastity were wasted on her. She'd broken hers often enough.

"All right, but just this once. You owe me nothing and I owe you nothing."

"Yes. Yes." He panted, sliding down her body and taking one of her nipples into his mouth. He sucked and laved it. Sun wound her fingers in his hair and gazed at the spring. Though her nipple hardened and bumps rose around the areola, she didn't feel that thrill other women spoke of.

"Sun, Sun. Beautiful," Nicolý murmured, his big, rough hands rubbing her breasts, stomach and hips, his motions more clumsy than arousing.

This boy needed lessons and Sun loved being a teacher. Rather than gaining her pleasure in the throbbing, explosive physical thrills that usually accompanied sex play, Sun received her pleasure from keeping control of her partner. She liked having a man beg her for more. She enjoyed lording power over him, of holding him trembling and writhing on the brink of fulfillment, then deciding whether or not she would give him what he most desired.

Too often men controlled women. They used their bodies to hurt and force, but not with Sun. Not ever again.

After years of living in fear of her sexuality, she'd tried facing her dread like she faced just about every other difficulty in her life. Taking lovers whenever she wanted to, she proved she could bed a man and still keep control. Yet making love was simply a string of motions to her. Other women spoke of affection for their lovers, but Sun felt nothing.

"You're unlike any woman I've ever met," Nicolý breathed, dragging Sun back to reality. His hand slipped between her thighs, caressing gently.

"On your back." Sun shoved Nicolý onto the damp ground by the edge of the spring. Gazing at him, she ran her fingers over his powerful chest and grasped his hips. "You have a fine build."

"As do you." He reached for her breasts, but she eluded him by kneeling between his hard, hair-dusted thighs.

She clasped his balls in one hand and the base of his cock in the other. Leaning forward, she spoke close to the ruddy crown of his erection, her warm breath fanning the sensitive flesh. "Just relax."

He groaned as if to say how can I relax when your soft, wet lips have just enveloped my cock head? Sun's tongue rolled over the smooth, velvety flesh. She sucked hard and fast then drew him in so deeply that his cock brushed the back of her throat.

"Ah. Goddess." Nicolý panted, clutching her head with trembling hands.

Sun almost smiled to herself. This boy was so inexperienced she wondered if he'd last another ten seconds. She continued sucking then ran her tongue from the base of his cock to the tip. The scent of his arousal and the harshness of his excited breathing filled the small cave. Sun moved her hand from his sac to the ultra-sensitive flesh of his perineum. With a lustful cry, his hips lunged upward and Sun grasped his bottom cheeks.

A noise outside the cave reached her warrior's senses. She drew back, his cock popping from between her lips, and reached for her sword.

"Why did you stop?" he gasped, raising himself on his elbows and gazing at her as she stood, her long blonde hair hanging wildly down her back.

Every muscle in her naked body taut, she stared at the mouth of the cave.

"By the Goddess." The young woman who stepped inside covered her mouth with her hands.

Sun shook her head. Just her luck. Nicolý's betrothed had come to visit.

"How could you?" the girl snapped at Nicolý then turned her glare to Sun. "You have infringed upon my rights, Dame, and I will see that you pay for it."

Sun raised her eyes to heaven. "Sorry, hon, but it's not as if I forced him."

"Angeline." Nicolý jumped to his feet and struggled into his clothes while approaching his fiancée.

"I don't want to hear it." She stomped out of the cave, Nicolý close behind her.

Sun shook her head and stepped into the spring, allowing the water to soothe her. She'd just spent the past few minutes with a hot young stud and felt not even the mildest disappointment that he'd gone. While his touches hadn't offended her, they hadn't aroused her either. It seemed she would never feel the utmost pleasure with any man, nor would she feel love for one, except for the familial affection for some Knights of the Ruby Order who had managed to befriend her. Thanks to General Mica of Ademene, her emotions were as dead as her womb.

She floated on her back, gazing at the torchlight dancing on the rocky ceiling. She'd better enjoy herself now because once Nicolý's little fiancée complained about tonight's incident, Sun would most likely be punished by the Opal Order. Seemed a pity, especially since she had derived no real pleasure from the experience.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Sun, you know why you've been called here," said Dame Neila, leader of the Opal Order.

A tall woman of late middle age with braided silver hair, Neila possessed an aura of quiet strength that Sun had always admired. It was her controlled self-assurance that made Neila a trusted leader who knew when to use force and when to negotiate. Sun tried to be more like her, but the young woman's temper often blinded her to diplomatic solutions to problems.

The two women stood in Neila's private chamber in the Opal Order's Fortress in Femmeglen. Sunlight poured in through five large windows cut into the round stone walls. A spring breeze wafted inside, carrying with it the scent of wildflowers, damp grass and food cooking in the kitchens below.

"The incident in GreenTown."

"Yes. Your indiscretion with that boy nearly led to a war between his family and that of his betrothed."

"*He came to me.*"

"That's beside the point. You not only broke a law of the village, but you've broken your vow of abstinence yet again."

"I know."

"Everyone realizes breaking that particular vow is often overlooked in both the

Opal and Ruby Orders, as long as no unwanted children are produced and discretion is used.”

“I realize I should have been more careful.”

“Your breaking of the vow isn’t what bothers me most. It’s why you broke it and have broken it many times in the past.”

“Please don’t get into this again.”

Neila ignored her. “What you endured during the attack on your village was something no one, least of all a child, should ever experience. Your promiscuity is not unexpected. Some people react by shunning sexuality entirely while others, such as yourself, become obsessed with carnal actions.”

“I can’t deny my affairs, Dame Neila.”

“Or my theory about your promiscuity?”

“To agree with you means Mica of Ademene still has power over me. I will not accept that. I’m not afraid of men or sexuality. I’ve never understood or agreed with the vow of abstinence, and—”

“Regardless, you have sworn to uphold it as well as your other vows. You are a good woman, Sun. You’re courageous, strong, intelligent and in many ways selfless, but you will never reach your full potential by carrying such hatred and fear inside you.”

“I fear nothing and no one.”

“Can’t you see that you do? It’s understandable. You need a special kind of man to love and—”

“I will never love any man. Not in that way.” Sun’s words were spoken without emotion, yet sorrow coiled inside her like a snake sleeping in the pit of her belly. While other women married and raised families, Sun was unable to find the same happiness with a partner. Sadly, she knew she never would.

Neila sighed. “I hope someday you will change your mind. Now, I must issue punishment for your actions in GreenTown. Since you’ve just returned, I was going to allow you to take over training of the Home Guard. Instead, you will accompany several Knights of the Ruby Order on a mission to Cat’s Cove, which has been overrun by raiders from a neighboring kingdom.”

Sun nodded. The assignment could have been worse. Cat’s Cove was a small, dull village, but at least Neila hadn’t demoted her or stuck her on moat duty for a month.

“You leave immediately,” Neila continued. “And try to stay out of trouble this time, Dame Sun.”

“Yes,” Sun bowed from the neck and left Neila’s chamber. On the way to the stable she muttered, “I don’t look for trouble. It just finds me.”



## Chapter One

*Cat's Cove*

*One month later*

"Nothing feels quite as good as saving a village from ruin." Sun grinned, raising her ale and smashing it into the lifted mug of Sir Lock.

A tall, powerfully built man with a kinky, waist-length shock of white and brown hair, he belonged to the Knights of the Ruby Order, the Dames' male counterparts.

"I'll drink to that," Lock said, taking a swallow of ale. "But not too much. The last thing my crew needs is a drunk captain."

Sun laughed. "I've never seen you drunk, Lock. You don't drink enough to get drunk."

"And he mimics the feathered hooter," observed Sir Blaze. At his companions' questioning looks, he thought for a moment then said, "He is wise not to imbibe too deeply."

Sun cast an affectionate glance at the tall, slender Knight seated beside her. Blaze was the closest thing to a father she'd known since hers had been slaughtered during the raid on her village when she was nine years old.

Blaze had taken her to the Knights of the Ruby Order. He'd been the strongest yet most gentle man she'd ever known. Stunned by the horror of her loss, Sun withdrew, only breaking from her icy shell with random bouts of temper. Blaze spent hours with her, talking to her and teaching her the art of weaponless fighting as an outlet for her anger. She learned mostly from watching him, since he spoke in a strange code. The auburn-haired Knight was not like other men. Blaze communicated with the dead. He saw them as clearly as other people saw the living. The spirits spoke to him constantly, giving him insight, though his gift was not without a price. Often he couldn't decide if a person was living or dead, and constant interpretations from the spirits made his phrasing odd. After several years, Sun began to truly understand him, realizing that he spoke in symbolism. He never called her by her given name. The spirits told him she was Brightest Star, so that was how he addressed her.

When he was sent away on assignment, Blaze brought Sun to the Dames of the Opal Order, knowing they could provide a stable life for her. At first she missed him terribly, but the Dames were patient and kind. Eventually Sun realized the Opal Order was truly her home. The Dames would never turn her away, and Blaze visited often, continuing the deep friendship she treasured. Among the Dames, Sun learned more about fighting as well as healing. Eventually she decided to join the Order where she could put her skills to use. By helping people in need, she found some peace regarding the destruction of her village. Still, no matter how she tried, she always seemed to fall

short of the Dames' expectations.

She loved Blaze with all her heart, but Sir Lock she understood better. Lock had been a pirate before meeting his wife, Sparrow, and joining the Order. Lock had a quick temper and the power to back it up. Only Sparrow could completely pierce the Knight's tough exterior. At times Sun envied their affection. Maybe if she had someone with whom she could share a love like Lock and Sparrow enjoyed, it would dull the bitter edge of her temper.

"Drunk or not, the village is back on its feet. We did a great job," Lock said.

"As did the people," Blaze added. "I wonder how useful is this self praise?"

Lock and Sun glanced at each other and shrugged before the reformed pirate finished his ale and wiped his white beard on his sleeve. "We'd best be going. I want to be out to sea before sunset. The faster we leave, the faster we get home."

"Not to mention that if Sparrow decides to come ashore looking for you and finds you in this tavern she'll have your hide."

Blaze glanced at Lock. "With your temper and reputation, this serpent pit tempts you too much. I was ready to go before we passed the wooden barrier."

"Are you Lock the White?" growled the tall, dark-skinned man approaching their table. A small group of filthy rogues, most likely pirates, followed behind him.

Sensing trouble, Sun placed her mug down.

Her heartbeat quickened with anticipation. Though Blaze's face remained calm, Sun caught a concerned expression in his pale blue eyes.

Lock stood, his gaze sweeping the newcomer. "Why?"

"I'm Taddy the Tough."

Lock raised a pale eyebrow and broke into laughter.

Taddy's gray teeth gritted and his eyes bulged. "I've waited ten years to slit your throat, pig. You sank my father's ship."

"Taddy Twin Knives, the dumbest thief ever to sail out of the Archipelago? I sank him, Taddy, and I sank your brother's ship too."

Blaze glanced at Lock and shook his head.

A muscle twitched in Lock's cheek, but he loosened his clenched fists and spoke with practiced calm. "We have to go."

"To hell." Taddy unsheathed a dagger and lunged at Lock who grasped his arm and snapped his wrist. Taddy screamed, his face turning white.

Sun leapt from her chair as Taddy's companions attacked. Lock punched one in the face, sending him sprawling across the floor. A wiry blond with no front teeth hopped on Lock's back, his fingers gouging four bloody tracks across the Knight's cheek. Grabbing the man by the hair, Sun yanked him off her friend. The man's elbow struck her in the stomach, but she tensed her hard muscles against the blow. She jabbed her knee into the man's back then kicked him in the face. He joined three more of his

companions on the floor, sent there by Lock's powerful fists.

"Stop." Blaze bellowed. "This is—" The slim, auburn-haired Knight spun, avoiding a dagger aimed at his head. As he twisted, his long leg shot out, sweeping his attackers' feet out from under him. With the grace of a cat, Blaze blocked and punched men on both sides of him, executing blows that rendered his opponents unconscious.

Sun laughed, kicking another man. She wasn't even certain this one was an enemy, for the tavern was in an uproar. Chairs and mugs of ale flew across the room. People screamed and bellowed obscenities. The barkeep huddled in a corner to avoid soaring debris.

"Enough." Blaze grasped Sun by the arm and shoved her toward the tavern door. "We're peace bringers, not brigands."

"What about Lock?" Sun shouted, glancing over her shoulder at the tall, burly Knight. He was fighting three men at once—and winning.

"Disgraceful," Blaze muttered. He pointed a finger in Sun's face. "Stay."

"Do I look like a dog?" Sun called after Blaze who returned to the tavern. Still, she obeyed his command out of respect. Blaze was probably the only person in the world who could control her when her temper was up.

Two men on horseback, one whom Sun recognized as the local sheriff, dismounted and raced inside. Moments later, the sound of fighting stopped and Lock emerged, walking between the sheriff and a guard. The big Knight's hands were bound behind his back and he wore an expression of frustrated indulgence. Blaze must have convinced Lock to surrender, otherwise the two law enforcers wouldn't have restrained him.

Shouting abuse, the barkeep followed Blaze out of the tavern.

The Knight opened his hands to the furious man. "I have no more. I keep little silver."

"Damn Knights," the barkeep snapped. "Healers, my ass. That giant ruined my tavern, and this—" He pointed at Sun. "She should be home having babies instead of breaking chairs over my patrons' heads."

"You probably couldn't even make a baby," Sun bellowed.

"Silence," Blaze ordered then said to the tavern keeper, "We will send funds for the damages."

The tavern keeper snorted with contempt before stepping inside and slamming the door in Blaze's face.

"We have to get Lock," Sun said. "They're going to want bail. I hope I have enough to pay for it. If we have to get Sparrow, it will be a disaster."

"This is a disaster." Blaze's fists clenched as he strode across the cobbled path to the local jail.

Sun fell into step beside him. "But we had to do something."

"Yes. Travel."

"You mean walk away?"

Blaze shot her an irritated look. "So novel an idea? What of your vows?"

Sun lowered her eyes and sighed. He was right. Knights and Dames were supposed to be the epitome of good manners. Though Sun's heart was true, she usually fell short of the traditional description of a Dame.

At the jail Sun paid Lock's bail, then the three friends hurried across the small, seaside village to the dock. The scent of salt water and fish wafted on the breeze. In the distance, the silhouette of Lock's ship, *The Sparrow Song*, shone against the dark red sunset.

"Shameful," Blaze snapped at Lock. "What an example you set for those in your care."

The burly Knight winced and pressed a hand to the back of his head where a table leg had struck him during the fight. "Blaze, not now. I have a headache."

"Of your own making."

"Not everyone is like you. Some of us have normal feelings of anger. All of us don't wear that." Lock pointed to the green sash around Blaze's narrow waist. The sash symbolized a special faction of the Ruby Order. Only ten members existed in that faction and Blaze was their leader. Any Knight who wore the green sash never carried a weapon, though they were often stationed in the thick of battle. They were purely healers, the finest in the Order and though skilled in hand-to-hand combat, they never killed.

"We all have sworn to respect life," Blaze argued. "Not this foolishness."

"Taddy attacked me, in case you didn't notice."

"I noticed," Sun said.

Blaze looked from one to the other before he stalked ahead, ranting to himself.

"I didn't mean to upset him. I just can't hold my temper."

"I know the feeling," Lock muttered.

"You know you have a black eye?"

"So do you."

"Yes, but I don't have a wife who's going to bury me as soon as she sees it."

Lock groaned, clutching his head again, and Sun did her best not to laugh.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Welcome back, Sun." Dame Neila looked up from the maps spread across one of the long wooden tables in the Opal Order's great hall.

Sun smiled. "It's good to be home. Our mission was successful. The village is on its feet and several Knights have remained behind to continue assisting. There was no further need for me to stay."

Neila nodded, studying the younger woman. "You haven't been sleeping well again?"

"I've been busy. There was much work in Cat's Cove."

Neila didn't speak but continued watching her. It sometimes upset Sun how well the older Dame knew her.

"I think the battle on the coast last month disturbed me more than it should have," Sun finally said.

"The attack from the army of Upper Kenna?"

Nodding, Sun gazed out the narrow window across the hall. "I haven't had nightmares about home in a long time. Stupid, isn't it?"

"You'll never forget what happened to your village. You've come far, Sun. Even when I must punish you for incidents such as the one at GreenTown, I'm still proud of you."

A smile flickered across Sun's lips, though Neila's words only made her next request more difficult. "I want to go to Upper Kenna."

Neila's brow furrowed. "Why?"

"You were right when you said I won't reach my potential until I face the past. I want to find the man who destroyed my village."

"Confronting your past doesn't necessarily mean looking for a fight. Our way is not about vengeance. You knew that when you took your vows."

Clenching her fists, Sun said, "For years I've tried to forget about him and his army. I tried to forgive what they did, but I can't. Maybe I'm not a good enough Dame. I can't be perfect."

"None of us are perfect. It's not your dedication to the Order that I'm questioning. I don't like to see you consumed by a man who no longer means anything to you. You've already overcome him and his army a thousand times."

"Don't you understand I have to face him? I have to look in his eyes and find out why. He had no reason to slaughter my people. He'd already won."

Neila sighed and shook her head. "Asking a man like that will get you answers no quicker than bedding men who mean nothing to you or picking tavern fights."

"If I don't go, I'll be haunted for the rest of my life. I'm no longer helpless or one of his victims. I'm no longer afraid, and I want him to know that."

"We haven't any ships going to the Kennas for quite some time."

"Sir Lock will be trading there soon. I'll travel with his crew."

Neila placed a hand on Sun's shoulder. "You do what you have to. We'll always be here for you, no matter what your decision."

"Thank you."

"When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow, if I can."

“Laurette has taken over your duties while you’ve been abroad. She’ll continue to do so until you return. You have my permission to go.”

“I won’t shame you or the Opal Order.”

“You never could.”

Though she doubted it, Sun hoped Neila was right. When she finally faced this man she’d hated for ten years, she doubted she could refrain from killing him.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Remember, we leave port in one week,” Lock told Sun as she stood with him and his wife on the pier at Upper Kenna.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like company?” Sparrow asked. “I can travel with you while Lock is trading.”

Though small in stature, Sparrow was strong, intelligent and hard working. She had a kind heart, and at times Sun wished she could be more like her.

“Thank you, but I don’t know how long I’ll be. I have to find this basta—I mean this man. I only know his name and city.”

Sparrow gazed at Sun with concern. “If that’s what you want. Just be careful.”

“Careful?” Sun grinned, taking the reins of her roan stallion and guiding the animal toward the marketplace. “I’m always careful.”

Lock muttered something about the foolishness of women, but Sun couldn’t quite hear him above the chatter of the crowd. Stopping at a cart, she bartered for a white hooded robe to protect her in the desert.

The islands of Kenna were vast, sandy places with random oases, some of which stretched for miles. Days were hot in the Kennas and nights could be bitter cold. Sun had stopped briefly in Lower Kenna years ago but she’d never ventured to the land of the beast who’d destroyed her village. Her heartbeat quickened at the thought of finding him and bestowing upon him some of the pain she’d suffered during his attack. Loyalty to the Order and to Sir Blaze kept her temper in check, but as years passed her insides continued twisting with rage. The decision to seek her worst enemy had been difficult, but it was long past time for the necessary confrontation.

Even on the waterfront, the air felt hot and dry. Sun found a secluded space behind one of the market stalls to slip off her brown tunic, roll it and store it in her traveling pack. She slid into a leather vest and draped the white cotton robe over her head, raising the hood against the sun. Checking the sheath at her hip, she continued toward the food carts where she bought fruit, bread and cheese for the next several days. She filled a water skin in a central well and continued through the port city until she reached the outskirts.

She squinted toward the miles of sand dunes gleaming in the morning light as far as the eye could see. Her destination, Ademene, the largest city in Upper Kenna, was due north and at least a three-day journey.

Sun decided to walk for several miles, saving her horse the added burden in such heat. She considered the animal a companion rather than a possession. The stallion had aided her in many battles and guided her through storms and harsh terrain over the years. Sir Blaze had given her the horse as a gift for her dubbing ceremony when she was initiated into the Dames two years ago. She knew Blaze had been concerned when she'd left for Upper Kenna. If only she could make him understand her need to face her old enemy.

"Sometimes I don't understand Blaze." She sighed. "Perhaps if I lived with the souls of the dead, I would be more hesitant to kill even someone who deserves to die."

The sun rose higher, gleaming off the dunes and seeping through the protective cotton garment covering her from head to boot. Glancing over her shoulder, she noted the port city was no longer in view. She was entirely alone in a desert as beautiful as it was deadly.

A tall, smooth rock loomed ahead. When she reached it, she sat in its shade and took a bite of bread. Leaning against the rock, she let her thoughts drift. She stared in the direction she'd just walked. The hot wind had smoothed away her footprints, leaving no indication she'd ever disturbed the dunes. Narrowing her eyes, she noticed a dark figure in the distance.

"I know that horse." She stood as the chestnut gelding approached. The rider, draped in a white robe, removed his hood and smiled, his pale eyes gleaming in the sunlight.

"Blaze? What are you doing here?"

"Sailed on a feeding vessel soon after you left with Mate of the Key."

Mate of the Key was Blaze's name for Lock. The former part of the sentence momentarily bewildered Sun then she smiled. Feeding vessel. "A fishing boat?"

"A rats' breeding ground. Not all captains keep ships as clean as Mate of the Key."

"But why are you here?"

"You're my daughter." He dismounted.

"I appreciate what you're trying to do, Blaze, but I have to face this alone."

The Knight rubbed the white star between his gelding's eyes. "Why?"

"Because I do. I don't want to drag you into my problems."

Blaze lifted a fine red eyebrow, his large eyes staring into hers.

"I have to do what I feel is right," Sun snapped, pacing in the sand.

"You're angry?"

"Yes. No." She ran a hand through her hair. "I don't know. I'm not sure how I'm going to react to him, and I don't want you to be ashamed of me."

Blaze touched a hand to his chest. "You are my heart. I could no more be ashamed of you than I am of it."

Sun knew his words had no link with sexual affection but signified platonic love.

She embraced the Knight and rested her head against his shoulder as she had many times as a child. "I love you too, Blaze, but I have to find him."

"I know."

"Even though I've been through wars, you still want to protect me?"

"You've guarded my back in battle."

"I'm good in battle." Sun dropped onto the ground in the shade of the rock, her legs stretched out in front of her. She picked up a handful of sand and watched it slide through her fingers.

"If you want me to go away..."

She grinned. "You mean after you came all this way on a stinking, rat-infested boat? I don't have the heart to send you away."

"Sympathy is good." Blaze sat beside her.

"If you think I'm going to show that bastard a bit of sympathy—"

"Much time has passed."

"I don't care if a thousand years have passed. Once a bastard, always a bastard."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dusk settled in and the wind grew stronger and colder. Sun and Blaze draped cloaks over their robes and searched for a place to spend the night.

"Company?" Blaze pointed east toward an approaching horse and rider.

Sun lifted her hand, shielding her eyes against the glare of the setting sun and studied the figures.

A black mare taller than her stallion moved with the power of a war horse and the grace of the small, delicate horses native to the Kennas. Dark blue robes draped her rider. A hood of the same color covered his head. The mare pranced before coming to a stop.

Sun tingled with unaccustomed attraction. The newcomer was not only handsome but poured sensuality like water from a cascade. Blue eyes gleamed in his smooth, dark-skinned face. His sharp cheekbones, oval chin and beautifully shaped nose looked as if they'd been carved by the greatest sculptor. A pleasant smile curved his lips.

"Hello," he said in their language. The almost musical accent of the Kennas combined with his deep tone captivated Sun. "You know a storm is coming?"

Sun looked at the clear sky. "A storm?"

"He's right," Blaze said. "Spirits are muttering."

The man cast a questioning glance at Blaze then turned back to Sun. "I have shelter, if you'd like to share it."

"That's kind of you," she said, "considering we're strangers and could be thieves or murderers."



The man tilted his head slightly to one side and winked. "So could I."

"Risks excite me. Whoa." She grasped her stallion's reins at the same moment the stranger tightened his grip on his mare that had begun prancing again. Sun nodded at the tall, sleek female. "She's in heat."

The stranger patted his horse's glossy black neck and smiled. "Just don't let that rogue of yours get her in trouble. If you want to wait out the storm, you should follow me."

He nudged the mare toward the dune over which they'd appeared. Sun and Blaze glanced at each other in silent consultation then followed their host.

From the top of the dune, they saw a bare mountain, several cave mouths visible in its side. The man led them into the largest entrance. Once they'd dismounted, Sun noted their host's impressive height. She stood at eye level or taller than most men, but she had to look up to meet the stranger's gaze. Inside, the cave narrowed around a bend before opening into a chamber large enough for several people and horses to comfortably spend the night. A torch burned in the wall. Blankets and saddlebags were piled on the floor.

"You live here?" Sun asked.

The man grinned. "I'm not so misanthropic."

He removed his hood, revealing thick black hair that hung to his waist in a straight, gleaming mass. Sun's breath caught. Never in her life had she seen such beautiful hair. She wondered how it would feel to run her fingers through it. The robe came off next and Sun's pulse leapt. His lean body was clothed with tan trousers and a sleeveless vest of dark brown leather. Muscles rippled in his arms and broad, smooth-skinned chest. The baggy, wide-legged trousers would have shortened most men's legs, but his looked miles long. She glanced at his cock and balls pressing against trousers so thin she could almost discern the exact shape of the bulbous head. Sun's mouth went dry.

"How long did it take you to grow that?" she asked.

The stranger glanced at the front of his pants. "Depends on how beautiful the woman in front of me."

Sun raised her eyes to heaven and snorted with disgust. "I meant your hair."

"Oh, that." He grinned, looking sheepish. "Years."

Sun resisted the urge to laugh aloud. Typical man. Always imagining women were impressed with their cocks. What irritated her most was this time it was true. She'd seen few bulges as magnificent as the one in his pants.

"Are you hungry?" he asked. "I was about to eat. Just some bread and dried fruit, but you're welcome to it."

"Kind of you," Blaze said, withdrawing a round of cheese from his belongings. "I can add to the feast."

"So can I." Sun slapped her thigh before reaching for the special reserve of wine she kept hidden in her saddlebag. "This might not be such a bad night after all."

Soon the three sat eating and talking by a small fire in the center of the cave.

“What brings you to our land?” asked the stranger.

Sun watched his long, slim fingers slide a fig into his mouth. She nearly squirmed as she imagined what those fingers would feel like rubbing her clit or exploring her pussy. The giddy sensation in her belly was completely unaccustomed. Even her nipples tingled and swelled when she thought of bedding this man. Her gaze followed the tip of his tongue flicking across his voluptuous lower lip.

“I’m looking for someone,” she said.

“Who? Maybe I can help you find him.”

“His name is Mica of Ademene, a combat general.”

The stranger’s eyes widened. “Then look no further. I am Mica of Ademene.”

For an entire five seconds, Sun stared in dumb shock.

Shrieking a battle cry, she unsheathed her sword and swung it directly at Mica’s skull.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mica rolled away before the blade split his head. He tried kicking the beautiful blonde warrior’s feet out from under her, but she sprang, forcing him to dive over his horse to avoid another of her deadly blows.

*She’s crazy. That’s what I get for trusting a pretty face.*

Moments ago, the woman’s statuesque beauty had his pulse pounding—now it raced out of survival instinct. Just what he needed, a foreign warrior with petal-blue eyes and breasts like a goddess trying to lop off his head with a blade she wielded far too well for his taste.

“Put the sword down, you crazy bitch.”

“Not until you’re dead, you murdering bastard,” she snarled, her beautiful face distorted with fury.

“I haven’t killed anybody lately.”

“Brightest Star, lower your weapon.” The auburn-haired man chased the woman around the cave. He finally caught her, ducking her swinging blade.

“He deserves to die, Blaze. After what he did, I can’t look at his ugly face.”

*Ugly? I might not look like a palace sculpture, but I’m by no means ugly.*

“You said you wanted to speak with the one who killed your family,” Blaze continued.

“I didn’t kill her family.” Mica remained where he stood, one foot in the stirrup, one hand clutching a dagger he’d pulled from a sheath on his waist. “I never saw her before today.”

“General Mica of Ademene destroyed the village of Greenhaven. Raped the

women, drowned the children and cut the head off every man. I was the only survivor but I'm enough to avenge my people. You're going to die, you son of a bitch. Blaze, let me go." She struggled against the Knight's grasp, her teeth visibly clenched.

"Not until you listen to reason." Blaze forced the sword from her hand.

"Don't make me fight you, Blaze."

"I was never in Greenhaven," Mica said. He knew about the place, however, and his anger at the woman faded, replaced by sympathy. Many villages on the coast of the Western Continent had been destroyed during the time she mentioned. "The General Mica you're referring to was my father."

Sun pushed away from Blaze and approached, her hands raised to fight. "Then I can use you to find him."

"It will do you no good."

"Yes it will," she snarled. "Even if I have to beat his whereabouts out of you—"

"I've held my tongue for worse than you." Mica removed his foot from the stirrup but didn't advance on her. The woman had obviously lost much to his father's brutality. Though her attitude irritated him, he could see no reason to further upset her. "I realize you've suffered because of my father's actions. I'm sorry."

"Keep your apology. It makes me sick. I want to know where your father is."

"He's dead."

"Right. One way or the other, you'll tell me the truth."

"He speaks the truth," Blaze told her.

She glanced at the auburn-haired Knight. "He can't be dead."

Blaze opened his hands helplessly. "The spirits don't lie to me."

"All right." Sun picked up her sword, pointing it at Mica. "If I can't kill the father then I'll destroy his spawn."

"You cannot." Blaze stepped in front of Mica. "The lamb cannot be accused of doing the coyote's work."

Sun glared at the Knight. "Blaze, now is not the time to test my patience!"

"You cannot punish him for a crime he didn't commit. What of your vows? Will you ruin your life for the sake of a dead man?"

The woman sheathed her sword, kicked the cave wall and dropped to the ground. "You can step away from him, Blaze. I'm not going to kill him, though I have no doubt he deserves death as much as his father."

Mica stared at her. He'd seen many like her in his lifetime, people destroyed by hatred because of the likes of his father—and himself. At least Mica had realized his violent path promised him and those he touched nothing but loneliness and pain.

"I wish I could change what he did," Mica said.

"Keep quiet," she snapped.

He sheathed his dagger, wrapped his robe around his shoulders and sat on the

blankets. "The storm might last the night. You should sleep."

"I'd sooner sleep in the company of a snake."

"I won't be closing my eyes either," he stated. She'd probably cut them out if he did.

"Then both of you watch." Blaze settled onto the floor, tugging the blankets around him and muttering to himself.

Moments later, Sun knew by the evenness of his breathing that he was asleep. She looked across the fire at Mica who sat staring at the flames. The sight of him infuriated her. Thick tendrils of ink-colored hair flowed down his shoulders and back. His slightly parted lips looked soft and finely shaped. She noted for the first time the black lines rimming his eyes. She had seen several people in the market with the same type of eye makeup and guessed it was part of the Kennas' culture. Some of the Knights and Dames wore tattoos from their homeland. She knew in certain parts of the world warriors painted their faces in battle, but she'd never seen a man in makeup before.

Still, the black lines in no way detracted from his masculinity; they merely enhanced the beauty of his eyes.

"I wish I could change what happened to you," he said.

"Excuse me if I can't believe any son of *his*, particularly if you claim to be a general yourself."

"I am no longer a general."

"Good," she seethed.

"There aren't adequate words to describe the horror of battle."

"You don't have to tell me about battle."

"No. I can see you're familiar with it, but you've also overcome your past. Your friend spoke of vows you took. By the way you handle your sword, I'm guessing you're a Dame of the Opal Order. I recognized the emblem on your companion's tunic to be that of the Ruby Order."

Sun stared hard into Mica's eyes. "You're wondering why, after all I went through to become a Dame, I've wasted my time looking for your father?"

"The answer is obvious. Becoming a Dame doesn't wipe away your humanity. You have every right to hate my father and want revenge."

Sun leaned forward, pointing a finger at him. In spite of the rage sparking her lovely blue eyes, Mica saw deep pain. She tried hiding it and had obviously learned to live with it, but it still burned inside her. "I don't understand you. What are you trying to prove? Do you actually think I'll believe you're decent, that you don't have a bit of him in you?"

"I don't care what you believe." His words weren't taunting or hateful. He simply stated a fact.

His neutrality seemed to incite Sun's rage. "What kind of general were you, Mica of Ademene? Were you honest, upstanding and noble?"

“There is no nobility in war. Only suffering.”

“That’s right enough.” Sun leaned against the bumpy cave wall, her square jaw set and her eyes half closed. Her smooth, golden skin was different from the darker women he was accustomed to. Perhaps her strangeness attracted him, but he longed to touch her face and taste her lips. Her mouth was sensual, the lower lip full. He wondered how she would look wearing a smile instead of a scowl.

“Why don’t you sleep? I’m not about to attack you.”

The look she shot him explained just how much she trusted his promise.

“How did he die?” she asked.

“My father? In battle.”

“I hope he suffered.”

“I don’t know. I was banished at the time and heard of his death months after it happened.”

“Banished? It figures. What disgusting crime did you commit? Rape? Murder?”

Mica’s gaze fixed on the fire. “Treason.”

“Treason? How?” Sun could have ripped out her tongue. His life and his crimes shouldn’t interest her.

“Why do you want to know?”

“I don’t. I couldn’t care less except to say they should have executed you. Banishment was too good for you.”

A sad smile touched his lips. “There was a time when I wished they had killed me, but that was the point of banishment.”

Sun looked away. She didn’t know how much time passed before drowsiness overtook her. Forcing her eyes open, she tried to keep awake by thinking about some new herbal remedies Blaze had taught her.

“My army had taken over one of the largest villages in Upper Kenna, several miles from the capital city,” Mica began. “At the time, I reported directly to my father who was advisor to the man who called himself the emperor of Ademene—a usurping pig of a cousin to the true emperor. I sent word that we’d secured the village. My father sent a message back telling me to kill everyone in it. I refused.”

Sun glanced at him, wondering if he told the truth or if he thought to play on her sympathy.

“You did the right thing.” Blaze’s soft voice broke the stillness hanging between Sun and Mica.

Sun snorted, lifting her gaze to heaven. “He’s probably lying, Blaze.”

Blaze raised himself onto his elbows and blinked sleep from his pale eyes. “You know the spirits talk to me, Brightest Star.”

Mica turned to Blaze. “You commune with the dead?”

"They never let me rest," Blaze muttered. "You interest me, Mirrored Rock."

*Mirrored Rock. Mica.* Blaze's interpretation of names never ceased to amaze Sun.

Mica chuckled. "I interest you?"

"You have a deep soul. Contradictions battle inside you."

"They battle inside us all." Sun buried herself deeper in her cloak. The night had grown very cold.

"The fight is stronger in some than in others," Blaze continued. "I would say you and Mirrored Rock are much alike, but—"

"We are nothing alike," Sun bellowed.

"But I knew you would shake the walls should I say so."

Mica's eyes glistened with amusement. "She has a soft, womanly voice, doesn't she?"

"At least I look like the woman I am. What kind of man paints his eyes like you do?"

"It's called kohl," Mica explained, as if to a child. "In the desert, it helps deflect the sunlight. You should try it."

"I'd like to try hanging your head from my belt."

"That's enough," Blaze snapped.

"You can't tell me how to act, Blaze. I'm not a child anymore."

Again Mica grinned. "Could have fooled me."

Sun drew a dagger and loomed over him. "One more comment from you, and I'll cut off your hair and sell it at the market."

"They pay well." Mica lifted a section of his black mane to reveal shorter locks beneath. "Ten silver pieces for just two braids."

Sun wrinkled her nose. "You actually sold your hair?"

"I'd been in the desert for over a month. The first market I reached, I wanted to eat everything they were selling. Dried fruit, fresh bread and dye all for a couple of measly braids seemed a good bargain."

"Dye?"

"I hoped that would pique your interest." Mica opened his cloak and unfastened his vest. He parted it, revealing a chest and abdomen of lean, chiseled muscle. Black and burgundy symbols formed an attractive line from just below his breastbone to his navel. Each of the ridges of muscle on his stomach was painted with snakes and rams. Sun's mouth went dry at the sight of his body. Did it feel hard as it looked? She imagined running her hands across the dark, chiseled chest. How would those flat, brown nipples feel beneath her fingers and tongue? The man was gorgeous enough to make a woman lose her breath.

He continued, "Sun, from the moment I saw you, I thought 'here's a woman whose body was made to paint'. I usually charge four copper pieces per design, unless you

supply the dye, then it's three, but for the honor of decorating such a lovely body, I'll lower my price to—"

Sun kicked him so hard and fast that he scarcely had time to raise his arm in defense.

"You are disgusting."

"I didn't mean to offend you." He wiped his bloody lip since the arm that blocked her kick had smashed his face.

"That time, I don't blame her," Blaze said.

Sun returned to her place by the fire. Her stomach clenched not only because, as Blaze hinted, Mica's lewd offer was offensive but because the idea of his long, graceful fingers painting her body actually appealed to her.

Sun liked being in control. She'd bedded men who attracted her, but never one like Mica who could make her wet with a look. It wouldn't matter anyway. After tonight they'd never see each other again.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following morning, after eating a meal of bread and dried fruit, the trio saddled their horses.

"Lock will be surprised to see us," Sun told Blaze.

Fastening his saddle, Mica glanced at Sun over his horse's back. "Too bad you have to leave so quickly. There's much to see in the Kennas."

"My one tie with the Kennas is dead and I say good riddance."

Mica's brow furrowed. "You want to hate an entire country because of one man?"

"Don't you ever shut up?" Didn't he know how fragile the wire he tugged? If he irritated her too much, she wouldn't hesitate in following through with the attack she'd started last night. "I want to get as far from you and this stinking country as possible."

Mica whistled. "And I was under the impression Knights and Dames thought of all people as equal."

"She's abandoned the ways of her Order of late." Blaze glanced at Sun with irritation but she pretended not to notice.

She mounted. "Let's go. We'll reach the port by dusk."

"Thank you for your hospitality." Blaze extended his hand to Mica who grasped it.

"My pleasure, Sir. Good luck, Dame Sun."

She curled her lip and kicked her horse forward.

Moments later, Blaze's horse fell into step beside hers. When they reached the top of the dune, Sun glanced back at Mica who rode in the opposite direction, his blue robes a sapphire droplet on the expanse of golden sand.

"I know that was hard for you," Blaze said.

"You don't have to say anything. I'll be fine."

"My reasons are selfish. It hurts me to see you in pain, Brightest Star."

"I'm not in pain anymore."

"So you say. What do you think of Mica?"

"I don't like him."

"No?"

"He pretends he's not like his father," she sneered.

"Perhaps he's not."

"No matter what he says, the blood in his veins will not change. Besides, he has bigger balls than a White Island yak."

"Brightest Star!"

Shrugging, she said, "Sorry, Blaze, but I never was much of a lady."

"You are a coconut."

"What?"

"A coconut. Hard on the outside, liquid on the inside."

"I know you like to think I have a heart but I don't. Not really."

"It's a rare Dame who has no heart. Like crying tears to quench the desert's thirst. Giving one's life to the Order requires sacrifice."

"Yes, and I get to fight in plenty of battles."

"I must agree with Mica's view of battle. No honor, only suffering."

"Doesn't mean I can't like it."

A bellow of rage echoed across the dunes.

"Mica," Blaze said and turned his horse back.

Sun didn't hesitate in following. They galloped down the sand dune.

At the base, Mica had dismounted. A body lay on the sand, stone buzzards pecking at the tattered heap. More interested in dead prey than in the living, the stone buzzards flew off.

By the time Sun and Blaze dismounted, Mica was kneeling beside the blistered corpse. One of the eyes had been plucked out by the buzzards, the other stared lifelessly toward the sun.

"Damn scavengers." Mica snarled. He parted the corpse's robe, revealing whip slashes encrusted with dried blood. "I knew it. Bastards."

"What happened to him?" Sun asked.

Mica met her gaze, the hatred in his eyes stunning her. "He was banished, Dame Sun."

Banished. Just as Mica had been.

"I have to cremate what's left of him and bury his bones."



“I’ll help you,” Blaze offered.

“Thank you.”

Sun drew a deep breath, knowing she shouldn’t care one way or the other what Mica did. She told herself she wouldn’t help for his sake, but for the deceased man she didn’t know. After all, as a Dame, she was sworn to lend aid where needed.

“I saw some dead trees over the last dune,” Sun said. “We can make a pyre.”

She mounted her stallion and rode off to collect the wood.

## **Chapter Two**

By the time they gathered wood and built the pyre, darkness had settled over the desert. Blaze and Sun stood at a respectful distance while Mica lit the pyre and sang a funeral chant in his language. Though Sun couldn't understand his words, she was moved by the depth and beauty of his voice. When Mica finished, he joined Sun and Blaze. The three watched the flames in silence for several moments before retreating to a nearby cave where they lit a fire to warm themselves against the coldness of the desert night.

Blaze glanced at Mica. "Some ritual song, Mirrored Rock?"

"It is a traditional prayer sung when we bury our dead."

"Your voice is a gift."

"Thank you, but the words matter more than the voice."

Sun tugged out her sword and sharpened it on a rock. Unable to control her curiosity any longer, she asked, "What did the words mean?"

"The Goddess is merciful. She wraps our souls in her gentleness and saves us from man's horror. The Goddess keeps us where sins do not abound. She cleanses and absorbs our pain. The Goddess is the mother of all. From her we begin and in her we end."

Sun stopped sharpening her weapon and stared into Mica's eyes, wondering if her disgust was apparent. "That's what you say in prayer? You slaughter innocent people in the name of this Goddess who you claim is so merciful?"

"No one who believes in the Goddess kills in Her name. Anyone who tells you different is either lying or misinterpreting Her. In case you haven't noticed, Dame Sun, slaughter isn't a way of life in the Kennas. I admit when my father and those like him were in power, there was devastation, but no longer. Not since the rightful leaders have taken their places."

"Then how do you explain the corpse out there?" Sun demanded.

"I can't." Mica's jaw tightened. "But I'm going to find the answer. I'm returning to Ademene in the morning."

Blaze's brow furrowed. "Will you be in danger? You were banished."

"Under my father's order. He's dead and the emperor he serves long out of power. I was allowed back years ago. I must speak with the High Advisor. He knows everything that goes on in Ademene. The emperor makes no decision without him."

"Would they allow banishment?" Sun asked.

"That's another reason why I have to return. I fear the only way banishment would

occur in Ademene is if something happened to the High Advisor and the emperor.”

“If that’s the case, then you are in danger,” Blaze said.

Sun raised an eyebrow. “And you still want to go back there?”

“I must. I have commitments.”

“I’ll join you,” Blaze told him.

“Blaze.” Sun glared. The Knight shrugged, his blue eyes wide. She muttered a curse and sheathed her sword. “That means I’m going too. Damn it.”

“Neither of you need come.”

“I’m going with you.” Blaze wrapped himself in his cloak and lay down by the fire. “Sleep well.”

Mica and Sun stared at the flames for several minutes before he said, “I know the last place you want to go is Ademene.”

“I go where Blaze goes.”

“You’re a good friend.”

“He’s more than my friend.”

“Oh.” Mica searched her face. “I see.”

“We better get some sleep.” She rolled onto her side, facing Mica.

“Still don’t trust me?”

“As much as I’d trust a half-starved wolf among a pack of sheep.”

He grinned. “I hardly think you a sheep, Dame Sun.”

Gritting her teeth, she tried to ignore him. It bristled her anger to think in addition to his raw good looks, there was something cute in his silly smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

At dawn, the three began the trek across the desert to Ademene. The city was known as the largest in the Kennas. Though Blaze had traveled there several times in the past, it was the one place Sun had never asked him about.

The nighttime chill soon faded beneath the sun, surrounding them in oppressive heat. She wondered how anyone enjoyed living in such a barren, uncomfortable place. The snowy winters of her homeland were preferable to this kingdom of sweltering days and freezing nights, without either the beauty of springtime flowers or glistening winter countryside.

“What’s this city like?” she asked. “Probably a pigpen.”

Mica laughed. “Not exactly. Ademene is the most beautiful city in the Kennas.”

“I’m sure.” Her voice dripped sarcasm.

“You will see for yourself.”

“Unfortunately.”

Mica sighed and glanced at her from beneath the shadow of his hood. "Can't you try enjoying life, Dame Sun?"

"There's nothing about this pit of a kingdom for me to enjoy."

Blaze glanced at Mica. "Don't waste your time. She could bend a ram's will."

"As stubborn as she is beautiful, eh?" Mica winked.

"As dangerous too," Blaze warned, probably noticing the fury in Sun's expression.

Mica's teasing ways grated on her nerves—mostly because part of her enjoyed the attention. Other than approaching her for a night of sex, few men dared risk her wrath. Those who didn't find her too tall for a lover at least had the good sense to fear her sword. Mica need not concern himself with any woman being too tall for him, and he had no fear of dying beneath her blade. Of course, he claimed to have been a general, and no man could achieve such a rank without admirable prowess and courage—even in the Kennas.

"How far is it?" she asked.

"We should reach it by tomorrow afternoon."

"There is more of your story yet to be heard," Blaze said to Mica. "How did a banished man become welcome again?"

"I offered my services to the exiled emperor and helped him take back power."

Sun shot him a taunting look. "You really were a traitor."

"Would you have preferred I continued spreading my father's evil?" He held her gaze, his expression calm though she sensed the conversation roused his emotions. "After the war ended, I gave up fighting under the guidance of the High Advisor."

"Strange advice from a military leader."

"The High Advisor is a spiritual leader. A Holy Man."

Sun raised an eyebrow. "And he counsels the king?"

"Perhaps that's best," Blaze said.

"There are times when physical power is needed and prayers will do nothing," Sun argued.

"The High Advisor prefers peaceful means, but he doesn't avoid confrontation. His voice is one of the strongest I've ever known, and believe me, Dame Sun, I've fought against and alongside the fiercest warriors in the Kennas."

Sun snorted with contempt and edged her horse away from Mica's.

"I understand the High Advisor is not only second in command to the emperor but the religious leader in Upper Kenna," Blaze said.

"That is true. He is the Grand Priest."

"Your religion interests me—"

"Sorry to interrupt, gentlemen," Sun pointed at a dust cloud in the distance.

"Sandstorm," Mica said. "Follow me."

He turned his mount sharply and kicked her to a gallop. Sun and Blaze followed, tearing across the desert until they reached the mouth of a tiny cave.

"This will delay us," Mica said. "But there's nothing we can do. It's far too dangerous to travel through a sandstorm."

"How long will it last?" Sun asked.

Mica shrugged. "Maybe moments, maybe hours."

"The internal beast cries for satiety." Blaze removed his saddlebags.

Sun smiled at her mentor. "To you it's always a good time for a meal. I don't know how you stay so skinny."

He raised an eyebrow. "Luck?"

"Probably all that fighting practice."

"Fighting?" Mica looked surprised. "I know you're a Knight, but I thought your green sash meant you didn't fight."

"Blaze is probably the best I've ever seen in hand-to-hand combat. The Green Sash Faction doesn't carry weapons, but they're highly trained in empty-handed fighting."

"Really?" Mica looked interested.

"Blaze is the Order's most coveted instructor, and he's trained many of the Dames as well."

"I take more pride in my healing skills." Blaze settled onto the ground, a chunk of bread in his hand.

"He's easily the best healer of all the Knights and Dames."

Mica smiled. "Must be nice to have the affection of such a woman, Sir Blaze."

"My daughter exaggerates my powers as much as she exaggerates her harshness."

"That's not true in either case," Sun argued. "Ask anyone about Blaze's skill and they'll tell you—"

"Your daughter?" Mica raised an eyebrow. "But I thought you and Dame Sun were lovers?"

Blaze choked on his bread. "Lovers. I should say not."

Sun burst out laughing. "Lovers? Me and Blaze? He found me after your father killed everyone in my village. If it hadn't been for him, I'd be dead. Blaze raised me."

"I see. He did well."

"That is not an exaggeration." Blaze cast Sun an affectionate look. "No blood father could be prouder."

Mica walked across the cave. Sun studied his tall, lean frame. The hair hanging down his back was dark and glossy. Once again, she repressed the urge to touch it. Another thing she longed to touch was his taut, perfectly formed bottom, prominent beneath his robe. Thinking about squeezing it made her pulse race out of control. Pressure built in her pussy and her nipples ached as she imagined Mica's chiseled lips tugging upon them. Shaking her head, she looked back at her food.

"Damn storm," Mica whispered.

"Maybe you shouldn't be so eager to get there," Sun said. "If things aren't as you left them, you might be an outlaw again."

Sighing deeply, he closed his eyes for longer than a blink. "I hope not, Dame Sun. I'm not sure I have another war left in me."

His words took her aback, mostly because she had the unfamiliar urge to offer him reassurance. Though he seemed like such a strong man and his sense of humor didn't speak of someone tired of life, his voice sounded weary.

"At such times, you'll find a reserve inside yourself," Blaze said.

Thank the Spirit for Blaze. He might be hard to understand, but his message was always right.

"I'm not sure about that, Sir." Mica sighed, folding his arms folded across his chest. He leaned a broad shoulder against the cave wall.

"If you're returning, then you have the strength to face whatever comes."

This time, Mica's smile looked sad. "Or maybe I'm just a nosy fool."

Such a comment invited insult, but Sun didn't have the heart to bait him. What the hell was happening to her? She should despise this man. Edging closer to Blaze, she ripped a chunk from his bread.

She had the worst feeling a greater adventure awaited her than the one she'd originally sought.

\* \* \* \* \*

Built on a vast oasis, Ademene was a magnificent display of white stone houses amidst lush green trees and flowers of every color imaginable. The palace's pointed roof rose above the highest trees, like a marble finger pointing to the sun.

"This city in the desert is a jewel amidst stones," Blaze said.

He, Sun and Mica stood at the top of a high dune overlooking the city.

"You mean this pigpen?" Mica winked in Sun's direction before kicking his horse onward.

As he approached the city wall, Mica's heart thudded against his ribs. If the banished man had come from Ademene, then Mica's fate would be the same. This time his survival would be doubtful. No man could be so lucky twice, since banishment almost always resulted in death.

Glancing over his shoulder, he noted the Knight and Dame flanking him looked as wary as he felt. Though Blaze sat calmly, his gaze swept every direction. One of Sun's hands rested over the sword at her hip. In spite of the gravity of the situation, Mica was again struck by her beauty, not just physical perfection, for some might consider her too large. Mica liked women with meat and muscle on their bones. They made heartier bed partners than the scrawny, delicate chits many men fawned over. Nothing felt better

than a strong, willing woman wrapping her satiny arms and legs around him and—

He chastised himself. Not only was he riding into possible danger, but such thoughts were forbidden to a man like him. He turned his attention away from Sun and back to the city walls.

Ademene had four entrances. One each on the north, south, east and west, all guarded by the emperor's finest warriors. At the southern gate one of the guards, a young man called Rune, raised his hand in greeting.

"Mica, I didn't expect to see you back so quickly. Not much trouble with the Bedouins?"

"Not as bad as it could have been." Mica smiled, relieved that everything in the city appeared unchanged. "I'll be joining them again soon. First I have business at the palace."

"The High Advisor is there if you're looking for him."

"I am."

"Who are your companions?"

"This is Sir Blaze and Dame Sun from the isle of Travelle." Mica gestured to his companions. "They're friends."

Rune nodded at Sun and Blaze. "Enjoy the city. You have a wonderful guide."

The guard motioned for the gates to open. Moments later, the three stepped onto one of the narrow streets paved with smooth tan and white stones that wove throughout the city. None of the refuse found in many cities of the Western Continent seemed to exist in Ademene.

"They have an underground sewage system," Blaze explained.

"One of the best," Mica added. "There are also bathhouses throughout the city. Magnificent ones at the palace. If we have the time, I'll show them to you."

"We have bathhouses in Femmeglen." Sun glanced over her shoulder at several carts set up on the side of the road, one filled with fresh eggs, the other with fruit. Women sold the goods to passersby while their children played on a patch of grass.

Ademene was not the filthy pit she'd imagined, but a fine city filled with interesting sights. The people appeared happy and prosperous. She couldn't imagine them gleefully slaughtering others.

Blaze and Dame Neila had often told her she should stop thinking of everyone in the Kennas as General Mica. Lately she was beginning to think even the general's son might have somehow eluded his father's evil.

She removed her hood. Though the air still felt warm, the shade of buildings and trees decreased the brutal desert heat.

Another wall surrounded the palace. Guards draped in pure white robes and carrying double swords stood ready to admit visitors. They greeted Mica by name and allowed his small group to pass. They stepped into a vast garden of exotic plants and flowers. A silver cage as high as a house and filled with pink and blue birds stood

amidst tall trees with feather-like leaves.

Mica nodded toward the birdcage. "A gift from the king of the Eastern Land. Have you ever visited the Eastern Land, Dame Sun?"

"No. My assignments have been north and west. Since the wars with Zaltana, few have been sent far east."

"If you have the chance to go there, I think you'd like it. There are some excellent fighting masters."

"Blaze learned many of his skills there."

Mica glanced at the Knight. "Combat?"

"And healing," Blaze added.

"It seems we have much to talk about, Sir."

"Undoubtedly," Blaze said, his expression one of keen interest. "One of the guards mentioned Bedouins. What have you to do with them?"

"I help them when I can."

Mica had spent the past several years off and on among the Bedouins. After he'd been banished, a group of them had cared for him. When he'd taken service under the High Advisor, he'd been sent to assist the tribes often.

"I heard they fight among themselves," Sun said. "What do you do there?"

"Whatever's needed."

She shot him an annoyed look. "Do you try to be elusive?"

He wondered if she'd ever gaze at him with anything but anger—not that he blamed her entirely. Traveling with the son of the man who had nearly destroyed her life must be difficult.

Stepping through the arched doorway leading to the great hall, Mica glanced around. Two servants worked in the vast hall of pink and white marble, one dusting a silver table in the far corner, the other lighting candles on a chandelier.

His gaze riveted to a tall, slender man who entered through the doorway across the room. The High Advisor's blue eyes gleamed in his dark-skinned face. He waved to Mica in greeting. Dressed in pale blue robes, a sapphire the size of a small fist resting at his throat, he hurried to meet his guests.

"Mica." The High Advisor embraced him. "Good to see you, though I admit it's sooner than expected. The last time you were gone so long I nearly sent a search party for you."

"I'm back for a disturbing reason. We found a man in the desert. He'd been banished."

The High Advisor's smile faded. "Dead?"

Mica nodded. "I thought banishment was illegal here. If someone was to be executed—"



"You should know better. Since the war ended, no one has been banished. You helped make that change."

"I was afraid something might have happened to the emperor again."

"The emperor is safe and well. If anyone was banished, it didn't happen in Ademene. Are you sure the Bedouins weren't somehow involved?"

Mica shook his head. "They've been at peace for months. If there were any uprisings, I'd have heard."

The High Advisor's smooth brow furrowed. "Perhaps rebel groups are forming again, or the victim might have been banished by another kingdom."

"And gotten so far south?"

"It's unlikely. Still, we have to be sure, which is why you came, is it not?"

"I think we should exhaust every possibility," Mica said.

"The emperor is in a meeting now, but first thing in the morning, I'll ask him to send soldiers to search the surrounding area."

"Thank you." Mica bowed his head then glanced at his companions. "I'm sorry. High Advisor Kado, this is Dame Sun and Sir Blaze. They helped me bury the banished one."

"After he sheltered us through night and storm," Blaze said.

Kado offered a pleasant smile. "Welcome."

Sun stared at the High Advisor and found herself liking him. His large blue eyes were gentle and strong, reminding her of Blaze. He stood about Sun's height and wore his black, waist-length hair in a thick braid. Sun could scarcely keep her gaze from the enormous jewel at his throat.

"Please enjoy the palace while you're here," Kado said.

"This is Sun's first time in Ademene." Mica grinned at Sun who resisted the urge to slap him. "I want to make sure she sees all the beauty it has to offer."

"Be sure she visits Marta's tavern. The best food in the city." Kado glanced at Blaze. "You've visited the Kennas before?"

"Several times. There's much to learn. Akin to the shining waters of a celestial shore."

Mica and Kado glanced at him in question.

Smiling slightly, Blaze added, "A magnificent land."

"I wish you could have come here under better circumstances, but we will find out where the banishment originated and why. Please excuse me. I have some business to attend." Kado turned to Mica. "It is good to have you back. You have been well?"

"Yes."

Sun thought she saw a hint of concern on Kado's face as he said, "Was that an honest reply?"

"It was."

Was it her imagination, or had a look of irritation passed over Mica's calm face?

"You'll join us for ritual this evening?"

"I would be honored."

Kado left the hall and Mica turned back to his guests. "First I'll find rooms for you then we can eat and visit the bathhouse."

"What ritual was he referring to?" Sun asked.

"Ritual prayer. It's routine for Priests and Messengers of the Goddess. I'm a Priest in Waiting, Dame Sun."

Mica and Blaze walked toward the door, but Sun stood, stunned and rooted, in her place.

*Priest in Waiting.* This gorgeous hunk of man flesh with a bulge the size of a melon in his pants was going to be a *Holy Man*.

"Dame Sun?" Mica glanced at her over his shoulder.

"Coming," she muttered.

This was turning out to be the strangest series of events in her life. She should have listened to Dame Neila and stayed out of the Kennas.

\* \* \* \* \*

After escorting Sun and Blaze to rooms in the palace's east wing, Mica visited the Priests' quarters where many of the Priests, Messengers and students lived. When in Ademene, he shared a chamber with a Messenger called Zareb. He knocked on the door.

"Come in."

Mica stepped inside, glancing at Zareb who looked up from where he knelt in prayer.

"Wasn't sure I'd find you here," Mica said. "Last I heard you were somewhere in the Eastern Land."

Zareb finished his prayer before rising to greet Mica with a clap on the shoulder. The Messenger was one of the few men in Ademene tall enough to meet Mica eye to eye. "Just got back yesterday. You look well. Have you been?"

"Yes." In truth, he felt better than he had in months. The past few years had been difficult, the previous year being the worst, but life had been pleasant of late.

"How goes it with the Bedouins?" Zareb asked.

"Very well, or so I thought. I found the corpse of a banished man yesterday. Kado said no one here knows anything about it, therefore I'm guessing rebels are somewhere in the desert."

Zareb's brow furrowed. "Has the emperor sent a search party?"

"He will in the morning."

"But I guess you'll do some investigating yourself as well. I'll help you."

"I could use it." Mica dropped his travel bag on his cot and tugged out a loincloth.

"Bathhouse, eh?" Zareb said. "That's the only good thing about this place."

Mica grinned. "The only?"

"The food's good too but being cooped up in these chambers..."

"It's the life of a Holy Man. You've been here almost all your life."

Zareb curled his lip. "And been complaining about the chambers for just as long."

"Complaints, complaints. No wonder you chose to be a Messenger instead of a Priest."

"Messengers work just as hard, but I guess *hard* is the key word when it comes to being a Messenger." Zareb winked. "You still plan on going through with it?"

"In two months, I become a Priest. I'm more than ready, Zareb. If I'd followed the way of the Goddess sooner, I wouldn't have such guilt now."

"You can still follow the Goddess even if you don't have your—"

"I'm not changing my mind."

"I still think you're crazy. It's an old, brutal custom. Turning men into—"

"Will you lower your voice? The Priests might hear you," Mica snapped. "Each man has his own reason for becoming a Priest, just as Messengers have their reasons."

"Guilt is not a good enough reason to sacrifice yourself."

"Yes it is, and it's not just guilt. You've never been anything but a Holy Man, so how can you question me?"

"I'm not questioning your need to serve, but the initiation to Priesthood has nothing to do with helping people and promoting peace. In fact, I've always thought the initiation was a contradiction to the very essence of the Goddess' teachings."

"If you were meant to be a Priest, you'd understand." Mica undressed and pulled on the loincloth, glancing at his cock and balls and feeling a bit of longing. Most of his old strength had returned these past months, but he thought his urge for women had died—until meeting a certain tall, golden warrior. Mica shrugged on a robe and headed for the door. "I have guests waiting to visit the bathhouse."

"Guests?"

"A Knight and a Dame. Met them in the desert."

"Now *they* live in complete contradiction. Warriors and healers in one. I hear Dames are as fierce as men on the battlefield."

"If Dame Sun is any indication of her Order's skill then most men wouldn't stand a chance against them."

Zareb folded his arms across his chest and narrowed his eyes at Mica. "That's an odd look on your face when you mention her."

"You're seeing things that aren't there, Zareb."

“What does she look like?”

Mica knew Zareb was fishing for any sign of interest. He wouldn't give him the satisfaction of providing another reason to point why he shouldn't become a Priest. Instead of admitting Sun was beautiful enough to be a goddess herself, he shrugged and said, “She's tall.”

“And?”

“And I have to go. Good to see you again, Zareb. I think.”

“*Think* is the key word.” Zareb called as Mica closed the door. “*Think* about what you're going to do before you make a mistake.”

The last thing Mica needed was more lecturing. It had taken him years of service and heavy thought to form his decision regarding Priesthood. Until yesterday, he'd been absolutely positive he was making the right choice—then he'd met Dame Sun. Since then, his thoughts had been everything but religious. Now he was escorting her to the bathhouse for more reasons than simple hospitality. The idea of seeing her in swimming clothes seemed to inspire complete recovery from the ravaging effects of the past few years.

He walked down the staircase, passed through the great hall, and up another flight of steps to the guest chambers. Sun and Blaze awaited him in the hallway, both draped in robes supplied by palace servants. Sun's was black, a startling contrast to the thick, blonde hair hanging loose down her back. Imagining her body beneath the robe, Mica felt his pulse leap.

“How was your meal?” he asked.

“Excellent,” Blaze replied.

Sun's gaze held Mica's. “Where's this bathhouse? Outside the palace?”

“No. Under it.”

“A spring,” Blaze said.

“Yes. The water's warm and very pleasant.” Mica led them to another dim, narrow staircase at the end of the hallway. “There are several bathing rooms, one for male servants, one for female, one for the Priests and private baths for the emperor and the High Advisor. Kado has given us permission to use his—unless Dame Sun would prefer the company of the other women?”

“I'm a soldier and don't require special treatment or segregation.”

Blaze raised an eyebrow in her direction. “I would say using the great Holy Man's bath is special.”

“Very true, Sir Blaze.” Mica smiled.

Near the end of the steep staircase, the air grew warm. At the bottom of the steps moisture beaded the tile walls and ceiling. Straw and leather mats kept their boots from slipping on the marble floor. Torches lit their way down the hall which was randomly scattered with plants in colorful pots. The tiles on the wall created pictures of the Goddess in many forms. Tall, slender, fat, short, redheaded, blonde, raven-haired,

large-breasted and small. In some she was the mother, in others an old woman. Always she wore an expression of compassion—even in her fiercest poses.

Mica's father and his followers had hated the Goddess and tried to crush the people's belief in Her, but Her ways were rooted deep in the Kennas.

"These works are lovely." Sun paused in front of a picture of the Goddess astride a blood bay mare.

"Most were done by an old Priest, now long dead. This palace is over a thousand years old, Dame Sun."

## Chapter Three

They continued down the hall. Giggling and splashing sounded from the bathhouse used by female servants. Glancing into the Priests' bathing chamber, Mica noticed several of his friends enjoying the pool. Ahead, the hall divided. Mica guided his guests to the left. Taking a torch from the wall, he led them through an open door to a dark chamber. He lit torches around the room and at each corner of a square pool. Potted trees scattered randomly throughout the room. Several feet from the pool, the marble floor rose to a slightly higher level, accommodating a black and silver trunk, a tiny wooden table and four large satin pillows serving as chairs. A hearth only large enough for the black pot hanging over it stood beside the trunk.

"How do you release the smoke?" Blaze nodded toward the hearth.

"Blaze has proven smoke to be bad for breathing. He tries to spread his message to villages everywhere, but not everyone believes him."

"Change can be difficult to bring about," Mica said. "However, we are not a backward land. Our houses and the palace have pipelines for smoke to escape. Look." The three walked to the hearth where Mica knelt, sticking his entire arm up a hole in the wall above the hearth. "It goes all the way to a chute on the first level of the palace. When the palace was built, there were no pipelines or vents."

"Interesting engineering. I have a friend, Colt, who would love to study this."

"He should visit here someday. I would arrange for him to meet our architects."

"We'll be sure to tell him." Sun stared at the pool. "Do you mind if I jump in? I love swimming."

"So do I." Mica stood. "I'm sure you'll find—" His voice faded and he stared at Sun.

She slipped off her robe and tossed it aside, revealing a leather shirt that left her arms and stomach bare and a pair of trousers cut off at mid-thigh. Firm, full breasts strained against the leather, a gold amulet dangling between them. Her abdomen was flat and sleek, and her long, tanned legs curved with muscle. Mica's cock swelled beneath his robe. He resisted the urge to adjust the annoying erection.

"Brightest Star, what sort of cover is that?" Blaze demanded.

"Do you want me to go swimming in full armor?" She glanced at the men over her shoulder before dropping into the water. Surfacing, she shoved locks of wet hair from her face. "Come on in. The water's great."

Mica tried swallowing, but his mouth was dry. Lust enveloped him like an inferno. He must have been crazy to take her bathing. Was he trying to tempt himself away from the Priesthood? No. She was perfectly safe. She hated the sight of him. No matter how beautiful he found her, all he could do was dream.

Blaze dropped his robe as well, leaving his body bare except for a loincloth. His tall body was incredibly lean, so much that every hard, supple muscle and bone shone beneath his flesh. In spite of his gentle ways, this man was all warrior. He reminded Mica of a bamboo lash, thin yet made to inflict pain when necessary.

Sun laughed, pointing at her mentor. "And you say I'm practically naked. If you come in this pool, the fish might mistake you for a water snake."

"Laugh not, brat." Blaze half smiled. "This water snake showed you how to bite in combat."

"That's true enough." Sun's blue eyes gleamed. "Can you believe a skinny thing like him once kicked the stuffing out of ten armed men at once?"

"I've learned not to judge by appearances." Mica shrugged off his robe, pleased to see the Dame's gaze sweep him from head to foot.

Sun tried to keep her expression impassive when Mica's robe fell to his feet, revealing the most exquisite male body she'd ever seen. This was no small praise from a woman who'd grown up surrounded by Knights of the Ruby Order, men who spent their lives perfecting their physiques through grueling training sessions.

Sculpted muscles played sensuously beneath Mica's smooth, dark skin. Naked except for a loincloth, he walked toward the pool. His legs were incredibly long and well shaped. Curling black hair dusted the hard curves of his thighs and calves. A flat abdomen trailed up to a broad chest and powerful shoulders that Sun imagined sinking her fingers into. Like the rest of his body, his biceps and forearms were well developed, though not too bulky.

The man personified strength and grace. Sun's gaze riveted to his cock pressed against the loose fabric, creating almost a tent of passion.

When Mica's gaze met hers, she detected tenseness in his expression before he waded into the pool, hiding his telltale erection. In the water, his hair lashed behind him like a demon's black tail. With a few long strokes, he was directly in front of Sun, so close she saw droplets of water clinging to his thick lashes.

"Do you like the bathhouse?"

"What's not to like?" Sun swam away, not trusting herself to keep her hands off him. Her reaction to this man infuriated her. He was the last person on earth she wanted to find attractive, yet she couldn't seem to help herself. Just looking at him made her tingle. If he ever touched her, she'd probably come on contact.

"There's much for you to see in Ademene. I wish I could stay longer and show it all to you myself, but tomorrow I must join in the search for the rebels."

"You really think there are people still loyal to your father's ways?"

"I know some believed in his ideas of conquering. We fear they will grow strong enough to plan another attack against Ademene. Whoever rules the city has power over all of Upper Kenna. If that power falls into the wrong hands, then Lower Kenna is also

in danger. We are basically a peaceful people, but there are those who would like to see violence done.”

“Better to find them before more lives are taken,” Blaze agreed.

“Do such uprisings happen often?” Sun asked.

Mica shook his head. “We’ve had few since the emperor returned to power. Things are as they should be.”

Sun stared hard at the Priest in Waiting, baffled by his complexity. A one-time general, a Holy Man and a joker, he was so serious about his beliefs that he’d supposedly risked his life to save others. Sun still refused to believe any child of the man who’d destroyed her village could be anything but evil.

“Why did you go against your father?” she asked

“Because his order to kill thousands of innocent people made no sense. Because I had enough death on my soul. After so many wars, Dame Sun, I saw myself going nowhere.” Mica’s eyes narrowed slightly, a look of frustration crossing his face. “Many were killed so he and the pig he called emperor could live in luxury while commoners starved and I fought myself bloody year after year.”

“I still can’t understand how you reasoned that for yourself after being raised by him,” Sun stated, rebelling against the idea that this man had truly reformed.

“My mother raised me until he took me away and stuck me in his damn army. Everything was to benefit him. I scarcely saw his face until I was old enough to pick up a sword.”

“Where’s your mother now?” Sun asked.

“She died in exile after he took me from her.”

Once again she resisted the urge to offer him words of consolation. Yet again Blaze saved her.

“I’m sorry for your loss, but she watches over you,” the Knight said. “She stands behind you now, floating on water. Raven hair and eyes like Mirrored Rock’s.”

“You can’t really speak with the dead.”

“Zako. A pig.” Blaze stared past Mica.

Pale, Mica spun, searching, then turned back to Blaze. “Go on.”

“Zako’s blood on your father’s hands. He laughs.”

Mica wrinkled his nose. “Zako laughs?”

“No. Your father. He stands by the pool’s edge.”

“Why are you doing this? This can’t be true.”

“Your father learned little in his life. He walks alone in death waiting to be reborn.”

“Reborn,” Sun snarled. “The Spirit wouldn’t be so cruel to the rest of us.”

“We each have lessons to learn, daughter.” Blaze shook his head as if clearing it of images then focused on Mica. “I didn’t intend to cause pain, but I see what they show me.”



"Who the hell is Zako?" Sun demanded.

"A pet. A pig, given to me by my uncle on my mother's side. My father slaughtered him and forced me to eat him."

Sun felt a little sick.

"Deeper damnations had been conjured by the enforcer of terror," Blaze murmured softly, his expression sympathetic. "That was mild for him, was it not?"

The Knight's handling of people never ceased to amaze Sun.

"What he did to me was nothing compared to what he did to some others." Mica glanced at Sun. "How can I complain after what he did to you?"

"I said before I don't need your lousy sympathy."

"Your mother worries for you still," Blaze said. Before he could continue, Mica shook his head, his expression fierce. A sad smile touched the Knight's lips. "Forgive me. I lose myself in the spirit world."

"It must be difficult for you. You cope with seeing the dead far better than I would. Can you talk back to them?"

Blaze looked almost pained. "Better not to try. They never listen, but they love to talk. So I hear and I tell. Sometimes I almost tell too much."

Mica smiled. "Let's finish our swim, then I'll make tea."

The High Advisor stepped into the chamber. "Forgive the intrusion, but Sir Blaze and I spoke earlier in the hallway about the sculptor who created several statues in the guest rooms. He's here now, and I thought you might like to speak with him."

"Very much." Blaze hurried out of the water and slipped on his robe.

The Advisor glanced at Sun. "Dame, would you like to join us?"

"I don't mean to sound rude, but I'd rather stay here and swim for a while."

"Please enjoy yourself." Kado nodded, escorting Blaze out of the chamber.

Turning to Mica, Sun realized she had just made a terrible mistake. Now she was alone with the Holy Man. Alone, half-naked, and floating in a pool of warm, soothing water.

"Would you care for tea, Dame Sun?"

She spun, her heart pounding. Mica stood so close that his chest grazed her breasts. Heat even greater than the hot spring enveloped her. By their own accord, her nipples hardened beneath her wet vest, the buds elongating. Sun was no stranger to men, but the feelings inside her were completely foreign. Her clit tingled and her pussy ached. A quiver of desire ripped through her.

Concerned that Mica would notice her attraction, she turned away. "Why not?"

"Good. I'll prepare it. You continue swimming."

Mica waded to the edge of the pool and hoisted himself out, providing her with a full view of his broad back. Dozens of old scars streaked the flesh, creating several valleys in the hard muscles. Remembering the flogged body in the desert, she guessed

the scars were reminders of his banishment. For the first time her hatred of Mica truly waned. She had blamed him for what his father had done to her village but the elder general had treated his son with the same contempt. Mica had suffered at the maniac's hands. In spite of his violent upbringing he tried to change his own ways. Sun didn't think he'd succeed. He was damned by his bloodlines but she had to give him high marks for effort.

Her gaze dropped to his sculpted buttocks and thighs. Muscles rippling, he walked to the tiny hearth and lit a fire beneath the pot. From the trunk, he removed an onyx tea set and a pouch of tea leaves then arranged them on the table. When the water boiled, he ladled it into the cups now filled with leaves and set them aside to steep.

Sun pushed herself out of the water and wrung out her wet hair. She joined him on the platform.

"Try this." Mica withdrew a jar from the trunk and removed the lid. He held it out to her.

"What is it?" She glanced at the tan, creamy substance inside and sniffed it, enjoying the aroma of flowers and almonds. "Umm."

"It's good for the skin after bathing." Dipping his fingers inside, he rubbed some on his arm. "Like this."

Sun shrugged. "Why not?"

She scooped out some of the cream and massaged it into her arms. The sensation was pleasant and the scent divine. Taking more, she sat, smoothing it onto her legs. Mica's gaze focused on her thighs. He turned away, but not before she noticed the enormous bulge in his loincloth had grown so the leather stretched almost to bursting. Sun contemplated running him through with her sword. Even better, she wanted him to run *her* through with *his* sword.

*You should be ashamed, Sun. Keep a little self respect. This man's father destroyed your life.*

Mica pulled his robe over his head, once again cloaking his exquisite body as well as the evidence of his lust. Sun could at least take some comfort in knowing he found her attractive as well. Not that it would get him anywhere.

Mica knelt on one of the pillows near Sun and silently chastised himself.

*Damn, why did I have to give her the stupid cream?*

Trying not to stare as she rubbed the scented mixture on her gorgeous, rounded thighs, he imagined his hands running along her smooth flesh and fantasized about how soft and warm it must feel. His erection throbbed, but he resisted the urge to adjust it, or better yet wrap his fist around it and relieve some of the torturous sexual tension. Drawing a deep breath, he forced himself into submission and tried to ignore his racing pulse.

*Stop it, Mica.*

But why should he stop? It had been a long time since he'd been overcome by

sexual urges. He'd begun to wonder if he'd ever feel like a man again.

The hint of a blush in her cheeks when he'd stood by her in the pool and the way her nipples turned to hard pebbles revealed her attraction to him.

*You're not supposed to think about such things. The less you desire, the better. You're to be a Priest. Romantic relations with a woman will have absolutely no place in your life.*

"I have something similar." Sun interrupted his thoughts.

He raised an eyebrow in question.

She reached for her leather bag which she'd left beside her robe and tugged out a jar containing a greenish lotion. She handed it to him. "I like how yours smells better."

Mica sniffed the jar's contents. "Mint?"

"I have others too. Some are good for muscle soreness."

"We should discuss ingredients. I know Knights and Dames are expert healers."

Raising an eyebrow, Sun asked, "You have an interest in the healing arts?"

"I learned some on the battlefield, but I've also had to train with some of the Priests who are healers, since part of my duty is to lend aid among the Bedouins. We could talk about remedies sometime."

A look of interest crossed Sun's face before she took back her jar of mint cream and placed it in her bag. "You'd learn more from Blaze. He's the best healer in the Ruby Order."

"You were his student?"

"Yes."

"Then you must know almost as much."

"I know the basics." Sun sat across the table from Mica. "My expertise is fighting."

"Your weapon of choice?" Mica took a sip of tea, focusing on her full, pink lips. She had such a lovely mouth. It looked soft and kissable.

"Short sword, but I'm just as comfortable with daggers and staves. I'm a decent archer too."

"Interesting."

"What's your preference, or have you given up fighting entirely now that you're a Priest?" Sun asked, her fingers caressing the teacup.

"I'm still allowed to defend myself, if I like."

"Do you?"

Smiling slightly, he said, "I try to avoid such situations."

"But if you were forced?"

"I'm best at hand-to-hand, though I'm a decent swordsman too." He wondered if she caught his slightly teasing tone as he tossed her own words back at her. "My favorite weapon is the staff, however."

Sun moistened her lips, her gaze dropping to his crotch. Mica nearly laughed aloud.

She had a wild side, that was for sure.

"You don't fool me, you know." She placed the cup on the table, her gaze fixed on his. "No matter how you play the part of a Holy Man, you still have *his* blood in your veins."

"I'm my own man, Dame Sun." Mica refused to allow his anger to surface. He'd spent too many years trying to redeem himself to allow her or anyone else to convince him it was all for naught. "He no longer commands me. You, however, seem unable to grow beyond your past."

Sun stood and balled her fists. "If I wasn't a guest here, I'd belt that putrid expression off your ugly face."

"Ugly again. I suppose most people look ugly to one so beautiful."

Her teeth visibly clenched, Sun yanked her robe over her head, picked up her bag and stalked toward the door.

Mica caught up to her and grasped her arm. She spun, knocking his hand away. "Touch me again and I'll break your wrist."

"It might not be a good idea to try it," he warned.

"You're pushing the wrong woman."

"I tried being nice, so maybe you need to be pushed instead. Violence seems to be the only thing you understand."

"Just a lesson your father taught me," she said bitterly.

"I can't change what he did."

"Don't tell me you weren't just like him. You said you were a general under his command. How many deaths are on your soul, Mica? No matter what you do, you'll never make up for your past. You know that, don't you?"

Mica realized the truth of her words but refused to show how they affected him. "No, I can't change the past, but it doesn't mean I need to continue with a destructive future. You came here to kill a man, Dame Sun, and you're taking it out on me because he's already dead. Do you want to dig up his body and scatter his bones to the desert? Will it make you feel better?"

"Maybe."

"It won't bring back your village."

A muscle twitched in her cheek before she continued down the hall.

"Dame Sun." He strode alongside her. "I understand your anger and your pain, but I also see you've chosen a life of service when you could have allowed evil to destroy you instead. You might not have killed my father but you defeated him a long time ago. Your actions as a Dame define who you are, just as his evil deeds defined him. No one mourns his death. No one remembers him with affection or pride, as one day you will be remembered."

Sun stopped, swallowing hard and glaring at Mica who blocked her path. "Why are

you saying this?"

"Because it's the truth."

"I shouldn't have bothered coming here. It was a waste of my time." She shook her head, anger and confusion battling inside her.

"Then make it not a waste. Let me show you the city. You'll like it."

Sun touched a hand to her temple. "You are unbelievable. What does it take to insult you?"

"I dare you to find a sword sharp enough to pierce my hide. Would you like to finish this argument over dinner?"

"You are the most annoying man I've ever met."

"I can't let you leave the city without tasting the food at Marta's tavern."

She lifted her chin. "Fine. We should find Blaze. He'll want to come too."

"I'll look for him. Meet me in the great hall in half an hour."

Sun raised her eyes to the ceiling and shook her head. "The food better be good enough for me to suffer through the company."

Mica laughed. "I suppose it would be too much for the Goddess to have given you grace as well as beauty."

"Spoken by a man who has neither." Sun shoved by him. "Out of my way."

Mica stepped aside, watching her go. Why was he bothering? He couldn't be so lustful that he'd put up with such a horrible attitude. A goat's shitting ass was preferable to this woman's manner, but he *liked* her. She had spirit, and Mica sensed she could be as loyal and kind as she was hateful. He'd never known anyone quite like her, and she intrigued him.

Mica realized her bitterness was justified and he might never reach her, but he was willing to try.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sun stalked to her room, fuming. Never had she met a more infuriating man than Mica. What enraged her most was that the longer she was with him, the better she liked him.

While she still wanted revenge, the idea of killing him no longer appealed to her. She prayed her change of heart wasn't due to his handsome face and body that made her wet just looking at it. No. She would not trade her vengeance for a tumble in the hay with this monster-in-disguise.

*Wait.*

Sun's anger faded to something completely uncharacteristic of her—cold calculation. There were worse things than death, especially to a man seeking redemption. His priestly ambitions demanded he forsake pleasures—in particular carnal ones. Sun had taken similar vows, yet she'd already broken them numerous

times, searching for the sexual joy that had been denied her when those Kennian pigs ruined her innocence as well as her life. She'd learned the art of using her sexuality as a weapon—one that could be aimed directly at Mica's heart, if he truly had one. Luring him into bed would be easy. The way he looked at her indicated that he was teetering on the edge of denying his religion for sexual pleasures. He might think he was strong enough to change, but Sun would prove otherwise. Then she could sail away, laughing, because no man could reach her soul, particularly Mica of Ademene.

In her room, she dressed in fresh trousers and her leather vest. Rather than braiding her hair, she left the long, honey-blond tresses loose. Glancing at herself in the mirror, she thought she looked pretty good.

Downstairs in the great hall, she found the Knight and Priest in Waiting admiring a picture in colored tile on one vast wall.

Blaze's back was to her, but Mica's gaze fixed on hers.

He smiled and said, "It seems you and I will be going to Marta's tavern alone."

"What?" Sun glanced at Blaze who shrugged, his blue eyes wide.

"I'm tired, Brightest Star. I've an appointment with my bed. When I was younger perhaps I could play all night, but—"

"You're not that old. If you don't go, I don't go."

"But I sent word to Marta already. She's preparing her finest meal," Mica said.

"Well I'm sorry for Marta."

"Brightest Star, rudeness doesn't become you."

"So you've told me for years." Sun's pulse raced. What a fool she was. If she planned to seduce Mica, what better way to do it than an evening entirely alone with him? She forced a smile and took a step closer to the Priest in Waiting. "Blaze is right. Forgive my rudeness. I am very much looking forward to seeing the city with you."

Blaze's jaw dropped but no words came out. Mica raised a sleek, dark eyebrow. "Dame Sun?"

"You feel well?" Blaze touched a hand to Sun's forehead. She stepped back and cast him an irritated look, which he ignored.

"I *can* be nice, you know." She took Mica's arm. Her nipples tingled at the sensation of his hard biceps beneath her palm.

Mica tossed her a toothy, adorable grin that she wanted to hate. "I'm sure you can, Dame Sun."

"Enjoy the food," Blaze murmured, still looking bewildered at her sudden change of manner. He placed a hand on Mica's shoulder. "Luck to you."

"Thank you."

"What do you mean luck?" Sun demanded, but Blaze merely walked out of the hall, talking to himself, or more likely the spirits.

"Unusual man," Mica said, "but a good one, I think."

“There is no better man than Blaze. I don’t think he has a vicious bone in his body.”

“It must be nice to have retained such purity when the world can be so brutal.” Mica looked thoughtful. Even Sun remained silent, considering the truth of his words.

Blaze’s life hadn’t been easy. As a child, his family had thought him insane and kept him hidden away with madmen. Sir Mahir, leader of the Ruby Order, had stumbled upon Blaze by chance and convinced his family to allow the boy to live with the Ruby Order. After years of careful work, Blaze had learned to express himself and convey what he saw of the spirit world. Since then, he’d been devoted to the Order, though he disliked killing in battle, as Knights and Dames were often forced to do. His love of peace had given birth to the Green Sash Faction—healers and weaponless warriors. Sun knew she could never live up to Blaze’s moral character. Her temper was far too quick.

“Shall we go, Dame Sun?” Mica extended his arm toward the double doors leading out of the palace.

Sun shrugged and left the great hall, Mica close behind her.

## **Chapter Four**

The dark, narrow streets were rather unsettling, so different from the open fields of home, and Sun found herself on the alert as they walked down twisting alleyways. The throb of drums and the sweet music of flutes drifted from behind closed doors and through windows. Glancing to her left, Sun noticed two young girls on a doorstep painting each other's faces. A dog picked through scraps outside an inn and through the window, Sun watched men and women laughing and drinking.

"The Well of the Goddess." Mica pointed to a well of pink and tan rocks in the center of four streets. "It's the oldest well in the city. And there, the emperor's coach builder's shop."

Sun stared at the rows of coaches standing in front of a long, narrow building. Mica continued down the street, Sun close behind. The sound of soft chanting echoed around them, growing louder as they neared a temple. Again Sun glanced in a half-open window but this time she stopped, fascinated by what she saw. Mica joined her. Everything in this city seemed more colorful than in her homeland. Several people dressed in blue, green and lavender robes danced around a low wooden table in the middle of the tile floor. The chanting and dancing increased in speed until the robes were a swirl of color then the dancers stopped and knelt. A tall figure dressed in white robes stood by the table. A slender figure joined him, carrying a small, round table covered with white silk. It was then Sun noticed iron shackles on each corner of the larger table. Chanting resumed as five more figures, four dressed in red leading one in white, ascended a staircase and approached the table. The figure in white stopped while the others undressed him. Beneath the robes he was naked, except for a cloth tied loosely around his waist.

In spite of the half-naked man's stoic expression his hands trembled at his sides. He lay on the table while the four red-robed figures locked his wrists and ankles into the shackles. The chanting was almost deafening now and Sun finally understood the reason for the noise. The silk was lifted from the small table, revealing an array of gleaming silver instruments similar to the ones Knights and Dames used while stitching wounds or performing surgery. Sun almost dove through the window when the tallest figure chose a blade and approached the man who was tied down.

Before Sun could lunge inside to prevent the attack Mica grasped her arms.

She struggled. "They're going to kill him."

"No. It's a sacred ritual. You cannot interfere."

"But—"

But it was too late. Sun detected the sound of agonized screaming above the chanting. She stared in horror, watching the robed figures completing the castration.



“Are they insane? Let me go.” Her teeth clenched, she tugged hard against his hold.

Mica’s grip loosened. He swallowed hard, seemingly unable to look away from the spectacle inside. “They’re not insane, Dame Sun. He’s just endured the initiation. He’s now a Priest.”

Stunned, she couldn’t speak for several seconds. Finally she asked, “What?”

Mica tugged her away from the temple. “That was not meant for our eyes. Such a ritual is private.”

“What kind of religion demands that a man be mutilated?” Of all the places she’d traveled, she had never known any religion to demand such a horrible act.

“No one demands. He volunteers to give up part of himself to become more like the Goddess.”

“By having his balls cut off? What kind of a sick, barbaric—”

“Sick and barbaric is when children used to be recruited and made into eunuchs without choice,” Mica explained patiently. “Now the religion states a man must be fully grown and wish to offer such an important part of himself to the Goddess.”

Sun’s eyes widened. “You’re a Priest in Waiting. You’re going to allow yourself to be castrated?”

Mica drew a deep breath. “It is my decision.”

“You *are* crazy.” Sun tossed up her hands.

“Shall we go, Dame Sun? Or has this business affected your appetite?”

“I’m accustomed to such things.” She held his gaze. “Except, of course, the people I’ve ministered to haven’t willingly harmed themselves. This is absolute madness.”

“It’s an offering to our Goddess.”

Sun shook her head, her gut twisted with fury and disgust. No man who looked at her like he did could possibly want to lose his virility.

Casting a look over her shoulder at the temple, Sun followed Mica down the street. After several turns they approached the door of a tall, narrow building. The scent of spices and incense wafted through the dozens of windows riddling the white walls. Strains of flute and drum music drifted from inside. Sun tilted her head upward, noting several people seated around tables on the rooftop.

Mica pointed to symbols painted in black just above the doorway. “House of Marta.”

Sun followed him inside. Low tables, a lantern in the middle of each, filled the room. People sat on pillows around the tables, enjoying a variety of foods—thick, golden slices of bread, soup, fruit, goat cheese, chicken and nuts.

To Sun’s right a narrow staircase wound its way to the upper floors. An arched entrance across the room led to the kitchen where Sun noticed men and women chopping, stirring and cooking while servants carried orders in and out.

“Mica,” called a cheerful voice. A robust woman flounced down the steps, a

wooden tray dangling from her hand. Her thick black and gray hair hung in a braid over one shoulder. A flowing dress of red silk covered her voluptuous curves. Fine lines around her eyes and mouth were the only sign of aging in her otherwise youthful face. She smiled, glancing from Mica to Sun. "This must be the Dame from across the sea. A pleasure." She reached for Sun's hand and pumped it with enthusiasm. "How do you like our city?"

"It's beautiful," Sun admitted.

"For a pigpen." Mica's blue eyes glistened.

The woman cocked an eyebrow in his direction before grasping his shoulders and dragging him toward the steps where she could better reach his face. She patted his cheek with her palm and planted a smacking kiss on his mouth. "Don't be such a tease, Mica. After all, this young woman hardly knows you."

Sun folded her arms across her chest. "Oh, I think I know him well enough."

"Sun is not easily shocked or offended, Marta." He winked at Sun who ignored him.

She said to her hostess, "I should thank you for arranging dinner for us."

"It was my pleasure. Besides, it has been a long time since Mica has eaten here. Off in the desert again, were you?"

"Where else?"

"Not working too hard I hope. You look well enough I suppose. A little skinny though."

Mica turned to Sun. "And did I tell you I had no mother? Marta took over where mine left off. As if I need mothering at my age."

"Everyone needs mothering once in a while, isn't that right, Sun?"

"Yes. I've missed my own greatly."

Marta took her hand and guided her up the stairs. "Now you can say you have one in Ademene. Come. We'll get you seated and bring the food my cook has been preparing. You like desert fruit?"

"I've never eaten it."

"You'll enjoy it," Marta said. "Tell me about your Order. I know little about the Dames but your life interests me."

"It's exciting, that's for sure." Sun smiled, taking an instant liking to Marta.

"Have you really fought off men in battle?"

"Often."

Marta slapped a hand to her thigh. "I love hearing of such things. You're the first warrior woman I've ever known."

"Dames are healers too," Mica called from behind.

"Yes I know but I want to hear about the weapons and pummeling men senseless." A wild expression lit Marta's eyes. "Later she can talk about all the lives she's saved."

Sun actually blushed at the attention.

"Mica has a great interest in healing," Marta explained. "Fighting is nothing to him. He was a combat general. Seen and done it all so he can't understand my fascination with fighting."

"Fighting brings nothing but pain as I've told you," Mica said.

Marta glanced over her shoulder at him. "I understand your abhorrence of it and I know you don't like speaking about your past, which is why I don't bring it up."

"Was he that bad?" Sun asked.

Marta's smile faded. "I'll leave Mica's past for him to discuss but anything you'd like to know about the local cuisine, I'll provide all the details."

"It's a deal." Sun tried to sound cheerful in spite of her curiosity. She knew Mica had a dark side. According to Marta it was so bad he didn't even want to speak of it.

Marta opened a wooden door at the top of the stairs and they stepped onto the roof. Stars glistened in the dark sky. From where Sun stood, she saw the rooftops all over Ademene. In the distance the palace rose like a gleaming white mountain in the moonlight. Until she'd arrived in the Kennas, Sun had never seen so many white buildings before. She was accustomed to the brown and gray structures of her homeland.

"A beautiful view, isn't it?" Marta glanced around in wonder though Sun knew she must have stood on the rooftop thousands of times.

"It is."

Only two of the seven tables were occupied. Marta brought them to the most secluded one behind a tall potted tree on a corner of the roof. She lit the lantern in the center of the table while Mica and Sun sat on pillows opposite each other.

"Someone will bring you wine and bread. Enjoy yourselves."

"I'll pay you now." Mica reached for his coin pouch.

"No. Consider this dinner a welcome to Ademene for Dame Sun."

"Thank you very much."

"It is my pleasure."

Marta disappeared down the steps.

Sun continued gazing at the view. After a moment she said, "How bad were you, combat general?"

"Not quite as bad as my father."

Sun turned to him. "Not a wonderful argument for your case."

"I didn't know I was on trial."

"You must think you are or else you wouldn't have selected such a punishment for yourself."

Furrowing his brow, he asked, "Punishment?"

Sun made a chopping motion with her hand. "Goodbye forever, balls."

Mica looked amused. "Our custom bothers you greatly. I thought Dames took many vows to uphold their belief in your...what do you call your deity again?"

"Spirit. Like the Knights most of us believe in the Spirit and yes we take vows. We even take a vow of celibacy until after marriage."

"And you claim to be offended by our ways?"

"But we don't mutilate ourselves. We abstain by will not by force."

"It has little to do with abstinence. Priests are castrated to take on the image of the Goddess, meaning they give up their ability to father children but also something deeper. In ancient times, when the very young were castrated, it was an attempt to make them more effeminate, supposedly allowing them to more closely resemble the Goddess. The ritual is and has always been a symbol of devotion and affection."

"Affection? It's terrible. How can you think of doing it to yourself?" Beneath the table her hands tightened into fists. She didn't understand her anger. It was his custom and *his* body. Why should she care? Besides, if he was gelded at least his bloodline would end. According to what Marta said about his past he was his father's son after all. Still the idea of ruining such a beautiful body bothered her. She remembered seeing him in the loincloth. How could a man with such obvious attributes wish to—

Her thoughts were interrupted by a young girl who brought wine and a basket of warm bread to the table. She hurried away, leaving Mica and Sun to eat. They reached for the bread at the same time, their fingers brushing. His warm touch made her body tingle. Mica drew back for Sun to take her bread while he poured the wine.

"I don't usually drink much," she said.

"It's a very mild wine. Sweet."

Sun took a sip, pleased with the fruity taste. When she drank, Mica focused on her lips. She found herself doing the same to him. The tip of his tongue circled his mouth, tasting the excess wine gleaming on his lips. She stared, wondering if his mouth was as soft as it looked.

"What's Travelle like?" he asked.

"Much colder than here. We have short summers and long winters. The eastern coast is lovely though. The cliffs are hundreds of feet tall and the sea below froths and crashes. It sounds like a dragon roaring—if such creatures were real."

"I'd like to see it."

"Why don't you visit?"

He shook his head. "My work is here."

"The Bedouins?"

Lowering his gaze to his hands, he said, "Yes. I must return to them soon."

"Someday you might travel to Travelle—"

"I don't think so," he interrupted almost sharply then his voice softened. "I'll spend

the rest of my life here, Dame Sun. It's fated."

"A little dramatic, don't you think? You probably have a long life still ahead of you."

Mica's brow furrowed and he glanced at the bread turning between his long fingers. He took a bite. "The bread is good. Even better than I remember."

Sun chewed a mouthful of the warm bread. The center was soft, the crust golden brown and crunchy just as she liked it.

Moments later the serving girl returned with a tray of stew, flat cracker-like bread, a plate of brownish paste and a bowl of pink and green fruit.

"What's that?" Sun glanced at the paste.

"It's good." Mica broke one of the hard flatbreads in half and dipped it into the paste before handing it to her. Sun took it, her fingers once again brushing his. Their gazes met and Sun noted with satisfaction the desire burning deep in his eyes. It seemed seducing him would be even easier than she'd first imagined.

She took the flatbread and bit into it. The taste was absolutely delicious.

"Nuts?"

Mica nodded, since his mouth was full. He took a swallow of wine and said, "People come from all over Ademene to eat this paste. It's Marta's secret recipe."

"What's the secret?"

He grinned. "As if she'd tell me."

For the next few moments they ate in silence. Once all the stew, bread and paste were gone, Mica took the bowl of fruit. Dozens of tiny needles covered the pink and green skin so he held the fruit steady with a knife while using another to cut it open. He cleaned out the pulpy inner flesh and offered it to Sun. "Desert fruit."

She shoved it into her mouth, juice running between her fingers and down her chin. It tasted even sweeter than the wine. She dragged her sleeve across her lips, trying to ignore Mica's look of amusement.

"Well?" he asked.

"Very good."

He cut up the rest of the fruit and divided the flesh between them. Sun giggled, pointing at Mica's juice-streaked chin. "You're making a mess."

"That's the only thing I hate about this fruit." He reached for a piece of cloth on the table but Sun snatched it and wiped his face. Placing aside the cloth, she stroked his smooth jaw. She told herself she was still trying to lure him but to her dismay she thoroughly enjoyed touching him.

"Dame Sun," he said, taking her hand, his thumb massaging her palm in a manner that sent a rush of desire through her entire body. Damn. If she was aroused by his hand touching hers, how would she react when they were entwined naked with his cock buried deep inside her? His warm, dry palm was callused in places. A gentle yet

masculine hand. Gentle? There was nothing gentle about a man like him. To forget that would be suicide.

Mica stood, tugging Sun to her feet.

"Now what?" she asked.

He guided her to the edge of the building. The streets below wound like veins among the pale buildings. Darkness had enveloped the city. Other than the sound of talking, singing and laughing from behind some of the walls, all was quiet. Mica held her hand in both of his, stroking with such warmth and tenderness that Sun once again needed to remind herself of exactly who he was.

"Did you brutalize women and children like your father did?" Again she couldn't keep the bitterness from her voice.

"I don't doubt many suffered because of me."

"What made you change?"

"I don't know," he said softly.

"That's not an answer."

He sighed, his thumb stroking the back of her hand in an almost nervous gesture. "My father's ways made no sense to me. When I was younger I just followed blindly. It was what I was raised to do. Then I couldn't see the reason for killing once we'd conquered. I hated him, Dame Sun. I hated what he did to me and my mother. I hated seeing people suffer because of his will and that of the false emperor he served."

"You went from a warrior to a Priest."

"Priest in Waiting."

"That's right." She glanced at their entwined fingers. "After you're gelded then you'll be a Priest."

"You make it sound filthy."

"It's tragic."

A smile played around his lips. "Funny but when we first met I thought you'd have gelded me in a heartbeat."

"No I'd have killed you in a heartbeat."

Glancing at her from the corner of his eyes, he said, "That was a very short time ago. I don't seem to disgust you as much now."

"If not for your father I might even like you."

They stood so close that his breath fanned her face. If she leaned just a bit nearer their lips would touch. Her pulse raced out of control but she told herself whatever she did with Mica would be an act of revenge. Whether or not she enjoyed it was beside the point. "Is there someplace we can be alone for a while?"

"I'm not sure I understand you, Dame Sun. You speak like a woman who hates me yet your expression and your touch send a different message."

"This is no easier for me," she said truthfully then dove into her lie. "Finding myself

attracted to a man I should despise is like punishment from the Spirit.”

“I don’t want you to hate me.”

“Do you want me?” she asked, her voice almost a whisper.

“Want you?”

She nodded, staring at him in a manner that had always lured men to her bed.

“You know I cannot admit to such a thing. I’m a Priest in Waiting. You’re a Dame of the Opal Order.”

“I am not afraid to break my vows if what I feel for a man is powerful. I can’t explain it, Mica, but you and I—”

“I know. From the moment we met you made me think thoughts and feel emotions I thought were long dead in me.”

Sun drew a deep breath. Obviously his libido cried out for her and he would do anything to make it seem like indulging in her body was beyond his control. Sun wasn’t sure why this upset her. She thought he’d at least put up more of a struggle.

“What is that place over there?” She pointed to a round stone structure across the street.

“The shrine to the first emperor of the city. Few people visit it now. Some of the Messengers see that it’s cared for.”

“May we visit it?”

“Of course.”

She followed him out of the tavern to the building. Inside the room was empty except for a fountain. The impeccably clean walls reflected the pride the people took in the shrine. Glancing up, Sun looked at the moonlight shining through a round hole in the ceiling, bathing the room in light. Turning her attention to the walls, she admired paintings of armor-clad warriors, many on horseback, that covered the walls.

“It’s lovely,” Sun commented, glancing around. She approached the fountain and gazed at the coins glistening at the bottom.

“Offerings from visitors. The Messengers collect them at the end of the month.”

Nodding, Sun stepped closer to one of the painted warriors and examined the detailed artwork.

After a few moments, they left the shrine to further explore the city. They stopped at an indoor garden open to the public. The many exotic plants and flowers pleased Sun, absorbing her attention. When she stopped to pay particular attention to a flame-colored blossom, Mica stood behind her and her pulse quickened. The warmth of his body was a welcome sensation.

*Now or never.*

She turned to him and captured his gaze. “It’s quiet. Peaceful.”

“I can’t say I feel very peaceful right now, Dame Sun.”

The lust in his eyes made her tingle from head to toe. Her clit ached with the

sudden need to wrap herself around him and feel his tall, strong body close to hers.

*Control yourself, Sun. You are supposed to seduce him not the other way around.*

"Is something wrong?" she asked, stepping closer.

His sapphire gaze fixed on her mouth and he moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. Placing a fingertip to his flat belly, she ran it up his torso. Her palm rested against his chest, feeling the rhythm of his heart. His arousal was almost tangible but so was hers.

Overwhelmed by confusion, Sun nearly turned away. Should she continue? If she enjoyed the experience would she end up hurting herself? Her personal feelings didn't matter. Vengeance did, yet were her actions only for revenge or did she desire his dark, lean body more than she wanted to admit?

"Dame Sun, if we don't leave, I might do something we will regret."

"Like this?" She slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

His warm lips teased hers. He wrapped his arms around her, pressing her so close to him that their hearts beat in unison.

Sun closed her eyes and clung to him. Their lips parted and his tongue met hers with hot, wet strokes that weakened her legs and sent ripples of need through her entire body. She moaned softly, searching his mouth, tasting every corner and crevice while her fingers stroked his shoulders and nape.

By the Spirit he tasted and felt wonderful. Sun's clit tingled and her pussy turned to liquid. His cock pressed against her, hard and thick. She longed to feel its velvet stiffness in her palm. Mica's kisses deepened. He licked the top of her mouth and gently sucked on her tongue.

Finally he broke the kiss and buried his face in her shoulder. His panting breath warmed her flesh. "Sweet Goddess. I haven't felt like this in so long, Dame Sun."

She knew he lied yet his words touched her.

*Stop it, Sun. Feeling for him is not allowed.*

"Most rules are made to be broken, Mica." She ran her hands across his broad shoulders then down his spine.

Pausing just above his taut buttocks, she placed a hand on his hip then edged lower. Her fingers fluttered delicately over the enticing bulge beneath his robe.

"But not vows," he murmured, his lips hovering over hers.

When she met his gaze she saw the struggle inside him. *Good.*

"Maybe not as easily but emotions can be more powerful than vows."

"How can a woman with an angel's face tempt me like this?" He rested a hand on her hip and tugged her nearer. Closing his eyes, he released a deep breath as she thrust her pelvis against his crotch. His hand trailed up her ribs and cupped her breast. Sun's heart pounded so fast and hard that she was certain he must have felt it against his palm. Tenderly he massaged the firm, warm globe through her vest. Sun's nipple



tightened and her pussy grew slick and wet. She wanted him to slide one of his long, graceful fingers deep inside her. Somehow she knew without doubt this man would please her. None of her many bed partners had made her come. Only by her own hand did she writhe and throb with sexual gratification but she sensed Mica would be different. Wonderful, orgasmic tightening had already enveloped the lower half of her body.

“Dame Sun, tell me to stop,” he murmured.

“I don’t want you to stop.”

He kissed her so passionately she nearly lost her breath. His lips opened over hers and his tongue thrust into her mouth with long, slow strokes. Sun trapped his tongue and sucked it while grasping his tight bottom. Damn, the man had such a gorgeous body. She squeezed his rock-hard buttocks. The sudden urge to rip off his clothes and cover every inch of his sleek, dark-skinned body with kisses almost overwhelmed her.

Mica’s thumbs massaged her nipples, teasing them to sensitive peaks through her vest.

Again he kissed her, sucking on her lower lip and licking the tender flesh.

Voices outside the garden’s entrance forced them apart. They gazed at each other, their lips kiss-bruised and their breathing ragged.

Two women stepped inside. The visitors nodded at the couple.

Sun forced a smile. Mica greeted them then took Sun’s hand and left the garden.

“Perhaps it was good we were interrupted,” he said. “Forgive me, Dame Sun. I forgot myself.”

She offered him a coquettish smile and squeezed his hand tighter. “Maybe not. Should we go back to the palace?”

“So soon? There’s still much of the city to see.”

“Don’t you have a ritual dance or something tonight?”

“That’s not until later. Don’t you want to see more of Ademene while you’re here?”

Sun paused, glancing at him. By the Spirit the man was stupid. She wanted to return to the palace, go to her room or his and finish what they started in the shrine. Unfortunately he seemed bent on being her personal guide to all the sights of Ademene. Still, looking around a little more couldn’t hurt. It was a beautiful city and she might never have another chance to see it. She had plenty of time for a more intimate tour later.

“All right.”

He brightened. “Good. There’s someplace I know you’ll like to see. It’s not in as nice a section of the city as this, but I think you can handle it.”

Sun winked. “What gave you that idea?”

Before they turned the corner Marta rushed out of the tavern.

“Dame Sun, you come back next time you visit the Kennas.”

“And if you ever come to Travelle you’ll stay with the Dames.”

Marta laughed. “It’s a promise. Imagine me with the Dames of the Opal Order?”

“I believe you’d fit in perfectly,” Mica said.

He and Sun continued down the city streets toward the west side of the city.

“Where is this place you want to take me?” Sun asked, the tingling sensation incited by his touch finally fading. Still her thoughts drifted back to the kisses of moments ago. By the way Mica looked at her from the corner of his eye she knew he was having similar thoughts. She grinned, noticing the respectable bulge still pressing against the front of his robe.

“The place I’m taking you to is called the Circle. People gather there to practice the fighting arts.”

“A training hall?”

“Of sorts,” he said.

“Sounds like fun.”

“I thought you’d enjoy it.”

The streets grew dimmer and narrower with each turn. Prostitutes, both male and female, lurked in doorways. Gangs congregated in front of abandoned buildings. Some cast taunting looks in Mica and Sun’s direction yet none approached. Sun wondered if their discretion had anything to do with Mica’s presence. She was about to ask when they stopped in front of a gray stone building, shorter and wider than the ones common in Ademene. Two tall men stood outside the double doors. One look at the bulging muscles beneath their leather vests and Sun knew they were formidable warriors. Their black hair was cropped close to their heads and they wore neatly trimmed beards. By the pristine appearance of the double swords dangled at their hips, she knew they took pride in their position.

One of them opened the door, nodding to Mica as he and Sun passed.

“It’s safe to guess they know you here?” Sun asked.

Mica only smiled and guided her down the dark hallway.

## Chapter Five

At the end of the corridor Mica pushed open a door. Another bearded man dressed in trousers and a knee-length tunic greeted them.

“Mica. It has been a while. Here for a workout?”

“Of course, Sefu. You know I never bet.” Mica winked and Sefu laughed.

“Sure. Whatever you claim. Who’s your lovely friend? I didn’t think you felt the need to woo women with your prowess.”

“I don’t think any man can woo Dame Sun. She’s here to practice.”

Sefu’s dark eyes raked Sun from head to foot. “She looks strong enough. I’m afraid you won’t find many women to compete with here, Sun, but the few we have are tough challenges.”

“I’m sure we’ll appreciate each other then.”

Sefu laughed, clapping Sun on the shoulder. “I like this woman, Mica. Where did you find her?”

“Wandering in the desert.”

“It would only happen to you. All I find in the desert is thirst and stone buzzards.” Sefu held out his hand to Sun. “The sword must stay here. Only staves are allowed inside.”

Sun made no motion to remove her sword though her gaze swept the collection of blades lining the wall.

“It’s the rule, Sun. One they won’t allow to be broken,” Mica explained. “Only hand-to-hand or staff fighting is accepted. Sefu will take good care of your sword. He’s never lost one yet.”

Though she didn’t like the idea of stepping into the unknown without being armed, Sun removed her sheath. By the collection of weapons being guarded, it was obviously accepted by the people to enter unarmed.

“Take a look,” Mica opened the adjoining door a crack.

Sun glanced inside. Several rings were roped off in four corners of an enormous room with a polished wooden floor. Torches lit the training hall, the smoke dispersing through a circular opening in the ceiling so as not to impair the warriors’ breathing. Warriors fought inside the rings surrounded by cheering, shouting onlookers while others practiced sparring or hand fighting in the empty floor space.

Sun handed her sword and sheath to Sefu who motioned for them to join the others. She and Mica stood against one of the walls, watching for several moments before he slipped off his robe and hung it on a hook next to dozens of others. Beneath he wore

blue cotton trousers and a vest. Sun stared at him from the corner of her eye once again, admiring his physique. She imagined cuddling naked with him later that night. He bound his long, black hair at his nape with a strip of leather and extended his arm toward one of the rings. "Shall we, Dame Sun?"

She tossed him a smile then approached a ring where a tall woman with black hair braided down her back fought with a shorter, thicker man. Sun noted the woman's skill surpassed her opponent's. Within seconds she struck him in the abdomen then the face. He lunged at her, his fist aimed at her nose. The woman dodged the blow and spun to the floor, using her leg to knock the man to the straw mat covering the inside of the ring. Snarling, the man hopped out of the ring while the woman shook her fist above her head to the sound of cheering.

"They fight for points?" Sun asked.

"Yes. That's usually how it's done here. Occasionally more dangerous matches are allowed but only in special cases. This is a training hall—where we have a few harmless bets every now and then."

"Harmless bets, eh?"

"Would you like to practice with staves?" He removed two staves from the wall and tossed one to her. They spent the next few moments stretching their limbs and warming up with some staff exercises, spinning and striking, before they found an empty space to practice.

Sun's gaze fixed on Mica as they circled each other. She attacked first. He used his staff to block her blows and execute his attacks. Within moments Sun knew he was exceptionally talented with the weapon. They fought until he backed her to the wall, the tip of his staff pressed to the hollow of her throat.

He released her and said, "You're very skilled."

"I'm better with a sword."

"Then I'll refrain from challenging you."

"If you're as talented with a sword as you are with a staff it would be an interesting match—although I can think of other ways I'd rather fight you." She offered him a seductive smile.

"Dame Sun." He stepped closer, his lips parted and desire gleaming in his eyes.

Her attention drifted to one of the rings where the same dark-haired woman now fought a tall redhead. Both women seemed equally skilled, their punches and kicks forceful and precise. A crowd had gathered around them.

She turned to Mica. "Do you mind if I get a closer look?"

"Enjoy yourself." He took her staff and she walked toward the ring.

Mica returned the weapons to the wall before following Sun. He allowed himself a lingering look at her shapely buttocks in the brown cotton trousers. Her body tempted him to beg for favors he'd long intended to give up for religion—favors that for the past

few years he'd been unable to appreciate because of circumstances he refused to think about. Not when he was having the most perfect evening of his life. Still her change of heart confused him. This evening she seemed to enjoy his company. In the shrine he felt sure if the women hadn't walked in she'd have made love with him right then and there. Sun was a complex woman. Was it reasonable to believe she had finally realized the senselessness of blaming him for his father's crimes?

Of course not. Mica wasn't an inexperienced idiot. A few kisses and a pleasant evening couldn't instantly wipe out her deep hatred but it might be a start. She wouldn't be in Ademene long, which was a good thing since there was no way Mica could engage in a lasting relationship. Too much stood in the way of his happiness with a woman and not all of it was religious.

Tonight he would not think about it. He was with a woman he liked and who for the most part seemed attracted to him. Pleasure was meant to be enjoyed because it could be taken away like a grain of rice on the wind.

Sun paused outside the ring. Nearby one of the skinny old men who handled bets stood beside the black-haired warrior woman known as Una Rock Fist. A fierce fighter who usually beat her matches both male and female, Una was a regular at the Circle. Mica had the feeling tonight Una's luck was about to run out. Once Sun realized she could challenge one of the fighters she'd leap into the ring. Though muscles bulged from Una's tall frame and her punches lived up to her nickname, Mica had gotten a taste of Sun's skill and he sensed she was as stubborn as she was talented. She also possessed experience in battle.

Still, Una was rough from fighting in the Circle and had seen her share of wars. The match would be an interesting one.

"Who will challenge the winner?" the skinny man bellowed.

"I will." Sun stepped into the ring.

Mica smiled to himself.

Una cast her a scathing look. "Pasty-faced bitch with little muscle. A waste of my time."

"Then it should be an easy win for you," Sun stated calmly though flames leapt in her eyes.

Una laughed. "Who'll bother to bet on you?"

Mica was about to wager on Sun when a feminine voice shouted, "I will. One hundred silver pieces on the white one."

A young woman with fawn-colored hair approached the ring. She wore black silk pantaloons beneath a knee-length tunic the same pale blue as her eyes. In spite of her demure appearance she wore a mischievous expression. She glanced at Sun and the women nodded to one another.

"Done," the old man said. "Anyone else?"

Mica lifted his hand. "Fifteen silver pieces. I have merely a Priest's funds or else I'd

bet a thousand.”

Una threw back her head and laughed. “Mica. You should know better. Look at her.” She pointed a crooked finger in Sun’s direction. “I’ll pound her into Marta’s nut paste.”

Mica winked at Sun and a smile flickered about the corners of her mouth.

Several more bets were placed before the skinny man stepped out of the ring. Sun and Una circled one another. The women attacked simultaneously, Una’s thick fists flying at Sun’s face. Sun dodged and blocked each blow before the women broke apart, their fists raised as they assessed one another. Una snarled but Sun’s lips were fixed in a half smile. Her apparent amusement seemed to infuriate her opponent who shrieked a battle cry and flew at the Dame. Sun’s left hand blocked Una’s fist and she spun, her punch crashing into the side of her opponent’s head. Una staggered and Sun swept her feet out from under her. The crowd shrieked with excitement.

That was the quickest Mica ever remembered Una hitting the mat. Enraged, the dark warrior flipped to her feet, showering blows upon Sun who blocked like a person with second sight. Mica’s brow furrowed and he stepped closer to the ring. She’d been good with a staff but her talent for empty-handed fighting amazed him. He knew she’d learned from Sir Blaze but had thought she’d exaggerated his skill. If his student was so gifted one could only imagine the Knight’s ability.

One of Una’s punches struck Sun’s mouth. Though she’d managed to avoid the full impact of the blow, blood dripped down her chin. She seemed unhindered by the blood flow. She kicked in Una’s stomach, knocking her onto the mat. Una landed flat. Seconds later she pushed herself to her knees, her eyes unfocused and blood dripping from her nose. Casting Sun a grudging look, she stood and left the ring.

The skinny man stepped in to announce Sun’s win and asked for a challenger.

Sun glanced at Mica, her eyes gleaming with excitement and her face misted with sweat. Muscles rippled in her smooth arms as she placed her hands on her hips and searched the crowd for her next challenge. Without doubt she was the most captivating woman Mica had ever met. He only wished for the chance to know her better.

Sun fought two more matches, both with men. For each the small foreign woman bet on her. Mica also wagered, knowing they would be easy wins since the men weren’t even as skilled as Una let alone Sun. He considered them fools for not recognizing their limitations. Unfortunately some people still believed the appendage between men’s legs awarded them instant victory over women.

After the last fight Sun stepped out of the ring toward the lady in black and blue silk. Mica joined them.

“Thank you for placing the first bet,” Sun told the woman.

“My pleasure. I know a great warrior when I see one and only a fool would bet against a Dame of the Opal Order. I can tell you are a Dame by your uniform. Thank *you* for the entertainment—and the extra silver pieces.”

“I’m Sun.” She extended her hand and the lady took it. Mica noted the differences

between the two women—Sun long-limbed, powerful and nearly two heads taller than her small yet curvaceous patron.

“Milady of the House of Bluegale. It’s nice to see another stranger in Ademene.”

“Where are you from?”

“Norcliff of the Unownland.”

“I’ve heard of the Unownland. Fascinating stories.” Sun glanced at Mica, brushing a tendril of damp hair behind her ear. “They say a race of wolf people lives there. I’ve always wondered if it’s true.”

“It is,” Milady said. “Though they’re not exactly wolf people. They’re called Nalmites, an ancient and respected race who has served the Royal Houses of the Unownland for generations.”

“Then they don’t have the power to shift shape as the stories say?”

Milady laughed. “Of course not, but they are a bit different from us.”

“In what way?”

“Hey,” a bearded man bellowed from a doorway at the end of the room. “There’s a staff fighter back here who’s beaten all of our best. He’ll break the house if the wagering keeps up. Mica, come and have a look. I think he’s even got you beat.”

“Who is he?” someone shouted.

“Don’t know,” the man replied. “A stranger.”

Milady’s smile broadened. “Would you like to meet a Nalmite? My protector is here.”

“Your protector?” Sun asked.

“He’s served me since I was born. He’s assigned to me as my personal bodyguard for life. His family has always protected mine. They’re Nalmites and we’re a Royal House.”

“Come on, Mica.” Sun glanced over her shoulder as she followed Milady to the adjoining room.

“I’d like to see this stranger who is so good with a staff,” Mica said.

“It’s my protector,” Milady replied. “That’s why I came to see the sparring in this room. I got bored watching him win for the past two hours.”

Mica squinted in disbelief. “He has been winning for two hours?”

“Of course. He could probably win for the next four hours—providing the fighters here can last that long. Though it really isn’t fair. Nalmites are generally stronger than other men and he is elite among Nalmite warriors.”

“Now I really want to have a look at him,” Sun said.

They stepped into a smaller room containing a single ring. Along the back wall stood ten men whom Mica recognized as the best staff fighters in Ademene. Some nursed injuries while others, sweat drenched and looking angry, stared at the ring where two men fought. One of the men Mica recognized as another deserter from his

father's army who had a reputation as a fierce warrior. Rivulets of sweat running down his shaved head, he blocked blows from his opponent. His opponent, apparently the Nalmite, stood several inches taller than Mica with a powerful build. A black leather vest swathed his upper body, exposing the thick muscles of his shoulders and arms. Mica could tell by several jagged scars marking the man's biceps that he'd seen many battles. Perspiration glistened beneath the curling hair matting the Nalmite's well-developed chest. By his appearance and ability, he'd obviously spent his life training. His overhanging brow and sharp cheekbones gave his face a primitive look. A beard, dark brown and wiry as the hair hanging halfway down his back, covered the lower portion of his face. Mica noted he moved with animal strength and grace, his feet shifting stances rhythmically. His wrists, hands and arms exercised complete control over the staff he wielded, making him a formidable opponent.

"Doesn't he get tired?" Mica heard someone mutter.

"His stamina is unsurpassed," Milady replied. "He could easily fight ten more matches."

"He's very good," Mica focused on the Nalmite. "I'd like a try at him."

Milady offered him an indulgent smile. "If you like."

He approached the ring, Sun and Milady behind him. Moments later the Nalmite struck his opponent in the leg then across the face, knocking him to the floor and ending the fight. Mica stood close enough to see the Nalmite's gray eyes gleaming beneath dark brows. Those eyes looked shrewd and valiant. Mica's heartbeat quickened. He wished for the briefest moment he was the same man he'd been five years ago. Still he felt he could hold his own against Milady's protector. Mica guessed the Nalmite was stronger than he was and nearly as skilled.

When a new opponent was summoned Mica stepped into the ring, accepting the staff one of the men tossed to him. Cheering filled the room.

"Mica," a man shouted.

"Now we'll see how good the stranger is," said someone else.

Meeting the Nalmite's steady gaze, Mica gripped his staff harder. In spite of his yearning for the Priesthood something about a good fight turned his blood to molten lava. Combat evoked similar feelings to when he imagined his body locked and writhing with Sun's. Damn. He'd better focus on the fight or else he'd end up making a jackass of himself in front of her.

He and the Nalmite moved around the ring, their gazes locked. The Nalmite attacked and Mica countered. Staves spun and struck, deflecting blows. After several moments Mica's heart began pounding and his breathing quickened. He'd only recently begun regular practices and though he was in better condition than he'd been in years he would need to be at his peak to best this Nalmite in a lengthy fight. Each of the man's blows felt like an axe strike and he moved with the speed of a great cat.

Mica's movements were serpentine in their swiftness. After several moments of trading fierce blows, he managed to strike the Nalmite in the back of the knees. The



man staggered, growling. Before he caught himself Mica whipped the staff across his face twice. Though the blow ended the fight Mica was a bit surprised the Nalmite didn't even appear dizzy. He stood, wiped blood from his mouth and bowed his head.

Drawing several deep breaths Mica wiped sweat from his eyes and climbed out of the ring, the Nalmite beside him.

Sun and Milady joined them. Mica smiled at the approval in the Dame's expression. Her blue eyes raked him from head to foot. "Impressive."

"Highly but the staff isn't Valor's best weapon," Milady stated. She withdrew a silk handkerchief from her tunic and gently dabbed the Nalmite's bleeding lip. He snatched it from her hand, an odd look passing between them, and cleaned his mouth.

"It was a good fight." Valor turned to Mica.

He noted the Nalmite's sharp canine teeth and the pointed tips of his ears.

"One of the best I've had in a long time," Mica agreed.

Milady gestured toward the Nalmite. "This is Valor, my protector."

Mica grinned. "I can see you must be very safe. I wondered what a lady such as yourself was doing in Circle—in one piece, that is."

"Valor is an excellent deterrent of rapists and thieves."

"Milady." Valor sounded reprimanding in spite of the soft tone of his deep, rich voice. Though his expression remained impassive and he stood behind her like a respectful guardian statue, Mica noted heat in the Nalmite's gray eyes. His family might have been born to serve Milady's but Mica sensed Valor guarded her for more than deference to tradition—and he knew few Royals who would use a silk handkerchief to tend the wound of an ordinary slave.

"He hates it when I'm blunt," Milady continued, "but there's no other way to be, is there?"

Sun smiled. "Not in my mind."

"I never thought to find another woman with your attitude." Mica glanced from Sun to Milady. "Are you staying in Ademene long?"

"Only briefly. I'm visiting the emperor's daughter. We're going to the palace later. Valor was told of the Circle and wanted to visit it while we're here."

"I'll probably be seeing you again. I'm also spending the night at the palace with Mica."

"Wonderful." Milady looked thrilled. "I want to know all about the Dames. I've never known one personally. How long will you be staying here?"

"We planned to leave in the morning."

"Too bad. Perhaps we could break our fast together?"

"I'd like that." Sun smiled, turning to Mica. "If it's possible?"

"I don't see why not, especially if the emperor's daughter approves."

"I'll ask her," Milady said. She glanced at Valor. "Now if your manhood has been

appeased I'd like to go now."

He nodded, gesturing with his hand for Milady to walk ahead and followed behind her, his tall frame dwarfing hers.

"What an odd relationship," Sun commented once their new acquaintances were out of hearing distance.

"Do you suppose they're merely servant and mistress?"

"It's a bit deeper than that. Milady told me about it while we were watching you fight. It seems Valor knew the moment she was born and went to her immediately. He was the first to hold her—even before her own mother. From that moment they were inseparable. Most Royals get their Nalmite protectors in that way."

"I thought I sensed something else but I guess I was wrong."

"You fought very well," Sun said. They walked back through the larger training hall to pick up her sword from Sefu. "At first I thought Valor was unbeatable. Nalmites are supposedly very strong."

"Like a White Island yak," Mica agreed, glad he'd managed to sneak in those strikes before Valor knocked him through the floor. Still his body tingled in the aftermath of the fight. He wasn't sure what was happening but lately he'd felt more alive than he ever remembered.

On their way to the palace Sun glanced at Mica from the corner of her eye. He hadn't bothered putting his robe back on but slung it over his shoulder. Perspiration streaked his face and glistened on the sleek curves of his muscular arms. His hair, still bound at his nape, lashed behind him like a whip. For a short time she'd gotten a glimpse of what he must have been like in battle—fierce, strong and skilled. She understood his need to make amends for evil acts he had committed but wondered how a man who still possessed such fire could possibly be happy as a castrated Priest.

Mica glanced at the moon. "I hope I'm not late for the ritual dance. Telling the High Advisor I missed it because I was off fighting isn't a good excuse."

"What is the dance like? May I watch?"

"I don't see why not. Sometimes the Priests dance publicly but I'm sure no one would mind if you observed the ritual." His gaze flickered toward her.

"If I learn more about your religion it might help me understand your desire to be gelded."

"You're obsessed with castration, aren't you?" He tossed her a look that bordered on annoyance.

"I don't know why a man like you would do such a thing." She edged closer to him. "Especially a man with such talent for kissing."

Mica chuckled. "I think I like the sound of that."

"Well don't get used to it if you plan on going through with the sacrifice for Priesthood." She flung him an almost taunting look.

"I like the work I do as a Priest. I enjoy helping people."

"Not that you would be accepted but you might try to become a Knight. That way you could fight and heal and most important, keep your balls intact."

Raising his eyes to heaven, he sighed. "You like being crude, don't you?"

"It's like Milady said, why not be blunt?"

"I'm almost glad you're only staying for one night. I can't imagine what you and Milady might do if you spent any length of time together."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Let's hurry."

When they reached the palace, Mica and Sun rushed to the lower levels. Instead of heading for the bathhouses they turned down another corridor in the opposite direction. More paintings of the Goddess covered the walls. Chants wafted through an open door to their left. Sun followed Mica into the room where several Priests dressed in robes of various colors gathered in a circle, singing. Others stood or sat along the walls.

Sun glanced at Blaze who sat beside a slender Priest. She approached, her arms folded across her chest, and whispered, "I thought you were so old and feeble that you needed to get to sleep early?"

Blaze stared at her with wide blue eyes. "It was my intention, however the High Advisor traded stories with me and—"

"No excuses," Sun teased, sitting beside him. Mica had disappeared into an adjoining room. Moments later the group of chanting Priests melted against the wall, leaving one in the center of the floor. He was slim and smooth-shaven. In a lovely voice he began a solo performance. Sun guessed he was a eunuch, castrated as a boy in accordance with the old customs Mica had spoken of. She was glad that tradition had changed. It was bad enough some men chose to mutilate themselves without destroying an innocent child against his will.

Two Priests dressed in black robes with silk swathed across their faces, leaving only their eyes exposed, began dancing. Their motions reminded Sun of seaweed swaying beneath crystalline water.

"Too bad Lock isn't here," Sun whispered to Blaze. "He'd love to see this."

Lock in spite of his gruff manner had a passion for dancing. Having learned to perform as a youth in the Archipelago, he was one of the best dancers Sun had ever seen. Though tall and well-muscled, Lock moved with grace unexpected in such a large man. His dances were a personification of male stamina and beauty.

When the two finished dancing a Priest with a flute and another playing drums accompanied the singer. A robed man stepped through the door and Sun recognized High Advisor Kado's sapphire hanging against the silk robes. His dance was an exhibition of quick, flexible movements. His robes swirled about the room, the jewel glistening in the torchlight. He was even more skilled than the Priests who had

performed first.

"Mate of the Key would indeed appreciate this form of prayer," Blaze said. "One day he must visit—"

Sun touched Blaze's arm and jerked her head toward the center of the room. The High Advisor had finished his dance and was replaced by another robed figure. In spite of the billowy blue fabric draping his tall form and the cover across his face Sun immediately recognized Mica. The music began, a slow, sensual rhythm that he mimicked with spinning, swaying motions of his long-limbed body. Though Sun didn't understand the words of the prayer the eunuch sang, she felt their meaning through each of Mica's movements. It amazed her that a man covered from head to foot in yards of fabric could arouse such feelings of sexuality.

"I think he's as good as Lock if not better," Sun whispered.

Blaze raised a finger to his lips, his gaze focused on Mica.

Entranced she watched him glide across the floor in low stances. His arms stretched above his head, he turned with a warrior's precision and an eagle's grace. At the thought of watching him perform the dance naked, Sun's clit tingled and her pulse raced. The idea of his sinewy body moving so sensuously, his dark skin bathed in firelight was enough to turn her pussy to liquid and her nipples to hard peaks of desire.

Only when the music ceased and he paused in front of her did she notice the teasing gleam in his eyes. She snapped awake from her daydream, annoyed and aroused at the same time. She would have him tonight. One way or the other Mica's fine, powerful body would be hers.

He joined the other Priests who had walked to the center of the room, leaving only Sun and Blaze seated by the wall. The holy men chanted for several moments before dispersing.

Mica unraveled the silk from his face and approached his guests.

"An experience of fascination." Blaze nodded.

"Thank you." He turned to Sun. "What do you think of our ceremony?"

"I've learned something new about an unfamiliar culture," she said.

"That's usually considered good."

"You dance well." Sun moistened her dry lips. If Blaze wasn't standing beside her she would have used the opportunity to lavish more attention on this man she sought to seduce. Her foster father knew her too well though. He would sense her desire and probably end up talking her out of it. The less Blaze knew about her plans for Mica the better.

"She is stingy in her praise," Blaze commented. "You are a master."

Mica grinned. "I wouldn't go that far but it's an enjoyable form of prayer."

"Better than other methods of showing your piousness," Sun commented.

The High Advisor joined them, exchanging greetings with Sun before turning to Blaze. "If you would like to continue the tour of the palace I would be glad to guide

you.”

“I would.” Blaze bid Sun and Mica good night and left with the High Advisor.

“If you like, I’ll walk you to your room,” Mica said.

Sun accepted the arm he offered, squeezing his hard biceps. “I would like that very much.”

Mica raised an eyebrow. “It seems rules are made to be broken—providing your mentor doesn’t find out.”

“Blaze doesn’t need to know about us any more than you’ve gone singing to your High Advisor about our attraction—”

His eyes gleaming, he smiled and said, “Then you admit it. Somehow I thought you’d be more stubborn about it.”

“After what we shared in the shrine how can I deny it?” Sun’s belly tightened with arousal. She wished her words were only part of a lie created to lure him to her bed but to her frustration they were true. She was very attracted to him.

“The High Advisor invited us to break our fast with him, the emperor’s daughter and Milady tomorrow,” Mica continued.

“Good. I’m looking forward to talking with Milady again. Maybe we can visit each other in the future.”

“I would like to travel to both your lands but—”

“Let me guess. You’re going to die here.” Shaking her head, she thought he really played the martyr role to the hilt.

“Most likely.”

“Only you can change your future, Mica.”

“I’ve tried to do that.”

They made their way up the narrow staircase to the upper palace and paused in front of Sun’s room. He stood close, the warmth of his body seeping into hers, the expression in his eyes embracing her soul.

“I’ve enjoyed this time with you, Dame Sun.”

“So have I.”

Nodding, he brushed her lips with a chaste kiss and turned away. She caught his arm.

“Mica.”

He turned, placing his hands on her waist and speaking against her lips, “By the Goddess, Dame Sun, I don’t want to leave you tonight.”

The warmth of his hands against her made her heart flutter, or was it simply knowing she was about to succeed in her seduction that made her pulse leap?

One of her hands curved around the doorknob and the other around his nape. “I don’t want you to leave. Mica, this might be the only chance we have.”

He cupped her face in his hand, stroking her cheek with his thumb while gazing deeply into her eyes. “Do you do this with every man you want?”

“No,” she lied, for the first time ashamed of her promiscuity. She quickly shrugged off the guilt. Sex play shouldn’t matter—or at least it never had before.

*One night, Sun. You can spend one night with him and walk away in the morning.*

“Don’t go, Mica.”

By the expression in his eyes, she knew he was fighting an emotional battle. He drew a deep breath and released it slowly. She sensed he wanted her but the Priesthood and redemption struggled against his physical desire.

Leaning a bit closer she kissed him, a mere brushing of her lips against his before she whispered, “I won’t ask again.”

Mica’s hand closed over hers on the doorknob and turned it. No sooner had they stepped inside than he dragged her into his arms and covered her mouth with a kiss that sent waves of volcanic passion crashing through her body.

## **Chapter Six**

Closing the door, Mica pressed Sun against it. His eyes slipped shut and he ran his tongue over her lips then thrust it into her mouth. Hers met his with warm, sensual strokes. Nestled between their bodies his cock swelled. Never in his life had anyone made him feel as thrilled and aroused as this tall, voluptuous warrior. Mica was no stranger to women. In his youth he'd claimed more than his share and enjoyed every moment. He had thought those times were long past. Each day he awoke healthy and useful was something to be thankful for but making love with Sun was something he hadn't dared hope for. To find a magnificent woman who was only passing through his homeland and wished for a single night of pleasure was like a fantasy—a temptation. Perhaps if he was the true Holy Man he aspired to be, he would consider her offer a test of his spirit.

He drew back slightly, knowing he should walk away for both their sakes.

Sun held his gaze, her fingers massaging his shoulders and back. She pressed closer to his body.

"I thought you left your regrets outside, Mica?"

He brushed a wisp of blonde hair behind her ear and stroked her cheek with his fingertips, relishing her soft skin.

His lips hovered over hers and he whispered, "I did."

Sun's grip on him tightened and he kissed her deeply. His lips moved to her neck where he licked the tender flesh. Her taste and scent filled him, arousing him even more. She uttered a soft moan of desire as he untied the front of her vest, freeing her warm breasts to his touch. Gazing at her taut pink nipples, he brushed his thumbs over them. His desire for her seemed to turn him into a creature of pure sensation, with no thought to the pious lifestyle he'd cultivated over the years. The muscles of her sleek abdomen tightened and she thrust closer so her pelvis pressed against his cock. He rubbed his aching staff against her and drew a deep, cleansing breath.

Sun shrugged off her vest and tossed it onto a nearby chair.

His hands roamed over her bare torso. He wanted to touch every part of her magnificent body at once. Well padded in places but with hard muscles beneath the soft skin, she looked and felt like a woman from his dreams. Touching her sent an erotic thrill through his entire body. His cock twitched and swelled even more. Damn, he hadn't grown such a desperate erection since his first woman. With Sun everything felt new. Being with her aroused him not only because he found her incredibly attractive but because he enjoyed her company. Maybe having her even once was a mistake. He could easily fall in love with her and that would be a disaster.

Did she care for him as well or was this night just to indulge their physical attraction? If she cared for him—no. He wouldn't think of it. Tomorrow she would be gone and Mica would go on to become a Priest.

He swallowed hard and reached down to adjust his aroused cock and balls. This would be his last time with a woman. He nearly panicked at the idea of being castrated. His heart said yes but something deep in his soul shrieked. *No. No. Not on your life.*

Sun tugged at his robe. "Take this off. I want to see you, feel you."

He stepped back and undressed while she kicked off her boots and trousers. Mica drew a sharp breath, his pulse racing as she approached the bed. Flinging him a lustful grin, she sat on the bed and beckoned him with a finger.

Mica placed his boots and clothes aside and walked to her. Grasping her waist, he tugged her onto the mattress beside him.

They lay close to one another, her breasts flattened against his chest and their legs entwined—hers pale and smooth, his dark and hair-roughened.

"Mica," she murmured, her hand sweeping down his lean waist and curving around his buttocks. She moved back just enough to reach between their bodies and curl her fist around his cock. Though her palm was rough from years of practicing with weapons, her touch was gentle and he loved the contrasting sensations.

Mica almost closed his eyes with pleasure as she stroked and pumped him.

"This staff is much finer than any at the Circle." She grinned, giving the velvet shaft a final stroke before pushing him onto his back. Her brow furrowed as she fingered the small gold ring piercing one of his testicles.

"What is this for?" she asked.

"It was a rite of manhood in my father's tribe."

"I think I like it." She tugged very gently on the ring.

Pleasure flooded his groin, making his cock swell even more, the skin stretched to bursting over muscle and veins.

"Hmm. You enjoy this?" Her lips lifted in a grin as she tugged a bit harder on the gold ring.

"Yes," Mica gasped with desire.

He grasped her shoulders but she slid from his grip and knelt between his spread thighs. Clasp the base of his staff in one hand and his balls in her other, she took his bulging cock head between her moist lips. Her tongue swirled over the sensitive flesh while she sucked. Mica groaned, his heart slamming against his ribs, his muscles tense and toes curled. He clutched her head, loving the sensation of her soft blonde hair between his fingers. She sucked deeply. His cock brushed the back of her throat and pure lust ripped through him. "By the Goddess, woman, you're going to kill me."

It was probably true. Such excitement was inadvisable for him but he didn't care. Fighting in the Circle might have been a mistake as well but he was tired of caution. In the end it wouldn't matter anyway so he must take advantage of pleasure while he



could.

She sucked harder and his coherent thoughts vanished. His balls tightened and his cock felt ready to burst from the ministrations of her beautiful lips and wondrous tongue.

She pulled back, her lips glossy and parted, a hint of a blush on her cheeks. Desire and excitement glistened in her eyes. Her nipples hardened, little bumps of pleasure rising on the areolas. Seeing her so aroused spurred his desire.

"You are so beautiful." He reached for her, tugging her atop him. Flipping her hair over her shoulder, she straddled him and clasped his cock, guiding it slowly into her pussy.

Groaning, he enjoyed the tight warmth of her slick passage.

Suddenly he tensed, staring into her eyes. "What if there's a child?"

"There won't be."

"You can't be sure of that."

"Yes. I can. I take herbs to prevent it."

Mica nodded. He knew of such herbs and had she not admitted to using them he would have offered her some from his medicinal supply.

His rod disappeared completely inside her. He relaxed, breathing deeply, and looked at the joining of their bodies. The sight of her pale hair mingling with his dark thatch stoked his passion even more. He placed a hand on each of her hips and stroked upward, tracing her ribs and outlining her navel while she rocked upon him.

He rolled his thumbs over her nipples then pinched them gently. Sun moaned. Her head arched back and she quickened her pace. Pleasure built deep inside Mica. How he longed to close his eyes but he couldn't bear to shut out the sight of her gasping and writhing, her beautiful body controlling their pleasure.

Sun's pulse raced and her entire body tightened and tingled with need. Her plan to seduce Mica had certainly worked but not without a price. Never in her life had she felt such pleasure with a man. This experience awakened a part of her she never knew existed. The way Mica looked at her and touched her, the way he spoke to her with his deep, gentle voice caressing each endearment was like nothing she'd ever dreamed of. Years ago men had destroyed her ability to experience pleasure. No matter how she tried facing her fears and overcoming the past, a barrier had been erected around her heart. She'd mastered many men in her lifetime, had held their pleasure in the palm of her hand but never had one breached her heart or provided the marvelous, breath-stealing lust she experienced now.

His chest heaving with pleasure, Mica arched his body beneath her.

Her heart raced out of control and her clit ached in pleasure. In spite of her real motives, she couldn't help enjoying the sensations he evoked in her.

"Oh, by the Spirit," she gasped, the red-hot pleasure in her pussy almost

unbearable.

"Yes, Sun, tell me," he panted, his fingers playing with her nipples. He cupped her breasts, squeezing and massaging. The man seemed to know just how to touch her to bring forth the greatest pleasure.

"Mica, oh."

"Sun."

One of his hands left her breasts and rubbed her clit as she rocked faster. Sobbing with ultimate pleasure, she exploded in a mind-shattering climax.

With a raw cry he lunged upward several times and burst inside her.

Mica lay on his back, his eyes closed and breathing ragged. Sun rested atop him, her head buried in his shoulder. He gently stroked her bare back, loving the sensation of her tender skin.

"Mica," she murmured, pressing a gentle kiss to his neck. Desire shot through him even from such a simple kiss.

He tightened his arm around her, unwilling to release her just yet. An odd feeling settled in his stomach and weighed on his heart. Never had he experienced such pleasure with a woman or had he seen a woman express such delight while making love. Her every breath and cry revealed her unabashed passion. It had been a beautiful experience mostly because he had somehow grown to care for her during the short time he'd known her.

Perhaps it had been a mistake after all. If he cared for her then there was a chance she cared for him as well. He should have been honest about his situation. He should have—

"Are you going to leave?" Sun lifted her head from his shoulder, the coldness in her expression taking him by surprise.

"Excuse me?"

"Are you leaving? I'm tired. Blaze and I will be going early tomorrow."

"Yes, but—"

"Seems I was right about you after all." She rolled away from him and raised herself onto her elbows. Her lip curled with contempt. "If you break your Priestly vows while still in training then why should anyone believe you're not the same murdering, torturing villain as when you rode under your father's command?"

Coldness and disgust seeped into Mica's heart. The entire night had been a charade. He should have known a woman who despised him yesterday couldn't like him today.

He was more enraged at himself than at her. Had he become so desperate that he'd fallen into her trap this easily? Perhaps he'd been affected in body and mind more than he realized.

"Speechless, Mica? That's unusual for you."

“Nothing about you could leave me speechless, Dame Sun, including your lovemaking ability. Have a pleasant journey home.” He stood and reached for his clothes. Flinging her a cool gaze, he pulled them on and left her room without looking back.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sun spent a restless night thinking about Mica. To her horror she missed the warmth of his skin and the sound of his voice close to her ear. If only she was back home where she could relieve her frustration with a workout in the field outside the Opal Order’s fortress. Knowing she’d allowed Mica to reach her disturbed her deeply. Her only consolation was in hoping he might feel the same. She had wanted him to feel hurt, angry and used. Now that her plan had worked she still wasn’t satisfied.

She rolled onto her side in the enormous bed and stared at the moon outside her window.

Her sleep was brief and restless. When morning came Sun’s stomach churned at the thought of facing Mica again. At least it would only be for a short time then she’d never have to look at his face again, unfortunately she would forever possess the memory of his kisses, his whispered words and his velvet-skinned cock filling her so perfectly.

Gritting her teeth with fury, she washed and dressed then stepped into the corridor. A servant boy waited to guide her to the High Advisor’s chamber.

Her gaze fell on Mica who sat with Blaze and Kado on one side of a rectangular table. He didn’t so much as glance at her. A glare or a look of longing would have been preferable to such disinterest.

A dark-haired young woman who Sun guessed was the emperor’s daughter sat near Milady. A tall, curly-haired man who looked about Blaze’s age sat opposite them. Valor stood several feet behind Milady, his arms folded across his chest. The Nalmite’s expression was stern. His silver eyes observed every corner and crevice of the room though they continually returned to his charge. She wondered if Milady was ever annoyed by the man hanging over her like some tremendous statue.

“Dame Sun.” Kado smiled at her in greeting and she returned the gesture. The High Advisor continued, “I don’t believe you’ve met Princess Nan.”

“Princess.” Sun bowed to the young woman.

“And this is Zareb, a Messenger of the Goddess,” the High Advisor continued.

“A Messenger?” Sun took the seat beside Zareb, noting he was quite attractive though not as striking as Mica. “You’re similar to Priests, are you not?”

“We’re of the same religion and do the same work but there are some differences.” A quirky smile played around Zareb’s mouth and his eyes glistened with mischief. “Mica told me so much about you last night that I wanted to meet you for myself, Dame Sun.”

“Last night?” Sun questioned, anger sparking at the thought of their gossip.

"We're assigned to the same chamber here at the palace."

In the moments she'd observed Zareb she guessed he and Mica were friends. They seemed to possess the same sense of humor and flirtatious behavior.

"Don't believe his lies."

"He said you're one of the finest fighters he's ever seen," Zareb continued.

She glanced at Mica, surprised he'd kept their lovemaking a secret. "Then that much is the truth."

Grinning, Zareb added, "He said he's known goats less stubborn."

The High Advisor shot him an irritated look. "Zareb."

"Forgive me." Zareb bowed his head though he didn't look at all sorry.

"Zareb is a rare Messenger who prefers starting trouble to soothing it," Mica said.

The Princess took a sip of tea and said, "I think we should engage in more polite conversation. Don't you agree, Milady?"

"It would be proper," Milady glanced at Sun from the corner of her eye, "but incredibly boring. If we must speak properly then I would like to hear more about your religion, Mica. The ritual dances you described sound very interesting."

"I wish I could stay longer to tell you more but I must ask one of the Messengers to answer most of your questions. Unfortunately I must leave the city this morning."

Blaze glanced at Mica. "You return to the desert?"

"Yes. The emperor has sent foot soldiers to search the area for signs of my father's followers, however I'm traveling farther away. I'm concerned with a settlement several days' journey from here."

"My father doesn't believe the corpse you found could have come from there," the Princess said. "However if you feel you must go we trust your judgment."

"I'll go with you," Zareb said. "It's a long journey to make alone."

"I always travel alone. You must visit the Bedouins for me. Some of them will need more medicine."

"I know he's right. Into solitary heat invites death," Blaze said but everyone stared at him in confusion especially since he'd spoken to an empty space beside him.

Only Sun realized immediately he was conversing with spirits. She noticed Mica relax after a moment and guessed he remembered Blaze's oddities. The others tried to appear composed but only the Nalmite succeeded. Blaze turned to Mica. "Lone travel can be dangerous. I will accompany you."

"Blaze," Sun snapped. The last thing she wanted was to spend more time with Mica. The faster they parted, the better.

"I will."

"Then it looks like I'll have to go too." Sun sighed, furious with her mentor. She wanted to leave Ademene and return home.

For the first time Mica looked at her. He wore a strange expression, neither hateful

nor gloating. Her hands tightened on her knees and her heartbeat quickened. Why did his eyes seem to penetrate hers?

"No need," Blaze said.

She cast him a knowing look. "Just like there was no need for you to follow me here? I'm going."

"This is unnecessary," Mica stated. "I will go alone."

"Let them go if they want to," Zareb said.

"It might be a wise idea," Kado agreed.

Sun could scarcely believe what she was hearing. Why were they so concerned with Mica—a former combat general—carrying a message to a group of people in the desert? Sun had often traveled alone for weeks at a time through dangerous, unknown country. She'd seen Mica fight. He could take care of himself if he ran into trouble.

"When should we go?" Blaze asked.

"I'm leaving right after the meal," Mica said.

They finished eating quickly. The Princess was quiet and reserved and Sun wondered how she and Milady had become friends. Milady kept the conversation lively with stories about her homeland and questions about the many places her companions had visited. This was her first trip away from the Unownland. Sun's tales of battles and Zareb's stories of the exotic places he'd visited during his work as a Messenger seemed to fascinate her.

Though she knew a man of his reputation must have had many adventures Mica spoke little about himself. They also avoided speaking to each other and for that she was grateful. Perhaps they wouldn't talk for the entire desert journey. The thought of traveling with him made her ill, mostly because she still desired him. She couldn't stop thinking about making love with him again, of his cock filling her and his kisses stealing her breath.

Throughout the meal Blaze tried engaging in the conversation but in his enthusiasm his speech became so eccentric that the others could scarcely follow his stories. Finally he gave up. Sun always felt a little sorry for him when his communication with the spirits hindered his relationships with regular people. She often tried translating for him but sometimes his words confused even her.

Finally Mica stood, bowing to the Princess and the High Advisor. "Thank you for your hospitality but I must go."

Sun and Blaze excused themselves and followed him out the door.

"There's really no need for you to come with me."

"It is our pleasure, Mirrored Rock."

"Speak for yourself, Blaze," Sun said.

Mica glanced at her. "You seem angry again, Dame Sun."

"I'm not angry. You seem to have had a nice long talk with your friend Zareb. I can

imagine what you said about me.”

“I said nothing you would be ashamed of.”

“All men talk about things women are ashamed of, except Blaze.”

The Knight’s gaze darted from Sun to Mica. “This seems to be private conversation.”

“Some things that happen between a man and a woman should remain private,” Mica said quietly.

“I knew you’d bring it up.”

“I can’t hear this.” Blaze covered his ears with his hands. “Have you no shame? A Priest and a Dame both with vows of—”

Sun tugged one of Blaze’s hands from his ear. “We’re not saying anything, Blaze.”

“Still, it’s not my affair...” Blaze winced. “Bad choice of words.”

“I don’t know why you seem so angry when you’re the one who played me for a fool.” Mica’s gaze held Sun’s with calmness that infuriated her.

“If I did you don’t seem any worse for wear.”

“But you are. Perhaps your heart isn’t as cold as you pretend, Dame Sun.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means I don’t think you hate me as much as you pretend. I still feel for you and I think you feel for me too.”

Her lip curled. “I don’t feel anything for you, Mica. For all I care you can die a slow, painful death and it would probably be deserved for what you did while under your father’s command.”

Mica paused, an odd expression passing over his face.

“Brightest Star, you should choose your words carefully,” Blaze said in a hushed voice. “You may find you don’t mean them after all.”

“Oh I mean them, Blaze. He could writhe in agony before my eyes and I’d most likely step right over him.”

Mica glared at her. “Do both of us a favor, Dame Sun, and go back to Travelle. I don’t need your help or your company. And though I appreciate what you’re trying to do, Blaze, I don’t need you to waste your time either.”

“Tempers have conquered.” Blaze ran a hand through his disheveled locks. “I will still go with you.”

“I’m not going for you, Mica. If there are people in danger then it’s my duty as a Dame to do what I can to help them.”

“This is not your concern.”

“It is. There are some vows worth upholding.” She flung him a scathing look before returning to her chamber to gather her belongings.

\* \* \* \* \*

By noon the city of Ademene disappeared behind seemingly endless sand dunes. Sun squinted at the clear sky, the familiar desert heat seeping beneath her white robe. To her left Blaze's mount plodded. The auburn-haired Knight glanced from side to side. Sun wondered what spirits paraded around him when all she saw was sand and the occasional desert flower.

She glanced to her right where Mica sat astride his big-boned mare. Dressed in a pale blue robe, his head covered with a *kaffiyeh*, he looked remote and handsome. His gaze fixed on hers but he didn't offer his characteristic grin. Almost imperceptibly he shook his head and looked to the horizon.

"If your friends in Ademene were so concerned with you making this journey—though I still have no idea why—why didn't Zareb go instead of tending the Bedouins?" Sun asked.

"Because the people in this settlement don't trust easily. After what my father and the false emperor did the people there are very discriminating about who they allow in and who they listen to. Zareb isn't known to them."

"But you are?"

"I've spent much time there as healer."

"And they trust you? The son of the man who was responsible for their suffering?"

"I won't lie, Dame Sun. Gaining their acceptance wasn't easy but eventually they realized I'm sincere. Not everyone blames me for my father's crimes."

"Like me?"

"Perhaps."

"Would you be so quick to forgive the spawn of the person who slaughtered your family?"

He held her gaze. "Maybe not but I am not my father. Believe me, Dame Sun, I've done everything possible to atone for my crimes as well as his. There's nothing more I can do except continue down the path I've chosen for myself."

Sun lifted her eyes skyward. "You'd make a marvelous actor, that's for sure."

"And you'd make a marvelous executioner."

"No, that was your job."

Mica sighed. "I don't want to fight with you. Whatever you think I've done I apologize. Isn't that enough?"

"No it's not enough."

"The problem is you care for me."

Sun gritted her teeth and prayed to the Spirit to keep her temper in check. "I do not and will never care for you."

Blaze laughed. "Speak to the sand, Mirrored Rock. It will appease you sooner."

"I thought you were supposed to be on my side?" Sun glared at Blaze.

His pale eyes widened. “Always, Brightest Star. However you can be demanding, vengeful...”

She jerked her thumb in Mica’s direction. “So I’m supposed to forget who he is and what he stood for?”

“You use the past tense. That’s the key,” Blaze said.

Sun looked from Mica to Blaze with disgust before kicking her horse ahead.

Even Blaze sympathized with Mica. How could so many people show such concern over a former combat general, the son of a monster? Worst of all how could he possibly be right about her liking him even a bit? She had been the one who’d suffered damn it—she and all the people like her who had been tainted by the evil actions Mica had committed earlier in his life. Now she was suffering more because she’d finally made love with a man who brought her true pleasure and she could never have him again.

They rode throughout the rest of the day, pausing only to eat a sparse meal and rest their horses. At dusk they set up camp in the shelter of a small cave.

“How far is this settlement?” Sun asked, pulling her cloak around her shoulders and sliding closer to the fire.

“Another two days’ ride,” Mica said, leaning against the cave wall and closing his eyes. “If we rode very hard we could make the entire journey in two days but there’s no reason to push the horses. Most likely everything is fine there. I just want to make sure they know what might be happening should the emperor’s men find a significant force was behind the banishment.”

“A thousand sweet fantasies for you in twilight’s embrace,” Blaze said, stretching out on the ground.

“Good night,” Sun murmured. Though tired she doubted she could sleep. Since meeting Mica she hadn’t spent a restful night. No matter how she tried she couldn’t keep her thoughts from straying to him. He enraged her yet at the same time she recalled moments they’d shared and her body heated. She ached for him, longed for his arms around her and his lips against hers. He was a frustrating man. She needed to forget about him completely. Difficult when Blaze kept volunteering to travel with him. Of course she couldn’t place all the blame on the Knight. She didn’t *have* to go with them but it was a Dame’s duty to serve a good cause. The plight of the people of Upper Kenna to remain safe from those like Mica’s father was definitely a good cause.

Sun’s eyes slipped shut and her breathing deepened until sleep finally claimed her.



## Chapter Seven

Sun awoke in the middle of the night. For several moments she watched the glowing embers of the fire and listened to the desert wind howl before rising to rekindle the flames.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Mica asked.

His sensual voice made her tingle with lust.

She glanced at him. “Couldn’t you?”

“I dozed for a while. Listen.”

Sun strained to hear. “What? Trouble?”

He chuckled. “No, Dame Sun. The wind blowing through the rocks.”

“What about it?”

“Sounds like music.”

Wrinkling her nose, she muttered, “Music.”

“You don’t think so?”

How the hell could he talk about music and gaze at her without a hint of rage, frustration or longing after what she’d done? The man angered her enough to kill.

Mica walked to the cave mouth and squinted against the wind that rustled his cloak and hair and forced tears from his eyes.

“You’ll be blinded by sand if you don’t move away from there.”

He stepped back slightly and motioned for her to join him.

“What?”

“Shh.” A long finger rested against his lips and he pointed outside.

Sighing she approached. “Now what do you...what is that? It’s beautiful.”

A fawnlike creature stood beside a tall, craggy rock. Its fur shone milky in the moonlight. Gray dapples peppered its shaggy rump. Between its rounded ears, two pale horns curved inward forming a glistening circle.

“It’s called a star skipper. Very rare animals. They sleep most of the day in caves and travel the desert by night. The Bedouins say they’re gifts from the wizards of Glacara. Beryl—the woman who was awarded the powers of Aldora, land of the first wizards—once touched an albino star skipper, an impossible feat since they’re the fastest creature in the world.”

“I heard stories about wizards from some the Dames. The Western Continent is filled with their legends. It is said if it hadn’t been for a chosen few with wizards’ power, Zaltana would have ruled the world. I’m not sure if that’s true, but everyone

knows about the Ancient Wars and the rebels who fought oppression for so many years.”

“And from what I hear, you’re still fighting.”

“Unfortunately.” Sun drew a long breath. “The last major war against Zaltana ended five years ago but there are still some small outbreaks.”

“Like here I suppose.”

“Like everywhere.”

“Do you know any legends from your Ancient Wars?”

Sun shrugged. “A few.”

“I know many.”

“Why do you know so much about the Western Continent? You speak our language and know the continent’s history.”

Smiling slightly, Mica replied, “My maternal grandmother was from the Western Continent. She told me many stories and taught me her language when I was very young.”

“So that explains your blue eyes.”

“She came from a place called Verni. Do you know of it?”

“Verni.” Sun glanced skyward and searched her memories. “I’ve never been there, but it sounds so familiar.”

“The wizard who led the rebels in the last of the Ancient Wars came from Verni. He married a warrior supposedly sent to him by the heavens and together they brought about the fall of Zaltana. He received his knowledge from a man called Alrik who was once a great king. After gaining the power of Aldora through a mind-sharing with Beryl, Alrik left his throne to pursue magic with the hopes of one day bringing peace to the world.”

Sun shook her head. “Well he certainly failed.”

“But he never stopped trying.” Mica turned to her, his gaze intense. “Isn’t that the most important part of being alive? Trying to make things right?”

“Nothing will ever be right, Mica. There’s too much evil in the world. You of all people should know that.”

“And you of all people should understand the value of trying. You’re a Dame of the Opal Order.”

Sun’s lip curled. “You don’t see me as I am. You’re like a child in your views.”

“No, Dame Sun, I think I see you exactly how you are.” Mica smiled so tenderly that Sun felt the urge to kiss him again. She turned her gaze back outside. The star skipper had gone. Fearful that if they stood in silence she’d be overcome by the desire to make love with him she asked, “Do you believe in wizards?”

“I believe anything is possible. And you?”

Sun glanced at her sleeping mentor. “After knowing Blaze I do believe some people

have powers not of this world. However I do think the legends are embellished, just like all tales of battles grow with each telling.”

Mica smiled. “Perhaps.”

“If wizards had such power where are they all now?”

“Wizards were few and feared by many. Their bloodlines faded and those who left migrated to the land of Glacara where the first of their kind, the Aldorians, fled to build a world of peace and prosperity.”

Chuckling, she said, “Now *that* sounds like a legend.”

“It is. Word for word. Passed down from my grandmother.” Mica glanced at her from the corner of his eye. “Still doesn’t mean it can’t be true.”

“Have you ever been to Glacara—if the place even exists?”

“They say it’s far north. An island of pure ice.”

Sun snorted. “No wonder wizards died off.”

Mica nodded in Blaze’s direction. “Like you said, have they?”

Sun cast an affectionate look at the Knight. “He does have a spiritual power. At times it worries me though. It has made him different.”

“Different can be good.”

“Sometimes I think it makes him lonely.”

“I doubt a man who has your affection could ever be lonely.”

His words touched Sun though she knew they couldn’t be true. Perhaps his ploy was to lure her into caring for him then he could refuse her just as she had refused him last night. Worst of all he didn’t have to lure her. She already cared for him though she’d never admit it aloud to anyone. As she gazed at him her stomach fluttered like it did sometimes before a battle—a mixture of excitement and apprehension.

She turned away. “I’m going back to sleep. We have to leave early.”

Mica touched her arm. She glanced at the long, graceful fingers curved around her biceps. “What?”

Cupping the back of her neck, he drew her face closer and his mouth covered hers. Sun’s eyes slipped shut. Her legs weakened and her belly tightened with rapture. She loved the sensation of his tongue tracing the bow of her upper lip.

Clinging to him, she resisted the urge to moan. His tongue slipped into her mouth, stroking and thrusting as his steely arms wrapped around her, holding her close. His erection tightened between them, a sensual pressure against her belly. She grasped handfuls of his hair. It ran like silk between her fingers.

He broke the kiss and ran his lips across her cheek and over her temple. Gently he bit her earlobe and whispered, “You are so beautiful, Dame Sun.”

Drawing a deep breath, she pulled back just enough to gaze into his eyes. She wanted to see a lie burning there. She wanted him to be mocking her or attempting to seduce her out of revenge for the previous night. All she saw was the same desire that

burned inside her, making her clit throb.

"I still want you," he continued, stroking her cheek with the back of his hand. Extending a graceful finger, he used the tip of it to trace the shape of her mouth. "I think you want me too."

"You're either the most stubborn man I've ever met or the most conceited."

"Perhaps but there are few people I misread, Dame Sun. You enjoyed our time together as much as I did."

She flung him a humorless smile. "Somehow I doubt it. Women can often fake what a man cannot."

Mica raised an eyebrow, a smirk on his lips. "So you're usually so slick and wet for a man who doesn't interest you? Fascinating talent you have, Dame Sun."

His words angered yet aroused her. At the moment she was slick, wet and oh-so-ready for him. His gaze held hers and he cupped her breast, stroking gently. Sun's pulse raced. Part of her wanted to stop him while a larger part of her needed his touch. Again Mica kissed her, his moist lips caressing hers, his tongue exploring her mouth. Slowly he slid his hand between the parted folds of her robe and beneath the waist of her trousers.

*Oh, by the Spirit. Yes, Mica. Yes. Touch me.*

One of his long fingers circled her slit then inched inside her pussy. Drawing a sharp breath, Sun clenched her vaginal muscles around his finger. He licked her ear and growled softly, a sound of animal desire, potent and arousing. A second finger joined the first, both rubbing and thrusting until her hips mimicked his rhythm. While his fingers stroked his thumb teased her clit.

Sun melted against him, panting softly, her eyes closed tightly and her fingers gripping his robe. He rubbed faster and her clit throbbed. The marvelous tightening inside her became unbearable. Orgasm flooded through her. She staggered, her cry of delight muffled against his shoulder. Mica supported her with one arm while continuing the sensual rubbing until the last spasm ripped through her.

Wrapping both arms around her, he held her for a long moment. Finally she pushed away.

"You are right, of course," he continued, a knowing smile on his lips. His fingertip moving from her face to her neck then trailing over her nipples. "It was only meant to be one night."

Gritting her teeth she shoved him away. By the Spirit she was weak around this man. Why couldn't she resist him?

He continued, "Yet I would like to hear you admit it was more to you than vengeance."

"Why?"

He held her gaze for a long moment. Leaning forward, he was about to kiss her again when a sleepy utterance from Blaze drove them apart.

Her pulse racing, she returned to her corner of the cave, pulled her blanket around her and tried to sleep. Mica remained at the cave entrance for several moments before settling down for the night. She wondered if sleep eluded him as it did her.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day passed without any new crisis. At dusk they found another cave to spend the night in. Mica told more stories of wizards, the Ancient Wars and Glacara. Familiar with many of the legends, Blaze relished the stories. Sun had to admit Mica was a gifted storyteller. His deep voice possessed an almost musical quality. His descriptions were so vivid that Sun swore she smelled the fires of old Aldora or felt the water encompass her body when King Alrik dove to the bottom of the sea and received magical powers from the wizardess Beryl. She saw the skeletal helmets of Old Zaltana and watched the sky darken and lightning strike at the climax of the Ancient Wars.

"The wizards gained power from the Spirit." Blaze nodded once Mica finished his tales. "It's what I was taught."

"The Goddess gave them their powers," Mica insisted. "Beryl, the one to inherit the power of all wizards, was female."

"The Spirit has no sex," Blaze said.

"I suppose it doesn't matter what we believe as long as good is done."

Sun raised her eyes and blew with disgust.

"He speaks the truth," Blaze told her. "Sun or moon, each light casts warmth on all it touches."

"Somehow, I knew you'd agree with him, Blaze."

"I know, Dame Sun. You're a hard woman who cares for nothing least of all me."

"I already said what I thought of you."

"Yes. You wish me to die a slow, painful death. Many feel the same."

Curling her lip, she cast him a sour look. "I'm sure."

"And many don't," Blaze interrupted. "The spirits tell me. Your work is sincere and good."

"I've had enough for one night." Sun rolled onto her side, facing the cave wall.

Blaze and Mica continued talking for a short time before they too settled down to sleep.

"Beautiful dreams, Dame Sun," Mica said.

"Nightmares, Mica," she muttered, her stomach twisting at the sound of his familiar chuckle. Tonight they would share no kisses or touches. She would remain in this spot even if she didn't sleep for a moment.

\* \* \* \* \*

"The settlement is just over that dune." Mica pointed ahead.

Raising a hand to block the sunlight, Sun gazed across the desert.

"It's built on a small oasis," Mica continued.

"Smoke scented," Blaze murmured.

Sun glanced at her mentor, noting a peculiarity in his expression only perceivable to someone who knew him well. "What's wrong?"

Blaze shook his head, kicking his mount to a canter. Sun and Mica urged their horses after him. They paused atop a dune and stared at the remains of what had once been a small but prosperous village. Dusky patches of ash splotched the oasis' green surface. Remains of huts smoldered on the torn ground. Bodies were strewn amidst the rubble.

Cursing, Mica urged his horse to a gallop. Sun and Blaze followed. Before they reached the oasis, Mica had already dismounted. They joined him in searching for survivors but most of the bodies were decapitated, missing limbs or burned beyond recognition.

"This is my fault. Why didn't I come sooner?" Mica snapped, stepping over the rubble.

"There are no animals," Sun noted.

"Of course not. They would have taken those for food or transportation." Mica's eyes gleamed with fury and sorrow. "Why didn't I travel faster? The fires are still smoldering so this couldn't have happened more than a day or so ago."

"How were you to know?" Blaze said. "The fault is not yours but the vile ones who lit the flames and swung the swords."

Mica ignored him and continued searching, his face ashen. "Just like it used to be. I thought this brutality was over."

"Just like before," Sun murmured, glancing at him as she approached a well in what must have been the town square. "This is exactly what happened to my village when your father—"

"I know." Mica's gaze fixed on hers. "It was his and the false emperor's ways. It must have been done by their followers. This proves they *are* in the Kennas."

Blaze held up his hand for silence then darted over to a collapsed hut. The Knight yanked up stones and boards. "Life."

Mica and Sun joined him. After several moments of digging they discovered a man covered in splinters and gore, badly injured but alive.

"Uja," Mica said as he and Blaze examined him.

The man half opened an eye crusted with blood and whispered, "Mica."

"You'll be all right. We'll help you."

"I'm dying."

"Just rest." Mica cut away the leg of Uja's trousers.

Insects crawled over the swollen, pus-filled flesh.

Sun knew at a glance the appendage must be removed. She retrieved water from the well and rolled up her sleeves to assist Mica and Blaze.

"We'll take care of this," Mica told her, his voice calm though she noted lines of tension around his eyes and mouth. "Look for more survivors."

Sun nodded, impulsively touching a hand to his shoulder before beginning her search.

She picked her way through the rubble. Half an hour later Mica joined her while Blaze remained with Uja.

"Have you taken off the leg?" she asked. Mica shook his head and she realized Uja's wounds were fatal.

"According to Uja, it was an army who attacked. He overheard their plan to take the smaller villages across Upper Kenna then attack Ademene. We'll have to leave right away. The village nearest to here must be warned unless we're already too late."

"Did he say whose army attacked?"

"They wore the symbol of the false emperor."

"I thought he was dead along with your father?"

His expression angry, Mica's jaw tensed visibly. "He is. But he had a son who apparently has loyal followers as well."

"Loyal?" Sun kicked a piece of wood aside.

"A different kind of loyalty. They serve particular military bloodlines. As long as the warrior is of the right family and takes his place by force, they obey his commands."

Perhaps her loathing of Mica's father had colored her perception of the Kennas, but in spite of how many cultures she had been exposed to some of their ways seemed unacceptable to her. Lowering her gaze, Sun murmured, "I don't understand your ways."

"They're not mine anymore. They're archaic, violent and useless." Mica's fists clenched. "I can't believe I let this happen."

"Be reasonable. Even if we had gotten here before the attack the three of us couldn't have stopped an army—at least not without time to plan."

"I could have challenged their general and perhaps stopped the battle."

"And perhaps gotten yourself killed," Blaze stated. Both Sun and Mica turned. The Knight's pale eyes shone with sympathy. "Your friend has passed."

Mica closed his eyes for longer than a blink. Again Sun felt the urge to touch him, offer some comfort. His pain and guilt were almost tangible. Though she tried not to care about him, her heart betrayed her.

"We'll bury the bodies we've found and douse the remainder of the flames," Mica said. "Or I should say I will. None of this is your concern."

"Oh please." Sun raised her eyes to heaven. "We've come this far."

"Now is not the time for pride or loneliness, Mirrored Rock," Blaze told him. "We must remain like honey in a hive."

She glanced at Mica. "He means we have to stick together. Let's get to work."

They spent the remainder of the day digging through the rubble but found no survivors. They burned Uja's body along with many others then left for the nearest village nearly half a day's ride away.

"I should go alone," Mica said. "These villagers speak the northern dialect so you probably wouldn't understand them. The two of you ride back to Ademene and warn them about what's happening."

"I speak the northern dialect," Blaze said. "It's not wise to travel alone. Besides the detour is small and this is the main path to Ademene."

"I suppose you're right," Mica said. "With the false emperor's men wandering about one of you could be attacked should you ride alone."

"What of you?"

"I don't matter." Mica urged his mare faster.

Sun guessed he was hoping to cover as much ground as possible through the cold, moonlit night. Pushing the horses in the day's heat wouldn't be wise.

They reached the settlement at dawn and told them of the approaching danger. The villagers, grateful for the warning, offered them food and a place to rest. The three agreed to the meal but Mica refused to rest, saying he needed to reach Ademene as soon as possible.

"You both stay," he told Sun and Blaze. "As I said, this is not your concern."

"I'm sick of hearing you say that," Sun snapped. "We're a Dame and a Knight accustomed to hard travel and battle. This is what we do best so worry about yourself, not us."

"Rest is wise," Blaze said. "You haven't allowed yourself a moment to—"

"I'm ready to go." Mica stood from the low, wooden table in the home of the young couple who'd offered them food. "The village leader has provided us with fresh horses. When ours are rested they'll send riders with them to Ademene."

Blaze began, "Several hours' sleep is necessary for—"

"Then you stay and get it. I'm not letting what happened before happen again."

"He's right, Blaze. Speed is crucial since we have no idea when an attack could come."

"Sun, you don't—" Blaze began, but a fiery look from Mica stopped him. Shaking his head and muttering to himself, the Knight left the house and headed for the stable, Mica and Sun at his heels.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mica squinted toward the sun and slowed his horse. The almost unbearable heat



made traveling uncomfortable. Still, they'd ridden hard since early morning. On this main path from Ademene, identified by stone markers, to the northern coast they passed several other travelers and warned them about possible attacks.

Though Mica wanted to reach Ademene as soon as possible he didn't want to destroy the animals. He could sympathize with the horses. It had been almost two days since the group had slept. To Mica's irritation the lack of rest affected him. He remembered a time when he could fight, train and scout for days with scarcely any sleep or food. He'd been a warrior then, a military leader who didn't issue orders from a distance but rode into combat with his troops. The time he'd spent in prison and the banishment had marked him for life, however much longer that might be, since he didn't doubt he would die soon.

Even the slight motions used to control his horse were painful to Mica. His bones and muscles ached more with each passing moment.

*It's from digging through the rubble a day ago and this constant riding. You're not used to such hard work anymore, Mica.*

He straightened in the saddle, dismissing the feeling of a metal pike driving down his spine. His heart pounded against his sore ribs when he realized he wasn't suffering from simple weariness. Clutching his saddle's pommel to still his trembling hands, he urged the horse ahead of Blaze and Sun.

"Don't be foolish, Mirrored Rock," Blaze called. "The beast won't last."

"We need to get to Ademene," Mica said.

"Push a horse in this heat and we'll end up walking there," Sun commented. "We're making good time anyway."

"In two days we'll reach the grand oasis." Blaze fell into step beside Mica. "Mirrored Rock, perhaps we should stop for a time. At the next cave we can—"

"No. I almost forgot about another settlement several hours' ride from here. I think it's too small for the army to be interested in but we must be sure they're safe. Then if we continue at a steady pace we could reach Ademene in two days."

"You ask the impossible."

"Nothing's impossible."

Sun smiled, edging her horse up on Mica's other side. "That's what the Knights always say. Maybe you should become one instead of a Priest, Mica."

"I've already made my decision," he snapped, resisting the urge to shiver in spite of the heat.

"So what's this settlement like?" Sun asked.

"Similar to the one we just came from but much smaller. No more than thirty people. They also speak the northern dialect."

"I'm stopping." Blaze slowed his horse.

Sun kept up with Mica but glanced over her shoulder at the Knight. "Maybe he's right."

"You both do what you want." Mica's gaze fixed on the horizon. His vision blurred and he blinked a few times to clear his eyes. At times the symptoms took hours to fully appear. He needed to travel while he could. If he was lucky he might even make it to...

"Mirrored Rock," Blaze shouted. "Don't be foolish."

"Mind your own business for once," Mica snarled, glaring at the Knight, irritation at war with guilt. Blaze had been nothing but kind and helpful since they'd met but the man couldn't seem to keep his opinions to himself. The last thing he wanted was for Sun to witness his greatest weakness, his curse, the one thing his father had given him along with the skill to destroy.

"He's only trying to be nice." Sun turned to Mica. Her brow furrowed and her furious expression faded a bit. Mica knew he must look as bad as he felt. "What the hell is wrong with you, besides a foul temper, that is?"

"Nothing." He edged his mount away from her.

Blaze, having decided not to stop after all, rode beside him though his gaze fixed ahead.

"I'm sorry," Mica said.

"It's not uncommon for a man to tie his own noose," replied the Knight.

Mica tugged his horse behind his companions. Perhaps Blaze was right and they should stop at the next cave. He shivered beneath his robes. It felt like a hundred steel fists were squeezing every bone and muscle in his body. His vision blurred again and he clenched his teeth.

*I will not make a fool of myself in front of her. Not in front of this beautiful bitch who reveres strength above all else.*

"One thing's for sure I prefer a good blizzard to all this heat any day," Sun said, brushing a stray lock of sand-coated hair from her mouth. "I don't know about anyone else but I'm getting hungry. Let's stop for a few minutes at least and rest the horses."

"There's shade ahead." Blaze pointed to several caves in the side of a mountain a short distance away.

"Let's head for it. We should—"she paused, glancing over her shoulder upon hearing a loud thud behind her. Her stomach tightened. Mica had fallen off his horse. She dismounted quickly and hurried to him. "Blaze, stop."

In an instant the Knight was beside her. She grasped Mica's shoulder, feeling him shake beneath her hands. At the sight of his unusual pallor and chattering teeth, she experienced a wave of sympathy and concern she had never expected to feel for him.

"What's wrong with him?" she whispered to Blaze.

"Bog tremors, I'm guessing." The Knight touched a hand to Mica's brow. "Am I right?"

"Y...Yes," Mica gasped.

"I've never heard of it," Sun said.

"It's very rare. I've seen it few times. It's caught in wet, dirty conditions hence its name. It cannot be passed from person to person, Brightest Star."

"I wasn't thinking about that." Sun spoke truthfully. Her concern with Mica's condition overcame her fear of catching the disease herself. Still it was good to know that in a week or two she and Blaze wouldn't be in his position.

"The cave," Blaze said, hoisting Mica up. "He'll travel with me. Lead his mare, Brightest Star."

Blaze helped Mica onto his gelding and mounted behind him, supporting him until they reached the cave. Sun started a fire while Blaze helped Mica to sit against a wall and covered him with a blanket.

"What do you use for the pain?" asked the Knight.

"Black haw." Mica's voice wavered from chills.

"I have white willow which I think will work better." Blaze searched through his leather bag of healing supplies.

Sun finished building the fire then took her blanket from her saddlebag and brought it to Mica. She removed his kaffiyeh. The material and silky hair beneath were damp with sweat, his brow clammy.

"We can't stop long." Mica pushed himself onto his elbows. "I have to get the message to Ademene."

"Don't worry about that." Sun touched his shoulder. "The message will get there."

Mica looked ready to argue—for all of ten seconds before he dropped to his side, shaking violently. She covered him with the blanket and glanced at Blaze who approached with medicine and a water flask. Mica managed to swallow the medicine and some of the water.

"When did you first get sick?" Blaze asked.

"Five years ago in the prison before banishment."

Blaze nodded and stepped aside to repack his supplies.

Sun approached and whispered, "How long will this last?"

Blaze shrugged. "Usually bouts last about an hour with no more than three hours between each. After three hours without symptoms the attack is over."

"How long between attacks?" Sun's brow furrowed.

"Sometimes days, sometimes weeks. If a person rests and avoids emotional upsets he can go months without an attack."

"No wonder everyone was so concerned with him back in Ademene," Sun murmured. "And you, Blaze. You knew."

"The spirits spoke yet they did not tell me which disease."

Sun glared in Mica's direction. "Damn him. Why didn't he say he was sick?"

"Pride and guilt can be deadly."

“Will anything else happen to him besides fever and chills?”

“Those whom I knew with bog tremors described pain. Like his bones were crushed, one man told me. Each attack gains in intensity until the victim expires.” Blaze held her gaze. “A slow, painful death.”

“All right, I understand your point.” Sun’s teeth clenched. “And no, I’m not glad he’s been infected.”

Blaze took her hand. “I knew.”

She glanced at Mica again, this time her anger dulled by sadness. Even if she never saw him again after she left the Kennas she would miss knowing he was alive and flashing his stupid grin. “Isn’t there a cure?”

Blaze tugged her away from Mica and lowered his voice even more. “There is. A plant called portia. When properly prepared it will lessen the symptoms until they diminish. Here we have two problems.”

“What?”

“The portia works best if given when the disease is new, preferably within the first year. After that the chances for a cure are slim.”

“But there’s still a chance. What’s the second problem?”

Blaze opened his hands helplessly. “I have none left with me. During my last journey I aided a man with bog tremors and depleted my supply. Portia is not available in the Kennas, only certain islands in the north—or back home in my garden.”

“We have to get it for him.” Sun paused, straining to listen. “Sounds like hoofbeats.”

She walked to the mouth of the cave, hoping the horses belonged to more travelers and not enemies. Milady and Valor were dismounting near the cave.

“We’re on our way to the coast where my family’s ship waits to bring us home,” Milady explained. “We saw your horses and figured you were heading to Ademene so we decided to say goodbye. It was nice meeting you, Dame Sun.”

“And you.”

“Where’s Sir Blaze and Mica?”

“Mica’s very ill.” Sun wondered if she looked as concerned as she felt.

Milady’s brow furrowed. “I’m sorry to hear that. Is there anything we can do to help?”

“Not unless you have some portia on you,” Sun muttered.

“The herb?” Valor spoke so seldom that Sun was almost startled by the sound of his deep voice.

“Yes. Don’t tell me you have some?”

“I know where I can get it. Nalmar, the ancestral home of my people, grows portia. My father is a healer and uses the herb often.”

“Where is Nalmar?”

"In the Unownland," Milady said. "We're less than two weeks' journey both ways. We could bring you the portia, if needed."

Sun's heartbeat quickened and she smiled, grasping Milady's wrist and tugging her into the cave. Valor followed.

"Blaze. They're going to get your portia," Sun announced.

The Knight squatted beside Mica, attempting to force him to drink more water.

Blaze nodded. "Very good. How soon?"

"About two weeks," Milady said.

"We should leave right away if you're ready." Valor glanced at his charge.

"Of course I'm ready. We'll send the portia as soon as we can."

"Thank you so much for your help. And be careful. As you know, there are dangerous warriors somewhere in this desert. Who knows where they could turn up next," Sun said, escorting them back to their horses.

"You're welcome." Milady mounted her petite white mare, a startling contrast to the big-boned stallion Valor rode. Like its master, the horse had a mane of wild chestnut hair and a fierce expression in its eyes.

The Nalmite nodded in Sun's direction before he and Milady rode off.

Sun stepped back into the cave, kneeling beside Blaze who wiped sweat from Mica's eyes.

"We have to warn the settlement." Though his shivering had lessened Mica's voice sounded weaker than before. Sun guessed the first bout was over. She wondered how much time he had before the second—if there would be a second. Hopefully there would not.

"You cannot travel," Blaze stated. "I will go to the settlement then to Ademene. When you're rested, you'll follow."

"What about me?" Sun demanded. The last thing she wanted was to tend Mica. Already she cared too much about him. If she nursed him through this she'd lose the last shred of anger that kept her from loving him more deeply than she'd ever imagined loving anyone. "I can ride on. You stay with Mica. Blaze, you've treated this disease before. I haven't."

Blaze sat back on his heels. "There's nothing I can do that you can't. You're a good healer, Brightest Star. And I speak the northern dialect. You do not."

He was right. Though Blaze was difficult to understand in any language he had a better chance of communicating with the villagers than Sun did.

"I'll leave right away." Blaze turned to Mica but he'd already fallen asleep. "Stones or gulls. The hands that touch all with gentleness shall prevail."

At the moment, Sun was too distracted to attempt to decipher the meaning of Blaze's comment. She followed the Knight to his horse.

"See that he drinks as much water as possible," Blaze instructed. "Give him the

white willow at your discretion. He might need much. I've known even the strongest warriors to scream in the disease's clutches. After the last bout, make sure he rests for at least a day, preferably two."

"I can't believe I'm stuck here."

"Your vocation." Blaze shrugged then mounted the horse. "Blessings."

"And to you."

From the mouth of the cave Sun watched Blaze ride away.

## Chapter Eight

Sun removed her healing supplies from her saddlebag and sat beside Mica who was deeply asleep. She touched his forehead, noting his fever hadn't dropped but the white willow would help with that. Her hand strayed to his cheek. For the first time she felt no hatred of him, no anger, only sympathy. He'd seemed so strong both in the ring at the Circle and later when they made love. By the Spirit no man had ever made her feel so aroused and cared for just with a kiss.

"Why did I have to get stuck here?" she murmured.

"I'm sorry," Mica whispered.

"You should have said you were sick. What were you trying to prove?" She reached for the water flask and held it to his lips. "Drink this."

He swallowed then lay still. Apparently even that simple motion tired him. "I hoped to make it to Ademene before I got to this stage. Should have known it was impossible."

"If you'd have taken better care of yourself you wouldn't have gotten sick at all."

"It was inevitable."

"But not right now. Blaze said if you rest you won't have attacks as often."

"Doesn't matter, Dame Sun. One way or the other it will be a slow, painful death."

She glanced away, feeling the sting of her words thrown back at her for the second time that day.

He continued, "I'm not exactly undeserving of your words."

"I was angry when I spoke them." She placed the flask aside and settled her back against the cave wall. "You don't deserve this."

"In my past—"

"You can't change the past but I've seen and heard about the work you do with the Bedouins and others. You're a decent man. On the dumb side though. You should have told us how bad you were feeling long before you fell off the damn horse."

"I didn't want you to think me weak."

Stunned, she turned to him. "Why should you care what I think?"

"I don't know. I just do." His eyes slipped shut.

He slept for nearly half an hour before waking to another bout of chills and bone-crushing pain. He hardly complained but Sun knew the extent of his agony by his glazed eyes and the pallor of his skin. She administered more white willow and covered him with blankets but the shivering was worse than before and the attack lasted longer.

*Blaze said things will get worse before they get better.*

All Dames were experienced healers and Sun was usually sure of her actions. She'd never contended with bog tremors before. Knowing Mica could die disturbed her. The attack left him too drained to drink from the flask so she let him sleep. Once he'd rested she'd make sure he swallowed more water. She bathed his face and neck with a damp cloth then rekindled the fire.

Dusk dimmed the world outside the cave. Soon the wind howled through the cold night. Sun wrapped herself in her cloak and sat by the fire. She hadn't intended to drift off but it had been almost three days since she'd last slept.

She awoke chilled. The fire had burned low and as she rekindled it an agonized moan drew her attention to Mica.

"Not again," Sun murmured, kneeling beside him. He shook, his breathing ragged. His fingers weakly clutched the rocky floor and he groaned. Dark circles sagged beneath his eyes, a ghastly contrast to his corpse-pale skin.

Sun gave him as much white willow as she dared, fearful such massive amounts would eventually harm his stomach. She prepared the herb and helped him to sit up, difficult while in the midst of an attack. He was much bigger than she was. In spite of his state of obvious exhaustion he possessed little control over his body when gripped by such violent tremors. The change of position dragged a whimper from his throat.

"I wish it would stop," he moaned. Sun doubted he even realized he spoke. For the past several hours he'd been in a semiconscious state either engulfed by an attack or resting death-like in an attempt to garner strength for the next bout. Each attack grew in intensity until Sun wondered if the next might kill him.

"So cold," he murmured. While adjusting his blanket, her hand brushed his. It felt icy in spite of the heat emanating from the rest of his body.

"I'll get you another blanket." Sun rested her hand on his shoulder. She took her blanket and covered him with it, tempted to share it with him since the temperature in the cave had dropped in the frigid desert night. Maybe it wasn't a bad idea. Her body heat might help his chills and at least she wouldn't freeze too. Resting beside him, she draped the blanket over them. His entire body trembled against hers but he edged closer to her, seeking her warmth. Dropping his head to her shoulder, he draped an arm around her waist. Unable to stop herself she held him close, stroking his shoulders and back. She spoke to him softly, attempting to comfort him with her voice and her touch.

Sun knew she was lost. Anger and hatred of him were now a foreign thing. As much as she'd once wanted him dead she now wanted him cured. She wanted back the man who had made love with her, the one with humor glistening in his eyes and the silly yet arousing grin on his lips.

Eventually his tremors lessened. Her hand strayed to the back of his neck and slipped beneath his hair. Finally his shaking stopped altogether and he slept, his body so close to hers that their hearts beat in unison.

Hours dragged by while Sun prayed that bout had been the last.

Outside dawn broke and she finally relaxed. Three hours had certainly gone by.



They'd survived the night. According to Blaze, Mica should have no more attacks—at least for a while. Drifting to sleep, she hoped Milady and Valor would return with the portia, giving at least the chance that Mica could be cured of this horrible disease.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sun awoke to Mica shifting position beside her. She sat up, the blanket falling from her shoulder.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "Do you need another blanket?"

"No." One hand braced against the cave wall he stood and paused a moment as if the simple motion tired him. "I just need to go outside."

The cave was cool but no longer cold. Sunlight shone through the jagged mouth.

She rose and touched his arm. "Let me help you."

Offering his familiar smile, he patted her hand. "Thank you, Dame Sun, but some things a man needs to do on his own."

She couldn't help respecting him for keeping a sense of humor when he must have felt awful.

"When you come back we can have something to eat."

He shook his head, his lip curling as if the idea of food made him ill. "I can't. Not right now."

Sun watched, resisting the urge to follow as he left the cave to relieve himself. Part of her feared he'd die where he stood.

She removed some bread and fruit from her saddlebag and munched while staring at their sleeping space. She longed for the day when they would sleep together again—this time for pleasure. By the Spirit when had she decided to make love with him again? Would he want to after what she'd done? Most likely. He made it clear he still enjoyed her company.

Mica stepped into the cave, his movements slower than usual. Though still haggard, his face wasn't corpse-like as it had been the day before. He walked to his saddle and stooped to pick it up.

"What the hell are you doing?" Sun demanded.

"We have to move. Enough time has been wasted."

"We're not going anywhere." She yanked the saddle from his hands and grasped his wrist, dragging him toward the blankets. "Do you want to get sick again?"

"I don't matter. Ademene—"

"Blaze has gone to the settlement and then to Ademene."

"I'm grateful for what he's done but—"

"But nothing. He said you're to rest for two days."

Mica shook his head. "That's a luxury I can't afford."

"You'd last about ten minutes out there. Look, you can hardly stand now." Sun pushed him toward the sleeping space.

This time he didn't resist but settled onto the blanket, his eyes half closed. "We'll start in a few hours."

"You're not going anywhere today or tomorrow." She sat beside him, cupping his cheek in her hand.

Mica tilted his face against her palm and she guessed he liked her touch as much as she liked touching him. His jaw was slightly stubbled from the night's growth of beard. It felt rough and pleasant against her hand. His blue eyes lost focus and his breathing deepened.

"I know you're not strong enough to travel."

"What makes you say that?" he murmured.

"Because you're not arguing with me right now."

His lips curved upward the slightest bit before he closed his eyes completely. Still a little groggy, Sun curled up beside him, her hand resting against his chest. His body felt warm through his clothing but not feverish. She slowly stroked his hard chest, enjoying the beating of his heart against her palm. As Blaze suggested he probably just needed time to recuperate.

Mica's arm slipped around her. He pressed her close and spoke in a drowsy whisper, "Why are you being nice?"

She raised her head from his shoulder, not bothering to keep the irritation from her voice and snapped, "Excuse me?"

"I said why are you being so nice to me?"

"Was I supposed to leave you dying on the sand and ride away?"

A quirky smile touched his lips then faded. "I thought you might have. It's not like I haven't been alone when attacks have occurred."

Sun's belly twisted at the thought. "Then you're lucky you didn't die. I still can't believe your father stuck you in a prison so filthy you got this disease."

"I was a traitor."

"You did what was right. He was the traitor to humankind."

"He didn't care about people any more than the false emperor did. There was a time when I didn't either, Sun. I did exactly what he ordered."

"You were raised to follow him."

He laughed. "I never thought you'd make excuses for me."

"It's not an excuse. It's the truth."

"I should have rebelled sooner. When I think of all the lives I helped destroy—"

"Now you think you have to pay for it by giving up your manhood."

"Back to the Priesthood again? Our ritual really bothers you, doesn't it?"

"Mica, cutting off your balls won't change the past."

"I'm not trying to change the past. I'm a Priest in Waiting. It's an honor."

"An honor." She sat up, her fingers tightening on the front of his robe. "What if you decide you want children one day? How can you give that up?"

"You've taken vows, Dame Sun. Are they for no reason?"

"That's different."

"You said yourself Dames take a vow of chastity." His eyes opened and a smirk played around his lips.

"Abstinence until after marriage."

"Not that you seem to care much about that."

"Are you complaining?"

"Not in the least. I've never felt such sweet lips on my cock as when we made love that night. It was almost worth the pain of your rejection."

"Right," she scoffed. "You didn't seem to be hurt by it."

His eyes slipped shut and he paused for so long she thought he might have fallen asleep.

"It did hurt, Dame Sun. If you must know you're the only woman I've been with since before my imprisonment. You're the only woman who has aroused me enough. Until you I thought I would never again know how it felt to be a man."

His words made her tingle. "Then how can you possibly give up your manhood?"

"There is more to being a man than the ability to make love and create babies. Besides there is no rule that says Priests can't marry."

"Your ritual would make for a difficult wedding night."

"I don't see why you're so concerned with my decision or with me for that matter."

"Because I think I care for you." Her heart pounded at what she'd just admitted.

"Think." He cupped her face in his hand, his thumb stroking her cheek. "You think?"

"I do care for you, Mica. Very much."

"I'm sorry."

"You're..." By the Spirit, the man confused her.

"I'm sorry I made love with you. I'm sorry I want to kiss you right now, sick and all. I'm sorry you care for someone who probably won't last another year. I was so damn selfish again. I want to be a Priest. I know you're a Dame but I couldn't help desiring you. I thought after that night we'd never see each other again, that I could carry on with the beautiful memory of making love with you. For the past five years the only comfort I've had is knowing the last bout of my disease will be a little better than the next. It will kill me one of these times, Sun, and I never should have flirted with you even for amusement."

“Mica, you’re talking like you’re already dead.”

“I am.”

“We all are.” She grasped his wrists, her gaze fixed on his. “Any of us could die at any time. And you won’t necessarily die from bog tremors.” He shook his head and started to protest, but she continued, “Blaze knows of a treatment, a cure even. It’s an herb called portia.”

Mica’s eyes narrowed. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“It grows in the north. Valor said the Nalmites of the Unownland have access to it. He and Milady have gone to their homeland and promised to send some back to us.”

Mica drew an unsteady breath. “This can’t be true.”

“I won’t lie to you. Blaze said unless the treatment is given within the first year of catching the disease it might not work but there is a chance, Mica.”

His eyes glistened with hope. “That’s more than I’ve had until now.”

“So you have to rest and recover. When Valor and Milady return with the portia Blaze can begin treating you.”

Mica shook his head. “I meant it when I said I don’t have the luxury of time. I will not put my personal needs above the people of the Kennas. Not again. If we’re at war my place is in the heart of it.”

“We can talk about it later.” Sun brushed a kiss across his mouth.

He tugged her to his shoulder. “At least for today.”

“And tomorrow.”

“We’ll see about that.” He squeezed her tighter.

Within moments she knew by the sound of his breathing he was asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sun awoke an hour later. Careful not to disturb Mica, she slipped from his arms and stood, stretching. After checking the horses, she walked to a corner of the cave and undressed to her loincloth and vest. Using some of her precious water, she washed.

Her skin prickled, an odd sensation washing over her. She reached for her clothes. Before she could step into her trousers three men, sand sticking to their perspiring faces, entered the cave. They grinned, staring at her long, sleek legs and ample cleavage. Though their accent was different from the people of Ademene she understood their comments.

“Looks like we picked the right cave,” the tallest man removed his robe, exposing a well-muscled body beneath.

Laughing, his companions did the same. They looked strong as well. One had a jagged scar above his eye, the other was bald and bearded.

“Don’t waste your time with that.” One of the men pointed the tip of a curved

sword at the trousers Sun yanked on.

“Don’t waste your time making yourselves comfortable,” she stated, reaching for her sword.

“She’s going to put up a fight.” The tall man rubbed his hands together. “Good. I like it better when they struggle.”

Sun’s stomach tightened with rage. *This bastard is going to eat his own cock.*

“Glad to hear it,” she snapped.

“Eh.” The scarred one nodded at Mica who was still deeply asleep. “Isn’t he the traitor from Ademene?”

The bald man raised an eyebrow. “I thought he’d be dead by now. Heard he was rotting from bog tremors.”

The tall man stepped closer to Mica. “That’s him.” He unsheathed the sword. “Karlus will love me to bring him his head on a pole.”

Sun positioned herself between the men and Mica.

“Out of my way, wench.” The tall one reached for her arm just as the ball of her bare foot struck between his legs. He cursed, loosening the grip on his sword. Sun knocked the blade from his hand. Shouting, the other men attacked.

Mica awakened and leapt to his feet. “What the hell—”

“Stay behind me, Mica,” she ordered.

“Stay be—” Mica ducked as she spun, her blade blocking the sword thrust aimed at his head. Mica kicked the scarred man’s feet out from under him. With a grunt he landed on his back.

From the corner of her eye Sun observed Mica wrestling the weapon from his adversary’s grip.

She blocked an overhead strike from one side and shifted her stance, avoiding a blade thrust from the other. The tall man tugged a dagger from his belt and flung it. Sun turned her head and the blade whizzed by. A warm trickle of blood ran from her stinging ear down her neck. Her teeth grinding with rage, she knocked the blade from her opponent’s hand. Wielding both swords, she met her attackers with a vengeance. Within moments one lay dead on the cave floor but the tall man escaped.

Sun hesitated, making certain Mica had the advantage over his opponent before she chased her adversary. Outside the man had already leapt onto his horse and was galloping across the desert. Not bothering with tack, Sun mounted her stallion bareback, her fingers clutching his mane as she guided him with her knees and voice alone.

If her guess was right the men belonged to the rebel group that had destroyed the village on the oasis. They had called Mica a traitor and would tell their companions where to find him. She couldn’t risk having their enemies discover them before they reached Ademene.

Her stallion’s long legs devoured the distance between Sun and her enemy. The

man glanced over his shoulder as she neared his horse's churning flanks. Tingling with excitement, Sun edged her mount alongside his until she felt the lash of the animal's mane and the heat of its body. Fury and a touch of panic gleamed in the rider's eyes just before she leapt onto his horse. His elbow jabbed backward, striking her in the face. The blow knocked her off the back of the horse but she held onto the warrior. They struck the sand with bone-jarring force.

Mica shouted her name but she had no time to concentrate on anything except her enemy. He straddled her, one hand squeezing her neck, the other wrestling the dagger from her hand. She punched him hard in the throat. His eyes bulged and he fell away, clutching his neck. Gasping, her throat bruised, she kicked him in the face. He collapsed on the sand.

"Sun." Mica dismounted before his mare came to a stop. He dropped to his knees beside her, examining her bleeding lips. She noted his sweat-misted face was as pale as it had been the day before. The struggle in the cave had obviously taken what little strength he'd recovered.

"I'm fine," she croaked, her throat aching from her enemy's death grip. "Is the bastard dead?"

Mica examined the body and nodded. "Are you crazy? You could have gotten killed."

"If the likes of them could get the better of me, I'd have been dead in my first battle." She stood, wiping her bloody lips on her forearm. "Are you all right?"

His brow knitted in an angry expression. "Fine. What the hell were you trying to do back there?"

"Save your skin. What do you think?"

"I'm capable of protecting myself."

Drained, he leaned against his horse.

She curled her lip. "Uh-huh."

"You didn't have to chase him down and kill him. He was running away."

"Running to that army you're so worried about, I'll wager. They recognized you, Mica. Called you a traitor. They were trying to kill you. Why do you think I chased him? For the pleasure of it?"

A strange expression shone in Mica's eyes. He gently touched her cheek. "I'm sorry."

"Let's get back to the cave. Maybe we can question the one you were fighting."

Mica shook his head. "I killed him."

"And you're talking about me?"

"He had a knife. I had no choice."

Together they hoisted the dead body onto his horse and walked back to the cave. The sun was at its highest and the weather unbearably hot. Sun made sure they traveled

slowly since she knew Mica was more tired than he admitted.

"Once we burn the bodies we'll have to start for Ademene."

"You really need to rest."

"No. We have to get back. It's more dangerous out here with members of the army so close. I can't have you fighting for me, Dame Sun." His eyes glimmered with a combination of humor and admiration.

She took his face in her hands and brushed a kiss across his mouth. "Too late."

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time they arrived in Ademene, Mica was ready to fall out of the saddle. It had been so long since his last attack that he'd almost forgotten how drained he felt for several days after. This time had been the worst. The pain had nearly driven him mad. Unable to remember all that happened during bouts, he hoped he hadn't made too great a spectacle of himself in front of Sun. However he guessed he'd been quite pathetic since she hadn't insulted him in days.

When she'd rested beside him he thought it had been a fever-induced dream. Why was it when a beautiful woman with the body of a goddess crawled under his blankets he was too sick to enjoy it? Even worse the same woman had to protect *him* from his enemies. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth when he recalled the shock on the men's faces when Sun fought them off. Obviously they'd never met a Dame of the Opal Order. Still, it vexed him to know she considered him such an invalid that she'd ordered him to hide behind her.

Their horses plodded down the road to the palace, the thud of hoofbeats nearly lulling him to sleep.

"How are you?" Sun asked.

"Fine."

"Fighting that man didn't help you and neither did the long ride in this heat."

Mica's anger bristled. "You're starting to sound like my mother. I'm accustomed to the desert, remember?"

"Why are you upset with me? I'm only thinking about your welfare."

He smiled. That was more like the Sun he knew. "I never thought I'd miss having you yell at me."

"I'm not yelling."

At the palace, Mica dismounted. Steadying himself against the horse, he took a few seconds' rest before he and Sun left their mounts with two stable boys. Straightening his shoulders, Mica strode across the yard and through the great hall directly to the emperor's chamber. Two guards dressed in white and carrying swords waited outside. One excused himself and disappeared into the chamber, appearing moments later with the emperor's approval for them to enter.

Mica had no sooner stepped inside than Kado approached. By the look in the High Advisor's eyes Mica must have appeared as haggard as he felt.

"You've been ill again."

Mica turned to a smooth-shaven man seated in a gilded chair on a raised platform across the room. He approached, bowing deeply, "Emperor."

"Mica. Is it true? Have you not been well?"

"I had a brief attack but it has passed. We have news. Has Sir Blaze returned?"

"No. Is something wrong?"

"An army destroyed the settlement. They're planning to continue conquering smaller villages then attack Ademene. By the damage at the oasis I'd say this army is sizeable and well armed."

The emperor's brow furrowed. "Who is behind it?"

"Dame Sun heard them mention Karlus," Mica said.

At the mention of Karlus, Mica felt a twinge of not exactly fear but concern. Karlus was the name of the general just below Mica in his father's army. He and Mica had trained under the same instructors and been rivals since childhood. Karlus was a powerful fighter and a shrewd strategist. After the war he had disappeared. Many believed him to be dead. If the men who'd attacked Sun had been referring to the Karlus Mica remembered then an army ruled by him would not be easily defeated, unless—

"I suggest you step up your guard and send out men to discover the army's whereabouts."

"Immediately. I know you're a Priest in Waiting now, Mica," the emperor said, "but during the last war your advice brought us victory. I may call upon your leadership skills again."

"I am at your disposal."

The emperor stood, motioning for a servant boy to approach. The youth hurried to the emperor's chair and knelt.

"Tell General Kasir and the Captain of the Guard I must speak with them immediately," the emperor ordered then turned to Mica as the boy rushed off. "Please join us. We need to discuss plans."

"He needs rest after his journey, My Lord," Kado said to the emperor.

"With all due respect it's important for us to start planning now. I can rest later."

Kado shook his head almost imperceptibly.

The guard entered the chamber again. "Emperor, Sir Blaze wishes to speak with—"

"Send him in," the emperor bellowed.

The guard disappeared. Seconds later Blaze, looking hot and dirty from travel, strode to the emperor and bowed. The Knight's auburn hair hung in disarray around his frantic face. His pale blue eyes were bloodshot and sand streaked his skin.



Apparently Blaze's journey had also been difficult.

"Blaze, how did it go?" Sun asked.

The Knight sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I thought those people and I would never see the same sky."

"Trouble making them understand, huh?"

"A nightmare."

"At least you weren't attacked by a bunch of pigs."

Blaze's concerned gaze switched from Sun to Mica. "Attacked?"

"We're fine," she said, "which is more than I can say for the ones who attacked us."

"Were you able to find any new information?" Mica asked Blaze.

The Knight shook his head. "Only to spread word."

General Kasir and the captain of the guard stepped into the chamber. For the next hour they discussed plans of defense as well as the possibility of sending spies to search for the army and learn what they could.

"We'll continue this discussion once you've rested," the emperor told Mica, Sun and Blaze.

Leaving the chamber, Mica thought how good rest sounded. Had it not been for the bog tremors he might have been too preoccupied to sleep. At the end of the hall he turned one way while Sun turned another. When he glanced over his shoulder he found her staring back at him. She smiled and offered a short wave. It occurred to him how much better it would feel sharing his blankets with her again.

*Stop it, Mica. No matter how sweet the dream that's all it is. A dream. You and Dame Sun don't belong together. No matter what you feel for each other the relationship is impossible.*

Turning from her, he continued down the hallway and climbed the flight of stairs to the chamber he shared with Zareb. He stepped inside and sprawled on the bed without bothering to undress or even remove his kaffiyeh. Since Zareb was lending aid to the Bedouins Mica knew he'd have the chamber to himself. He closed his eyes. The room was almost *too* quiet. Again he wished for Sun's company.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What a chore, making people understand." Blaze sighed, dropping into a chair by the window in his chamber. Sun had followed him, hoping they could talk. "My head throbs."

Sun smiled, approaching his chair. She massaged his shoulders. "I told you I should have gone but you leave me with a sick man instead."

Blaze glanced at her. "He's not well at all. Pray the Nalmite's herb is his cure."

"He's grateful to even have a hope. Though I do pray for his complete recovery."

"You look at him differently."

Sun's fingers strayed to Blaze's unkempt hair. She smoothed the unruly auburn locks. "Why do these things happen to me?"

"Love?" Blaze turned, staring at her. "His heart is true, Sun. I care for you too much to lie about such things."

"I never said anything about love."

His lips curved upward slightly. "You didn't have to."

## Chapter Nine

Feeling like a spy, Sun opened the door to Mica's chamber a crack and glanced in. She knew she should have knocked but she didn't want to disturb him, merely assure herself he was all right.

She gazed at him, her heart pounding and her mouth dry. His lean body sprawled across one of the small beds, a hand dangling over the edge, the back of it brushing the floor. His eyes were closed, his expression almost peaceful. She longed to crawl into the bed with him and sleep in the warmth of his arms as she'd done only a short time ago.

"Dame Sun?"

Her pulse raced. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry you and Blaze were dragged into all this."

"Don't be. It's what we do. If not here then it would happen somewhere else."

"Nevertheless I do appreciate it."

"Not a problem. Get some rest, Mica, or you'll have another attack before Valor and Milady get here."

He raised himself on his elbows and stared at her. "Dame Sun."

She hesitated then approached.

"Do you..." He sighed. "Would you sit on the bed with me?"

Her stomach churning, she moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. By the Spirit she wanted to curl up beside him.

He shook his head, dropped back onto the pillows and closed his eyes. "I shouldn't have asked especially now that you've witnessed my affliction."

She slid into the bed beside him and kicked off her boots. He tugged her against his shoulder. Her bare foot touched his leg, the sensation so pleasant that she continued rubbing her toes along his hair-roughened calf. Desire tightened her nipples and made her belly flutter. Sun reminded herself he was still a sick man yet the warmth of his body, the sensation of his breath on her cheek and the gentleness of his touch aroused her completely.

He sighed, a contented sound deep in his throat, and fell asleep in the midst of stroking her shoulder.

Sun raised her head, staring at his face. His cheekbones seemed even sharper since his attack. His lips fell apart, exposing the tips of his even white teeth. When she kissed his cheek he smiled in his sleep.

"Rest well, Mica," she whispered, wishing she could do the same—difficult with his warm, hard body pressed close to hers. His cock even in its flaccid state pressed against

her. She recalled how it looked at full mast, so thick, long and patterned with veins beneath the dark skin, the balls beneath dangling in all their glory. How could he someday bring himself to mutilate such a perfect image of male beauty by voluntarily having his testicles removed? At least she would be around to try to convince him not to. With the upcoming attack she and Blaze had no intention of leaving the Kennas any time soon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Enveloped in comfortable warmth, Mica stirred. Opening his eyes, he rolled onto his back, his muscles a bit sore though he felt much better than when he'd arrived at the palace.

"Mica?"

He turned to Dame Sun who raised herself onto her elbow. She shrugged her hair over her shoulder and edged closer to him, stroking his face.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Better. Thank you."

Two of the top ties of her vest had come undone, revealing her ample cleavage. At the sight of the creamy tops of her breasts and the gorgeous shape of her shoulder, his cock awakened. Goddess how could he still be tired yet want her so badly?

Sun followed his gaze to her breasts then smiled upon noting the bulge of his cock beneath the sheets.

She grinned. "Glad to see you're feeling stronger but maybe I should leave. Too much excitement in your condition—"

"The bout has passed, Dame Sun." He stroked her face with his fingertips. At that moment he wanted nothing more than to make love with her again. "But you are right. My body might not finish what my heart desires."

"We can work around that."

As she rose to her knees the covers fell seductively from her shoulders. She finished untying her vest and shrugged it off. The sight of her gorgeous curves sent Mica's pulse racing out of control

"Dame Sun." Mica stroked her ribs and ran his palm over her belly. He cupped her rose-tipped breasts and stroked the nipples to straining peaks.

Sun tugged the sheet off him and reached for his trousers. His body tingled with anticipation as she tugged them off then dropped them beside her vest.

With his body completely bared to her touch he fought for control of his excited breathing.

Kneeling between his legs, she leaned forward and splayed her hands across his chest. Massaging in circular motions, she left not an inch of his torso untouched. Where her hands roamed her lips followed, teasing and arousing him. She licked his nipples

and lapped him from breastbone to the base of his belly while Mica floated on a haze of passion. Using the tip of her tongue, she traced the line of his pubic hair while squeezing and caressing his hips.

She straddled his hips and unwound her hair from its braid. Her fingers ran through the thick, blonde tresses. Unable to resist, he gently grasped a golden lock and caressed it.

A coquettish smile touched her lips and she arched her back slightly. The position offered him a perfect view of her uplifted breasts, the nipples extended like rosy peaks against her creamy flesh. Goddess she was beautiful. She bent forward, brushing his chest with her hair, and inched her way down his body. Her soft locks caressed his belly and swept his straining cock. The faint, tickling sensation aroused him more than he dreamed possible. Leaning lower, she used her nipples to caress him from cock to chest by moving her body up his.

"You feel so good, Dame Sun," he breathed.

"So do you, Mica." Stretching out on top of him, breast to chest, thigh to thigh, his cock trapped between the sensual nest of their mingling pubic hair, she licked his neck. Tenderly she nipped the flesh. Inching lower, she gently bit his shoulder then pressed her teeth to his solid chest muscles.

His heart pounding, he watched her lick the indentation of his hips and thighs. When she'd finished she began lapping first one inner thigh then the other. Mica longed to close his eyes to better enjoy the sensation but he didn't want to stop looking at her.

She took his balls in her mouth and sucked, her hair teasing his stomach. Gasping, he clutched handfuls of her hair and spread his legs wider so she could settle more comfortably between them. Nothing felt as good as making love with her.

Releasing his sac from her warm, wet lips, she pressed fluttering kisses to the base of his staff then traveled upward. She laved the straining rod then nibbled it from head to base and back again. The pleasure was so intense he nearly lost control of himself. Her lips pressed against the ridge along the underside of the bulbous head. The woman had stolen his heart and pleased his body like no one he'd ever known. She was his perfect match, the mate he'd dreamed of.

The arteries in Mica's neck throbbed as he arched his head into the pillows and his eyes slipped shut. His heart pounded. Passion filled his entire body and mind. He tingled with impending orgasm, his cock stiff and aching, his need almost painful.

Sun's lips were on his cock head now. She sucked him into her mouth and ran her tongue over the bulging crown. The tip of her tongue traveled along the underside and tickled the ridge before she sucked short and fast then so deep that he brushed the back of her throat.

"Dame Sun," he panted with almost unendurable pleasure. Goddess, she knew how to make love to a man.

His hips thrust upward, his buttocks taut and his legs as steely as his cock. One of her hands grasped the base of his erection while the other squeezed and caressed his

balls. Mica struggled to keep from groaning. He hoped no one decided to barge in through the unlocked door. In another second it wouldn't matter. He was headed for the most tremendous orgasm of his life.

He gasped, a raw sound of pure desire and came just as his cock popped free of her mouth. Pure ecstasy overcame him. His seed spurted in a climax of such length and intensity that for several moments he was unable to move but lay on his back, gasping, his pulse racing.

Opening his eyes, he saw her gazing down at him with a half smile on her lovely lips, her breasts and belly streaked with his essence. Her fingertips stroked his stomach then trailed up his chest and caressed his cheek. Grasping her hand, he kissed her palm.

Sun glanced at her torso. "I need to clean up."

She approached the table and dipped a cloth into the basin of water. Pleasantly drowsy and satisfied, Mica joined her, tugged the cloth from her hand and grasped her wrist. He sat on the bed and guided her between his legs. With the utmost tenderness he wiped his semen from her breasts and belly, wanting to show her through touch how much she meant to him. When she was thoroughly clean he placed the cloth aside and continued sweeping her soft curves with his hand. He kissed first one breast then the other.

"Oh, Mica," she purred, settling onto his lap. She wrapped her legs around him. Moisture from her pussy seeped onto his skin, a most pleasant sensation.

Grasping a handful of her hair, he took her lower lip between his teeth and sucked on it. She moaned, squirming against him, her hard nipples scraping sensuously against his chest.

"Dame Sun." In a swift motion he pushed her onto her back. His lips fastened on her nipple and he sucked hard. She panted and writhed, murmuring his name. Slashing his tongue across the nipple, he gently pinched the other one then rolled his thumb over it.

He kissed beneath her breast in a sensitive place that made her giggle and squirm. The sound of her laughter sent warmth throughout his entire body. Placing his lips to her stomach, he sucked and licked her flesh. He moved lower and she hooked her legs over his shoulders. Mica clasped her bottom and kneaded the satin-skinned globes. His tongue explored her clit and rimmed her pussy lips, savoring her texture and taste. He used the tip of it to tease and tickle her perineum. Goddess he could touch her all night. He loved the way she writhed and whispered breathless words of encouragement.

His lips fastened on her clit, he sucked and licked relentlessly. Locking her ankles behind his neck, she thrust her hips and burst in orgasm, her soft, damp flesh throbbing against his tongue.

Mica prayed the portia would cure him. More than anything he longed to make love with Sun when he was at full power, ready and able to claim her with all the passion and strength such a marvelous woman deserved.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mica awoke ravenous and well rested. He washed in the basin of water on the table in his room, slipped a robe over his naked body and carried his clothes down to the bathing chambers.

Two Priests and a Messenger swam in the warm water. Upon seeing Mica, one of the Priests approached the edge of the pool. "How are you? We heard you were ill again."

"I'm better, Val."

Mica shrugged off the robe and approached the water. Val's gaze swept him.

"Almost ready for the ritual?" the eunuch asked.

Mica's stomach flip-flopped a bit. He told himself it was due to hunger and ignored thoughts of making love with Dame Sun or rather *not* making love with her.

"I'm dedicated to the Goddess."

"None of us doubt that, Mica, but Priesthood isn't for everyone."

"He's right." The Messenger, floating on his back, drifted closer to where Mica and Val were talking.

Val's brown eyes looked far off for a moment. "Maybe if I had the choice my life would have been different. When I endured the ritual boys were chosen. Now at least Priests make their own decision to mold themselves in the Goddess' image."

"It's good that some traditions change." Mica dropped into the pool, ducking under to wet his hair. Black tendrils wrapped around his arms. He unwound them. "I should cut off this mess."

Val grinned. "And lose profit for selling it off piece by piece in the marketplace?"

"Imagine the price I'd get for the whole head?"

Val leaned closer to Mica and whispered in his ear, "Are you sure the pretty blonde Dame wouldn't miss it along with *other parts* of you if you get my meaning?"

"She's a friend." Mica reached for a cake of soap on the edge of the pool and scrubbed, avoiding Val's gaze. Sometimes the Priests and Messengers were so damn nosy.

"Friendly of her to spend the night in your bed."

Mica glared at Val. "What do you know about that?"

The eunuch raised his eyes toward the heavens. "*Everyone* knows. The High Advisor sent someone to check on you to make sure you were all right. When he saw the Dame with you he assumed you were quite well enough."

"I was half dead, Val. Trust me, after a bout with bog tremors I can do no more with a woman than you can." At least that had been true before. Sun had certainly inspired a miracle this time. "Who is spreading these stories? I don't want Dame Sun embarrassed." Mica's teeth ground with fury at such gossip. In his anger he squeezed the thick bar of soap in half. Both pieces plopped into the water.

Val edged away from Mica, his eyes wide. "Don't worry. It was only spoken of among the Priests. Besides if the woman is so concerned with rumors what was she doing in your chamber?"

Mica washed the soap off his hands and reined in his temper. Usually he wasn't so easily agitated. He blamed his foul mood on the aftereffects of bog tremors. "Dame Sun is a decent woman. If it hadn't been for her I might have died in the desert this time."

"No one doubts her decency," said the Messenger. "She spent the morning helping in the temple and caring for orphans. We just wondered if maybe you were having second thoughts about the Priesthood."

"Seriously, Mica," Val said. "If you want to endure the ritual it might be a wise idea to keep the woman out of your bed. The High Advisor might revoke his decision and ask you to become a Messenger instead."

"It's not all that bad either," the Messenger said. "My wife and children like me intact."

Mica ran a hand through his hair. Both of them were right. Being a Messenger wasn't such a horrible idea but if he wanted Priesthood he would have to keep his hands, lips and thoughts off Dame Sun at least in a sexual manner. Impossible. How could he keep from kissing and touching the woman any chance he got? Still it could never amount to anything more than many wonderful memories. Soon she would leave the Kennas. Even if she didn't he had little hope for a future.

He finished washing, braided his hair and dressed. After eating he walked to the emperor's chamber where the emperor, Kado, Sun, Blaze and General Kasir sat around a marble table.

"Glad you could make it," the general said.

"How are you feeling?" Kado asked. Though the High Advisor must have known about his night spent with Dame Sun, his expression revealed nothing.

"Much better. I'm sorry I slept so long. I guess traveling yesterday was more tiring than I imagined after the attack."

Sun smiled. "Yesterday? You're a little behind, Mica. We arrived the day *before* yesterday."

Mica's face heated with embarrassment. "I've been asleep for a day and a half?"

"A good thing too," Blaze said.

"My apologies—"

The emperor waved his hand. "Not necessary. Please join us. We have much to discuss."

Mica took his place at the table beside Sun. She cast him an affectionate glance that warmed him deep inside.

"I sent a Messenger to find Zareb and the Bedouins so they'll know what's happening," Kado said.

"Our proposal was to have them move to Ademene until the threat is over," the



emperor continued. "However, they have refused."

General Kasir shook his head. "The fools."

"The Bedouins are very independent," Mica said.

Kasir looked disgusted. "That independence might just get them killed. We cannot risk soldiers to help those who won't help themselves. I know the Bedouins have their own warriors but they won't survive against the army you described."

"And of course Zareb refuses to leave them," Kado said.

Mica sighed. "I'll ride out and talk to them but I doubt they'll listen to me."

"I'll go with you," Sun said.

Kado's gaze flickered between the Dame and the Priest in Waiting. Mica's stomach clenched. Surely the High Advisor would not condone their obvious attraction to one another.

"I don't want to burden you with another desert journey," Mica told her.

"It's no trouble."

"I can assign another Priest in Waiting to travel with you," Kado suggested.

Sun leaned back in her chair. "We can take care of it. I saw how short you are on help when I visited the temple in the city square this morning."

Kado turned to Mica. "Will you need further assistance to keep this journey safe?"

He understood the High Advisor's implication that he and Sun might need a chaperone. "No, it will not be necessary."

"We should leave right away," Sun said. "The sooner we go the sooner we will get back to help with defenses."

"When you return you will be acting as my consultant," the emperor told Mica.

"It's my honor to serve you again," Mica bowed from the neck.

"Mica, before you go I must speak with you," the High Advisor said.

Mica resisted the urge to clench his teeth. He knew what the discussion would involve.

"I'll meet you in the stable," Sun called over her shoulder as she left the chamber.

Kado and Mica walked to an empty conference room just outside the great hall. The room's only furnishings were a round wooden table and four chairs cushioned in red velvet. Settling into one of the chairs, the High Advisor motioned for Mica to sit.

"I'm glad you're feeling better," Kado said, his expression sincere. "You've been an excellent Priest in Waiting and a wonderful friend."

"Thank you."

"As a friend I don't want you to make a wrong decision about your life."

*Here it comes.*

"I know about Dame Sun spending the night in your chamber in the Priests' hall."

"I—"

Kado held up a hand. "I don't need details. There are no restrictions about Priests and Messengers having relationships even though it's assumed a Priest or Priest in Waiting will not have companions other than in friendship."

"Dame Sun and I could never be a match."

Kado's brow furrowed. "Mica, I have no way of knowing how the woman feels but I do believe I know you. You cannot pretend your feelings for her do not exist. To do so will destroy you."

"I am dedicated to the Goddess."

"I don't doubt that. No matter what happens you will continue to serve Her and your people but not necessarily by becoming a Priest."

Mica stood, drawing a deep breath and folding his arms across his chest. "After the war I swore I would never use my skills solely for destruction again. Training for Priesthood has made me feel like a human being instead of the animal who led my father's army."

"There's nothing wrong with serving the Goddess in order to feel useful but giving up such an important part of yourself such as the ritual of Priesthood demands is not meant for all people."

Mica turned to Kado who still sat motionless at the table. He nodded to the sapphire at the High Advisor's throat. After the ritual, each Priest was given a jewel to symbolize his sacrifice. "Do you regret your decision?"

Kado offered a slight smile. "Not so far but between the two of us, Mica, if I someday meet a woman who makes me feel like Dame Sun apparently makes you feel I might very well regret it. Not that I would ever change my life. I'm honored to have earned my position but it's one I thought very carefully about. I ask you to do the same. The Priesthood should be a way of life, not a way to *hide* from life."

"I have never hidden from life."

"No, you never have. That's why I wonder about your reaction to Dame Sun."

"A man cannot give up his goals just because he finds a woman beautiful any more than a married man should commit adultery because he's attracted to a woman other than his wife."

"You're not some fickle idiot who frequents brothels and impregnates every woman in the vicinity. We're talking about *one* woman. If you ask me a very good woman."

"She is a good woman," Mica said. "And I'm dying of bog tremors."

"So that's the reason."

"No. Maybe part of it but not the whole reason. Sir Blaze claims he might have a cure."

Smiling, Kado stood and clasped Mica's shoulders. "That's wonderful. I didn't think there was a cure."

"It's an herb called portia. He said it has worked before on bog tremors but only

within the first year. It's probably too late for me but it can't hurt to try."

Kado placed a hand to Mica's cheek. "We'll pray for you in the temple."

Mica's lips twitched upward. "Thank you."

"Has Sir Blaze already started the treatment?"

"No. He didn't have any portia left but Valor and Milady promised to send some from the Unownland. I have to go. Sun will be waiting for me."

"Think about what we discussed."

"I will. Thank you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mica and Sun left almost immediately on their journey. Several hours later, Sun edged her horse alongside Mica's and said, "I think we should rest."

He squinted toward the midday sun and nodded.

At least he didn't put up an argument. His last attack must have reminded him that he was in no condition to play the hero. Still she admired him for taking such an active role in aiding his people. She'd known people hampered by far less suffering than Mica who wouldn't lift a finger to help someone else. Sun finally believed he was *nothing* like his father.

They stopped in the shade of a tall, narrow rock and watered their horses before sitting for a drink and light meal.

"How much farther?"

"We should reach their camp early tomorrow morning." Mica leaned against the stone and closed his eyes. "I doubt they're traveling much at this time of year."

"Are you feeling all right?"

"Fine."

"You better not be lying to me." Concerned, Sun felt his forehead and he pulled away.

A look of annoyance crossed his face. "It's the middle of the desert, Dame Sun. Who isn't warm?"

"What is wrong with you? Can't a woman show a little concern? And you say I hold a grudge."

"We don't have time for concern or grudges. I want to cover as much ground as possible before nightfall."

Shaking her head, she said, "The last time you said that you ended up flat on your back for almost three days."

He spun, his dark eyes gleaming with rage. "Do you think you can stop bringing up my weaknesses every few seconds?"

"Why are men so sensitive about the most ridiculous things? No one is strong all

the time, Mica.”

“You seem to be.” A teasing smile played around his lips.

Sun relaxed. Here was the Mica she was accustomed to.

They mounted their horses and continued their journey. Maybe she was paying too much attention to his affliction. She was a Dame. A warrior and a healer. Usually she could distance herself from any situation. How quickly one’s views changed when love interfered.

“Ridiculous,” she muttered.

“What?”

Sun glanced at him, startled that she’d spoken loud enough for him to hear.

“What’s ridiculous?”

“You are for trying to pretend nothing’s wrong.”

“Nothing is wrong—right now. Did it occur to you that when I’m between bouts I’d rather not think about them?”

Guilt struck her. She hadn’t considered that. “I’m sorry.”

After several moments of silent travel he said, “No, I’m sorry. I’m grateful for all you’ve done especially considering who my father was.”

“I try not to think about who your father was. You’re not like him.”

He winked. “Finally believe that, eh?”

Sun lifted her chin. “So far you haven’t given me reason to believe otherwise.”

“I knew I’d convince you. I told you I’m halfway decent.”

“I can see that.”

“Before the bog tremors, I was handsome too.”

“Don’t press your luck, Mica.”

“Couldn’t hurt to try.”

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. “You’re still handsome.”

He flashed his irresistible grin and her heart fluttered.

Throughout the day they stopped to rest several times. At dusk they found a cave to spend the night.

While Mica tended the horses Sun built a fire. The world outside the cave turned dark and cold but they sat side by side, warmed by the flames.

“Do you ever regret becoming a Dame?”

Sun met his gaze. “No. Sometimes it’s difficult. Our training isn’t easy but I love my life. We try to do good work.”

“You’re one of the kindest people I’ve ever known.”

“Kind? Me? Maybe I’m not so bad. It’s my temper that gets the better of me at times.”

"I know that feeling well enough."

"Most of the time you seem to have a very good temperament." She edged closer to him.

His lips parted slightly, beckoning her to kiss them. She leaned closer until her mouth covered his. Closing her eyes, she enjoyed the warmth of his lips, the way they caressed hers, the way their tongues stroked and tasted. He gently nipped her lower lip and placed a hand to her nape.

Without warning he tugged away and stood.

"What?" she demanded, her gaze following him as he paced the cave, his head nearly touching the craggy ceiling.

"This might not be a good idea, Dame Sun."

She felt a bit taken aback then angry. "It seemed to be a good idea the last time we made love."

"I wasn't thinking about our lives, only the moment."

Her stomach tightened along with her fists. "Well thank you very much."

"Sun, think about what I'm saying. You have vows to uphold for your Order and I'm going to be a Priest."

"Why the sudden change, Mica? Is it because I admitted I care for you?" She stepped in front of him and placed her hands on her hips. "I knew it. You're using my own techniques against me. You're just like every other man. Once you think you've snagged a woman you don't want her anymore."

"That's not true, Dame Sun. I'm just thinking about our beliefs."

"If you are so enthusiastic about being castrated you wouldn't have made love with me to begin with. Unless you were using me to decide whether or not it's what you want so I guess I shouldn't feel so guilty about that first night after all." Sun shook her head and kicked the rock wall. Why did she have to be stupid enough to fall in love with Mica? He was like his father after all—a self-centered pig.

"Sun, I wasn't using you to decide anything. Until I met you I was certain I wanted Priesthood."

She held his gaze, her fingers biting into her arms. What was he trying to say?

"Damn you." He advanced on her in a single stride. One arm wrapped around her waist and pressed her body to his while he buried his other hand in her hair and drew her face closer. He spoke against her lips, "I've never wanted a woman so much in my life. Until I saw you I thought I might as well be a eunuch for all the desire I had left in me."

Before she could reply his lips covered hers, his tongue exploring every warm, slick corner of her mouth.

Sun clung to his neck, her breasts crushed to his chest, his lashes tickling her face. He slid his hand up her back, the heat of his palm seeping through her clothes.

"Before I saw you I thought I knew exactly what I wanted." He buried his face in her neck, kissing the tender flesh.

"So did I."

"Sun, the portia might not work. I could be dying."

She took his face in her hands. "We're all dying, Mica. No one knows how long we have."

"Part of me is loyal to the Priesthood."

She sighed. "You're still undecided."

"I'm sorry."

She rested her forehead against his chest. Though she wanted to be with him she understood his feelings.

"Damn it. I know I'm terrible because I still want you so badly," he said.

"I want you too."

"Should we say to hell with everything again?"

She turned away, closing her eyes, her pulse racing. Of all the times she'd slept with men she'd never felt so confused. Except for Blaze and Lock, Sun disliked men. Yes she used them. Yes she mocked them. Perhaps the Spirit was punishing her by making her fall in love with Mica.

"Dame Sun?"

"We need to make a decision. I want to make love with you again, Mica. I want to keep making love with you but I will not give up my life and my freedom. You think you might want to be a Priest. We've already broken our vows or at least I have. I propose this—for the time we have while I'm here we will do as we please. When I leave, this relationship will be over."

"I don't know if I can do that."

She turned to him, her stomach churning. Inside she ached with desire for this man who had stolen her heart.

Intently holding her gaze, he said, "You mean more to me than a sexual partner, Dame Sun."

"Let's just leave it at that for now, Mica." She braced her hands against his chest to prevent him from moving closer.

"Once the Bedouins are settled and we know what we're facing we will deal with this."

"And for now?" Sun's nipples tightened, the hard buds pushing against her vest. Her legs weakened and her clit tingled at the thought of sating her passion with his lean, smooth body.

"For now." He grasped her shoulders and hauled her to his chest, his mouth descending on hers in a plundering kiss.

## **Chapter Ten**

Sun closed her eyes and slid her hands up his back. Her clit pulsed in time with each delicious stroke of his tongue against hers. She was a fool to believe she could continue making love with him without succumbing to her emotions.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered close to her ear. Trailing his lips down her cheek and neck, he caressed her breasts through her clothes. Her nipples tightened, aching for the sensation of his flesh directly against them.

The tickling kisses on her neck and shoulders made her tingle with delight. She uttered a soft moan, buried her fingers in his hair and pressed closer to him.

He took her face in his hands, his sultry gaze fixed on hers, and spoke against her lips. “I need to feel you, Sun. Every inch of your magnificent body so close to mine that we cannot tell your heartbeat from mine.”

Sun’s insides quivered. Never in her life had a man made her feel so weak yet so powerful. Stepping away from him, she shed her clothes. His gaze never left her but lingered over her powerful yet feminine body. He undressed then wrapped his arms around her waist and held her close. The sensation of her pelvis against his, their pubic hair mingling, her breasts crushed against his chest was enough to drench her pussy. How she wanted him.

Lowering himself to the blankets they’d spread on the ground, he loomed above her, supporting his weight on his forearms and gazing into her eyes. He looked about to speak and she prayed he wouldn’t. Now was not the time for talk but for satisfaction. She ached for it.

As if sensing her desire or perhaps surrendering to his raging need he buried his face in her neck, licking and kissing.

His erection pressed against her. With a shift of his hips he rubbed the thick, smooth head over her clit.

“Mica.”

“Dame Sun,” he purred, running his tongue around the curve of her ear until she writhed with passion and dug her fingers into his solid back muscles. Sun panted, her lust growing.

Inch by marvelous inch he slid inside her, filling and thrilling her. Sun’s legs wrapped around him. Her hands slipped downward and grasped his firm bottom. As they rocked together, she kneaded his muscular buttocks, their movements restrained in an attempt to prolong the inevitable burst of pleasure.

Their hearts raced in unison, their breath fanning each other’s flesh. In spite of the coolness of the nighttime desert their bodies heated.

Sun closed her eyes and moaned with unabashed desire. They were completely alone, totally free within an endless stretch of sand dunes.

Threading her fingers through his hair, she savored the sleekness of his long, black tresses. His masculine scent filled her. She gasped as his long, thick cock rubbed her toward perfection. His body fit so perfectly to hers. Never had she dreamed such a wonderful lover. It was as if he knew exactly what she wanted and how fast she wanted it.

By the rasp of his breath and the endearments murmured between deep, soul-stealing kisses she knew he too was aroused. This realization further increased her pleasure.

He thrust faster, pulling almost completely out then lunging deep inside. His warm, wet tongue laved her neck. Sun gasped and writhed, her legs trembling with need. She was so deeply in love with this man who pleased her body and wrapped her soul in his.

“Mica, yes. Oh yes.”

“Dame Sun. Goddess I feel like I’m going to burst with passion.”

His words, his ragged breath and the wild pounding of his heart drove her over the edge. With a sharp cry she convulsed, her pussy clamping around his cock, squeezing, contracting with waves of pleasure so incredible that for several moments the world turned black.

“Ahh,” he cried, doubling his speed, his buttocks like steel beneath her clutching hands. “Ahh. Goddess. Sun.”

His sleek body tensed and lunged hard, exploding in orgasm and filling her with his essence. Completely lost in pleasure, Sun remained limp beneath him, simply enjoying the moment.

Mica rolled onto his back and cradled Sun to his heaving chest. She listened to their harsh breath and the hard pulsing of his heart beneath her cheek. When her strength returned she raised her head and stared at him. There were so many reasons for them to hold their emotions at bay.

Before they entered a serious relationship she had so much to tell him about herself, so much he had to know to make an informed decision. If he hadn’t been adamant about Priesthood she might have told him then and there but if he still held back part of himself why should she discuss her deepest, darkest secrets?

“You are so beautiful. If any woman is in the Goddess’ image, then you’re the one.”

“Isn’t that blasphemy?” She kissed his fingertip that was outlining her lips.

“It’s not meant to be.”

Sun drew a long breath. She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue and tried rolling onto her side.

He held her, brushing her mouth with a chaste kiss. Strangely it stirred her as much as his deep kisses of moments ago.



"Sleep well, Dame Sun," he whispered.

"You too, Mica." She smiled slightly, curling up beside him, their bodies touching beneath the blanket.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Mica." Zareb embraced his friend once Mica had dismounted in the midst of the Bedouin settlement.

The Bedouins had chosen to spend the season on a small oasis west of Ademene. Already crops were planted, tents pitched and herds of goats grazed on the outskirts of the temporary village.

Men and women went about their daily chores while children assisted them or played games beneath the shade of leafy green trees.

Mica cringed to think about what would happen to the settlement should the army attack. He'd seen destruction of places much larger and stronger than this. Unless the Bedouins moved to Ademene until the army was disbanded they would be slaughtered.

The Messenger searched Mica's face, concerned. "You've been sick again."

"I'm fine, but we have more important matters to discuss. I know you've been told about the army massing in the desert."

Zareb's jaw stiffened. "I know. I've been trying to convince the Bedouins to move to the city just until it's safe to wander again but they'll have no part of it."

"They will kill all of you."

"I know that but I won't leave. They need some kind of—" Zareb paused as two young children tugged on his sleeves, begging him to give them another horseback riding lesson. The Messenger offered them a strained smile. "Go finish your chores. We'll ride this afternoon. I promise."

Momentarily satisfied the children left and joined a small group by a wagon. Sun noted the youngsters were skinny and unkempt.

"Their father was killed in the battle with the false emperor and their mother died of a snakebite over a year ago," Mica explained. "I wasn't able to get to her in time."

Sun nodded. "Looks like there are many children like them here."

"This season hasn't been good," Zareb admitted. "Food has been scarce and they've lost much of their livestock to disease."

"They'd be better off in Ademene. You Messengers and Priests have set up some excellent shelters and found work for many."

"You've been spending time with our workers?" Zareb smiled at her. "So have you convinced Mica to settle for being a Messenger instead of truly giving it all to the Goddess?"

"I'm trying."

Zareb's gaze flew to Mica. "Someone's finally managed to talk some sense into

you?”

Mica folded his arms across his chest. “We don’t have time for this foolishness. Where’s Arsha? I must talk to him.”

“He’s working in the garden but you’re wasting your time. I’ve talked until my throat’s sore. They won’t go to Ademene. They say they’d rather die free than live in a polluted, overly crowded chicken coop.”

“Don’t they mean pigpen?” Mica tossed Sun a teasing look before heading for the garden.

He had to convince the Bedouins to abandon the oasis and join them in Ademene.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I’m sorry.” The Bedouins’ leader held Mica’s gaze. “I respect what you’ve done for us but I cannot bring my people to Ademene where they must follow another man’s laws.”

“It’s only temporary, Arsha.”

Though Mica’s voice remained calm Sun sensed his growing frustration. For the past two hours he’d worked alongside Arsha in the garden all the while trying to convince the man to lead his people to safety. The Bedouins had lived in the desert for generations. It seemed they would rather die than adapt to city life even for a short time.

Mica stood, his fists clenched. “You’ll be slaughtered.”

“Then we’ll die free.”

“You’ll die fools.” Zareb snapped from where he knelt under a tree, milking a goat. “And take me with you.”

Arsha glanced over his shoulder at Zareb. “You’re here of your own free will, Messenger. We never asked for your help.”

Mica squeezed his temples with his thumb and forefinger. His teeth clenched visibly. “What can I do to convince you?”

“Nothing.”

“At least let me take the children—”

“We care for our own children.”

“Then prove it.” Sun stepped forward, unable to control her temper any longer. “Do the right thing and don’t keep them here to suffer.”

Arsha looked right through her. She resisted the urge to wring the man’s neck. Mica had told her how closed-minded the Bedouins were to anyone outside of their clan. It had taken him and Zareb years of service to gain their trust.

“We never asked for your help,” Arsha told Mica. “What you’ve done here has been your own choice. We’ve looked on you as a friend in spite of who your father was. Now you try to bend us to your will. Perhaps you’re not so different than him after all.”

Zareb looked from Mica to Arsha, his expression furious.

Mica's jaw tightened even more. "It's your life."

"Exactly."

Glancing at Sun, Mica said, "Let's go. If we leave now we can cover at least a few miles before nightfall."

Sun followed him to the horses. "We'll leave tomorrow."

"Tonight."

"In the morning after you've rested." Her tone left no room for argument.

He glared at her.

"Look, if we're headed into a war I'm not going to waste time nursing you in the middle of the desert again."

A smile played around his lips. "You do have a way of convincing a man."

A tall, dark-skinned woman draped in tan robes approached. "Please spend the night."

"Zea, your husband is a stubborn fool," Mica snapped.

The woman nodded. "I will continue talking to him but I doubt he'll change his mind about moving the entire settlement. Maybe I can convince him to let the children return with you."

"Please try," Mica said, his expression concerned.

"I will. In the meantime join us for a meal. You both must be hungry."

Sun and Mica sat by one of the fires with Zea and Arsha's family eating a meal of fruit and bread. Sun listened to the pleasant chatter of the Bedouins and noticed many spoke with Mica about everyday matters as well as the coming battle. Several children sat close by him, asking for stories or showing him toys, carved animals, dolls and dice. Sun recognized many of the tales he spun. Apparently his grandmother *had* told him all the myths of the Western Continent. He spoke of Alrik, a wizard, and Lila, his wife sent by the Spirit, and how they defeated the evil sorcerer, Mar Maska, who had once ruled Zaltana.

As Mica told his tale a little girl of about six edged closer to Sun until the child tilted her head against her arm. Sun glanced downward and smiled.

"Are you the Warrior Goddess?" the girl whispered.

Sun chuckled. "No I'm not the Warrior Goddess."

Mica winked. "But she's probably the closest thing to it this world will ever see."

"Tell us another story, Mica," a boy called.

"No, that's enough stories for tonight," Zea said. "Mica and Sun are tired and want to get some sleep. They're leaving early tomorrow."

"Another story another time." Mica stood and ruffled the boy's hair.

He and Sun walked to a tree. They spread their blankets beneath it and settled

down for the night. Mica tugged Sun into his arms, pressing her to the length of his body and burying his face in her neck. She cuddled closer, her thoughts darting between the pleasure of being in Mica's arms and concern for the Bedouins. If Zea couldn't make her husband see reason so many innocents would suffer.

"Why is Arsha being so stubborn?" she muttered.

"His decision is madness. If I could stay here with Zareb I would but I'm needed in Ademene."

"Zareb's a courageous man."

"Yes, he is."

"Much like you."

"I think that's the first real compliment you've ever given me, Dame Sun. I'm honored."

"You should be."

His arm tightened around her. Closing her eyes, Sun prayed Arsha would change his mind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sun's eyes opened, though it was still nighttime. She burrowed deeper into the blankets against the chill then realized Mica was gone. She stood, her gaze roaming across the camp until she noticed him seated by one of the fires, his back to her.

She approached, careful not to disturb the sleeping Bedouins. Several guards posted by the trees glanced in her direction but remained silent. A tender feeling touched Sun's heart. She neared Mica who sat on a log, a toddler in his arms, the girl's smooth cheek resting against his chest. One of his hands gently rubbed her small back and stroked her head of fine, dark curls.

"I thought you were supposed to be resting?" Sun whispered, sitting beside him.

"She's been sick." Mica's head tilted in the toddler's direction. "Zareb is very busy. He can't spend as much time with some of them as they need."

"Hasn't she any relatives?"

"Like many of these children she's orphaned."

Sun understood their situation all too well. If it hadn't been for Blaze and Dame Neila she might never have known the affection every child deserved. Mica's actions were more like Blaze's than she'd realized.

"Good news," he said. "Arsha has agreed to allow Zareb to bring the children to the temple outside of Ademene."

"It's still not in the city."

"But the temple is evacuated on Kado's order."

Sun smiled. "So one way or the other they'll be protected when the attack comes."

Good.”

“I told Zareb we’d help him guide the children there along with mothers of infants and any pregnant woman who wants to go. I hope that’s fine with you.”

“Of course it is.”

“I thought it would be.” He stood, carrying the girl back to the group of children sleeping by the fire. When he tried placing her on the blankets she whimpered and clung to him.

“I’ll take her.” Sun approached and accepted the girl who immediately fell asleep against her shoulder.

Mica smiled.

“What are you staring at?” she asked.

“You.” He touched her cheek. “With all your good qualities, you’ll make a wonderful mother someday.”

Sun turned away, her heartbeat quickening. That was the last thing she had expected him to say—and the last thing she wanted to hear.

“I’m not a motherly sort of woman.”

“Yes you are. You could teach children so many things, how to handle a sword, how to ride horses, how to be kind and giving.”

“Shut up, Mica.” Sun flung him an irritated look before settling down by the fire.

Chuckling, he went off to assist Zareb with the other sick and injured.

Sun glanced after him, swallowing an annoying lump in her throat. He’d make a far better father than she would a mother—not that it would do either of them any good. He planned to castrate himself and her chance for motherhood had been stolen long ago.

The toddler murmured in her sleep and Sun hugged her a bit tighter. She’d always liked children but Dames were often away from home. Still, many of them married and had families. Yet Sun never would. Ever.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mica spent most of the night helping Zareb prepare a wagon to carry some of the young children and women too pregnant to walk. Everyone else would make the journey by foot since Arsha and his warriors couldn’t afford to give up wagons and horses needed for defense against an attacking army.

“We’ll have to make frequent stops and most likely two trips,” Mica said. “The wagon is far too small for the number of infants and women in the final stages of pregnancy.”

Zareb’s blue eyes flashed. “Of course. We’ll all risk our lives just so *Arsha* can look brave. The man is an ass.”

“I agree but short of convincing the emperor to take them by force there’s nothing

we can do.”

“It would serve them right but why would the emperor waste his troops to arrest these fools for their own good?” Zareb ran a hand through his hair. “I’m going to get some rest while I can. It will be a long journey tomorrow.”

“Have a good sleep.”

Zareb cast him a skeptical look before trudging across the camp. Mica saw him pause beside an elderly woman who had apparently needed help. A healer’s life wasn’t easy. Priests and Messengers were forever busy. His gaze fell on Sun who still held the toddler against her shoulder while she tucked a blanket around another sleeping child. Dames also led hectic lives of service but Sun didn’t seem to mind. She looked as comfortable fighting in the Circle as she did comforting a child.

He approached and rested a hand on her shoulder. “We should get some rest too. I’ll put her back to bed.”

He touched the toddler’s hair. Though he cared for all the Bedouin children he couldn’t help feeling closer to some than others. At first he’d tried not to become too attached to any of them or allow them to depend on him too much. He was dying of bog tremors and most of them had already lost too many people they cared about. Unfortunately life didn’t work the way he intended. Maybe some people could keep a safe distance from those they aided but Mica found it impossible. This little girl was one of his favorites. Her father had been killed in a riding accident a week before she’d been born and her mother had died in childbirth. Several women had cared for her but Mica had taken on most of the responsibility since he was living with the Bedouins at the time.

Watching Sun with the girl inspired a fantasy of them together as a family. The thought of marrying Sun and raising children appealed to him all too much.

*Stop being a fool, Mica.*

“She’s so cute,” Sun whispered, passing the girl to Mica. “What’s her name?”

“Ebony Starr.”

“That’s beautiful.”

“I think so. That’s why I chose it.”

Sun looked surprised. “You did? You better not tell me she’s your daughter.”

“Her parents died before she was given a name. I’ve helped care for her. No I haven’t any children of my own. Yet.”

“What do you mean yet? Won’t castration make such plans *difficult*?”

Heat rose in Mica’s face. What had made him say that? “I meant once I’m a Priest and stationed among the Bedouins permanently they’ll all be my children.”

Sun stood, her arms folded across her chest. “You’ve done much for these people yet Arsha seems ungrateful.”

“You don’t fully understand the Bedouins. They’re proud.”

"That doesn't excuse thanklessness."

"No. I suppose it doesn't." He placed Ebony Starr in her blankets. This time she remained asleep. He glanced at the other orphans before taking Sun's hand and walking toward their blankets.

"I thank *you* for all you've done." Mica hoped his expression conveyed his gratitude and growing affection.

"It's part of being a Dame."

"You find it difficult to accept gratitude—or compliments for that matter."

"I don't expect either."

"That's not what I said."

"You love to annoy people, don't you, Mica?"

"Some more than others." He grinned, pausing beneath a tree and tugging her into his arms. He took her chin in his hand and tilted her face upward. Long lashes cast shadows on her smooth cheeks. "I'm going to annoy you more. You are so beautiful, Dame Sun."

"Mica—"

He grasped her shoulders and silenced her with a kiss.

Sun's hands slid up his back while her tongue met his in sensual battle. Mica's arms tightened around her, holding her warm curves closer. The kiss deepened and his body responded to hers in a manner that demanded satisfaction. His cock pressed thick and hard against her belly.

"Maybe I should sleep under another tree," he murmured.

"Maybe we can find one a little more private?" she asked hopefully.

A slight smile touched his lips and he grasped her hand. "Come with me."

The full moon shone through the trees, dappling the pathway leading to the pool of water that kept the oasis green.

"It's lovely here. Secluded," Sun said, gazing at the dark water surrounded by trees, plants and flowers.

Mica grasped her arms and turned her to face him. Tugging her close, he covered her mouth with his. Goddess she tasted so soft and sweet. His eyes slipping shut, he kissed both corners of her mouth.

Sighing with contentment, she slipped her arms around his neck and threaded her fingers through his hair. For a woman who wielded a sword with such power, whose hands possessed strength many men would envy, her touch was gentle, affectionate and feminine.

He sank to the ground with Sun wrapped in his arms, his lips never leaving hers.

"Mica," she breathed between kisses. "What if someone finds us?"

"They won't." He ran his lips down the side of her neck and inhaled her arousing scent. "The Bedouins use the water on the other end of the oasis. I need to feel you,

Dame Sun.”

He tugged off her robe and trousers, baring her long, smooth legs rounded with muscle. Starting at one hip, he kissed her entire leg down to her ankle. By the rhythm of her breathing and the tensing of her muscles he sensed her excitement.

“Oh, yes. Mica, it feels so good.”

Laughter rumbled in his throat. He loved hearing such encouraging words. He rolled her onto her stomach and lapped her ankles then ran his tongue up her calf. Using the tip of his tongue, he caressed the back of her knee. Cupping her firm yet prominent buttocks, he squeezed and kneaded the enticing globes while his tongue slipped down the indentation between her cheeks.

The pleasure of touching her was almost too much to endure.

Grasping her waist, he guided her to her knees and loomed over, sliding his hand beneath her vest and caressing her breasts while his steely erection brushed her back and buttocks. To his delight her nipples were already hard. He rolled the sensitive nubs and she moaned softly.

“It’s so hard to keep quiet,” she panted, her hips squirming in a manner that drove him almost insane with desire. “But the others still might hear us.”

“Consider it a challenge to your self-control,” he teased, his hand leaving her breasts and sweeping over her back and ribs. He knelt behind her. Parting her cheeks, he gently blew against her anus. His thumb stroked the soft, quivering flesh.

Grinning wickedly, Mica lay on his back and slid beneath her, grasping her hips and tugging her lower half to his lips.

“Oh, Mica.” She panted, her knees and hands supporting most of her weight while he used his tongue to circle the outermost flesh of her pussy. The taste and aroma of her soft, warm skin aroused him to incredible heights.

His tongue thrust deep inside her, swirling and exploring. At the same time his fingers applied steady pressure against her sphincter. Sun gasped, her breath coming in short, hard pants. The sound of her excitement and the tensing of her muscles beneath soft, warm flesh ignited Mica’s passion even more. His cock swelled, longing for the embrace of her damp pussy.

Lifting his head slightly, he lapped her clit, using the flat of his tongue to lave the sensitive tip in a fast, steady rhythm.

“Mica,” she gasped, struggling to keep her voice to a whisper. “Oh, Mica, don’t stop.”

He had no intention of stopping. While his tongue licked and stroked her clit his fingers prodded her bottom. Such a tender, passionate torture.

Her breathing ragged she wriggled and rocked her hips.

Sun exploded, panting hard, her flesh throbbing against his fingertips and tongue.

Before the last ripple ran through her Mica pushed her higher and mounted her from behind. His steely cock slid into her wet, clenching pussy. Each velvety squeeze



against his cock drove him toward perfection yet he forced himself to remain in control. He clenched his teeth and arched his neck, his heart throbbing madly.

"Mica. Yes. Oh by the Spirit."

Her fingers sank into the ground, clutching plants and dirt as her hips matched his rhythm. Her second orgasm built quickly. The marvelous pulsations flared up Mica's cock and tightened his balls. He rammed deeper inside her and joined her in bliss.

Both collapsed onto the ground, panting and laughing with pleasure.

When his breathing slowed Mica raised himself onto his elbow and gazed at her. It seemed he couldn't stare at her enough. The woman fascinated him completely. She smiled, staring at him from where she lay on her side, her cheek cushioned on her bent arm.

"Wait a moment." He stood and approached the water.

"Where are you going?" she asked, her gaze following him.

Squatting, he examined several plants before plucking a leafy, dark green one.

Kneeling beside her, he removed a leaf and ate it then plucked another and held it to her lips.

She glanced at the leaf. "What is it?"

"It's called jewel. It enhances pleasure."

"I'm having a fine time without it." She shrugged but licked the leaf from his fingertips.

His belly tightened at the sensation of her lips against his flesh and not just from the aphrodisiac though it had already begun to work. His erection was once again steel hard, the bulbous head aching for her lips or her warm, wet pussy.

As her gaze flickered to his cock a lustful smile curved her lips.

"On your back," she ordered. "It's my turn to show you how hard it can be to keep quiet."

"I know how hard it is." He smiled. "When I came inside you I wanted to roar like a mountain cat."

"You might yet, Mica." She straddled his thighs and massaged his smooth, sleekly muscled chest. By the glimmer in her eyes he knew the jewel was working on her as well. Her beautiful nipples swelled, tiny bumps of pleasure rising upon the areolas. Mica couldn't resist caressing the tempting little beads. She drew a sharp breath of pleasure.

"I see I have to work fast," she said, slipping farther down his body and pushing his thighs apart.

She grasped his balls, massaging with enough pressure to arouse while her other hand clamped the base of his cock. Her tongue ran up and down the length of the hard, straining rod. When she used the tip of it to tickle the underside and trace the shape of a particularly thick vein he thought he'd explode then and there.

Mica's fingers sank into the ground and he gritted his teeth against raw pleasure-pain. Perhaps the jewel hadn't been such a good idea after all. Such pleasure would surely kill him. His heart pounded, its throbbing filling his ears. His face and neck felt hot, the veins and tendons tight. By the Goddess he couldn't take any more of her soft, wet tongue on his cock.

"By the Spirit, Mica. I can't stand it." She gasped, straddling him again. This time she guided his cock deep inside her, her slick flesh enfolding him.

He raised his hands so she could entwine her fingers with his and lean into him while gyrating upon him.

Within seconds she exploded. Mica released the fragile hold on his passion and lunged upward, driving his cock even deeper into her quivering pussy.

*I love you, Dame Sun. I love you so much.*

One day he would tell her aloud.

## Chapter Eleven

At dawn, Mica, Sun and Zareb led the first group of Bedouins to the safety of the temple. The children required frequent stops throughout the journey. Sun and Mica's horses pulled the wagon filled with some supplies and several passengers. Sun, Mica and Zareb each carried a child in a backpack as did several of the women who accompanied them.

Mica glanced skyward during a short water break. "At this pace it will take two days to reach the temple."

"Then we'll have to go back for the others. At least we've narrowed it down to two trips." Zareb dusted off the clothes of the five-year-old girl who had stumbled. She looked as tired and miserable as most of the others forced to travel in the desert heat.

"If we want to reach the caves by nightfall we have to get going." Mica stood, adjusting the plump boy on his back.

Sun returned Ebony's Starr's grin before picking up the girl for the journey. Ebony was feeling much better than the night before. Her joyous manner was infectious. Sun could without doubt see Mica's influence on the girl. She knew when Mica returned to the Bedouins permanently he would be a wonderful father to Ebony Starr.

Mica turned to her, winking a gleaming blue eye. "Ready, Dame Sun?"

"At such a nice, slow pace I think I could walk for a month in this desert and actually enjoy it."

"We can't have a forced march with children and pregnant women, can we?"

She laughed. "I guess not."

He whispered close to her ear, "Between you and me I don't think I'm quite ready for a forced march either."

Sun touched his face. Though not usually a doting person, she couldn't help worrying about him. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Yes. I like having your concern though."

"I thought you hated it?"

The group moved onward, Zareb leading, Mica and Sun following up the back.

"I don't hate your concern. What I hate is feeling weak."

"It must be hard for you. By looking at the way you fought in the Circle and hearing about your reputation as a warrior you must have led a very active life."

He nodded, his smile fading.

"Once Blaze gets the portia and is able to treat you—"

"I won't think about it until it happens."

Sun studied his profile, wishing she could cure him instantly and ensure that he would lead a full, healthy life—maybe even with her.

At dusk they set up camp inside a large cave. Most of the children fell asleep immediately, exhausted by the day's travel, while others stayed awake to eat a meal. Mica and Sun tended windburns and blistered feet. They also examined a few of the women who were about to deliver any day.

"Why don't you get some rest?" Sun stooped beside Mica who was bandaging a woman's foot. "I can finish here."

He shook his head. "I'm nearly done."

While he completed his task Sun cleared away the herbal paste he'd used to treat the patient's foot. Afterward they settled on their blankets in a corner of the cave.

Mica yawned. "At least it will take us half the time to reach the oasis. Then two more days to bring the next group here. After that it's back to Ademene."

"I wonder how Blaze and the others are doing?"

"Planning for war. You know how that goes."

Sun rested her head against Mica's shoulder, marveling at how easily she touched and talked to him now.

"May I ask you a personal question?"

He smiled. "You may ask but I may not answer."

"Before you became a Priest in Waiting did you have many women?"

"Some, though only in a sexual manner."

"Nothing more meaningful than that?"

"I was General Mica, son of General Mica. Nothing except war had any meaning to me." His voice dripped with unfamiliar bitterness.

"After your exile there was still no one?"

"I was very ill for a long time, Dame Sun. When I recovered enough to be of use again I dedicated my life to the Goddess. How about you? Have you known many men in spite of your vow of chastity?"

"Yes but none I've cared about." She kissed his cheek and cuddled closer.

They fell asleep to the sound of crackling fire, random snores and horses' feet shifting on the cave floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following evening the group arrived at the temple. Since being alerted by Ademene most of the Priests had already joined their brothers in the city, leaving only a handful behind. It was decided that Zareb would remain to assist the Priests while Mica and Sun returned to the oasis to escort the rest of the women and children to the temple.

At dawn they hitched their horses to the wagon and headed for the Bedouin

settlement.

"I'm going to miss you when I leave the Kennas," Sun said from where she sat beside Mica in the wagon.

"I'll miss you too, Dame Sun. Who else will challenge me on a daily basis?"

"Surely I'm not the only person you irritate?" she teased.

"True. But you're the only one who reacts so colorfully."

"At least you'll remember me."

"Dame Sun, I will never forget you." His amused grin faded, replaced by a passionate expression that sent her heart pounding.

They traveled longer and faster than with the Bedouins. By nightfall they reached the oasis.

Zea greeted them with an offer to join her and Arsha for supper. They accepted and the meal was eaten in uncomfortable silence.

Finally Arsha turned to his wife and said, "You should go to the temple with them tomorrow."

"No. My place is with you."

Anger flashed in Arsha's eyes. "Your place is with our children, woman."

"If you weren't so stubborn all the families could be together," Zea said, her expression just as furious as her husband's.

"It's not our way to submit to Ademene."

"So you'd rather die," Mica said softly.

"Mind your own business, Mica." Arsha pointed in his face. "You've done enough already."

"If you mean he's tried to help us then yes he's done enough," Zea snapped.

"Tomorrow you go, wife. The discussion is over." Arsha stomped into the shadow of the trees. With a sigh Zea followed, leaving Mica and Sun alone by the fire.

Mica shook his head. "I know I keep overstepping my bounds but I can't seem to help myself."

Sun touched his shoulder. "You're only doing what you think is right."

"They don't want my help or suggestions."

"If they didn't Arsha would never have allowed some of his people to go to the temple."

"I can't stand to think of what will happen to the rest of them."

Sun's hand strayed to his face. "You can't save the world, Mica."

"No but at one time I could have destroyed it so easily."

"That wouldn't have been as easy as you think either. The kingdom of Zaltana has been fighting so long that no one even knows if the ancient legends about their battles are real or not. Even so they have yet to destroy the world."

"When my father and the false emperor were executed I thought there would finally be peace in the Kennas." He stared at the low-burning flames before shaking his head and turning to her. "We should get some rest. The next few days will be busy."

They cuddled by the fire.

"Mica?"

"Umm."

"Someday when all this is over will you come to Travelle? I think you'd like my homeland."

"I hope I can visit you there, Dame Sun. One day."

Sun turned to him, their faces almost touching. He meant he'd visit if bog tremors didn't kill him first.

He will live, she told herself, unwilling to believe otherwise. Soon Valor would send the portia. Despite Blaze's misgivings Mica would be cured.

He edged closer until their lips touched. Sun's eyes slipped shut and she looped her arms around his neck. Her lips parted beneath his tongue's gentle probing. His fingertips caressed her face and threaded through her hair. When the kiss broke she rested her head against his shoulder.

*By the Spirit I'm so in love with him.* She knew he cared for her but was he in love too? If so their plan to end their relationship when she left the Kennas might change. Then she would be forced to reveal a secret that might drive him from her forever. It would probably be better anyway. She'd never considered herself the marrying kind.

She almost laughed at her foolishness. Here she was contemplating marriage with a man who wanted his balls cut off. Even if he went through with the ritual they could probably still marry for all the worth she'd be to any man wanting a family.

Mica's arm tightened around her and he shifted slightly in his sleep. Sun closed her eyes. No use worrying about such a distant future. Tomorrow was more than enough cause for concern.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two days later they reached the temple with Zea and the last of the Bedouins.

"I wish I had been able to convince Arsha to allow the others to come here," Mica said. He and Sun were sharing the evening meal with Zea and Zareb. They sat in the single, round room of the temple. Though spacious the room was crowded with women and children.

"You did all you could. My husband is stubborn to the point of being a fool." In spite of Zea's harsh words concern glistened in her eyes.

Sun could only imagine how agonizing it was for her knowing people she cared about were simply awaiting their deaths at the hands of savages.

Zareb stood, brushing his hands on his trousers. "It's late. Get some sleep if you

plan on leaving for the city tomorrow.”

“He’s right,” Sun said.

Silently Mica walked out of the temple and Sun followed.

He stood in front of the sand-colored temple and gazed at the half moon.

“Zea’s right, you know.” Sun slipped her hand into his. “You did all you could.”

“I keep thinking if I stayed a little longer, tried a little harder—”

“Mica, you can’t force them to do what you want.”

“I know.”

“You’re as stubborn as Arsha.”

Drawing a deep breath, he released it slowly, his expression one of deep thought. “More. I’m going back to the oasis in the morning.”

Sun stared at him. “You can’t be serious?”

“I have to try again. You return to Ademene. They’ll need you. Tell them I’ll be back as soon as I’ve spoken to Arsha again.”

“If you speak to Arsha again he’s liable to string you up.”

“That would take some doing even in my present condition.”

“If you go back there I’m going with you.”

“Sun, there’s no need—”

“I can be just as pigheaded as you,” she stated, lifting her chin. “If you go I go. That’s all there is to it. And don’t even think about trying to escape without me. You won’t get away with it.”

He grinned. “I already know that. I still don’t see why you want to travel back there again.”

“To keep you out of trouble, if possible.”

“It’s not,” he teased.

“Then I can gloat when you get what you deserve for really overstepping your bounds with Arsha.”

Hand in hand they walked back in the temple and settled onto a blanket. Mica held her snugly, his breath gently fanning her brow.

Sighing, Sun pressed her cheek closer to his shoulder, wishing the temple had a private alcove where they might sneak a moment alone together. She missed his deep, sweet kisses and the sensation of his hands on her breasts. She longed to feel his thick, pulsing cock buried inside her. Never in her life had she been so hungry for a man. The sensations and pleasures he evoked were a priceless gift.

In his sleep he tightened his grip on her.

*I love you, Mica. She caressed his chest gently, careful not to wake him. But I don’t think I’ll ever be able to tell you.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Sun and Mica wasted no time before leaving the following morning. By traveling at a steady pace that wasn't too tiring for the horses they would reach Ademene in less than two days. If Mica convinced Arsha, the Bedouins would be with them. Sun couldn't guess how the situation would unfold. Both Arsha and Mica were the most stubborn people she'd ever known.

"I'm actually looking forward to the bathing chamber when we get back to Ademene," Sun said. Her horse pranced alongside Mica's.

"So am I. You bring a whole new charm to bathing."

"You know a man who spends so much time thinking sexual thoughts should really give up the Priest idea."

"Dame Sun, why must you always—" He stopped abruptly. "Do you hear that?"

Sun paused, listening. The distant rumbling grew louder. "Horses."

"Goddess," Mica whispered at the sight of several hundred men on horseback galloping toward them. He recognized uniforms of the false emperor, almost identical to the one he'd worn while serving in his father's army.

"Ride west." Mica ordered. "There's a canyon. If we reach it, it will be more difficult for them to track us there."

"Damn it, Mica. They've already seen us." Sun reached for her sword.

"Ride."

They kicked their horses westward but the army had turned in their direction.

Mica knew his mare was built for speed but Sun's thick war stallion wasn't. Still he doubted either of them would reach the canyon. Better to give Sun the chance.

He reined in and turned, heading toward the army.

"Mica," Sun bellowed.

"Go," Mica roared over his shoulder, watching her chase after him. Damn her. Why couldn't she just listen to him for once?

His sword drawn, Mica met the first wave of warriors. He realized his attempt was suicidal yet he blocked blades from all sides out of pure survival instinct. He snarled as the tip of a sword ripped a gash in his upper arm. Another horse charged into his and his big-boned mare stumbled. The flat of a sword cracked his head and the world turned black.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pain exploded across Mica's face and he tasted blood. He spat, forcing his eyes open and tried to move his aching arms but they were chained above his head.

"He's awake, General Karlus."

Mica's blurred vision cleared. He focused on the tall, bearded, dark-eyed man in



front of him. He'd known Karlus almost all his life. They'd trained together as children and fought together through numerous battles. Karlus was the son of the false emperor's third most trusted general directly below Mica in rank.

The man's slim lips turned upward in a wicked smile. "Mica, I was surprised to find you. We heard you died of bog tremors."

"Obviously false information."

"It has been a long time." Karlus strode the perimeter of the filthy cell.

Mica was bound to a wall, his arms stretched above his head and his ankles shackled to iron pikes driven into the bloodstained stone floor. Two thickly built soldiers each clutching a smooth, wooden club flanked the young general.

"About five years I think. I remember how proudly you stood when we sentenced you as a traitor. Not so much as a flinch or a flicker of fear. One thing was always certain about you, you stood behind your convictions. So tell me, are you still serving that pathetic excuse for an emperor and his pet eunuch—I mean High Advisor?"

"I still serve the Goddess if that's what you mean."

Karlus smiled, revealing even white teeth. "The Goddess. Yes. Speaking of goddesses who was the bitch riding with you this morning?"

*Dame Sun. What happened to her? Is she dead? Safe?*

He doubted she was safe if she still lived. He restrained the urge to struggle in his bonds and demand information about Sun. If Karlus and his soldiers knew they cared for each other they would use it against them. Guilt struck him like a sword blow. If he hadn't insisted on returning to the oasis they wouldn't have been caught.

"She was just a traveler."

Karlus' grin widened. "A Dame of the Opal Order to be exact. Ademene knows about our army. They've called for support from outsiders since they realize they'll be no match for us."

"Your words don't impress me. I know your tactics, Karlus. Always brag about what you don't have with the hopes of frightening the enemy. We received the same training, remember?"

Karlus placed his hands on his hips. "Our fathers were great leaders but we're better, Mica. Even in exile you overthrew his army. And I...let's just say I don't intend to make the same mistakes as the old generals."

"Who do you serve? Teman?"

"Emperor Teman."

Just as Mica had suspected earlier. The false emperor's son had recruited Karlus and together they hoped to rule the Kennas.

"So how many members of the Opal and Ruby Orders are here? Surely Ademene wouldn't have called one without the other."

"I'm a Priest in Waiting and know nothing of their military plans."

“Do you take me for a fool? You were one of the greatest generals the Kennas have ever known and you expect me to believe your emperor wouldn’t enlist your help, Priest or not? You led him to victory once and I have no doubts you will try to do so again.”

“When I led him to victory I didn’t serve the Goddess.”

Karlus’ grin changed to a sneer. “Let’s be truthful, Mica. It doesn’t matter if you sing the Goddess’ praises or cut off your balls, you’re still the same ruthless bastard who conquered every major kingdom in Upper and Lower Kenna. *I know you.* That’s why I have a proposal for you. Join us. We can use your skills and when Ademene is overthrown you’ll be a man of rank.”

“All who serve the Goddess are men of rank.”

Karlus grasped a handful of Mica’s hair and jerked his head against the stone wall. “Damn you, Mica. You don’t fool me. I’m giving you the chance to escape a horrible death.”

“Just because I turned traitor to vile bastards like my father and the false emperor doesn’t mean I’ll switch loyalties now that I know the truth. And even if I would, do *you* take *me* for a fool, Karlus? I know your proposal is no more sincere than a buzzard who swears not to touch a dying pig.”

Karlus motioned for the two soldiers to approach.

The first blow from the wooden club landed between Mica’s legs. Pain shot through his groin then through his ribs as another strike cracked across his side. From his bound position he couldn’t shield himself from the blows raining over his face and body. He’d hoped not to give them the pleasure of hearing him scream but found he couldn’t help himself particularly when they discarded their clubs and struck his beaten flesh repeatedly with bamboo switches. Blood oozed from a gash on his forehead and ran into his eyes. He prayed whatever the bastards did to Sun would be quicker than what he would face. He knew Karlus intended to repeat his banishment. To his people, the punishment of banishing included torture then exposure. But this time Mica wouldn’t survive.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sun awoke in a damp cell, the only light from a torch at the end of the corridor outside. Her head throbbed and her entire body ached. In her sleep she thought she heard grunting, wood striking flesh and screaming.

She lay still for a moment numb from the blow to the head. A rat scurried over her hand and she pushed herself to a sitting position, her bruised limbs screaming at the motion. The lower half of her body felt raw. She wore a filthy tunic with the sleeves torn off. The hem which only covered her to mid-thigh was jagged. Swallowing hard, she resisted the urge to vomit. *Raped again.*

“Bastards,” she hissed, tears springing into her eyes. If she ever had the chance

she'd chop up their cocks and feed them to the stone buzzards.

Wiping her eyes on her forearm, she stood and stumbled, pain shooting up her leg. She glanced down and saw that her ankle was swollen. She doubted it was broken but knew it was badly sprained. It must have happened when she'd fallen off her horse. She remembered chasing Mica who had ridden into battle against a small army. Moments later she'd been struck unconscious.

Sun walked to the bars and strained to see down the corridor. A guard stood beside the torch in the wall. The cell across from hers was empty. There were other cells but she couldn't discern any inhabitants. Still she was too far away to really see inside each one.

"So you're awake."

She glanced at the other end of the corridor. A tall man with dark skin, brown eyes and a neatly trimmed beard stood in an open door. He approached followed by two guards carrying bloody bamboo switches.

"What's your name, slut?"

Sun's jaw clenched almost as tightly as her fists around the bars.

"Come now, surely you can be more reasonable than Mica. He wouldn't tell us your name either."

*Mica.*

Where was he? What had they done with him? She wanted answers but doubted she'd get them so she remained silent.

"I was beginning to think my men had knocked you unconscious for good," he continued, leaning against the wall outside her cell and staring at her through half-open eyes. "I told them to save some for later."

Sun wondered if she could move fast enough to grab him by the throat and smash his face through the bars. She doubted it. In her present condition she could hardly move.

"We know you're a Dame." The man's gaze swept her from head to foot. "Tell us how many Knights and Dames have come to aid Ademene. It doesn't matter because you're all going to die but just to amuse me tell me how many."

Sun glared at him.

"I see you're going to make this difficult. If you don't tell us we'll rape you again—unless the thought doesn't frighten you. Perhaps you enjoyed sating my men."

"You'll do whatever you want to me no matter what I say," Sun told him.

He grinned. "Maybe you're not as stupid as you look. So what does Mica mean to you?"

Silence.

"I see." The man pushed himself off the wall and glanced at the soldiers. "Bring Mica. We'll see if they can't convince each other to cooperate."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mica staggered into another cell, his face scraping against the rock wall. He used his shoulder to right himself since his wrists were bound behind his back. Shackles cut into his ankles. Clotted blood sealed one eye, forcing him to turn his head to view the entire filthy room. He willed himself not to react upon seeing Sun bound to a wall, her hands chained above her head, her ankles shackled to the grimy floor. Her bare feet and legs were covered with dirt and drying blood. A ragged, filthy tunic scarcely concealed her body. Her condition along with the pain and rage in her eyes told him the extent of her violation.

Mica's heart throbbed with fury. If he hadn't been tied he would have shredded Karlus and the guards with his bare hands.

"Pretty, isn't she, Mica?" Karlus approached Sun and took a lock of matted golden hair between his fingers. Her head spun in his direction, her teeth snapping close to his hand. He jerked away and slammed his gloved fist into her face. Blood spurted from her split lips. She glared at him, jerking her chains like a captive animal.

*Stop fighting, Sun.* Mica struggled to control his own temper. The more they fought the better Karlus enjoyed it. Karlus didn't realize how lucky he was Mica was dying of bog tremors. If there was the slightest chance of his survival Mica would ensure Karlus remembered in agonizing detail every second of torture bestowed upon the Dame.

"At least she *was* pretty," Karlus smirked. "I don't think my men and I have ever enjoyed a woman so much. Did you get a chance to try her, Mica? Oh. I forgot. Priests give up the ability to enjoy women. But you're not a Priest yet, are you?"

Mica glared into Karlus' mocking eyes. Karlus motioned for the guards to chain Mica to the wall directly across from Sun.

"Now," the general continued, "we'll have an enlightening conversation."

"I have no information you could possibly want," Mica said, trying to ignore the aches in every part of his body. He couldn't decide if it was the beginning of another attack of bog tremors or simply a result of the beating.

"Such lies." Karlus shook his head. He extended his hand to a guard who slipped one of the wooden clubs into it. Karlus struck Mica's side. He jerked, the manacles cutting deeper into his wrists. Rivulets of fresh blood trickled down his forearms. "My rules are simple. Each time I ask a question you don't answer the woman will receive a cut. Each time she refuses to answer a question you will be struck."

Sun's gaze met Mica's. He saw pain clearly and a hint of fear. Most of all he saw fury.

"We'll tell you horseshit," she snarled.

The club struck hard between Mica's legs. He groaned, his vision blurring.

Karlus laughed. "Perhaps she's paying you back for a lover's spat for I have no doubt you mean far more to each other than what you're saying. Has the emperor of Ademene allied himself with any leaders from Upper Kenna?"

"I already told you," Mica said, "I have nothing to do with the emperor's plans."

One of the guards approached Sun with a long, curved dagger. He heated the tip in torch flames and sliced her upper arm.

Her teeth clenched and she groaned. Mica felt sick. Never in his life had he come so close to spilling all he knew to an enemy.

"How many of your Dames are in Ademene?" Karlus asked Sun. She remained silent and Mica braced himself for another blow.

He wasn't sure how long the questions continued. He only knew his hold on consciousness was slipping. Sun's arms and legs glistened red from dozens of shallow knife cuts. Karlus and his guards knew how to cause pain without taking life. Mica had once been an expert in such tactics. He imagined using his violent skills again, this time on Karlus and his henchmen.

"I see you need some time to think." Karlus' voice penetrated Mica's muddled thoughts. The general's spicy breath blew in his face. Mica opened his good eye and found the general standing so close he could see the gleam in his dark eyes. "Neither of you will see Ademene again. The remainder of your life can be tolerable or it can be excruciating."

Karlus stepped back, giving Mica full view of one of the guards, his trousers halfway down his thick, hairy legs, pounding into Sun who dangled from the chains. The guard's gloved hands clutched the wall and he stiffened and groaned before stepping away and adjusting his trousers. Sun's tunic hung in shreds, scarcely covering her bruised, bleeding body.

Karlus grinned at Mica. "I thought you were going to faint on me, Mica, but you look alive again. Could it be you're upset with what Slan has done to your woman? Don't worry. We'll allow you to share the same fate."

The guards loosened the chains on Mica's feet then spun him, pressing him face-first against the wall before binding his legs even tighter than before. The cell door creaked open and footsteps approached. Two guards held his arms and two grasped his legs. Between the men, the chains and the weakness from the beating he was unable to move.

"You bastards better pray I don't get out of here." Sun's hoarse voice dripped with rage.

Mica's trousers were jerked down. His fingers tightened on the chains as another body rammed his against the wall. Pain shot through him with each savage thrust. He tasted dirt and slime as Karlus grunted close to his ear. For the first time Mica wished bog tremors was contagious. Squeezing his eyes shut, he told himself that while they occupied themselves with him at least Sun was left alone.

After what seemed like forever Karlus shoved away.

"You see, Dame," the general panted, "we don't favor women over men."

A knock sounded on the door. Another guard entered and whispered to Karlus.

The general's teeth gritted. "You're certain?"

"Yes, sir."

Karlus glared at Mica and Sun. "So there are no more Knights and Dames, eh? Take him down. Then get to your stations."

The muffled sounds of shouting and clashing steel wafted from outside.

The guards released Mica and untied him. His hands dropped to his sides. Pain shot through his arms that had been tied overhead for too long. After several moments, he tugged up his trousers with trembling fingers, noting from the corner of his eye silver keys dangling from the belt of a tall, fleshy sergeant. Mica stumbled against the man.

"Get off me." The sergeant scowled, shoving Mica away. He clung to the man, his numb fingers searching. A punch in the gut and another to the back of the head sent him crashing to his knees.

"Hold him," Karlus ordered.

Mica resisted the urge to fight. What was the point? Short of killing him there was nothing more they could do. If he was to escape with Sun he couldn't waste what little strength he had left.

Three guards tightened their grips on his chains while the last forced his head forward. Hair and some flesh were sliced from the back of his head. Blood running down his neck, Mica gasped in pain. The guards released him.

"Nice," Karlus held out fistfuls of Mica's long, black hair, part of his scalp attached in clumps. "It would fetch a good price at the market but I think I'll attach it to my helmet instead. It will make a better show than feathers or ram horns."

"Should we bring him back to his cell?" one of the guards asked.

Karlus shook his head. "Release her too. Let them spend a few hours in thought before we kill them. I want them to see the bodies of their companions."

The muffled sound of shouting and clashing steel shook the stone walls.

Karlus stalked out of the cell while the guards unchained Sun. She slid to the floor. Finally the guards left.

## Chapter Twelve

Not bothering to stand, Mica crawled to Sun and massaged her arms, knowing how they must hurt as blood circulated again. Realizing his stubbornness had caused her suffering was more painful than anything Karlus had done to him.

"I'm so sorry." He held her close, stroking her matted hair. She rested her face against his shoulder.

"Are you all right?" She lifted her head, touching a hand to his cheek. "The bog tremors—"

"Forget about me. Sun, we're getting out of here," he whispered close to her ear. "I have keys."

She pushed away, her eyes wide. "How?"

"Took them from that fat guard when I fell on him. He was too busy thinking about the battle but I don't know how long we have before he realizes. Can you walk?"

"My ankle is sprained but nothing will stop me from trying to get out of here."

"I'm not sure where we are but it doesn't matter. They're going to kill us so we might as well risk an escape."

"I agree and the sooner the better. It sounds like most of the guards are preoccupied with whatever's going on outside."

Mica used the key to remove their shackles.

He rose, looking through the bars. A heavily bolted door stood at the end of the short corridor. Light shone through a window far above the door. Mica assumed guards waited outside.

Sun limped beside him. "Blaze must be out there. Karlus mentioned Knights."

"If we can get to the window we might have a better chance of escaping."

"Providing we're not too far up."

He unlocked the door and opened it, wincing at the creak of metal. Their hearts pounding, they waited for guards to burst inside.

"Give me the chains." Mica held out his hand. Sun gathered the chains and dropped them in his palm.

There were three other cells, all empty. The window was high but the wall craggy enough to ensure footholds during a climb. He stood below the window and tossed the chain upward. After several tries the manacle's end slipped through the bars and stuck. He tugged hard before climbing up. Halfway there the bars started to give. Stone crumbled.

"Mica," Sun called. "The bars are coming loose."

He finished his climb quickly. Gripping one of the more solid bars on the side of the window, he tugged the others away, scarcely believing their luck. The building must have been very old, perhaps left from the Ancient Wars before Ademene was founded.

He managed to fasten the chain to a more secure bar before glancing out the window, which was positioned just above a slanted rooftop. The opening was so narrow that Mica hoped he could slide through.

He climbed back down and said to Sun, "You go first. If I get stuck I don't want to ruin your chance to escape."

"I'm not going anywhere without you."

"Get up the damn chain." He grasped her shoulders, shaking her. There was no time for arguments. The beginning of bog tremors was coursing through him. Soon he'd be useless. He needed to know she'd be safe.

Sun scaled the wall, difficult with only one good foot. She squeezed through the window then signaled for him to follow. Mica climbed the chains. He pushed himself through the small opening. Sun's strong hands yanked him hard. Once his broad shoulders were through he knew he'd make it. They sat on the roof, observing their surroundings. The building was fairly low. Military tents were set up on the sand below. Karlus' men fought a small troop of the emperor's soldiers alongside the Bedouin army and a group of Knights. In the distance waves crashed upon the shoreline. Two ships were docked, one bearing the flag of the false emperor, the other with the black and red silk of the Ruby Order. Fighting raged on the decks of both ships.

"It's Lock." Sun pointed to a tall Knight with a mass of kinky brown and white hair. He fought with a straight sword in one hand and a curved dagger in the other. Sun smiled, glancing at Mica. "He's a friend. That's his ship out there. We'll be all right."

"Not if we don't get off this roof." He pulled the chain through and let it dangle down the side of the building. It reached a little more than halfway to the ground. They would still have quite a drop but one they could survive.

This time Mica climbed first. He fell to the ground just as one of Karlus' soldiers screamed a battle cry and flew at him with a bloodstained sword. Mica dodged the first blow. The blade struck the side of the building, scattering pieces of rock. Mica lunged at the man, grasping his sword arm and breaking the hold. He kicked the guard into the building and claimed the sword. Agony clawed through his entire body. The attack of bog tremors was strengthening. Blinking sweat from his eyes, he glanced at Sun who had reached the end of the chain.

Two more guards took notice of them and attacked. Mica blocked several blows, disarmed one guard and pierced the other's side. His sword arm dropped and he staggered, almost falling. Someone jerked the weapon from his hand. His vision cleared in time to watch Sun raise the blade in defense against another guard. She spun, slashing the man's chest.

Using the sword to support her injured leg, she grasped Mica's arm. "Come on."



“Just watch out for yourself.”

“Shut up, Mica.” She dragged him with her.

Why did she have to be so damn stubborn?

They neared the center of the battle. Soldiers attacked them from both sides. Momentarily Sun and Mica broke apart. He spun to the ground, extending a leg and knocking one of their attackers into the man behind him. Sun’s blade clashed with an enemy’s sword. The man used his weight advantage well, backing Sun into a barrel. Her injured leg buckled. Mica lunged, knowing he wouldn’t reach her in time. Her attacker was knocked aside by a whirling mass of hands and feet.

Blaze stood in front of Sun, fighting off a group of armed guards with skill that astounded Mica. The auburn-haired Knight’s face and tunic were drenched in blood. Mica wondered how he managed to survive at all fighting without the use of a weapon.

As Blaze fought his way through the battle, Mica grasped Sun’s arm and dragged her along the cleared path. She leaned heavily against him. Several times he thought he might lose consciousness. Someone tugged Sun out of his grip. Blinking, he saw her in the arms of the tall, white-and-brown-haired Knight. They were surrounded by Knights and the emperor’s soldiers.

“I’ve got you,” someone told Mica. Strong arms wrapped around him. Through his dimming vision he realized Arsha, his face streaked with battle filth, supported him.

“How—”

“It’s a long story. I finally listened to you and sent my people to Ademene.”

The Bedouins were safe. Sun was safe. Mica’s lips flickered in a smile before blackness took him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sun awoke groggy from the sleeping potion Blaze had given her. Glancing around, she recognized her room in the palace at Ademene. She remembered little of the battle up to the time Lock picked her up and carried her to his ship. His wife Sparrow had begun cleaning her wounds. Not even bothering to tend his own injuries, Blaze had arrived soon after. He’d given her the brew to drink. In spite of her protests to take care of himself he proceeded to clean and stitch her injuries. The potion affected her quickly. Though she asked about Mica she couldn’t recall the reply.

“Brightest Star?”

Sun turned in the direction of Blaze’s voice. The Knight sat on the edge of her bed and touched her face. She noted a gash stitched below his left eye. “Blaze, are you all right?”

His delicate lips twitched in a smile. “I should ask you.”

“I’ll be fine.” Sun raised herself to a sitting position, trying not to wince. Her entire body ached. “I need to bathe.”

"Sparrow made sure you were properly cleaned." Blaze reached for her hand, his eyes shining with fierceness Sun had never seen. "Such pain to my daughter drives me toward eternal bloodshed."

"No, Blaze." Sun squeezed the graceful, callused hand that held hers. "You aren't a killer. You live with the spirits of the dead. Killing would cause you more pain than the rest of us and I couldn't live knowing that."

"Then you know how I feel living with what's been done to you."

"How is Mica?"

He hesitated in replying. The expression in his eyes made her stomach lurch.

"Blaze?"

The Knight touched her face again. "Your feelings for him are deep. I don't need the spirits to tell me that."

"It's the bog tremors, isn't it?"

"I fear he won't survive the night."

Sun's throat constricted. Blinking back tears, she swung her legs to the edge of the bed. She was dressed in a clean, loose tunic of tan muslin that left her arms bare. Slices from the guards' knives marked her flesh. Most had clotted without the help of stitches but some Blaze had closed with his needle and thread. Her injured ankle was wrapped with bandages.

"I want to see him."

Blaze nodded, offering her his arm. "He asked for you many times when he was able."

"How long have I been asleep?"

"Nearly a day and a half." Blaze forced her to slow her pace, which was fast in spite of her injured ankle. "Brightest Star, I realize you're accustomed to illness and death but—"

"He's very bad. I know." Sun drew a deep breath. She'd never been in love before, never thought she *could* fall in love but it had happened and he was to die before they could explore their newfound emotions. "How did Lock and his crew end up at the battle? And the Bedouins?"

"Mate of the Key saw the battle days ago in a dream. He turned his ship and joined us when we were about to launch a rescue. The Bedouin leader decided to send all his people to safety. Some were scouting when you and Mirrored Rock were captured. They alerted us to your fate."

"So Arsha decided to listen to Mica after all." Sun wasn't sure if she felt relieved or angry. Perhaps a bit of both. "Did Mica know?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'm sure that made him happy."

In the Priests' quarters they stopped outside Mica's room. Blaze tapped on the door

before opening it.

Sun tried to harden herself to face Mica's illness but didn't quite succeed. Zareb sat in a chair by Mica's bed. The Messenger turned worried blue eyes toward Sun and Blaze but she only noticed him for a moment. Mica absorbed her attention. During the bout of illness she'd last witnessed he'd appeared gaunt, drained. Now there seemed to be nothing left of the man she knew. A bandage swathed his head, covering the patches of raw skin where Karlus had scalped his raven hair. A dark bruise spread from the stitched gash above his left eyebrow, marring his temple and blackening his eye. Lips that she remembered as soft and moist looked parched and trickled blood from several splits. Sweat dampened his ashen flesh and bled through the thin, tan tunic similar to the one she wore.

Zareb stood, joining Sun and Blaze before they stepped closer.

The Messenger whispered, "The last bout ended a few moments ago."

"What have you given him for pain?" Sun brushed by Zareb and sat on the edge of Mica's bed, resting her hand gently on his chest. Had it not been for the faint motion of breathing beneath her palm she would have thought him dead already.

"Star root," Blaze stated.

Sun's brow furrowed. Star root. The powerful herb was generally used as a last resort to ease the unfathomable pain of the dying. The herb itself often caused death.

Zareb stood beside her. "I don't think he feels pain any longer, Dame Sun."

She knew his words were meant as comfort but she was beyond consolation.

"Mica and I have been friends for a long time," Zareb continued. "I know he cares for you deeply. He felt very guilty about you being captured. He wanted you to know how sorry he was. I don't mean to make this more difficult for you, Dame Sun, but I promised him I'd tell you how he felt."

Glancing briefly at the Messenger, she nodded.

"We'll give you privacy. If you need us we'll be right outside." He and Blaze left the room, closing the door behind them.

Sun leaned forward and touched her cheek to Mica's. "You probably can't hear my words, Mica, but I know you can feel what's in my heart. Please don't blame yourself for what happened. I don't. We've chosen paths that include such risks. You're a good man and you were following a good cause. I love you."

She touched her lips to his forehead.

Sun wasn't sure how much time passed before Blaze joined her. She'd bathed Mica with cool cloths in an attempt to lower his fever and had touched him with all the affection she'd grown to feel. Not once did he open his eyes or so much as move.

"His mother watches," Blaze said, pointing across the bed. "There. She likes you, Brightest Star."

Sun's attempt at a smile turned to a frown as tears threatened again. She drew a calming breath. "Is his father here too or is he burning in hell?"

“His father is not here.”

“I hate him. He’d dead but he’s still stealing from me, Blaze. He took my village, my parents, my hope for a family of my own and now Mica. If he hadn’t put him in that stinking prison Mica wouldn’t be dying right now. How can I defeat an enemy who haunts me from the netherworld?”

“You and Mica both defeated him long ago when you became a Dame and he chose a better path than one of destruction.”

“Many times Mica said he was horrible in the past but he made up for it. He’s helped so many people, Blaze.”

“He’s earned reprieve.”

“I know what you’re saying but it doesn’t make accepting his loss any easier.”

Blaze drew her into his arms. “Never is.”

Sun clung to the Knight tightly for a moment before pushing away. She touched Mica’s shoulder. Tremors coursed through him, faintly at first then growing in intensity. She’d never felt so useless in her life but she could do little more than watch as the disease consumed a man she once sought to kill but whom she would now give her own life to spare.

“Blaze,” Zareb called, thrusting open the door. Sun glanced over her shoulder at the Messenger whose eyes looked wild. He held a brown leather pouch out to the Knight.

Valor’s tall, muscular frame filled the doorway. The Nalmite looked more disheveled than ever, his skin, beard and clothing covered in layers of dirt from hard travel. His deep voice rumbled throughout the room, “I came as soon as I could.”

“Our thanks,” Blaze said, opening the pouch and peering inside. “I pray your diligence was not wasted.”

Sun assisted Blaze in preparing the portia.

“Anything I can do?” Valor asked.

“He’ll need to be held.” Blaze glanced at Mica who was caught in the violent tremors that marked his disease.

The Nalmite crossed the room and helped Zareb hold Mica steady while Sun and Blaze forced the medicine down his throat.

“How long before we know if it works?” Sun asked, covering Mica’s trembling form with another blanket.

“You understand he’s very advanced,” Blaze said.

“I know,” Sun snapped then glanced at Blaze. “I’m sorry.”

He touched her shoulder before leaning against the wall. Zareb settled into the chair.

Valor said, “If I’m no longer needed I’ll return to the barracks. Some Nalmite troops have accompanied me.”

“Troops?” Zareb asked.

"The Unownland is not far from the Kennas. Should this false emperor take control, who's to stop him from trying to invade us? Better to help you crush him now."

"I'm sure all assistance is appreciated," Blaze said. "By morning I'll be joining you on the training field one way or the other."

Sun glanced at her mentor. She knew he meant by morning Mica would either be dead or on his way to recovery.

Several moments later Mica's trembling stopped completely. Panic tightened Sun's chest. She touched her fingers to his neck, praying for a pulse. Apparently the sudden vanishing of the symptoms worried Zareb as well. He stood close by, staring at his friend.

Blaze approached, a slight smile on his lips. "It's doing its work. Nothing short of a miracle at this stage."

"Thank the Spirit," Sun murmured, closing her eyes and squeezing Mica's limp hand. This had to be the happiest moment of her life.

"At least now he has a chance," Zareb said.

"He must drink the portia two times a day for the next seven days," Blaze ordered. "And he must rest until his health is completely restored. He's weak and it will take time. It's good that you need recovery time as well, Brightest Star. Watch over him until he's better."

"I will." Sun couldn't tear her gaze from Mica. She watched the faint rise and fall of his chest and the slight movement of his eyes beneath the closed lids.

"You should rest as well," Blaze told Zareb. "Two days and nights you've been watching."

"I will." The Messenger yawned, running a hand through his hair. Sun noted both Zareb and Blaze looked tired.

The Knight kissed her cheek and she embraced him tightly. "Thank you."

"Don't deny your heart," Blaze told her. "Ever."

She nodded, turning back to Mica.

"I'll find another room to sleep," Zareb said. "Use my bed to rest when you're tired, Dame Sun."

"Thank you."

"Pray the symptoms don't return," Blaze said, "but if they do call me without haste."

Both men left the chamber, closing the door behind them.

Sun took the seat Zareb had used and tugged it close to the bed.

Mica slept without sound or motion for the remainder of the day. His fever continued to drop and by evening his skin felt cool beneath her hand. As she lit the lantern on the table in the corner of the room she heard the rustle of sheets.

She sat on the edge of his bed. "Mica?"

His eyes opened, glittering blue in his ashen face.

“Sun.” He swallowed, attempting to moisten his dry lips with an even drier tongue. She reached for a mug of water and held it while he drank. Even taking a few swallows exhausted him. He closed his eyes again and sank into the pillows. “I’m sorry.”

“Mica, you don’t have to be sorry. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“If I hadn’t brought you there—”

“I chose to follow you.”

He gazed at her. “I haven’t the right but I love you. I can’t bear another attack. I’m dying. I’m sorry.”

“You’re not dying.” She cupped his cheek in her palm. “Valor came with the portia. It stopped your last attack. You’re going to get well, Mica. Blaze’s cure will work.”

“It can’t be.”

“It is.” She measured out another dose of the portia then held the mug to his lips, thinking how grateful she was that the portia had given him a second chance. “Drink this.”

He swallowed, nearly gagging on the taste, but finished the contents of the mug.

“Go back to sleep.” She fixed his blankets and kissed his forehead.

“Are you all right? You should be resting.”

“I am. It’s not like you’re hard to watch. You’ve been sleeping all day.” Sun smiled slightly as Mica’s eyes slipped shut. “Looks like you will be all night too.”

The physical drain from the disease combined with some of the strong ingredients she’d watched Blaze mix with the portia, she didn’t doubt Mica would be sleeping much over the next week.

Sun sat beside him for several moments before stretching out on Zareb’s bed. While gazing at her lover she drifted into a light sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mica awoke, the bitter taste of sleep and portia on his tongue. His entire body ached and his scalp felt raw beneath the cushion of bandages. His first coherent thought was of Sun. He glanced at her sleeping in the bed next to his. Sunlight streamed in through the parted curtains and glinted off her hair. Furious, he noted the bruises on her face and healing slashes on her bare arms. Karlus and his bastards had done their job well. Flashes of Sun’s rape—and his own—raced through Mica’s mind. Violation of his body had been humiliating not to mention painful but watching Sun endure the same indignity—Sun who had already suffered so much—was unbearable. Mica knew his life had been given back to him. The last thing he should consider was taking another life but he was overwhelmed by the desire for revenge upon Karlus and the guards who’d tortured Sun.

He pushed himself the edge of the bed, his stomach lurching. The aftereffects of bog

tremors combined with the strength of Blaze's potion made him queasy. Slight quivers—nothing compared to what he'd been accustomed to during attacks—coursed through his body, reminding him of how close he'd come to death. A bowl of water and a towel rested on the trunk at the foot of his bed. It took him several moments to rally the strength to move without fear of falling on his face. With slow steps he reached the water bowl where he washed his face and cleaned his teeth and tongue. Though the grime of prison had been washed away—he vaguely recalled Zareb performing the task—he longed for a bath. His skin was dirty with dried sweat and smelled of strong herbal salve that had been rubbed on his muscles in an attempt to lessen the pain of bog tremors. He forced his thoughts away from what he remembered of this last attack. The agony had been so blinding that he'd prayed for death. Now he was glad the Goddess had answered his call in a different way.

If the portia truly cured the disease he would become a whole man again. He doubted he could give up such a gift even to the Priesthood. Not when he could finally have Sun, providing she wanted him after what she'd endured.

"What the hell are you doing up?" Sun pushed tendrils of hair from her face. She stood, took his arm and tugged him toward his bed.

"I needed to wash and stretch before I grow to that mattress like fungus. And you don't have to walk me like an old man."

"Oh you're getting better already." She grinned but didn't remove her hands from his arm.

He settled back onto the bed. Though he refused to admit it he was glad to rest again. Sun left him to pour a mug full of the foul-tasting potion. "Drink this."

Mica curled his lip. "As much as I'm grateful for the portia, it's the most putrid brew I've ever tasted."

"It saved your life."

"I know. I can hardly believe it." Mica drained the mug quickly, trying not to scrunch his face like a child forced to eat a dreaded vegetable.

Sun laughed. "I guess it does taste as bad as it smells. Are you hungry? You haven't eaten in days."

"Not really."

The portia sloshed in his stomach. After attacks his appetite always took time to return.

"I'm bringing you something anyway. You need to eat."

"Sun." He grasped her wrist, staring into her eyes. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

He entwined his fingers with hers. "About what happened—"

"We don't need to talk about it. When I'm well I'll just make it my life's work to rip out Karlus' heart and any of those other pigs I can ram my sword into."

In spite of her callous words, Mica knew Sun well enough to understand she was

disguising her pain. She had spent her life hiding what she considered “weaknesses” and to give in now would, in her eyes, mean surrender to the filthy bastards who’d hurt her.

“Karlus and the others will be dealt with. You have my word.”

“Mica, let’s not talk about this now.” She dropped to the edge of his bed and placed a hand on his shoulder. Her touch warmed him through the tunic. “You’re going to be cured. That’s all I care about. Karlus and those guards mean *nothing* compared to what’s happened here.”

“Dame Sun, I can’t stand the thought of what they did to you.”

“They did the same to you.”

“I wish it had only been me.”

“My preference would have been neither of us. I’ll be back with something to eat.”

He watched as she left then closed his eyes.

Moments later a tap sounded on the door. It creaked open and the High Advisor stepped inside. Out of habitual respect Mica stood.

“Will you sit?” The Advisor shook his head, crossing the room in two strides and applying gentle pressure to Mica’s shoulders. “I’m sorry I couldn’t have come more often over the past few days but as you can imagine the emperor has been planning his defenses and forming alliances with some of the smaller Kingdoms. It was mandatory that I assist him.”

“I understand. What is our situation?”

“We have everything under control.”

“Details?”

“I refuse to provide you with details and I have forbidden anyone with knowledge of details to burden you with them until you’re fully restored.”

Mica’s anger bristled though he did his best to remain calm in the presence of his superior. “You know I can be of assistance—”

“And you will but not until you’re well. After that we intend to use your expertise as much as we did during the battle with the first false emperor.” Kado folded his hands in front of his floor-length blue tunic. “Is there anything I can do for you? Anything you need?”

“I’d love a bath.”

Kado nodded and headed for the door. Moments later he returned followed by several servants carrying a wooden tub and buckets of warm water. Once the tub was filled Kado excused the servants and removed his tunic, revealing a vest and trousers beneath. He approached the bed. “Do you need help undressing?”

Mica wondered if he looked as shocked as he felt. “You can’t help me bathe. You’re the High Advisor.”

“Who is also a High Priest and like my brothers spent years in service as a healer



and teacher. Promotion hasn't weakened my stomach, Mica. You have injuries that need care."

Mica removed the tunic, his arms and back aching from the overhead movement. He stepped into the tub and closed his eyes. The warm water soothed his muscles though some of the deep lacerations smarted.

Kado unraveled the bandage on his head. The High Advisor used fresh water from a pitcher to clean his scalp. In spite of Kado's gentle touch Mica's head stung. He wondered exactly how much flesh Karlus had ripped off with his hair.

The door opened and Val stepped inside. The Priest's gaze roamed over Mica with pity then he looked at Kado. "The emperor asks for your presence, High Advisor. He's in his meeting room."

"Of course. I need to bandage Mica—"

Val stepped inside. "I'll do it."

Kado nodded, wiping his hands dry and donning his tunic before he left the room.

## Chapter Thirteen

The slightly built Priest approached, taking a cake of soap and running it over Mica's back, carefully cleaning the bruised and broken skin.

"Val, thank you for the help but I'm fine." Mica took the soap from the Priest's hand.

"You look terrible though not nearly as bad as when you first got here." Val rinsed Mica's back and shoulders before reaching for fresh bandages to wrap his head. Most of his long hair had been chopped off along with a patch of flesh at the back of his head and some on the sides. After he'd been rescued, the healer had cut off what was left of his hair to make tending his wounds easier. "That looks painful. All your beautiful hair is gone."

"That's the least of my worries."

"I know. You and Dame Sun suffered terribly."

"I'm more concerned about her." In truth her refusal to admit how deeply she'd been hurt worried him, though he knew it was how she chose to cope with the problem.

"I knew you would be. Now that Sir Blaze has found a cure are you going to reconsider your decision to become a Priest?"

Mica sighed, at the moment not wanting to deal with the issue. "I don't know."

"If you don't know then it's already decided."

"I don't want to discuss it."

"You'll need to discuss it before your ritual." Val began wrapping Mica's head. "At least you have a beautifully shaped head. You could even stay bald and still be considered handsome. Are you going to keep the beard?"

Mica ran a hand over his stubbled chin. He reached for the razor and mirror on top of the trunk and began to shave, cutting in a goatee. When he'd finished he glanced at Val.

"I like it," the Priest said. "Something wicked about it. Reminds me of how you looked when you were a general."

*A shadow of what I looked like as a general.*

He'd been younger then, his face full, his skin dark and glowing with good health. His eyes had been sharp, cunning. Now they bore fine lines and the cunning had changed to wisdom. One of his eyes was badly bruised, half closed and bloodshot, a gash stitched shut above the eyebrow. His prominent cheekbones appeared even sharper since his illness. Soon with rest and Blaze's treatment he would regain the strength he'd lost and look healthy again. Such good fortune was almost beyond his

wildest hopes. To become the man he once was in body but possess the humanity that had developed throughout the trials of the past five years was a gift he wasn't sure he deserved. Only one more thing would make it perfect, having Dame Sun share his life. He wasn't worthy of her. Still he knew she cared for him but did she care enough? In the back of his mind through a haze of herbs and pain he thought he heard her say she loved him. Still he thought he'd seen and heard a number of things that could not have been. He thought he'd seen his mother too but that was impossible.

The door opened and Sun stepped inside, a plate of food in her hand. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you were bathing."

"Just in time, Dame Sun." Val hurried out the door. "I have duties to attend. You can help him finish."

"I don't need help."

"I brought you some salve," she said. "If you're half as sore as I am from being chained up you can use it. I like this." Sun touched his goatee before she picked up the soap and lathered her hands. Standing behind him, she ran her sudsy hands over his shoulders and chest.

"You don't have to do this, Sun. You've done enough for me already."

"Don't you like it?"

"Yes," he closed his eyes, his muscles relaxing beneath her soapy massage. He more than liked it.

"Then enjoy it."

Mica drew a deep breath as her hands rubbed slow circles over his chest. Beneath soreness and exhaustion desire stirred inside him. After what he'd gone through he was shocked he could feel anything sexual but Sun was more than arousing. She was affectionate, kind and comforting yet she'd suffered the same as he had.

Grasping her hand, he tugged her to the side of the tub and gazed into her eyes. There was so much he wanted to say but words wouldn't come. As if in understanding she smiled and kissed him. His cock swelled and he grasped her shoulders, holding her so close that his wet chest dampened the front of her tunic.

"Mica," she murmured between kisses. She took his lower lip between her teeth and ran her tongue over it, her arms sliding around his neck. "Mica, no. You have to rest more."

"I know," he said, running his lips and teeth down the side of her neck. She moaned softly. Her stiff nipples scraped his chest in the most arousing manner.

"Mica." She giggled, pushing away and standing.

By the Goddess she looked beautiful. The front of her tunic was transparent from the water. Her plump nipples stood out, beckoning his fingers and lips. Her eyes glistening with lust and good humor, she flung him a towel.

He dried off and tugged a fresh tunic over his head then joined her for a meal. The table wasn't meant for two exceptionally tall people. Or maybe it was. He grinned,

nudging her knees apart and settling one of his legs between them.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"I'm fine."

"You keep saying that." He reached for a chunk of dried fruit. Her nonchalance concerned him. He knew she must feel as invaded as he did—more considering this was the second time in her life she'd been violated.

"It's true."

"I'm not fine." Perhaps if he opened up to her about his feelings, she would respond in kind.

"You've probably never been raped before." She took a swallow from her water mug. "Can we talk about something else? It's done, Mica. All we can do now is rip the cocks off the bastards who did it."

*Oh I plan on it.* Mica reached for her hand. "I know how you must feel. I want revenge too but—"

"But what? You want me to cower in a corner somewhere to show how humiliated I am?"

"Of course not."

"That's not me and if you don't know that by now you don't know me very well." She stood, kicking her chair aside and walking across the room.

Mica approached and wrapped his arms around her. He half expected her to pull away but she clung to him instead and rested her head against his shoulder. Tilting his cheek against her hair, he inhaled its pleasant herbal scent.

"Sorry I lost my temper." She tilted her face up to his.

"If you didn't lose your temper I'd be worried."

They sat and ate while discussing less emotional subjects.

Mica leaned back in his chair and attempted to run a hand through his hair. Feeling the bandage, he dropped his arm. It had taken him ages to grow all that damn hair. Now it was wagging behind Karlus' helmet.

Sun smiled. "You look sleepy. Must be the portia kicking in."

Mica nodded and headed for the bed. He flopped into it, his bruised ribs and back aching at the impact. He started to mention something about the emperor's attack plans but his voice faded before the sentence formed completely.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sun lay on her bed for several moments, her gaze wandering from Mica to the pale gray ceiling. Though her muscles still ached from the abuse of a few days ago she longed for the training field. Now that Mica was out of immediate danger her thoughts focused on revenge. Dame Neila would advise her to be grateful that she and Mica were alive and not to lose herself in vengeance. Blaze would agree with Neila though he

would understand her feelings. They were probably right but she couldn't seem to help herself. She'd been violated too many times to sweep aside hatred.

Sun kissed Mica's cheek before leaving the room. He didn't move and she guessed he'd sleep for most of the day. On the way to the great hall she met Lock's wife, Sparrow.

"Sparrow, I've been wanting to thank you for cleaning me up onboard the ship but I've been spending much time with Mica."

"I'm glad I could help. How is your friend?"

"Better, thank you." It amazed her how wonderful she felt knowing Mica would recover and have the life he deserved.

"And you?"

"I'm fine. I hope to be back on the field in a few days." Sun wished everyone would stop asking how she was and simply allow her to cope with the situation in her own way. Whining about it wouldn't change anything. The only way to gain any release from the anger and pain festering deep inside her would be to take revenge on the men who sullied her and Mica.

"Don't rush it." Sparrow placed a hand on Sun's shoulder. "You had some serious injuries."

"I know. If Lock and the others hadn't gotten there when they did we'd have died."

"Lock dreamed the whole thing. He was quite upset when he woke up that night and turned the ship around so fast the crew thought we might capsize." Sparrow shook her head. "At times I hate it when he has those dreams though in this case I'm glad."

"So am I. Believe me."

"I was actually on my way to see you and Mica. I would have come sooner but I've been spending much time with the High Advisor's councilmen. I've spoken with the emperor and Sir Blaze and we hope to form an alliance between Ademene and the Ruby Order."

"I understand how busy you must be," Sun said. Sparrow held a special position as one of the only females working for the Ruby Order. Fluent in over ten languages, she had been appointed ambassador for the Order and traveled on Lock's ship in that capacity. Her talents were invaluable. She loved being stationed with her husband so the arrangement worked well.

"Mica's asleep right now," Sun said as she and Sparrow walked down the hall. "The treatment for bog tremors is very strong but I'm looking forward to introducing you once he's better."

"And I'm looking forward to meeting the man who gives you such a look in your eyes." Sparrow grinned, opening the door to the chamber she shared with her husband.

Inside Lock sat on a chair by the window, polishing his sword. The Knight smiled at the women, his teeth gleaming against skin almost as dark as Mica's, a striking contrast to his white-streaked hair. "Glad to see you're better, Sun."

"If it hadn't been for you I'd be food for the stone buzzards about now. Thanks." She offered Lock a firm handshake.

"All in a day's work, right?" Lock said, winking at Sparrow.

"I was just saying we're looking forward to meeting Mica."

Lock nodded, focusing on his sword. "Right enough. The man has earned himself quite a reputation as a fighter."

"Funny how much I hated him when we first met. Now we're good friends."

"Friends? Yes. That's important for a relationship," Sparrow said. "Lock and I are good friends."

The Knight grinned, placed his sword aside and dragged Sparrow onto his lap. "I hope I'm much more than that."

"What do you mean relationship?" Sun folded her arms across her chest.

"You care for Mica very much," Sparrow observed.

"Yes."

"It's just that when you talked about him you didn't look merely friendly."

Slightly irritated by her friend's comments, Sun said, "Either I'm too obvious or you're too observant."

"Probably a little of both," Sparrow told her.

"Nothing permanent will develop between us. You know how I've always been."

"Change can be good sometimes," Lock said. "I used to think I was too cold-hearted to marry. Sparrow changed me."

"It's not just me," Sun said. "Mica's a Priest in Waiting. Almost a Holy Man."

"And they're forbidden to marry?" Sparrow asked.

"Not forbidden but it would be very difficult. Before becoming a Priest they undergo a ritual."

Sparrow looked interested. "What kind of ritual? There's so much to learn about the culture in the Kennas."

Sun rubbed a hand over her face. "It's almost too ridiculous to describe."

"We've been so many places there's nothing we haven't seen." Lock leaned back in the chair.

Sun raised an eyebrow. "I don't think you've ever seen the likes of this. I know I haven't."

"Well don't keep us in suspense," Sparrow pressed.

"In order to become Priests the men are castrated in a ritual to honor their Goddess."

Sparrow's eyes widened and Lock's face froze momentarily.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"And you're a trained healer, love?" Sparrow elbowed her husband gently. "What

part of castrated don't you understand?"

Lock stood, nearly dumping Sparrow onto the ground. He caught her arms before she fell. "What kind of crazy religion demands a man cut off his balls?"

"Lock," Sparrow snapped.

"Let's call it what it is, girl. Pure insanity."

"Try telling Mica that." Sun didn't bother hiding her disgust.

"I plan to. As soon as you introduce me to the man."

Sparrow looked horrified. "Lock, you can't say anything. You don't even know Mica. It's none of your business."

"I'm standing on principle, girl. No man should cut off the balls he was born with. The Spirit put them there for a reason and not just to dangle pretty when you're impressing a woman with your naked glory."

"Lock." Sparrow tried to cover his mouth with her hand but he gently grasped her wrists.

"What if he ever decides he wants children?"

*Children.* That had been Sun's greatest concern of late.

"I don't understand the custom either," Sparrow said.

"Now that he knows you, Sun, maybe he'll change his mind." Lock walked to the window and gazed out. "I have to get back to the training field. We're not leaving while Ademene is under threat so my crew has been training with the emperor's men and that group of Nalmites. Fierce warriors they are. Be proud to fight alongside them, in particular Valor and his mother."

Sun raised an eyebrow. "His mother?"

"It's her troops that came with him to fight with us," Lock explained. "She's something like a Colonel. Zimm-Bella her name is. You'll want to get a look at her, Sun. She's got an inch or so on you I believe."

"Really?" Sun's interest piqued. Few women rivaled her in height or ability. "I'm looking forward to getting back on the field."

"Rest up first." Lock sheathed his sword and kissed Sparrow. "See you for dinner, girl."

The Knight left the women alone in the chamber. They talked about home and briefly discussed the impending war before Sparrow excused herself for another meeting with the councilmen and Sun made her way back to Mica's room.

\* \* \* \* \*

After checking Mica, Sun sprawled on the bed near his and drifted to sleep. When she awoke several hours later Mica sat at the table, a sheathed sword resting across his lap.

Sun stood and washed her face in a basin of water then rinsed her mouth. Wiping her lips on her sleeve, she nodded toward the weapon. "Plan on fighting any time soon?"

"As soon as I'm able."

She gripped his shoulder. "You have a while to go. Blaze said you've responded well to the portia but it's very important for you to regain your strength completely."

"I'm not a fool, Sun. I've been given a second chance at life. I don't intend to waste it." With one hand he placed the sword aside and used the other to tug her onto his lap.

"Mica." She tried to pull away but he slipped both arms around her waist. "I'm too heavy for you right now—"

He looked completely insulted. "I'm not *that* much of an invalid. And you're not heavy—for your height."

"You obnoxious son of a hog."

He laughed and slid his hand beneath her trousers, his palm gently warming her soft mound.

"Now get your hands off me before I give you another wound to worry about."

He dropped his hands, his smile fading. "I'm sorry. That was inconsiderate of me. After all you've gone through the last thing you want is a man groping you."

Instead of standing she slid her arms around his neck and said, "That's not the reason. I really was thinking of you."

He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. "That's your problem, Dame Sun. You're always thinking of someone else."

"Then I guess we do have something in common."

She took his face in her hands and kissed him. His hands slid up her back, pressing her curves close to his lean, hard body.

A tap sounded on the door. Sun got to her feet just as Zareb stepped inside, Ebony Starr snug in his arms.

The Messenger smiled. "Didn't mean to intrude but all this child has been saying for days is 'Where's Mica?' I was hoping you'd feel up to visiting with her for a short time."

Mica stood, taking the child from Zareb. "I always feel like seeing my girl. Missed me, Ebony?"

"No." The toddler giggled, clinging to his neck.

Mica glanced at Sun. "No is her favorite word."

"Mica, tell a story," Ebony demanded.

"I think I can accommodate you." He settled into the chair with Ebony Starr.

"Sounds good to me." Sun kicked out another chair. "Zareb?"

"I'll be down the hall talking to Val. Be back in a little while. I'm sure neither of you feel up to chasing her around and I doubt she'll sit still for long. All her energy is back



in full force since she's recovered from her illness."

"Good," Mica said.

Once Zareb left Mica spun the tale of a wizard called Ragnar, father of Alrik, who fulfilled the ancient prophecy to end a thousand-year war with Zaltana.

Sun watched Mica and Ebony Starr, thinking he would make a wonderful father.

After the story Mica and Sun played with Ebony Starr until Zareb returned. Several times she noticed Mica watching her with a tender smile on his lips.

"You'll make a fine mother someday, Dame Sun," he said once they were alone.

"No. I won't."

"You don't want children?"

"It's not that. It's just difficult for Dames to raise families."

"But many do."

She shrugged. "I plan to move up the ranks and not remain a foot soldier for the rest of my life."

"Well you definitely have the ability and determination to become a great warrior. I'd fight alongside you any day."

A smile flickered across her lips. "You're not so bad yourself. I'm looking forward to seeing you at full strength once you've recovered."

Mica's gaze hardened. "Maybe you are but Karlus won't be."

"We should forget about him until we can actually do something."

"Sensible. I'm surprised at you, Dame Sun."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He drew her into his arms and for a moment they stood in silence, warmed by each other's embrace until another tap sounded on the door.

"It's open," Mica called.

The door swung open and Lock strode inside. Sparrow, carrying a tray of food, followed him.

"Thought we'd bring you supper."

"Thanks." Sun accepted the tray and placed it on the table. "You'll be joining us, I hope?"

"If you're not too tired for company."

Sun glanced at Mica in question and he said, "We'd be glad for the company. I've been stuck in this room for too long."

"I wouldn't be in too much of a hurry to leave it after how you looked when we found you." Lock pulled a chair away from the table and straddled it backward. He extended his hand to Mica. "I'm Lock."

"Sun's told me much about you and your wife." Mica gripped the Knight's hand. The man's grasp was firm, his hands rough. Mica turned to the lady and nodded.

“Sparrow, it’s nice to finally meet you.”

She smiled. “Sun’s told us about you as well. How are you feeling?”

“Much better thank you. We owe you for turning your ship around. I’m very grateful.”

Lock waved his hand in dismissal. “It’s what we do.”

“Your gift of foresight is amazing.”

Lock snorted. “Some gift. At times I feel it’s a curse but in cases like this I’m glad for it. At least we were able to help.”

The group fell into light conversation over a meal of fruit, bread and stew.

“You have a beautiful city,” Sparrow commented. “I’m sorry we couldn’t have visited under better circumstances.”

“When the war ends I hope you’ll visit again.”

“You can wager on it.” Lock wagged his slice of bread in Mica’s direction. “Blaze has been talking to your emperor about opening relations between Ademene and the Ruby Order.”

Mica exchanged a pleased look with Sun.

“That would be wonderful,” Sun said. “Maybe I can talk Dame Neila into stationing me here for a while.”

“That would be excellent.” Mica smiled at her, his heartbeat quickening at the thought of Sun spending more time in the Kennas. He turned away when he felt Lock’s gaze upon them. Perhaps it was knowing the Knight could often read the future but Mica felt like the man saw everything, even things people tried to conceal.

“We’ll be here often I’m guessing,” Lock continued. “Sparrow speaks several of your dialects.”

“I understand from Sun you’re fluent in many languages.” Mica turned to Sparrow. “Such knowledge is an invaluable tool.”

“She’s my favorite crew member.” Lock winked at his wife who offered him a coquettish look. The Knight reached for a chunk of fruit and took a big bite. Uncurling his index finger from the fruit, he pointed at Mica. “So what’s this I hear about you getting your balls cut off?”

Sparrow gasped, her face turning scarlet. “Lock!”

Mica forced his expression to remain impassive. He wasn’t sure if he should be offended or laugh aloud. Lock wore the uniform of the Ruby Order and possessed the courage and skill of a Knight, but he obviously had learned none of the gracious manners that marked so many of his Order.

“Lock, now’s not the time,” Sun said, a smile playing around her lips.

The Knight leaned back in his chair. “I’m just asking because such a custom is unfamiliar to me. It’s supposed to be something religious, am I right?”

“It’s a sacred ritual,” Mica explained though he guessed Lock’s interest truly wasn’t

in the rites of another culture. “The Priest forms himself into the image of the Goddess. From what I understand the Goddess is similar to the Spirit your part of the world worships.”

Lock raised an eyebrow. “Except the Spirit doesn’t ask for the family jewels as a trophy.”

Mica smiled in spite of himself. The Knight was nosy and obnoxious but his honesty was almost respectable. “The Goddess doesn’t ask. We choose to give.”

“Have you lost your sanity, boy?” Lock tossed the fruit aside and leaned closer to Mica, placing a firm hand on his shoulder. “I wouldn’t even do such a thing to my horse and you’re contemplating this self-mutilation. Think about what you’re—”

“I don’t see how this is any of your business.” Mica shrugged off Lock’s hand.

Sparrow shot her husband a furious look. “He’s right.”

The Knight shook his head. “I don’t know how you can go through with it.”

“If it’s meant to be I will go through with it. Can’t you foresee that? You’re supposed to be the prophet.”

“I’m no prophet. Just a man concerned with the welfare of another man.”

“I appreciate your concern,” Mica said, some of his anger fading when he realized Lock’s words were spoken out of a genuine desire to help combined with total ignorance of an unfamiliar culture. “However any man considered for the Priesthood works hard to prove himself worthy of the ritual. I’m afraid someone outside the Goddess’ service can never truly understand.”

“I can’t argue there.” Lock sighed. “It’s odd that a man with your reputation as a general has turned to a Priest’s life.”

“No stranger than a SothSea pirate turned Knight of the Ruby Order.”

Beneath his heavy white beard Lock’s lips curved into a broad smile. “A point well taken. I’m looking forward to training with you and working to keep your land free of the false emperor.”

“As am I. Your help is appreciated.”

Sparrow stood. “Now that I’ve had my share of humiliation for the day I think I’ll drag my husband back to our room before he does any more damage.”

“I’m afraid not, girl.” Lock kissed her before he walked to the door. “I need to get back to training. I’ll be late.”

“It seems you’ll do better in the field than at a proper table,” Sparrow continued as the couple, still trading barbs, left the room.

Sun folded her arms across her chest and laughed. “Those two never change.”

“Now I understand why your friend Lock gets into all the brawls you’ve described. I’m surprised someone hasn’t killed him already.”

“Many have tried but Lock’s no easy target. He’s strong as a tiger and more cunning.”

“For his sake he better be.”

“He really was only trying to help, you know.”

“Why does everyone want to point out the bad side of this ritual?”

“You mean there’s a good side?”

Mica wanted to retort but he realized the truth of her words. The more time he spent dreaming of a life with her the more outrageous the ritual seemed.

The time was approaching when he’d have to admit his mistake. But not now. They had a war to endure. If he survived then he would be free to truly follow whatever path the Goddess intended for him.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was nearly a week before Mica felt up to leaving the Priests’ quarters to venture to other parts of the palace. Though he asked Kado and Blaze for details regarding the coming war he received little information. The forced rest was beginning to annoy him though he understood he needed a complete recovery to be of use to others as well as himself. He hadn’t mentioned it but he knew one possible way to end the war with scarcely any bloodshed. He realized the emperor, Kado and others in Ademene must have contemplated a similar plan but the risks were great. Perhaps too great. Should the challenge be sent and the emperor’s champion fail...

Mica shook his head. It wasn’t worth considering. Yet.

It was late morning when Mica left his room. He walked to the great hall where he sat for several moments watching the servants clean before deciding to visit the training field. He stopped at the stable and talked to his mare, glad to know Zareb had been exercising her daily. In truth he’d been shocked and pleased to learn his and Sun’s horses had been recovered during the skirmish in the desert.

He rubbed between the mare’s eyes and contemplated riding her to the training field but he often felt dizzy from the portia. The last thing he wanted was to fall off the horse and appear like even more of an invalid. Blaze assured him that soon the treatment would be complete and he’d have his life back. Mica could scarcely wait. He relished the thought of repaying Karlus in full for his vile actions—particularly toward Sun. Every indignity she’d suffered had driven Karlus closer to his death.

Mica vividly recalled the false general’s assault on his body. Each time he remembered the feeling of Karlus’ slimy skin and the heat of his breath, disgust crawled up his spine.

## Chapter Fourteen

At the training field Mica paused, watching the warriors jousting on horseback, wrestling and practicing with swords and other weapons. Amidst the archers Dame Sun dressed in her vest and trousers fired arrows into a target, striking the center each time. Mica noted many of her cuts and bruises had faded and she looked fit. Though he admired her physical strength at times he worried about her emotional health. She must have been deeply affected by what she'd endured. He longed to comfort her but she wouldn't allow it.

Mica caught sight of Lock practicing hand-to-hand fighting with Blaze and several Knights. A group of Nalmites also trained nearby. Valor, his sword drawn, battled with a woman even taller than Sun. A strip of leather bound her dark hair behind her back. Muscles rippled beneath the smooth skin of her arms exposed in a sleeveless brown uniform.

Moments later Sun joined Mica. She nodded in the direction of Valor and the woman. "That's Colonel Zimm-Bella, Valor's mother."

"His *mother*?"

"From what I hear she's one of the best warriors in the Nalmite army. She's in charge of the troops sent here."

Mica watched Valor and his mother trade blows. She spun, nearly swiping off his ear with the tip of her blade. Valor kicked her onto her back. She sprang to her feet and their blades clashed again.

"There are quite a few females with the Nalmite troops," Sun commented, her gaze sweeping the newcomers.

Most of the Nalmites were dark with elongated, almost animal-like ears and sharp incisor teeth. The females were taller than most human males. Their counterparts towered over most of the Knights and the emperor's soldiers. Only Lock, Mica, Blaze and a handful of others rivaled the Nalmites in height.

"They seem bred for war," Mica observed.

Sun nodded. "I'd rather fight alongside them than against them."

Lock strode across the field and joined them, studying Valor.

"Those Nalmites make quite a display," the Knight said.

"They appear formidable," Mica agreed.

"Good skill. Plenty of power."

Valor and his mother ended their match.

"Not bad," Lock commented as the two passed by.

Colonel Zimm-Bella paused, turning back to the group. Valor followed.

"I suppose you think you could do better, human?" The Colonel's gray eyes fixed on the Knight. Up close the Nalmite woman's face was as striking as her body. Wavy brown hair blended with her tanned skin. Her forehead was high, her eyebrows wickedly arched. The tips of her sharp incisor teeth glittered against her full lower lip. Fine lines marked her eyes and mouth, the only signs of early middle age. Mica guessed she must have been very young when she'd mothered Valor.

Lock smiled. "It would be a close match. Do you welcome visitors in your land? I'd like to train there someday."

It was Zimm-Bella's turn to smile. "Only the rarest of your kind could hope to survive among Nalmite warriors. Though we respect your Order you'd be outclassed and overpowered—even at your size."

Lock raised an eyebrow. "Not from what I've observed."

Mica's gaze switched to Valor who had been watching in silence, interest gleaming in his eyes.

"If you're ever looking for a sparring partner let me know," Lock told Valor.

Zimm-Bella laughed aloud. "Quite self assured, aren't you, Sir? Valor is elite among the Nalmites. He's a protector, specially trained to guard a Royal. His strength and skill are well-known even among our kind. I'm not speaking with a mother's pride. The Moon God knows he has his share of faults but none of them are in the battlefield."

"Sounds challenging," Lock said.

Mica realized the reason behind Lock's infamous fights. The man could never seem to hold his tongue. This time he might have met his match. Mica remembered fighting Valor in the Circle. They'd been armed with staffs but he recalled the Nalmite's brute strength.

"Any time you want a match, Sir," Valor said.

Lock unbuckled his sheath and handed it to Sun who'd been observing the conversation with excitement in her eyes. Smiling, Mica shook his head slightly. Sun was nearly as bad as Lock. He might have been jealous had he sensed any attraction between the two. Yet nothing sparked between the Knight and the Dame other than genuine friendship.

*Thank the Goddess.*

It would still be some time before he was in peak fighting condition and he knew just by looking at Lock a man would need every bit of strength to survive a clash with him.

"How about now?" Lock extended an arm toward the field recently cleared by the mother and son.

Valor and Lock strode to the center, their gazes locked. Both men were close in height with broad shoulders, powerful arms and long, muscular legs.

"This shouldn't take long providing my son remembers not to underestimate the

Knight,” Zimm-Bella observed, her expression rather condescending. While the Nalmite appeared to be a confident lot, Zimm-Bella appeared to take self-assurance to new levels.

“Underestimating Lock would be a mistake,” Sun assured her. Something about the Nalmite woman irritated her.

The fight began. Neither was armed and depended on their hands, feet, elbows and knees for attack and defense. Like the emperor’s soldiers all Knights and Dames trained in empty-handed fighting but Lock had also learned his skills from a family of one-time assassins who lived on a secluded eastern isle. He was one of the Order’s finest warriors.

The Nalmite fought with animal swiftness but Lock met him blow for blow. Several strikes slipped through their defenses, leaving the Nalmite with blood drizzling from his lower lip and the Knight with a large bruise on the side of his face. Mica thought they might end the fight at an impasse until Lock threw a punch a second too slow and Valor caught the Knight’s arm and smashed Lock in the face. Stunned, Lock staggered. In a swift motion the Nalmite raised him high above his head and hurled him onto his back.

Mica’s hands tightened into fists. Had he actually been hoping the Knight would win? He glanced at Sun and Zimm-Bella. Both women stared at the field, their faces impassive though their eyes betrayed their emotions—Sun a bit anxious, Zimm-Bella slightly gloating.

Mica almost smiled. Something told him the Knight wasn’t ready to give up.

Lock raised himself to his knees, his hands braced on the ground. Valor approached and the Knight’s leg lashed out, sending the Nalmite crashing onto the grass. Both men stood and circled one another again, their fists raised. After another storm of punches Valor managed to grasp Lock and raise the Knight above his head, flinging him several feet. Valor waited for Lock to stand before continuing. Lock kicked at Valor who caught his leg, knocking him off balance. The Knight managed to grab hold of his opponent’s vest and drag him to the ground as he fell. They grappled, their arms and legs tightening in death holds. Though wrestling favored the Nalmite’s superior strength, by the time he’d pinned Lock face down both were panting and drenched in sweat.

Valor released Lock and the two nodded at one another before joining Mica and the women.

Mica noted a frustrated expression in the Knight’s eyes. Losing was never easy but he’d put up a more than respectable fight. The surprise on Zimm-Bella’s face alone should have pacified the Knight at least a bit.

The Colonel’s gaze fixed on Lock and she cocked an eyebrow. “Perhaps you would be welcome to train in Nalmar after all.”

Valor extended his hand to the Knight who accepted it.

“It was a good fight,” the Nalmite said.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been thrown before,” Lock admitted.

"If it's any consolation you're the strongest human I've ever met," Valor said before he and the Colonel returned to their troops.

"That was entertaining." Sun winked at Lock, handing back his sword.

"Don't look so happy. That wolf man nearly beat my ass."

"Nearly?" Mica grinned.

Lock wagged a finger in his face. "If I were you I'd wait until I was healthy enough to back up my mouth before I mocked a man."

"That's the difference between me and you then."

"Intelligence?"

"Nerve."

"I'll give you nerve, you bald-headed scarecrow." Curling his lip, Lock glared at Mica.

"Forgive my sense of humor, Sir." Mica's smile broadened. "I meant no offense."

"Right."

"Can't you accept a joke?"

"I'm talking to you, aren't I?"

Sun looked disgusted. "You two argue like ladies in a sewing circle. Let's go back to your room, Mica. You shouldn't be out of bed."

"I'm tired of sitting in bed. As soon as I'm finished with the portia, I'll be back on the field."

"Then you can back up that mouth of yours," Lock commented.

"Is that a challenge?" Mica asked.

"One I look forward to. We'll use staves."

"Why staves?"

"Because Sun told me how proficient you are."

Mica folded his arms across his chest and studied Lock. "You must like to pick fights you're sure to lose."

"What better way to learn new skills?" The Knight's anger seemed to melt away and he left to join several of his men in swordplay.

Mica grinned. "You know that man actually has wisdom."

When they arrived at the room, Mica seemed tired from his first morning out. He took Sun's hand and tugged her toward his bed where she stretched out beside him. She felt uncharacteristically sore from training. Though she had always been a quick healer, recovering from imprisonment was no simple task. Her sleep was haunted by nightmares of assault and though she struggled she couldn't seem to win.

She told herself they were only dreams. The next time she met those bastards she'd be armed and ready.



“Are you all right?” Mica glanced at her, running a fingertip down her cheek.

“Fine.”

“How do you feel about me, Dame Sun?”

His question took her by surprise. How did she feel? She was in love with him. She could no longer deny it but now that he was well again could she tell him? The one time she’d admitted her affection aloud he’d been unconscious. Now with his gaze fixed on hers could she confess such a vulnerability?

“Sun?”

“How do *you* feel?”

Mica grinned. “That’s not fair. I asked first.”

“I don’t hate you anymore.”

He raised his eyes to heaven. “I gathered that much.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because I care for you deeply.” He drew a long breath and held it, searching her face. Finally he said, “I’ve asked Kado to postpone my ritual until after the war.”

Sun’s brow furrowed. “After the war? Mica, you have no way of knowing when the war will end.”

“It will be sooner than you think.”

“How can you know that?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Sun raised herself onto her elbow and stared into his eyes. “Mica, if you’re keeping something from me—”

“Traditions are different in the Kennas. Trust me when I say this war could end more quickly than it began. That’s not what I wanted to talk about though. It’s the ceremony—”

“I understand why you’re postponing it. Getting castrated will put you off the field for a while I imagine but is that the only reason or have Zareb and the rest of us finally talked some sense into you?”

“I take my vocation seriously. Nothing could turn me from the Priesthood except you.”

“Me?”

So there *was* love between them. How could she possibly cope with it?

“We don’t have to discuss details now. It would be wiser to wait until we’re out of danger.”

“*Details*. What details?” Sun stood, pacing the room.

He left the bed and grasped her shoulders. “Sun, I know I’m not fit for you now but Blaze has given me a chance to take my life back. How many people have that opportunity? I won’t waste it. If I choose the Priesthood I’ll be making good use of it but

if I marry I can still work with the Bedouins—or people elsewhere if my wife has duties that cause her to travel.”

Sun stared at him, her heart throbbing so hard she felt momentarily lightheaded. “Are you asking me to marry you?”

“I’m asking you to think about it.”

Sun forced a laugh. “Well at least it’s one way to stop you from going through with that stupid ritual.”

“I don’t want that to be the reason you consent if at all.”

“Mica, take a good look at me. I’m not the marrying kind.”

“You are from what I can see.” He touched her face but she turned away. His caresses felt too good and the idea of spending the rest of her life with him was far too tempting.

“Mica, there are reasons I can’t marry the least of which is I’ve vowed not to.”

His eyes narrowed. “I thought Dames could marry?”

“It’s a vow I’ve made to myself.”

“Why?”

She sighed, running a hand through her hair. “My Order is in Travelle. You live in Ademene.”

Shrugging, he said, “I can travel.”

“Your life is dedicated to the Bedouins.”

“If an alliance is formed between your Order and Ademene you may request to be stationed here.” He held her gaze, as if searching for a more solid reason why she rebelled against marriage.

“You know as well as I do that just because a request is made doesn’t mean it will be granted.”

“It will be.”

“Are you a prophet or something? I thought that was Lock’s role?”

“I’m not a prophet but I have a feeling.”

Sun curled her lip. “You also had the feeling you should have your balls cut off.”

“We don’t need to decide anything now. All I’m asking is that you consider it.”

“Yes I’ll consider it.” The words popped out of her mouth before she could stop them. Could she really marry Mica? She loved the idea but would the warmth between them turn to ice if he decided he couldn’t spend the rest of his life with a woman who couldn’t provide the most basic requirement of marriage? She didn’t have to think about it now. They had no idea what would happen over the coming months. He might decide—though she prayed he wouldn’t—that Priesthood was for him after all.

“Good.” He shrugged off his clothes and lay on his back, gazing at her through hooded eyes. “Come here.”

Sun grinned, loosening her sheath and placing her weapons aside. "Feeling that much better, are you?"

"Much."

"But you still shouldn't exert yourself." She seductively dropped each piece of her clothing, warmed by the lustful expression on his face. Wearing nothing but a tight leather loincloth and two leather wrist cuffs, she loomed over the bed. She unfastened her hair from its braid and shook it down her back.

"I'm more than ready to exert myself." He sat up, grasping her waist and covering her belly with kisses.

Sun drew a deep breath, her nipples tight with passion. Her palms ran over his scalp and she was struck by a sudden pang of longing for the silky hair she had so loved to touch.

His hair meant *nothing*. She had Mica. That's all that mattered.

His mouth covered her nipple and all coherent thoughts left her. He licked and sucked, his lips tugging and teeth worrying gently. Moisture flooded her pussy. Her clit throbbed and ached with need. For all the times she had been hurt in her life Mica's touch soothed her. Nothing felt as good as making love with him or simply kissing and embracing him.

"Dame Sun," he whispered, his breath fanning her flesh.

"Lie back," she ordered, pushing at his shoulders. When he refused to move she stroked his neck and murmured, "Please?"

Mica paused and tilted his face to hers. His blue gaze held her captive and he smiled gently. "I don't believe I've ever heard you ask so nicely for something."

He stretched out on his back and spread his legs to accommodate her as she knelt between them.

"Do you remember the oasis?" she asked, her body tingling at her memories of the time they made love there.

"How could I forget?"

Her hand clasped the root of his shaft and her warm, wet tongue swirled over his cock head.

Mica's eyes slipped shut and he entangled his fingers in her hair. Enjoying every marvelous sensation breaking over him he wished this spectacular foreplay could last forever. Weakness from more than just illness washed over him. With Sun it took all his willpower to keep from bursting in instant orgasm. Sometimes he thought he might climax just from thinking about her and the intimate moments they had shared. To have her tender, moist lips actually surrounding his straining cock, to feel her gentle yet callused hands squeezing and kneading his balls was almost more than he could endure.

"Sun. Beautiful Sun."

She smiled around his cock head then sucked him deep into her mouth. The smooth, sensitive crown of his erection brushed the back of her throat. His hips shifted upward, following her rhythm as gently as he could for fear of harming her.

She didn't seem worried though. Her deep, strong sucking continued. Mica's pulse raced and he drifted in a haze of passion.

"That's enough," he gasped. "Sun, any longer and I won't be able to stop myself."

She uttered a sound of approval and continued holding his cock firmly between her lips.

The wonderful tightening started deep in his balls, spread up his cock and flared through his entire body. Waves of climax pulsed through him, shooting out the top of his head and the soles of his feet. His buttocks tightened to rock-hard spheres and colors burst behind his tightly closed eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sun slipped from the bed and glanced at Mica. She couldn't resist smiling as she watched him sleep. Her lips brushed his before she left the room to find Sparrow. For the first time she could remember she actually needed a female companion to discuss women's issues.

Sun found Sparrow in the palace library. The spacious room contained hundreds of books and scrolls as well as paintings and statues of past emperors and generals. Absorbed in a thick volume scrawled in heavy black ink, Sparrow sat in a cushioned chair by a window overlooking the courtyard. Her one-year-old daughter, Shea-Ann, played on the floor nearby.

"Interesting book?" Sun dragged another chair across from Sparrow.

"Laws. I'm afraid I'm not nearly as familiar with the laws of the Kennas as I am with their language. Just trying to catch up so I'll be of use when the Orders start forming alliances here."

Sparrow looked absorbed in her work. Facilitating the alliances was far more important than Sun's love life. "We'll talk another time."

"Wait." Sparrow placed a ribbon in the book to mark her place then pushed the volume aside. "I need some diversion. Reading laws isn't my favorite pastime."

"Kind of like studying the healing arts when you'd rather be practicing swordplay."

Sparrow smiled. "Something like that. I've always thought it funny that Lock being how he is found the healing arts to be a rewarding part of his training."

"Well, helping people makes you feel good but I'm more of a fighter."

Sparrow stared at her with a knowing expression. "Not according to Blaze and Mica. It seems you've given yourself a permanent assignment nursing Mica back to health."

"He's a good man." Sun stood and gazed out the window. Shea-Ann tugged herself

to her feet, using Sun's leg for balance. She picked up the little girl. "You know I can't tell if she looks more like you or Lock."

"Well she has Lock's attitude, that's for certain." Sparrow's amused expression belied her disgusted words. "And she loves riding on the ship. But let's not change the subject. I want to hear more about you and Mica."

Sun shrugged. "What's to hear? Except perhaps that he's asked me to consider marrying him."

Sparrow's jaw dropped and her eyes widened. "He asked you to marry him? That's wonderful, Sun. I'm so happy for you."

Sun switched Shea-Ann to her other shoulder and held up a hand in defense. "Wait a moment. Nothing's definite."

"I imagine he'll forego the castration. It would make for an unpleasant wedding night."

"That's another problem. I've been trying to make him change his mind about that stupid ritual but he's so stubborn." Sun dropped onto her chair and gently uncurled Shea-Ann's fist from her hair. She placed the squirming toddler on the floor.

"Don't tell me he still wants the ritual even if you marry?"

"Of course not. He told me the only way he'd ever withdraw from the Priesthood is if I marry him. He's very dedicated to his vocation but he said he..."

Sparrow leaned forward. "Well don't keep me in suspense. He what?"

"He said he loves me."

"Why wouldn't he? You're a wonderful woman."

"I'm not meant for marriage."

"I thought the same thing until I met Lock. The big ox changed my mind completely."

"Lock's one of the best. You're lucky."

"Mica seems like a caring man. I understand he's done much for the desert people. He sounds like he'd make a good Knight."

"He'd look handsome in the uniform." Sun's heartbeat quickened at the thought of Mica's lean body draped in the traditional black silk of the Ruby Order. "And he has all the best traits of a Knight. He's kind, generous, courageous."

Sparrow grinned. "Anything else?"

"He can be very funny. And he never thinks of himself before anyone else."

"Then why in the world wouldn't you want to marry him? For heaven's sake if I didn't have Lock I might consider marrying him after your description."

"I can't marry him."

Sparrow rested a hand on her friend's knee, her expression serious. "Do you love him? That's what's most important."

"His father destroyed my life."

"I know it must be terrible for you caring for a man you want to hate."

"When we first met I tried to kill him. I said I wanted him to die a slow, painful death. Then I saw him suffering from bog tremors and everything changed. What's wrong with me, Sparrow?"

"You can't judge Mica by his father. Believe me. Lock's mother is a hateful bitch but he's *nothing* like her. I'm sure Mica is nothing like his father."

"He said he was in the past."

"I've been reading Ademene's history. I read about Mica's time as a general. He was harsh and powerful but he wasn't like his father even then. He wasn't a traitor to the truth and he never destroyed civilians once he'd taken land."

"I've gotten to know what he's like."

"So what's your answer?"

Sun's mouth went dry. "Answer?"

"Do you love him?"

Before she could speak Colonel Zimm-Bella strode into the library.

"Good. You're here," she said to Sun. "I don't speak the language here and need you to translate a request to some of the local women."

"Colonel, this is Sparrow, Sir Lock's wife."

Zimm-Bella nodded at the shorter woman. "You've married a fine warrior."

"Thank you. He is." Sparrow stood, picking up her daughter. "If you need a translator I'll be glad to help you as well."

"I'm looking for the child keep."

"The what?" Sun raised an eyebrow.

"A place where the young are looked after while their mothers train if they're military. One of my captains had a baby this morning and she needs someone to care for it when she returns to the field tomorrow."

"Returns to the field?" Sparrow wrinkled her nose. "She just had a baby. She should rest for at least a few days."

Zimm-Bella's proud posture straightened even more. "Unless there are complications there's no need for her to waste any time before returning to her troop."

"But returning to heavy work so soon could be dangerous."

"She can string bows, throw daggers and plan strategy. We're headed to war, ladies. There's no time for luxury."

"Luxury is one thing. Common sense is another." Sun stared hard into the Colonel's eyes. The woman had more balls than a herd of stallions but she didn't impress Sun.

Zimm-Bella's lips curved upward in a condescending smile. "You'll find Nalmite women don't overreact to childbirth as human females seem to."

Sparrow curled her lip, obviously as annoyed by Zimm-Bella's attitude as Sun was.

“I suppose Nalmite women just spit out babies like olive pits? I’ve had a baby, Colonel, and I assure you I would in no way be on the training field the day after. Neither would any sane woman.”

“I imagine it must have been difficult for a little thing such as yourself.” Zimm-Bella gazed down at Sparrow who just about reached her shoulder in height. “I can understand. When I delivered Valor, I was only twelve years old. I nearly had to call for assistance.”

Sparrow’s brow furrowed. “Assistance? Where was the midwife?”

“Probably busy with someone who had real difficulty. I understand humans almost always have assistance in the birthing cave?”

“The birthing *cave*?” This time Sparrow didn’t try to hide her horror.

“Usually in the same area as the child keep. Which brings me back to why I’m here. Where is the child keep?”

Sun placed a hand on Sparrow’s arm and shook her head to warn her friend against starting an argument, though she also longed to wipe the cocky expression off Zimm-Bella’s face. “There is no child keep here, Colonel. It’s traditional for mothers to care for their own young.”

“I believe you misunderstand our ways. Nalmite parents take a great interest in their young but warriors’ duties are taken seriously. We’re limited in number here so I need my captain with her troop.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to adjust your ways and allow your captain to care for her baby for now.”

“When she’s ready for travel I’ll send her home and ask for a replacement. Thank you for the education.”

“Thank *you*.” Sparrow raised an eyebrow. Once the Colonel disappeared through the door, she muttered, “By the Spirit. What a hard woman. And I thought Dames were tough.”

“She’s a good warrior, but now I understand why Valor is like the craggy side of a mountain.”

“What can you expect from a man born in a birthing cave?” Sparrow shook her head, a smile playing around her lips. “Unbelievable.”

“Speaking of training I’d like to get in some more archery practice.” Sun headed for the door.

“If you love Mica you should marry him.”

“Thank you for the advice,” Sun called over her shoulder.

*If I really love him then I should definitely not marry him.*

\* \* \* \* \*

For the next week Mica took daily walks to prepare himself for more vigorous

activity planned after he finished the portia treatments. Though Sun continued sharing his room neither mentioned his proposal again. He told himself their avoidance of personal pursuits was due to concern for the coming battle but in his heart he sensed her uncertainty. He knew she felt something for him. Whether it was the deep love he felt for her he couldn't say.

A braver man would have demanded her answer and faced the truth but Mica didn't want to know. Not until after the war. To fulfill his plans he'd need complete focus and he feared Sun's rejection would distract him beyond endurance. There had been a time when a tender emotion such as love would not have affected him. Not General Mica. As much as he despised him Mica needed to find that man again.

*Finding him might drive Sun away forever if she ever belonged to me at all.*

It was a necessary risk. Karlus and the false emperor's son needed to be defeated. This time Mica would stop at nothing to ensure the safety of the Kennas.

A tap sounded on his door before Blaze stepped inside.

"The last." Blaze extended a mug of the foul-smelling portia, a slight smile on his lips.

Mica gulped the liquid, trying not to grimace. "I can't say I'm not grateful but it tastes like manure."

Blaze grinned. "The shell instead of the nut or the scales of a fish. You look well."

"I feel much better. When do you suggest I begin training again?"

"Do what you feel but don't overexert for at least a few weeks."

"A few weeks," Mica muttered.

"You've just communed with the spirit world. Are you so eager to rejoin it?"

"I'm eager to end this battle."

"You're one man."

"Sometimes that's all it takes."

Blaze's pale eyes focused on an empty space beside Mica. "Patience. He needs patience for his goal."

Mica glanced beside him, wondering what spirit the Knight spoke to. It was strange knowing his friend talked with the dead—and the unborn. How much of the future did they show him?

Blaze's all-knowing gaze fixed on Mica. "You want revenge."

"Do you blame me? If it was only for myself I wouldn't be so furious."

The Knight rested a hand on Mica's shoulder. "The past cannot be changed. Don't hurt my daughter."

"I love Sun."

Blaze's lips flickered upward in a sad smile. "Sometimes we don't properly show what we feel. Take great care for both your sakes."

Mica watched as the Knight left the chamber. He stretched out on the bed, knowing



that within moments the portia would send him into a deep sleep. After today he'd once again be master of his own actions. This time he'd ensure the safety of his kingdom.

## Chapter Fifteen

Sun was practicing swordplay with Lock when the warning came. The emperor's guards cleared the field in a rush. Lock bellowed for his Knights to assemble while Sun grasped a passing guard by the sleeve. "What's happening?"

"Ademene is under attack," the man replied before jerking away from her grasp to join his troop.

Sun fell in with Lock's troops as they donned armor, grasped their weapons and awaited orders from Ademene's general. She caught sight of Blaze, his supply bag slung across his chest, weaving his way through the troops. It crossed her mind as it always did that he would be in the front lines without a weapon to defend himself. Marching toward the city gates, she wondered where Mica was. Hopefully he'd be intelligent enough to keep away from the battle.

As if reading her mind Blaze approached and grasped her arm. "When I heard about the attack I mixed sleeping potion with the portia. Between the two, Mirrored Rock won't awaken until the morrow."

"Good. Now let's get to work."

Blaze offered her a tense half smile before he disappeared into the crowd and Sun climbed the wall. When she reached the top she grasped her bow and took her place between two of the emperor's archers. The view of the surrounding desert revealed a large army marching on the city.

"I didn't think they had so many," muttered the guard to Sun's left.

"Where have they been hiding?" said the one to her right. "We patrol the desert regularly and have seen no sign of such an army."

Fighting broke out quickly. Sun didn't have time for much thought since she was engaged in combat almost immediately. Her main concern became survival. Steel clashed. Shrieks echoed above the desert wind. Sun dropped behind the safety of the parapet to avoid the arrows soaring overhead. The soldier to her left collapsed alongside her, spraying blood, an arrow protruding from his chest. She rose and fired. Moments later she became aware of fighting just behind her. The battle was now within the city. Her gaze swept the wall but she couldn't see where the defenses had been breached. The false emperor must have spies *within Ademene*. Drawing her sword, she climbed down from the tower and assisted a guard fighting off two enemy soldiers. An arrow struck the guard. Sun glanced up in time to see men—obviously the false emperor's minions—firing from a small tower in the city square. She dove behind a wagon, avoiding an arrow flying in her direction. She pushed herself to her feet just as a sword swung at her head. Before she could react the blade was blocked and her enemy run through.

Sun glanced up to her savior and found herself staring into Zimm-Bella's steely gray eyes. She and the Nalmite exchanged a quick look of understanding before each dove into battle in opposite directions.

Sun noted few enemies fought within the city walls. Most had already been slain by Knights, Nalmites or the emperor's guards. The ones who'd taken the tower however were striking down many guards. Several Knights fired crossbows at the tower but the men protected themselves with rows of shields. Guards rushed up the ladder in an attempt to take the tower but were slain before reaching the top.

Shouting a war cry, Lock raced for the tower. Instead of climbing the ladder he flung himself at one of the wooden legs. The big Knight's muscles strained for a moment then the tower started to tip. Sun grinned. *Go for it, Lock.*

Within seconds Valor hurled himself at another tower leg. Beneath the combined strength of the Nalmite and the Knight the tower tipped. Soldiers tumbled out. Those who survived the fall were taken hostage.

With the inner walls now under control of the emperor's guard, Sun ran to the gate and joined the others in fighting off the enemies outside the wall.

Beyond the gate the fighting was fiercer. Sun blocked blows from all sides. She drew a second short sword, thrusting and slashing with both arms. Her flesh stung where the tip of an enemy blade sliced through the sleeve of her tunic. Enraged she spun and met the gaze of a guard from Karlus' camp. The last time she'd seen this man his filthy body had been slamming hers into a stone wall. He recognized her as well and grinned, his free hand fluttering over his groin while his sword arm thrust at her heart. Snarling, she knocked his blade aside and blocked a second blow then pierced his shoulder. He gasped but struck again. Sun slashed his sword arm. A third blow sent his weapon flying across the field. Panic flashing in his dark eyes, he lunged for his lost sword. Sun reached it first, her foot pinning the blade to the ground while her weapon sliced through the front of her enemy's trousers. He shrieked, falling to his knees and clutching his bloody groin.

He stared up at her in horror, drool oozing from the corner of his slack lips.

Sun killed him—probably far more quickly than the bastard deserved.

When she turned Blaze stood behind her, his face smeared with dirt and his knuckles bloody. He reached for her but she moved away, glancing around.

"Looks like they've dispersed," she said.

"For a time."

"Their troops must have been spread thin to surround the city. There wasn't as many as we first thought."

"They're bold but led by a madman."

"I wonder how bad the damage is." She stooped beside Blaze who had begun examining the bodies of the fallen. In search of those who needed aid, they passed over the dead bodies.

“Not much after the tower fell.”

“That was good thinking on Lock’s part.”

“It seems he and the Nalmite have reconciled.”

“They make a hell of a team.”

“Though I’m not sure if that’s good or bad.”

“In this case it was definitely good.”

Blaze nodded, his gaze fixed on the wound he was cleaning.

Sun spent the next few hours weeding through the injured. She glanced around for Mica but didn’t see him anywhere.

Zareb joined her while she was setting a man’s broken leg.

“Mica?” she asked.

“Sleeping,” replied the Messenger. “Whatever Sir Blaze gave him this time knocked him into oblivion.”

“Good.”

Zareb smiled. “Then you know Mica all right. He probably would have gotten himself killed in this battle. Still we could use his skill about now. There are plenty of wounded to tend.”

Work continued throughout the night. It was after dawn when Sun trudged back to Mica’s room. Her body ached and she needed a good sleep. It hadn’t been long ago that she’d been wounded herself. Though she’d recouped quickly she still tired faster than usual.

She stepped into the room and stood over Mica. He lay on his back, his eyes closed and his face relaxed in sleep. She touched his cheek gently before walking to her bed and sitting on the edge. Leaning her forearms on her knees, she rested her head in her hands, her entire body numb from exhaustion.

“What happened?”

Startled by Mica’s voice, she looked up sharply and found herself staring into his concerned blue eyes.

“Battle. It’s over now.”

He dampened a cloth and sat beside her, cleaning blood and dirt from her face. “No one woke me.”

Sun placed her hand over his and held his gaze. “It wouldn’t have—”

“Done much good.” His smile looked strange, humorless. “I wouldn’t have been much use right now. I know.”

“Mica—”

“Get some rest.” He kissed her forehead before walking to the door.

“Where are you going?”

“To speak with the emperor.”

"I'll go with you."

"No. This is a private matter."

His tone left no room for argument. Sun stretched out on the bed. Whatever he discussed she'd hear about later. At least the battle was over and he was out of danger.

\* \* \* \* \*

"This is all they returned to us." A pale-faced soldier stared at the remains of General Kasir—his head, arm and both feet. "Karlus did it himself. I saw with my own eyes."

Mica glanced at Kado and Zareb. They stood in the courtyard with the soldier, the emperor and a spy still dirty from the road. The soldier had been taken as a prisoner during the battle but released to carry back what was left of the general. The spy's news had been even more disheartening. He and his men had discovered the whereabouts of Karlus' army—and that the false emperor was no longer false. Several days ago the emperor of Lower Kenna had died and his daughter had married Teman, making him the legitimate ruler of Lower Kenna.

"Kasir was the most powerful warrior I've ever known," the soldier murmured.

The spy said, "If Karlus or Teman had called the Blood War and defeated Kasir—"

"Neither of them is going to risk calling the Blood War." Mica didn't bother keeping the disgust from his voice. "Tell the captains to disperse. Station men on the shoreline around the entire island. Have the remaining soldiers search inland for any hidden troops but leave enough to defend Ademene against another attack."

The spy glanced at the emperor who said, "Do as he orders. He's no longer speaking as a Priest in Waiting but as acting general."

The emperor held Mica's gaze in question and he nodded. Though he wouldn't remain in the city to advise and defend over the coming months he would do all he could to organize before leaving to perform a more important duty.

The spy bowed from the neck and hurried to fulfill Mica's orders.

Kado sighed. "The spy was right. They wouldn't risk everything for the skill of one man."

"They wouldn't have risked anything because they would have won," the emperor said. "Karlus must be as powerful as we've heard. What if he decides to call the Blood War?"

"You wouldn't have to accept it," Kado told him.

"You know that would cause even greater disaster. The Blood War cannot be refused. Ever. The ways of our people cannot be discarded. The Blood War is—"

"The only way to end this without utter destruction," Mica said.

"Do you think Karlus will initiate it because of this? He must know he's sure to win after defeating our general."

The emperor held Mica's gaze. "He hasn't defeated our general."

"You can't expect Mica to take over completely." Kado extended a hand toward his friend. "He's just gotten over illness."

"Can we hold our own for a few months?" Mica asked the emperor.

"We will have no choice it seems."

"If they call the Blood War in the meantime—"

"They won't. Not when they can keep killing. Their kind enjoys destroying thousands of lives to simply one," Mica said. "I'll leave in the morning."

"You're sure you're prepared for this?" Kado asked.

"I will be."

Zareb who had been silent throughout the meeting now said, "Mica, you knew Kasir's skill and Karlus destroyed him."

"One thing is certain in this world," Mica said. "There's always someone with less skill and always someone with more."

\* \* \* \* \*

When Mica returned to his room he found Sun asleep. After tugging off her boots, he covered her with a light blanket then packed his few belongings for the next morning's journey. His mind spun with activity. In the past he'd possessed such skill and strength. He prayed he could regain all he'd lost. Yet if he was able to reclaim the powers of General Mica again would the decent man he'd become disappear?

Mica glanced at Sun. She was such a beautiful woman—and not just in appearance. She was kind and good. If he reverted to his old ways he might lose her.

*That won't happen. I've come far enough to know what I must take and what I must leave behind.*

The part of him that reveled in physical strength terrified him. Though he insisted he was nothing like his sire he had inherited his father's instinct for battle, his gift for strategy and his fearlessness.

Courage and instinct tempered with mercy, Zareb had often said. He hoped his friend was right.

When he'd finished packing Mica walked to the stable where he found Valor and Lock discussing the battle over a bottle of strong wine. Though the bottle was nearly empty neither appeared intoxicated.

Lock extended the bottle to Mica who refused and began brushing his mare.

"Your woman fights well," Valor stated. "Even my mother spoke highly of her."

Mica raised an eyebrow, not taking his gaze from the mare. "My woman? I don't know if she'd appreciate such a reference."

Lock grinned. "I wager she'd like it more than you know. You're feeling better I

see.”

“Well enough to begin training again.”

“It looks like Ademene can use all the hands it can get,” Valor said. “I smell a big war coming.”

Lock snorted. “It doesn’t take Nalmite senses to pick that up. This place stinks of war. I wish I’d sent my wife and baby home before coming here.”

“If we hold our own for a few months the war will be over,” Mica said.

“What are you supposed to be? An oracle?” Lock demanded.

“Our ways are different than what you’re accustomed to. There is a way to end the war quickly and with little bloodshed,” said Mica.

“So why wait a few months?” Lock asked. “I say do it now.”

“It’s not that simple.”

Valor stood, his arms folded across his chest. “Explain.”

“I cannot at this time.”

“If there’s something we should know about you better tell us.”

“I second that.” Lock also stood, propping his foot on a barrel and resting an elbow on his knee.

“You may bring any questions to the emperor to answer as he sees fit.”

Lock stepped in front of Mica. “I’m asking you.”

The men stood eye to eye. Valor watched them with interest.

“I’ve given my answer.”

For a long moment neither Mica nor Lock moved. Finally the Knight turned and strode out of the stable.

Mica turned to the Nalmite. “I know you must feel I owe you an explanation since you saved my life but I can say no more.”

“Personal gratitude is second to one’s duty. I expect no more information than what you’re at liberty to provide. However I agree with Lock. The Nalmites will not support any ally who doesn’t explain their methods. Colonel Zimm-Bella and I will discuss this with your emperor.”

The neck of the bottle dangling from his fist, Valor left Mica alone with the horses.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mica sat at the table in his room, a simple meal of bread and soup in front of him. He watched Sun sleep and wondered about his earlier proposal. Perhaps he’d spoken too soon. What if she decided to marry him after all and he lost the Blood War?

No. He had no intention of losing. Besides when Sun started seeing him as a general instead of a Priest in Waiting, it might seal her decision not to marry him. Her feelings for him were so fragile. In such a short time she’d gone from wanting him dead to

saving his life.

Mica had desired her from the first time he'd seen her. The more time he spent with her the deeper his feelings became. If he allowed himself he could think of Sun every waking moment and dream of her all night. He'd once thought nothing and no one could turn him from the Priesthood. Then he'd met Dame Sun. If she refused him he would gladly give up the physical portion of his manhood and become a Priest. He believed in serving the Goddess and supporting her followers but the one thing he desired like a fortune teller's potion was Sun. He wanted to talk with her, eat with her, make love with her. He wanted to work alongside her. Often he imagined Sun, Ebony Starr and himself together as a family.

Mica shook his head. There would be no such thoughts until Ademene was safe again.

Sun stirred. She sat up and stretched then smiled at him before washing in the basin of water between their beds.

She joined him at the table. "We're not eating with the others?"

"I wanted to speak with you alone."

"If it's about your proposal—"

"Please." Mica took her hand as she sat at the table. "Indulge me this one time and don't give me an answer until after I return."

Her brow furrowed. "Where are you going?"

"I must leave for a few months to regain my strength to provide service to my kingdom. Please don't ask for details. I cannot give them now. What I do is of the utmost necessity."

Nodding slowly, she cast her eyes down for a moment then met his gaze again. "When are you going?"

"In the morning."

"So soon? But you're still weak."

"I'll regain my strength along the way."

Sun sat back in her chair, her hand still resting in his. "I'll go with you."

"No, Sun. This I must do alone." He squeezed her hand his gaze fixed on hers as he tried to use the expression in his eyes to impress upon her how important his new mission was. "Please believe me."

"Mica, be sensible. Traveling in the desert alone at this time is suicide."

"Karlus' army will not go where I plan to. Though I would love to have you with me always please believe I must go alone. When I return everything will be different. The Kennas will be safe. Then I will ask for your decision about us."

"Mica—"

"Please. While I endure the coming tests allow me the illusion that you might one day share your life with me."



Sun looked hesitant, her lovely eyes almost pained. Finally she nodded. “Why is it men like you and Blaze are the most manipulative? You use sweetness like a weapon.”

“Sweetness?” He smiled, warmed by the thought that he touched her as deeply as she touched him. “So I’ve been lucky enough to charm you after all.”

She tugged away from his grip and tore off a piece of bread.

While they ate he briefed her on the situation in Lower Kenna. By the time they finished Blaze had joined them with news about a recent discussion among the Knights, the Nalmites and the emperor.

“The emperor and High Advisor Kado have convinced the Nalmites and Lock’s troops to support his army until Mirrored Rock returns. Take great care on your journey.”

“I will. You have my word I won’t destroy the gift of life you restored—at least not without just cause.”

“You haven’t said much about the training you’re undergoing,” Sun said.

“I must meet with a special group of Priests.”

“More Priests?”

“These are set apart from the others. I studied with them years ago and learned many difficult lessons.” Mica sighed, remembering physical tests that even exceeded the brutal conditions he’d endured in his father’s military.

“Warrior Priests,” Blaze murmured.

“Yes.”

“Our thoughts are with you,” the Knight said.

“Always.” Sun reached across the table and took his hand again.

Mica hoped his feelings for her appeared in his smile.

“Please excuse.” Blaze stood, nodded and left them alone.

Sun grinned. “Subtle, isn’t he?”

Mica stood, tugging her into his arms and kissing her. Slipping her arms around his neck, she pressed close to his body. His palms splayed against her back as her pliant breasts molded against his chest. Moist lips parted beneath his stroking tongue. The kiss seemed to last forever yet ended far too soon.

“Mica,” she began. “I—”

He rested a fingertip against her lips and smiled gently. “You promised. Not a word about it until after I return.”

She kissed his fingertip. “All right but you’re sure you’re not just making life more difficult for both of us?”

Mica laughed. “Making life difficult is what I do best. Don’t you know that by now?”

She tossed him an irritated yet amused look.

“Will you stay with me tonight?”

In reply she took his face in her hands and touched her mouth to his. Mica responded with slow, gentle nips and tugs of his lips. Wrapping his arm around her waist, he pressed her body close to his while unwinding her hair from its braid. He stroked through the thick tendrils. His affection filled her with every tender stroke of his hand and brush of his lips. Sun realized that no matter what she was lost to this man.

Bracing her hands on his shoulders, she pushed him away slightly and gazed into his eyes. “Mica—”

“Shh,” he whispered against her lips. “Don’t think or talk tonight, Dame Sun. Just feel.”

“I am.”

“Good.”

He nudged her onto the bed and lay beside her, one of his legs draped over her body. A smile playing around her lips, she stroked his thigh, relishing the sensation of hair-dusted flesh over hard muscle. Her palm swept up his back and rested on his shoulder.

Mica kissed her forehead and the tip of her nose, a silly gesture yet somehow just as intimate as the deepest mouth kiss.

He buried his face in her neck, licking her sensitive flesh until she giggled and squirmed with pleasure. Long, moist sweeps of his tongue stroked one of her breasts in decreasing circles, edging closer to her nipple. The delicate bud tingled. Her pulse quickened with anticipation. Finally his mouth covered her nipple and his tongue teased it with relentless strokes. She clutched his head and arched closer to him.

While his worshipping teeth and tongue paid homage to her nipple his hand caressed her belly and stroked through the curls between her legs. He savored every moment with her, knowing it would be a long time before they had a chance to be alone like this again.

One of his long fingers slipped inside her damp pussy. Keen pleasure darted through her. She shifted her hips when a second finger joined the first and his thumb stroked and circled her clit.

With a final sweep of his tongue across her fully awakened nipple he moved to the other one. The taste and scent of her raised his passion to fevered heights. He gently teased the very center of the bud.

“Ah, Mica,” she panted. By the Spirit he knew how to touch her.

Sucking hard on her nipple, he withdrew his drenched fingers from her pussy and used them to caress her clit. Up and down one side, over and over he stroked.

Her nipple popped free of his mouth and he edged down her body, his hand continually stroking her plump clit until his mouth took its place.

Sun gasped, spreading her legs wide. He gazed at their long, lean beauty for a moment before settling between them and sliding his arms under her thighs. Tugging her as close as possible, he used his tongue to explore her delectable flesh.

Sun floated on a haze of passion, only aware of the pounding of her heart, the rasp of her breath and the incredible pleasure building deep inside her.

Mica was relentless in his motions. Not a second passed when his lapping tongue wasn't driving her toward a climax that threatened to hurl her into oblivion.

No man had ever given her pleasure like this dark, handsome Priest in Waiting.

"Ah," she cried. Clutching his head closer, she tightened her buttocks and burst in hot, throbbing waves of climax.

No sooner had the last quiver run through her than he covered her body with his. The very tip of his cock prodded her slick passage. He felt too wonderful for words.

"Do you want this, Dame Sun?" he panted.

Staring into his eyes, she noted the desire burning in his gaze. Tension, pure and sexual, tightened his jaw line in spite of the gentleness of his motions. She knew what he was asking. Was she ready to feel a man inside her after all she'd been through so recently at the hands of their enemies?

Mica was as different from those sadistic pigs as a rusty cooking knife was from the finest sword.

Looping her arms around his neck, she thrust her hips upward and his cock slipped a bit deeper inside her. "Yes I want this, Mica. I want you."

He entered her slowly, lovingly, his gaze fixed on hers. Joined they stared at one another. So many words formed between them yet remained unspoken. The only communication they truly needed was through their gaze and touch.

He moved inside her, thrusting slow and deep. Sun knew he wanted to extend their pleasure as much as she did but their bodies dictated otherwise. The tight, wonderful sensation of impending orgasm enveloped Sun in its sensual embrace. She managed to keep her eyes open long enough to watch Mica's flutter shut. He swallowed, his breath quickening along with his thrusting. He filled her pussy with his thick, hard cock as he filled her heart with love and desire.

"Mica. Oh, Mica," she cried. Clutching him with arms and legs, she came, quaking and quivering, ripples of pleasure running from the top of her head to the soles of her feet.

"Sun. Ah. Goddess." Panting, he surged into her with three short, fast thrusts then stiffened. Every muscle tense, he came long and hard into her throbbing body.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sleep eluded both Mica and Sun that night. They lay in each other's arms, talking softly until he finally drifted off.

All too soon sunlight illuminated the chamber. Mica kissed her then left the bed, his stomach tense. Ahead of him stretched the greatest challenge of his life—a challenge that he could not avoid lest he fail everyone.

Sun stretched, her gaze meeting his. She offered a slight smile and watched as he donned his blue robe and kaffiyeh.

“I wish you’d at least let me travel with you part of the way,” she said.

Tugging her into his arms, he brushed her mouth with a kiss. “I must do this alone, Sun. Keep safe.”

“You know how good both of us are at keeping safe.”

“I will miss you.” He cupped her cheek, loving the sensation of her smooth, soft flesh.

The affectionate look in her eyes touched his heart. Abruptly he pulled away. Picking up his long wooden fighting staff and a satchel containing his few belongings, he headed for the door.

“Mica—”

“I can’t look back, Dame Sun. I can’t look back and still bring myself to go.”

He strode down the corridor and out of the palace.

\* \* \* \* \*

Since his horse couldn’t reach his ultimate destination Mica traveled by foot. Initially his stomach churned with apprehension as violently as his mind churned with thoughts. He couldn’t quite believe he was cured of bog tremors. As he crossed miles of desert he wondered if another attack might take him before he fulfilled his duty.

The strength coursing through him proved otherwise. By the end of the first night his confidence had nearly returned in full. He would do everything in his power to ensure the safety of his people. None of this could have happened without Blaze, Sun and Valor. The only way he could show his gratitude to them—and to his emperor and the Priests for believing in him—would be to win the Blood War. Even if it meant sacrificing his life Mica vowed to defeat Karlus and Teman. He only prayed his challenge would be accepted, avoiding the deaths of thousands.

*Goddess, Mica, you sound so self-absorbed. Don’t forget you can lose what you have as quickly as you gained it.*

Dusk fell and he huddled deeper into his robe to avoid the night’s chill.

Gazing at the starlit sky, he wondered what Sun was doing. Was she thinking of him? Longing for the softness of her naked curves pressed against him, he fell asleep.

## Chapter Sixteen

After nearly a week of hard travel Mica saw Goddess Peak rising in the distance. Tall and slender it shone against the sky like a dark beauty seated on a veil of pale blue velvet. Mica's heartbeat quickened and he forced his pace to remain steady. One of the most important lessons he'd learned on Goddess Peak was patience.

Early the next morning he arrived at the base of the peak. It appeared much larger than the narrow shadow on the horizon the day before. Smooth to the top the mountainside was nearly impossible to climb. Carved into the eastern side—a result of ancestors' diligent labor—was a narrow stone staircase. Mica craned his neck and squinted, straining for a glimpse of the mountaintop. It had been years since he'd sought the most revered of the Goddess' followers. To ask for their training he must travel the steep staircase to their place of worship.

Though eager to continue the final steps of his journey he realized such a climb required tremendous endurance and he had yet to regain his full strength. The rules were simple when approaching Goddess Peak. Either make the entire journey by nightfall or else descend and begin again.

After a brief rest Mica shrugged on his travel pack, picked up his staff and began the ascension.

With less than a tenth of the staircase behind him he already felt the effects of the climb. Wiping sweat from his eyes, he paused, taking several deep breaths, his heart pounding in his ears. There had been a time when he could run the stairs and still retain energy when he reached the top. Continuing upward, he realized how much he'd lost after years with bog tremors. Yes, he'd retained his fighting skills and kept in adequate condition between bouts of illness but it would take diligent training to summon the strength and skill required to win the Blood War.

Staff in hand he ignored the soreness in his legs and pushed upward, stopping several times to rest.

Halfway up the mountainside he sensed someone watching him and paused. A slender, white-robed man stepped from behind a boulder off the side of a particularly wide step. Mica knew such steps served as guard posts in several places on the mountainside.

"Mica?" the man—an aide to the High Priestess—smiled. "I never thought to see you again. You're feeling well?"

"I'm cured, Shen."

Curiosity glistened in Shen's eyes. "How?"

"A Knight of the Ruby Order knew of a cure."

"They are an honorable group."

"Yes. As are the Dames of the Opal Order." Mica tried to ignore the ache in his chest when he thought about Sun. He missed her so much. Many times during the journey he wished she was with him. He even missed her foul temper and sharp tongue.

Shen glanced skyward, measuring the daylight. "It's after midday, my friend. I fear you won't reach the top today."

Mica sighed. "I know. I had to make frequent stops. I've recovered only recently. I'm not the man I once was."

Shen laughed. "Who is? You seem determined to reach us though."

"The fate of the Kennas depends on whether or not you'll help me."

"Taking on the responsibility of many again, Mica?" Shen folded his arms across his chest and raised an eyebrow. "Arrogance was always a problem for you."

"I know only an arrogant man would do what I plan to but the risk must be taken."

Wagging a finger in reprimand, Shen said, "You didn't let me finish. Arrogance was a problem for you but so was selflessness."

"I didn't know you considered that a problem."

"Only to yourself. It is an honorable trait. Funny that so often arrogance and selflessness go hand in hand."

Mica longed to ask Shen if he thought the others would help him but he knew the Priest wouldn't reply. Only when he reached the top would he know if he would be allowed to train.

For the next several moments he spoke with Shen about day-to-day issues then descended the steps. Tomorrow he would try again then the day after that and the day after that until he reached his destination. Time was running out however. The longer he took to prepare the more people would die during the battles raging between the Kennas.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Damn it." Mica stumbled on the stone step. His heart pounding, he nearly slipped down the mountainside.

For a moment he sat, catching his breath and using his sleeve to stanch blood leaking from his skinned knee. Muttering a curse, he glanced at the jagged hole the rough stone had torn in his robe.

It had been nearly three days since he'd arrived at Goddess Peak. Each day he pushed to reach the top but by dusk he was forced to turn back and spend the night frustrated at the mountain's base. His muscles ached from climbing but the pain was nothing compared to bog tremors and it was a good, familiar soreness. He could become a true warrior again. Perhaps even better than before.

*At the very least I'll impress Sun.*

"Fool." Mica shook his head. Shen was right. He was arrogant and childish. Why when his kingdom teetered on the edge of destruction should he think about impressing a woman who had seen him at his absolute worst?

"You still need to learn patience, Mica of Ademene."

Mica glanced up at the tall, dark-skinned woman dressed in flowing red robes.

"Dayle." Mica bowed from the neck before pushing himself to his feet.

"You can't hurry fate."

"But time is of essence. I need your wisdom. Our world is in danger."

Dayle nodded. "We've seen."

"Will you help me?"

"You know our way, Mica. When and if you reach the top the High Priestess will decide."

"She must—"

"If everyone obeyed the word of the Goddess there would be far less suffering. No murder. No rape."

*Rape.* Mica's stomach clenched. Karlus must be destroyed.

"Your anger doesn't help your cause."

"Have you become a mind reader now?"

Dayle smiled. "No, I'm guessing by your narrowed eyes and clenched teeth something has peeved you."

"I can't help it, Dayle. Someone I love has been hurt by an enemy of our kingdom."

"You want to avenge her."

"Her. Me. I want to avenge us all."

"I understand your desire for revenge but don't become so obsessed with retribution that you defeat yourself. You were a respected general once. You didn't secure victories by allowing emotions to rule you."

"On the contrary my greatest victory occurred when I listened to my heart. By striving for the good of the people I helped overthrow my father and the false emperor."

"Striving for the good of the people is what the Goddess wishes. Don't forget that, Mica. Whatever happens."

"I'll try."

"And now I suggest you turn back. You won't reach the top by dusk."

Mica's teeth clenched and his hand tightened on his staff. Dayle wagged a finger at him. "Patience."

Forcing a smile, he turned back down the steps.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mica reached the top of Goddess Peak just as dusk settled over the desert. The temple of carved rock stood in the center of the flat mountaintop. Cacti twice Mica's height lined the dirt pathway to the temple's double doors.

Panting, his staff poised, Mica blinked sweat from his eyes and waited for the attack he knew would come. Though they ventured into the desert to lend aid to communities in need, the High Priests and Priestesses of Goddess Peak were a cloistered group. Most followers of the Goddess approached the temple to train even for a short time but few remained. Not everyone who ventured there was given the opportunity to learn from its inhabitants. Their skills were revered throughout the Kennas but they chose their students carefully.

After abandoning the false emperor, Mica had been allowed to study on Goddess Peak. He'd left to join the emperor and defeat his father's army with the hope of one day returning to continue his training. Imprisonment followed by bog tremors had dashed his hopes though he remained true to his promise to serve the Goddess.

The temple doors opened. Shen, accompanied by a young Priest whom Mica didn't recognize, approached, staffs in hand. Without a word both attacked Mica at once.

Though his skill didn't fail him eventually his strength did. The young Priest used his weapon to knock Mica's feet out from under him. He landed hard on his back and moved too slowly in blocking Shen's blow. The end of the staff stopped short of breaking his nose.

Panting, Mica stared at the Priests. By losing the match he might have forfeited his chance of remaining on Goddess Peak.

Shen offered a hand up, which Mica accepted. He bowed from the neck in acknowledgement of both Priests.

"Mica of Ademene. It is good to finally meet you," the youth said. "Many here speak of you with respect. I am Sahir."

Again Mica bowed. A Priest of this man's age must have spent his entire life training on Goddess Peak. For that Mica admired him.

"The High Priestess awaits you," Shen said.

Mica felt a bit shaken. "Now?"

They stepped through the temple doors and into a vast room devoid of all furnishings. Several Priests sat on the floor, their eyes closed in deep meditation. In spite of his worry, peace washed over Mica like cooling waves on a midday beach. The times he'd meditated in this temple had been so soothing that he'd felt as if he could accomplish anything.

The doorway at the far end of the hall opened to a long, winding staircase. Mica sighed. His legs were just beginning to recover from the trip up the mountainside. The three ascended and walked down a narrow corridor. Chanting, drumbeats and wind music wafted from behind several closed doors. Mica smiled to himself. Not only had



he learned to perfect his fighting skills here but he had studied the ancient art of ritual dance Sun had enjoyed watching.

Sun. It seemed every path of thought led back to her. He longed for the day they would marry and raise a family together.

They stopped in front of a door at the end of the hall. Shen knocked once.

An older Priestess, her braided hair as white as her robe, greeted them. She stepped aside, allowing the three men to enter.

The High Priestess' council room was no larger than one of the guest rooms at the palace of Ademene. No rugs covered the stone floor. No tapestries adorned the walls. A simple cot stood against one wall, a chair and bath in the center of the room. A wooden trunk sat beneath the chamber's single, oval-shaped window large enough to brighten the entire room by the light of the sun or moon.

The Priestess sat atop the trunk. An attractive woman of late middle age, she was tall and voluptuously built beneath her red and white robes. Other than streaks of silver-gray at her temples her thick, straight hair gleamed black. Dark eyes rimmed with kohl stared at him in a manner that had always made him a bit nervous. The High Priestess looked through a person's veneer and measured the truth in his soul.

"Shen tells me you're cured, Mica. Words cannot express my happiness."

"Thank you, High Priestess Naja."

"A Knight of the Ruby Order has cured you?" Naja gazed at him with perceptive eyes.

"He knew of the treatment and another man, a Nalmite, brought the herb to make it."

"I see."

For several moments they stared at one another in silence.

Finally Mica said, "I came here to request your help."

She nodded. "What do you require?"

"I need to become the man I once was. I need the strength and skill to win the Blood War against a powerful enemy."

"You believe the Blood War will end the violence tearing our kingdom apart?"

"I believe it's worth trying." In spite of his anxiety, Mica tried to remain calm and collected, knowing a display of temper would hinder his chances of gaining Naja's help. "If I win the Blood War the fighting will end with little bloodshed."

"And if you lose it could mean massacre for all the Kennas."

Mica drew a long breath. "I know."

"And you're willing to put everyone at risk so that you can be admired?"

"I don't want admiration. I want revenge."

Naja smiled.

Sighing, Mica closed his eyes. He'd just lost his only chance of training on Goddess

Peak. He would need to find another way.

"Thank you for your time, High Priestess." Mica nodded and turned for the door.

"You may train here."

Spinning on his heel, he stared at her. "I may?"

"I've never known you to risk lives if you didn't believe you could protect them. You are right in believing that if you win less blood will be spilled. I just wanted to be certain both you and I understand all the reasons for your decision to call the Blood War."

"Thank you."

"I'm glad you finally returned to us, Mica."

"So am I."

"I pray to the Goddess you can fulfill the task you set for yourself."

The alternative was too terrible to consider.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sun gazed at Upper Kenna's shoreline from the deck of *The Sparrow Song*. When she had left with Lock's crew and several temple Priests nearly three months ago guards had been posted at the dock. They appeared to have doubled.

Since Mica left battles had been frequent. In spite of Lower Kenna's attempts to take the northernmost island only a few random troops had managed to breach the emperor's defenses. Still many lives had been lost protecting the shoreline,

Shortly after Mica's departure, a group of Priests was taken during a battle and sold into slavery. Zareb was among them. When Kado allowed several of his best warrior-Priests to track their brothers, Lock volunteered the service of *The Sparrow Song*. The emperor's fleet was required to help defend Upper Kenna's shoreline so Lock's offer was accepted with gratitude. Knowing Mica would have searched for Zareb, Sun decided to join the rescue party.

The slave traders Teman had hired as mercenaries were elusive, yet after nearly two and a half months of searching they recovered almost every captive. Unfortunately three of the Priests had already been killed by violent masters. Only Zareb seemed to have completely disappeared. To everyone's surprise they discovered him on his way back to the Kennas in the company of a female warrior from the Western Continent. The woman had bought him at an auction with the intention of freeing him. Between the slave market and freedom Zareb and the woman Reana had fallen in love and married.

Throughout the rough travel and search for the missing Priests, Sun thought often of Mica. She missed him more than she'd ever imagined. She longed for his strong arms around her and the sound of his laughter. Even worse she had finally learned the reason for his sudden departure for the desert.

Soon after Zareb and Reana boarded *The Sparrow Song* the Messenger called her aside and disclosed Mica's intention to initiate an ancient ritual called the Blood War.

"By telling you of the Blood War I'm betraying my emperor's orders. Other than me and Mica only the emperor and High Priest Kado know of the coming challenge."

"Even Mica wouldn't tell me," she murmured.

"It's a solemn ritual."

"What does it entail?"

"Only someone of military bloodline is allowed to call the Blood War. Mica comes from a long line of military leaders. His father was a general. He was a general himself. Karlus is the same. By law one emperor's general may challenge the general of another emperor. If both kingdoms agree the two fight to the death. The defeated kingdom is forfeited and the winning general's emperor becomes the ruler of all. The tradition dates back thousands of years."

"What if Mica challenges and Teman or Karlus don't accept?"

"The people take the Blood War very seriously. An emperor who doesn't accept appears to lack confidence in his own military and it is a sure path to an uprising of the people. As for the general he must obey his emperor."

Sun's belly clenched. "So one way or the other Mica is going to fight Karlus to the death?"

Though she wanted to see Karlus dead she knew the extent of his evil. The thought of Mica dying by his hand was unbearable.

"I told you, Dame Sun, because I know how deeply you and Mica care for each other. Since meeting Reana I've learned how powerful such emotions can be so I will tell you he's gone to a place called Goddess Peak to train."

"How do I get there?"

"It is a sacred place to the followers of the Goddess. By the vows I've taken I cannot tell you all its secrets but I will tell you where to find it."

Sun gripped the ship's wooden rail. For almost two weeks she'd thought only of seeing Mica again. She prayed she wasn't too late and he hadn't already called the Blood War. If she had just a short time with him she would know for herself if he could defeat Karlus or if she should prepare for her heart to be broken yet again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dusk approached and Sun squinted at the darkening sky. Adjusting her backpack more comfortably, she drew a cleansing breath and continued the last several steps to the mountaintop. Sweat trickled down the sides of her face and she brushed it away. The grueling hike to the top of Goddess Peak had been a strange journey. In several places she passed men and women who either wouldn't—or couldn't—speak to her. They simply offered her water from their flasks and pointed upward as if pressing her

to continue. By the robes they wore she knew they were followers of the Goddess, however they weren't like the Priests she'd met in Ademene. They seemed almost untouchable.

Zareb had told her little about the dwellers of Goddess Peak. He simply warned that should she not reach the mountaintop by nightfall she must return to the bottom and begin again the next day. It had been a challenge but after so many years as a Dame she was accustomed to forced marches over rough terrain. She'd arrived at the base of the mountain just before noon and was about to take the final step to the top just as the sun sank in the sky.

*That was a hell of a climb.*

She flopped on the ground to catch her breath.

A man and a woman leapt from behind a tall boulder. Had she been a moment slower in springing to her feet they might have killed her with two sharp kicks aimed at her face and her ribs.

"I'm here in peace," she bellowed, drawing her sword, her gaze darting from the Priest to the Priestess.

They circled her, each carrying a staff that they wielded skillfully against Sun's sword. After several moments they seemed at an impasse. The two lowered their weapons.

"You are a skilled warrior," the Priestess said.

The Priest asked, "Have you come to train among us?"

"No." Sun lowered her sword though she remained wary of another attack. "I'm looking for Mica of Ademene."

The two exchanged glances before the Priestess said, "You must be Dame Sun."

"He mentioned me?"

The Priest smiled. "You know he must have mentioned you. I'm Sahir and this is Dayle."

Dayle nodded to Sun. "Mica has gone to the oasis. We expect him back early tomorrow afternoon. You are welcome to wait for him."

"Thank you." Sun sheathed her sword. "Why did you attack me?"

"It is tradition," explained Dayle. "Most who travel here wish to study with us to perfect their fighting arts during their service to the Goddess. To reach the top and still be able to defend yourself is the first test that helps us decide if you're ready for our training."

"So I passed I guess."

"Far better than most. Our High Priestess will like to meet you I'm sure," Sahir said. "I'll ask if you may join her for the evening meal."

"After you've washed and rested of course," Dayle said. "Come. I'll prepare a guest chamber for you."

Gazing at the beautiful stone temple in the distance, Sun followed Dayle and Sahir. Upper Kenna and its strange but fascinating customs never ceased to surprise her. She only wished Mica was there. It had been months since they'd last seen each other. She felt giddy with anticipation—though their reunion wouldn't be completely joyous. She brought news of the situation between Upper and Lower Kenna. Battles still raged. Two spies had been caught trying to infiltrate the palace in Ademene. The attacks from Lower Kenna hadn't slowed and she wondered if a Blood War was called could a single victory possibly end the war. Still she'd seen that the Kennas were deeply rooted in tradition, more so than almost any other place she'd visited. Perhaps the Blood War was the only way to win. She wished someone other than Mica had the courage to fight it.

After meeting with the High Priestess, Sun was shown to a simple chamber. She took her meal in the hall with High Priestess Naja and the other followers of the Goddess. They sat on mats on the floor since no furnishings were allowed in the prayer hall. In spite of the lack of material comforts the food was plentiful and good—flatbread, desert fruit and goat cheese.

High Priestess Naja asked many questions about the Dames and Knights.

"It's good to see a group of empowered women," she said. "As you must know our culture worships the Goddess."

"Yes but there's something I don't understand. Mica said that for him to become a Priest he must undergo a ritual that removes an important part of him."

"It is an old custom. In ancient times men did it to show their devotion to the Goddess."

"Don't the Priests show their devotion by all the good they do in her name?"

"You're a wise woman, Dame Sun. However it's difficult to end tradition. There are some who believe that without the ancient ritual they are missing an honor bestowed upon their forefathers. Those like you who think the ritual is cruel and unnecessary become Messengers. You've made Mica reconsider his decision."

"I don't want to interfere with him and his religion but—"

"That's not the complete truth."

She'd only just met the High Priestess yet she was as perceptive of Sun's thoughts as Blaze was.

"I can't help thinking it's a waste for him to mutilate his body."

"Though Mica hasn't spoken in detail regarding your relationship I know you have changed his feelings in many ways." Naja held up her hand before Sun could interrupt. "It is better that he know now what he wants before the ritual, is it not?"

A smile tugged at Sun's lips. "I think so."

"If Mica was born in your land he might have made a fine Knight, would he not? Though the men of the Ruby Order do similar work to our Priests they fight more often. In spite of Mica's devotion to the Goddess and to peace violence is still a part of him."

"He'd make a magnificent Knight."

Imagining Mica's gorgeous body in the uniform was enough to quicken her heartbeat. He already possessed the qualities of Knighthood—strength, courage, honor and compassion.

"It's getting late," Naja said. "Perhaps you'd like a tour of the mountaintop before retiring?"

"Very much."

Together the women left the hall.

\* \* \* \* \*

Toward early afternoon Sun waited for Mica at the top of the steps leading to Goddess Peak. All morning she'd anticipated seeing him again. Each time she thought of his embrace and the sound of his voice her pulse raced.

To keep from going insane with longing Sun practiced with her sword.

She paused, her blade thrust forward, her legs in a low stance, and listened to the sound of footsteps. The pace was steady and amazingly fast for someone who had climbed the staircase from the base of the mountain.

*Mica?*

Sheathing her weapon, she stood at the top of the steps, her pulse quickening at the sight of him. A thin shirt of blue fabric and matching trousers clung wetly to his perspiring body, revealing every hard curve and plane of muscle. He held a fighting staff firmly in both hands. A glossy black goatee rimmed his sensual mouth. His blue eyes seemed to glow against his dark skin. Upon seeing her, his expression looked as startled and passionate as she felt.

He continued running up the last steps to the top, the muscles in his long legs straining against the sweaty fabric of his trousers.

"Dame Sun." He stood so close that she saw the rise and fall of his chest and heard his panting breath. Moisture streaked his face, matted his long eyelashes and glistened on his beard. Heat radiated from his body or was it her own?

"Mica—"

Shrill war cries interrupted her as a group of Priests, staffs in hand, surrounded them.

"Dame Sun." High Priestess Naja stood atop the bolder. "Join me. You cannot interfere."

Glancing at Mica, Sun did as the Naja asked. She watched, her fists clenched at her sides while the group of ten warrior Priests, all powerful, young and skilled, attacked Mica. He must have been tired after climbing the steps yet his pace had been much faster than hers when she'd reached the top. By the way he fought he possessed enough energy to defend himself against the onslaught—better than defend. He was winning. He blocked and attacked, wielding his staff powerfully. One by one he knocked several

Priests onto their backs and claimed the weapons of others. Moments later only Mica stood, his chest heaving, his weapon poised and his eyes gleaming with battle lust.

Sensing Naja's gaze upon her, Sun turned to the High Priestess.

"He is not as you remembered him, is he?"

Sun shook her head. "I knew about his reputation but to actually see it—"

"Mica is powerful. How do you feel about him now, Dame Sun?"

"I feel he's going to win your Blood War."

"That's not what I meant."

"I don't know you well enough to answer that, Naja."

The High Priestess smiled, climbing down from the boulder. "Join him. I'm sure you have much to talk about."

Naja and her Priests disappeared, leaving Mica and Sun alone. He sat on the steps catching his breath. She joined him.

"What are you doing here, Dame Sun?"

"I thought you'd be glad to see me."

He cupped her face and kissed her. "I am glad to see you. Do you have any idea how much I've missed you? How's Ebony Starr?"

"She's well. I saw her before I left. Prior to that I hadn't been in the Kennas for months. Zareb and some of the Priests were taken during a coastal battle and sold into slavery."

He drew a sharp breath, his expression concerned. "Slavery?"

"Some died but we recovered the others. Zareb is fine. He's married."

A look of surprise crossed his face. "Married?"

"To a woman who bought him. He's very happy."

"He always wanted to get married."

Sun drew a deep breath and released it slowly. She hadn't come to discuss Zareb's marriage, but a less pleasant subject. "He told me about the Blood War."

"I have to do it, Dame Sun."

"I know. You've changed, Mica."

He stroked her face, sadness in his beautiful eyes. "I'm sorry."

His words shocked her. "Why?"

"Because I'm not the man you knew. Because I've had to become as I used to be."

"You aren't the same General Mica who fought in the false emperor's army. Just because you're strong enough to ram a cactus up Karlus' ass doesn't mean the most important part of who you are has changed."

He grinned. "Ram a cactus up his ass, huh?"

"And if it doesn't go against the rules of your Blood War I want to be there to see it."

Though part of Sun was terrified at the thought of Mica fighting Karlus to the death she knew it was important for him to realize how much she and his people believed in him. Prior to traveling to Goddess Peak she'd doubted his ability to defeat Karlus—now she knew it was more than possible.

"Everyone will see it. The Blood War must take place in public and on the traditional ground."

"Where is that?"

"There's a tiny island between the Kennas. Twin Snake Island. Since the beginning all Blood Wars have taken place there. Both emperors must be present and anyone else who wishes to watch."

"When are you going to issue the challenge?"

"I was planning to return to Ademene by the end of the week."

Sun took his hand, entwining her fingers with his. He tightened his grip and tugged her closer. "May I stay here and travel back with you?"

"I was hoping you'd say that."

Sun slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him.

In a fluid motion that took her completely by surprise he swept her into his arms and walked to the temple.

"Mica. Put me down. I'm much too big for any man to tote around."

"Nonsense. The bog tremors are long gone, Dame Sun. I'm a man again."

"You were always a man, Mica." She gazed into his eyes, her expression serious. "You have the heart of a Knight."

"From you I'll take that as the ultimate compliment."

"If I don't tell you after all this is over, I'm proud of what you've done."

"That means more to me than I can express in words."

"Then find another way," she whispered against his lips.



## Chapter Seventeen

Inside the temple Mica walked down an empty corridor to the sparsely decorated chamber he'd been given. The setting sun shone in through a single tiny window. He placed her on the bed then lit the candles on the round wooden table while Sun undressed and tossed her clothes onto the trunk at the foot of the bed.

While tearing off his clothes he gazed at her. "Goddess you're beautiful."

Sun's pulse raced at the sight of his smooth, dark skin over chiseled muscles. Looking at his rock-hard shoulders, powerful chest and thick biceps made her heart pound. She gazed at his granite thighs and well-defined calves, her nipples tightening with desire. Her clit tingled so much that she pressed her thighs together in a desperate attempt to appease the passion building inside her. Only one thing could truly do that and Mica sported it thick and proud between his legs.

Covering her body with his, Mica braced his forearms on each side of her head and playfully brushed his nose against hers. "I've missed you, Dame Sun. So often I longed to hold you in my arms."

"I've missed you too," she admitted, torn between utter happiness at being with him again and concern about the coming Blood War.

There had been times when her need for him was almost painful. How many nights had she lain in her bedroll gazing at the moon from the deck of *The Sparrow Song* or from a camp on some unknown shore and touched her body while imagining it was Mica caressing her? His hands had cupped her breasts and teased the stiff, aching nipples. His fingers had slipped inside her wet sheath then stroked her clit until it seemed to burst with pleasure.

She ran her palms up his back and clasped his nape. His neck was so strong just like every other part of him. He radiated power and she relished it.

"Dame Sun." He covered her mouth with a fierce kiss, almost savage in its intensity yet underneath it was still Mica, still the gentle, good-natured man she'd fallen in love with. This was just another part of him, a domineering and strangely satisfying part. "I want to take you. I want to feel your fingers driving into my back. I want to hear your moans of rapture but I will never take such pleasures unless you wish it, Dame Sun. You are too precious to me."

Sun's face heated with lust and a touch of embarrassment. She'd never been a woman to dream about a lover to slay her dragons or treat her like some fragile maiden but with Mica she became someone else. When he kissed her and spoke softly in her ear, her legs turned to water and she almost forgot all the proud vows she had made to herself.

“Take me, Mica.”

She could never fear him, never hate him again. This man was incapable of harming her, of that she was certain. It struck her that she trusted him implicitly. He might not have killed his father and he hadn't even been able to stop their torture at the hands of their mutual enemies but he *had* slain her dragon. Other than Blaze he was the only man she had ever bared her heart and soul to. In the midst of the world's horrors, in spite of the violence, greed and pain surrounding them, some men could be trusted and Mica was one of them.

“I want to feel you deep inside me. I want you so close that I don't know where I end and you begin.”

“Sun,” he breathed, gazing into her eyes with passion and affection that warmed her very soul. Grasping her wrists, he used one hand to pin them above her head. Burying his lips in her neck, he licked and kissed her tender flesh, his goatee tickling it as much as his fluttering tongue.

His engorged cock rubbed teasingly over her clit. Sun was so wet and needy that she could scarcely wait to feel him inside her.

“Yes, Mica. Fill me now. Deep, deep inside.” During their separation she'd dreamed of being with him, but even the dreams weren't as wonderful as this reality.

He groaned, shifting his hips and circling her slick entrance with his cock head before sliding in oh so slowly. Partway in he paused and covered her mouth with his. While his tongue rimmed her lips he slid his cock out almost to the tip then impaled her with a slow, tantalizing thrust.

Sun's heart pounded. She wanted to gasp but his mouth still covered hers. His hips moved in a sensual rhythm, driving her higher and higher as he licked and explored every corner and crevice of her warm, wet mouth. Unable to endure another second she gasped, wrapped her legs around him and rode his long, powerful thrusts. He broke their kiss and licked her ear, his fingers gripping her wrists in a gentle yet unbreakable hold.

Pressure built deep in her pussy. Her swollen clit ached with pleasure. The relentless rubbing, thrusting and licking drove her straight into an orgasm so powerful that for a moment the world turned black.

Sun moaned in protest, reaching for Mica. He pulled away but she needn't have worried. Kneeling, he grasped her hips and hauled her close, one of her legs on either side of his waist. She gazed at him through half-closed eyes, relishing the sensation of his steely cock sliding inside her again. While he teased her with slow, short thrusts he circled her clit with this thumb.

“Umm.” She smiled, stroking and pinching her nipples.

“I love watching you touch yourself.” The lustful gleam in his eyes reinforced his words. “Run your thumbs over your nipples. Yes. Just like that. So beautiful. Cup your gorgeous breasts and squeeze gently. Ah yes.”

Following his commands, Sun held his gaze. Another orgasm built deep inside her,

making her tingle from head to toe.

Grasping her hand, Mica guided her fingers to her clit. He clutched her hips and said, "Stroke yourself while I thrust."

She did as he asked, circling and rubbing her clit faster as passion grew. His thrusts followed the speed of her hand. With a satisfied cry Sun convulsed, her neck and back arched and her finger madly stroking her nub. He continued thrusting until the last quiver ran through her pussy.

Sun opened her eyes to find him stretched out beside her, gazing at her with passion and his cock harder than ever.

A smile touched her lips as she curled her fist around his thick erection. "Do you ever plan on joining me?"

"When the time is right."

"Well." She grinned, stroking his velvet-skinned shaft. "Just how many times are you going to please me?"

"How many times do you want me to?"

A giddy feeling swept through her entire body. "I like your confidence."

"How many, Dame Sun?"

"I'd like five," she cupped the back of his head and pressed her body close to his, "but I'll be satisfied with three."

Grasping her thigh, he hauled it over his hip and shifted closer, thrusting into her. He reached between their joined bodies and ran his fingertip up and down her clit. Extremely sensitive from the previous orgasms, it took only the lightest touch to stimulate her though this time the orgasm took longer to build.

While he thrust and stroked he kissed her. Not just average kisses but deep, slow, tender kisses that touched her heart and aroused her body. He tugged gently on her upper lip. Using the tip of his tongue, he traced the delicate shape of her mouth and gently bit her lower lip.

Sun swept her hand up and down his back and over his buttocks that was harder and firmer than ever. His entire body felt like a chiseled mountainside covered with smooth flesh. His scent—herbs and raw, sensual male—tantalized her. He took his time making love with her, allowing her to fully enjoy each kiss and caress.

Panting, she hovered on the brink of orgasm. With several thrusts and a flick of his thumb over her clit he pushed her over the edge but didn't pause for a second. Rolling her onto her back, he increased his speed. His thrusts came so hard and fast that they stole her breath. A fourth orgasm flared up just as the third ended. Completely swept up in passion, Sun relished every touch.

Mica pounded into her, driving her toward perfection, but there was no way he could last long enough, not at this speed and not when she had three climaxes behind her. Sun clung to him, loving the heat of his panting breath close to her ear and the dampness of his back beneath her palms. He rolled one of her nipples between his

thumb and forefinger while thrusting his tongue into her mouth simultaneously with his cock into her pussy. Crying out in utter pleasure, Sun came, her convulsions squeezing his steely erection.

“Dame Sun. Goddess you feel good.”

“Mica, oh, Mica,” she murmured dumbly, unable to think of anything better to say in the midst of such mind-clouding pleasure. Her orgasm waned but his thrusting didn’t.

“Hold onto me, Sun,” he panted. “Hard.”

“Mica.”

“Hard.”

She did as he ordered, her arms and legs holding him in a grip that would have strangled a lesser man. His muscles bunched and tightened as he rammed into her drenched pussy, igniting yet another fire inside her.

“Yes, oh, yes.”

“Tell me how it feels, Dame Sun. Talk to me, my beautiful warrior.”

“Oh, Mica, by the Spirit I don’t think I can talk. It feels too good. It’s too much. I can’t. I—” Several more long, fast thrusts and she exploded. Overcome by sensation, her world turned black.

\* \* \* \* \*

After sharing a meal with Sun, Mica spent the rest of the day training with the Priests. Sun joined him for several hours then took advantage of the short time she’d be spending on Goddess Peak by exploring more of the palace and grounds. During the time she’d observed Mica’s training she understood why he’d progressed so much during his months with the Priestess. He and the small group of Priests he’d joined practiced the fighting arts like special forces of the Opal and Ruby Orders. Again she thought what a fabulous Knight he’d make and wondered if he’d ever consider joining the Ruby Order instead of becoming a Messenger. She doubted it. His belief in the Goddess was deep-rooted though not all Knights were of the same religion. Most—like a majority of Dames—believed in the Spirit, a deity without gender whose power sustained all the universe. Still, since Knights and Dames were recruited worldwide there were some who retained belief in religions of their homelands.

At dusk Sun left the library and descended a winding staircase. She passed Shen and asked if the Priest had seen Mica.

“Yes. He’s in the lowest chamber practicing ritual dance. Just follow these stairs to the bottom.”

Sun continued downward, listening to the sounds of drumbeats and flute music wafting through the temple. The steps ended in a dim, cool alcove. She stepped into the main chamber—a single vast room lit by torches. The ceiling and floor were bare except for a few straw mats rolled up and piled in a corner, two flute players and a drummer

seated beside them. Five dancers practiced in the center of the floor. Facing an entire wall of mirrors, Mica stood closest to Sun. She watched his slow yet powerful movements, scarcely believing a man could fight with such ferocity but dance with such grace.

Just as she remembered from the first time she'd seen him perform ritual dance his motions were beautiful but masculine.

In the mirror he caught her gaze and smiled. He stopped his practice and joined her, gently grasping her upper arm and kissing her cheek.

"I was just going to find you," he said. "The dance helps me relax after training."

"Someday you'll have to show it to Lock."

"I still find it hard to believe a man like him appreciates any art form." An annoyed expression tainted his lovely eyes.

"Lock's a good man. I know he can be crude but—"

Seeming to relent a bit, Mica nodded and said, "I don't doubt he's a good man. He's fought for Ademene and rescued our Priests."

"You just have trouble understanding each other."

Mica grinned. How she'd missed his silly smile during their months of separation.

"Would you like to walk outside?" he asked. "The night will be cool but the view from the mountainside is breathtaking in the moonlight."

"I'd like that."

He took her hand into the warmth of his and together they ascended the steps.

Outside he brought her to a place behind the palace where the desert stretched for miles in the moonlight.

"It's beautiful," Sun said.

"So are you."

She tilted her face up to his and he kissed her. His tongue gently traced the shape of her lips before it slipped into her mouth. Hers met it, stroking and tasting. Mica's arms wrapped around her and she clutched his neck, rising to the balls of her feet to better reach him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three days later Sun and Mica arrived in Ademene. The emperor called his military leaders, Blaze, Lock, Zimm-Bella and Valor to his private chamber. There he announced the coming challenge of the Blood War.

Sir Lock snorted with skepticism. "You really think they'll abide by the outcome?"

"This isn't the Archipelago of SothSea," Mica replied. "Some cultures do live by honor and tradition."

"There's plenty of honor in raiding and raping like your General Karlus, eh?"

Mica's blood burned. "I don't expect you to understand, Sir Lock. Just trust that we know the Kennas better than you do. We ask for your support."

"You've had our support since we arrived," Lock stated. "That hasn't changed. I simply don't want to see you fight to the death if there's a chance of Lower Kenna not abiding by tradition."

Some of Mica's anger faded, replaced by a touch of embarrassment. If Sir Lock could learn to express himself without being offensive he might be less apt to incite people's anger. Mica guessed that was why his wife was the ambassador for the Ruby Order and Lock the ship's captain.

Mica said, "If there's a good chance a battle between two men can stop a war among thousands the risk must be taken."

"He speaks with wisdom," Blaze said.

Zimm-Bella leaned one of her smooth, muscular arms on the table where the group sat. "I agree with trying the Blood War but I also understand Sir Lock's concerns. As long as we're all prepared for the war to continue even if Karlus dies—"

"When Karlus dies," Sun said.

Zimm-Bella shrugged as if accepting the very real possibility that Karlus would lose to Mica. "I just say we should cover all grounds."

"Which we will," the emperor stated. "The challenge was issued this morning."

"How will the messenger pass the enemy lines without getting killed?" asked Valor.

"He carries the red veil of the Blood War. It is a signal to the opposing army that a challenge is on its way," said the emperor. "If the messenger is killed then we know the challenge was not accepted. If he returns the Blood War will ensue."

"Our prayers are with your messenger," Blaze said.

The emperor nodded. "He would appreciate that. It is High Advisor Kado who has gone to deliver the challenge."

\* \* \* \* \*

Two days later Kado returned to the palace, travel dirtied and red-eyed from sleeplessness.

"Emperor Teman and General Karlus have accepted the challenge for Karlus and Mica to fight," Kado reported. "They and their witnesses will meet you in three days' time at midday at the ritual ground on Twin Snake Island."

The emperor glanced at Mica who stood beside the throne. "It is settled. Now it's too late to back out even if you wanted to."

"I never had any desire to back out." Mica's fists tightened beneath the long sleeves of his robe. On the contrary he could scarcely wait to face Karlus.

"Kado, you look like you could use food and rest," the emperor said. "And I'm sure

you have preparations to make, Mica.”

“My preparations have been made over the past months, My Lord.” Mica bowed and exited the chamber.

“Mica, wait.” Kado hurried to catch up with Mica’s angry strides. “Karlus asked for this to be delivered to you.”

The High Advisor extended a rolled piece of parchment to Mica who opened it and scanned the bold lettering. Mica crushed the parchment in his fist.

“I imagine he sent the message with the intention of frightening you before the fight,” Kado said.

Mica’s lips slid into a wicked grin. “An old and pathetic trick. It reveals his fears.”

“Be careful.”

Mica held the High Advisor’s gaze. “I will not fail.”

*Especially now.*

Karlus’ intentions were clear. Should Mica lose, Karlus would rape him on the ritual ground as he died then would claim Dame Sun.

\* \* \* \* \*

The journey to Twin Snake Island took only a day. Sooner than she liked Sun stood between Lock and Blaze, staring up at the ritual ground for which the island was named. Twin rocks, tall with sides smoothed by the wind, stretched skyward like snakes poised to strike. Two ropes stretched from the top of one to the ground. A rope bridge that swayed in the breeze was the only route to the top of the second rock—the battleground for the Blood War. Thousands of citizens from the Kennas gathered on the island to witness the match. The emperors and their guests watched from raised platforms that enabled them to better see the fight. Sun, Blaze, Lock and the Nalmite leaders had been asked to join the emperor and Kado.

“His spirit guides are close,” Blaze whispered to Sun. “Mirrored Rock is strong.”

Sun nodded, welcoming the affectionate squeeze of Blaze’s hand. She glanced at the platform opposite theirs where Emperor Teman stood with three of his advisors. Their gazes fixed on the ropes as Mica and Karlus approached the mountainside. His hair braided tightly at his nape, Karlus wore tan silk trousers, a matching vest and boots, his staff strapped across his back. Mica wore blue trousers, a vest and black boots. Sunlight glinted off the dark skin of his powerful chest, shoulders and arms. Though he had shaved off what little hair had grown back on his head he kept the goatee. He exuded raw sensuality that excited Sun more than she’d ever imagined. Though she felt confident in his power she prayed for his safety. No one could guess the outcome of any fight and she prayed this one would end quickly with Mica victorious finish.

Both men grasped their ropes and ascended. When they reached the top each took a moment to catch his breath before traveling across the rope bridge to the battleground.

They walked to opposite ends of the flat rock top and took their weapons in hand. Sun knew their staffs possessed sharpened tips, specially created for the Blood War.

Mica knelt and chanted a prayer to the Goddess while Karlus laughed. Anger and fear coiled inside Sun. She longed to see Mica wipe the mocking expression off Karlus' face, but even more than that, she wished for Mica's safety.

Before Mica rose, Karlus lunged at him. Mica leapt with a cat's quickness, raising his staff in defense. For the next tense moments each blocked the other's blows until the tip of Karlus' staff cut across Mica's shoulder. Sun's fists clenched and she realized she was holding her breath.

Blood trickled down his arm and stained his vest. His injury didn't thwart him as he twisted his wrists and nearly struck Karlus in the temple. Karlus blocked and spun, his staff aimed at the back of Mica's knees. Mica leapt, avoiding the sweep, and snapped the blunt end of his staff at Karlus' temple. Karlus didn't block quickly enough. Though he managed to avoid the full brunt of Mica's blow his own blocking staff struck him in the head and he staggered.

Using the sharp end of his staff, Mica severed the rope bridge. The crowd murmured. Mica had just destroyed their only hope of escape should one of the men wish to shame themselves by stepping down from the battle.

Karlus pushed himself to his feet and stared at the empty space where the bridge had been. He grinned but Mica noted apprehension in his dark eyes.

"So my woman has regained his courage," Karlus sneered. "Tell me, Mica, have you made your wench fuck you with an ivory phallus while you dreamed of me? Perhaps I'll use one on her after you're dead."

"Don't try to buy yourself time. Pray to the Goddess if she'll hear you." Mica thrust his staff at Karlus.

Over the next moments Mica's attacks increased in speed and strength. Karlus began to tire first. His reflexes slowed and his breath came in hard pants. Mica almost smiled. Goddess Peak emphasized stamina. While their trainees' skills might be equal to other warriors, few possessed their longevity in battle.

Karlus stumbled. Mica spun, using his staff to sweep his enemy's feet out from under him. As Karlus crashed to his back, the blunt end of Mica's staff struck him in the nose. Blood splattered Karlus' face and chest. Mica knocked the staff from his hands. Before Karlus regained his sight the sharp point of Mica's staff pierced his heart.

Sun's fists clenched so tightly that her nails cut her palms. Only when Mica struck the death blow did she realize she'd been holding her breath.

After tugging his staff from Karlus' chest he knelt, catching his breath. His vest clung to his perspiring body. Blood glistened on his shoulder and arm. She hoped his injury was minor.



“Where do you think you’re going?” shouted one of the emperor’s captains. He and the Nalmites blocked Teman and his advisors who had tried to slip unnoticed toward the dock.

“You must pay homage to the one true emperor of the Kennas,” the Captain continued.

Teman looked ready to protest when the witnesses—both from Upper and Lower Kenna—shouted for Teman to relinquish his title.

Teman and his leaders approached the emperor and bowed deeply. “I relinquish all to you. General Mica is the rightful winner of the Blood War.”

“We have much work to do,” Kado whispered.

“I vow to do what is best for both Upper and Lower Kenna,” the emperor announced. “It will take cooperation and determination but we will arise a stronger kingdom.”

By the enthusiastic cheers Sun guessed the people of Lower Kenna were grateful to be rid of Teman and Karlus.

Lock pointed to Mica. “Somebody better throw him a rope.”

Sun and Lock stepped down from the platform and climbed the ropes to the top of the tall rock. There they tossed another rope to Mica who secured it and slid across to join Lock and Sun. She threw her arms around him and held him tightly. His heart pounded beneath her cheek. Enveloped by his hard, sweaty body, she thanked the Spirit he was alive. Never had she felt more grateful for anything than at that moment with Mica in her arms, alive and victorious. She glanced at him and saw love for her gleaming in his eyes, filling her with warmth such as she’d never experienced.

“How bad is the wound?” she asked.

“It’ll be fine,” Lock stated, examining the cut. He used a bandage from the pack slung across his shoulder to bind the injury.

“Would you like that staff fight we discussed earlier?” Mica smiled. “I’m ready for it now.”

Lock chuckled. “Do I look crazy? You have a few tricks with that weapon I’ve got to learn first. Then we’ll talk about a match.”

“You did it, Mica.” Sun embraced him again. “You’ve brought peace to the Kennas.”

“I love you, Dame Sun,” he whispered close to her ear.

“Let’s get down from this stupid rock and plan our future.”

“I can scarcely wait.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It was nightfall when *The Sparrow Song* docked in Upper Kenna. Mica and Sun had traveled aboard Lock’s vessel. To Sun’s surprise the former pirate and the Priest in

Waiting avoided any semblance of an argument. Mica even invited Lock and Sparrow to observe the ritual dance the following evening in the palace at Ademene.

"I've been curious to get a look at the dance since Sun's been praising it," Lock said over a meal of fruit and flatbread.

The group ate on deck, cooled by a mild breeze while watching the beauty of churning waves.

"Sun speaks of your talent," Mica said. "Perhaps you would like to join us in ritual one day?"

Lock snorted with laughter. "My kind of dancing has nothing to do with religion but I'll bump and thrust at a social gathering any day."

Sparrow raised her eyes to heaven. "Lock, must you be so crude?"

"Sorry, girl." Lock wrapped an arm around Sparrow and cuddled her against his chest. "She hates it when I speak the truth."

Mica looked about ready to reply with a comment that might start yet another war but Sun cast him a warning glance. Instead he closed his mouth and offered a patient smile.

Though she wished Mica and Lock would truly get along she doubted it would ever happen. They were as opposite as they were similar—a bit like her and Mica had been when they'd first met.

It seemed so long ago that she wanted to kill him. She could never imagine hurting him now nor had she ever imagined loving a man this much.

Perhaps in spite of all that was against her she could still hope for marriage and a family.

\* \* \* \* \*

When they reached Ademene the following day Mica and Sun were eager to see Ebony Starr. The child was in the care of Zareb and his new wife who lived with the Bedouins.

"Now we can return to the desert," Arsha said. "Would you like Ebony to go with us?"

Mica and Sun exchanged glances. He knew by her expression the family he dreamed of would finally be his.

"No," Mica replied, kissing the top of Ebony's head from where she rested in his arms. "From now on she'll be with us."

"You're going to marry then?" Zea grinned.

"Zea," Arsha snapped at his wife. "There has yet to be a formal announcement."

"But I get the feeling there will be soon," Zareb murmured.

Mica and Sun simply smiled at each other. With Ebony Starr tucked against his chest the three headed back to the palace.

\* \* \* \* \*

When they arrived at the palace Sun took Ebony Starr and joined Sparrow in the courtyard where they watched servants and Priests prepare for the ritual dance and feast that night.

“Have you and Mica decided when the wedding will be?” Sparrow asked.

Sun shook her head. Smiling, she watched Ebony Starr chase after a bird and tumble onto her backside. She offered a steadying hand as the girl pushed herself to her feet. “Haven’t talked about it yet. I’m still getting used to this mother role.”

Grinning, Sparrow said, “I’ve got news for you. It’s not a role. It’s the real thing.”

“I still can’t believe it. How could I go from hating a man to loving him all within a few short months?”

“Don’t question it. Just enjoy it. Finding the love of a good man is a wonderful gift.”

“I know. And speaking of gifts yours is walking this way.”

Lock approached, dropping a kiss across Sparrow’s mouth before flopping onto the cobbled ground at the foot of his wife’s chair. “Had a few issues on the ship but I’m glad I didn’t miss the beginning of this dance ritual.”

“The crowd’s gathering,” Sparrow observed.

People filled the courtyard, leaving a wide circle in the center where the Priests would perform. Drummers, flute and tambourine players and several singers practiced with bits and pieces of songs Sun recognized from her time spent in Upper Kenna. Tables filled with food and drink were set up closer to the palace. Robed Priests stretched and limbered their bodies in the prayer hall.

After a brief speech from the emperor and High Advisor Kado, the Priests, Messengers and Priests in Waiting entered the courtyard.

The music began and the first group of Priests performed a ritual dance.

Next two Priests danced with grace and skill. Last Mica performed. Sun stared at him, entranced. If possible his movements were even more powerful than before. His every step and pose spoke of strength yet gave depth and meaning to the prayer sung by a slender eunuch draped in a pure white robe.

Mica also wore a robe with black trousers and a hood that draped all but his eyes. As he danced the fabric flowed and snapped in the warm evening breeze. He dropped to his knees, leaning backward until his shoulders brushed the floor then he rose, his arms lifting in worship of the Goddess.

Sun’s pulse raced just from watching him, knowing that beneath the flowing robes was a powerful body of pure male perfection. Her nipples tightened and clit tingled as she imagined running her hands over his chest, hot and damp from the dance. How good it would feel when his thick, velvet-skinned cock thrust deep inside her, filling her, teasing and loving her.

He spun to his feet and continued with faster steps, finishing on bended knee.

When the ritual ended the crowd dispersed, eager to begin the feast.

Mica joined Sun and her companions, his headpiece dangling from his hand, his face misted with sweat. He tugged her close to his side and Sun slipped her arm around his waist.

Lock folded his arms across his chest. “Well, Sun, it was no lie. He’s one of the best I’ve seen. Somehow I thought the ritual would have been much different than SothSea dancing.”

“It’s similar?” Mica asked.

Lock nodded, grinning. “Most of those moves every Archipelago whore learns from they minute they step into the brothel.”

The rage in Mica’s eyes concerned Sun, but she should have known he wouldn’t start a fight at such an inappropriate moment. Instead, he explained, “This ritual has nothing to do with whoring.”

“I just said it looked similar—except it must be hard to learn to dance in all those robes. If you got yourself a good leather loincloth—”

“Sir Lock, this is not an auction block for flesh peddlers. Maybe if you stopped thinking with your loins you might discover something useful about a culture different than your own.”

Flinging Mica a challenging look, Lock said, “If you want to call a man ignorant you can do it with a few words rather than a lecture and if I was to pick a religion to study it wouldn’t be one where you have to hack off your balls to join.”

“Lock!” Sparrow said through clenched teeth.

Two Priests talking nearby paused in their conversation to stare at Lock with wide eyes.

“No offense intended.” Lock waved to the Priests. They turned toward the tables laden with food, whispering and casting odd looks in Lock’s direction. He glanced at Mica. “I didn’t mean any disrespect. I’ve always thought of dance as a way to enjoy myself and I have trouble considering it an expression of religion.”

Mica’s body relaxed against Sun’s. “I enjoy dancing very much.”

“You have some interesting moves. I’m guessing it would be against your religion to teach me a few of them?”

“On the contrary we encourage the dance as a form of communion with the Goddess.”

“I don’t know about any Goddess but I’ll give it a try.”

“Perhaps I could learn from your SothSea arts as well—without the loincloth, that is.”

Sun gazed at him through her lashes. “I think I like the loincloth idea.”

The thought of watching him dance in nothing but the tight slip of black leather melted her heart as well as her pussy.

Mica whispered in her ear, “Keep that in mind for later.”

## Chapter Eighteen

Before retiring that night, Mica and Sun stood watching Ebony Starr sleep.

"I never thought I'd have the chance to watch her grow up," Mica said, slipping his arms around Sun and tugging her against his chest.

She squeezed his forearms lovingly. "She's a wonderful child."

"Yes she is." Mica kissed the top of Sun's head and guided her to his room. Since Zareb had married, Mica had the room to himself.

He kicked the door shut then kissed Sun with all the passion he felt. Looping her arms around his neck, she parted her lips, her tongue fencing with his.

When the kiss broke she opened her eyes and held his gaze.

"I love you, Dame Sun." He kissed her temple while his hands caressed her waist, warming her through her clothes. "I can hardly wait to see what our children will look like."

Sun froze. "Children?"

"Yes. They usually come after marriage."

"What about Ebony Starr?" she asked softly, a numb feeling spreading through her.

"I'm sure she'll like some brothers and sisters."

Sun jerked away from him and sat at the foot of the bed. Why had she tried to convince herself this conversation wouldn't come? She'd hoped Ebony Starr would be enough—now Mica was talking about having more children. *Their* children.

"What's wrong?" Mica sat beside her, his expression concerned. "Sun?"

"Nothing. I just didn't think about having more children."

"Don't you want any?"

Want any. She'd love to have Mica's children. But it could never be.

"You do?" she asked.

"Yes, I would like more but not if you don't."

Sun held his gaze for a long moment, resisting the urge to slip into his arms, confess her darkest secret and still have nothing change between them.

"Sun, please talk to me." This time when he reached for her he didn't allow her to pull away.

"You want the truth?" When he nodded she steeled herself and continued, "All right. The truth is I don't like children. Never did."

Mica smiled. "You don't lie very well. I saw you with the Bedouin children."

"It was my duty as a Dame to aid them. The truth is the less I see of the brats the

better.”

“Sun, what’s wrong with you?”

She stood and paced the room. “You asked for the truth. If you want children, Mica, you’re with the wrong woman.”

“Sun, I don’t need more children. I don’t understand this sudden change.”

“It’s not sudden.”

Gesturing helplessly with his hands, he began, “But—”

“I’m going to my room.”

Mica stood, grasping her upper arms and tugging her close. “You’re not going anywhere until you tell me what’s troubling you.”

“You have about two seconds to get your hands off me before I finish what Karlus couldn’t.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he demanded, looking frustrated.

Sun knocked his hands away and headed for the door. She sensed rather than heard Mica following her and turned, her fists clenched at her sides. “Do you mind? I’d like some privacy.”

“We can talk more after you calm down.”

Sun turned on her heel and stormed out of the chamber, slamming the door behind her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mica spent a sleepless night thinking about Sun. What was wrong with the woman? He couldn’t understand why she’d been upset. Her refusal to speak to him confused and hurt him more than he imagined possible.

Even before sunrise Mica sat in the corridor outside Sun’s door, eager to make amends with her the moment she woke.

At dawn the door opened and she stepped out looking as emotionally weary as he felt. Hopefully she was ready to discuss whatever had incited her anger the night before.

He pushed himself to his feet.

“Mica, what are you doing out here?” Her tone and frigid expression didn’t look promising, but he ignored them, needing to uncover the root of the problem between them.

“Waiting for you. About last night—”

“We need to talk.”

He smiled, relieved. “Yes. Are you hungry? We can talk over the morning meal.”

Mica reached for her but she brushed him away. “No. We can get it over with here.”

"Over with?" His brow furrowed, his stomach clenching. The situation appeared to be getting worse instead of better.

"About us getting married—"

"When do you want the wedding? I'm sure the High Advisor would perform the ceremony or maybe the High Priestess. Unless you'd rather someone from your homeland marry us."

"I can't marry you, Mica."

He stared at her for a moment, swallowing the lump of dread sticking in his throat. Finally he demanded, "Why?"

"Because I'm not the marrying kind."

"I love you, Dame Sun, and you love me."

"Not enough." She folded her arms across her chest. "Last night when you brought up children the seriousness of your proposal struck me. I realized I can't do it. I enjoy my freedom. I don't want to be tied."

"Tied? Am I some kind of dragon that you think I'd try to hold you prisoner?"

Sun uttered a mocking laugh. "As if you could."

"I don't know what's wrong but if you talk to me I can help you."

"You can help me by forgetting about marrying me. Find yourself a good woman from the Kennas."

It was his turn to laugh. "You can't expect me to believe a few cultural differences would turn you away from me."

"It has nothing to do with culture. It has to do with me living how I want to. The last thing I need is a husband and a bunch of brats keeping me from my duties and my pleasures."

Mica's chest tightened. He could scarcely believe Sun was uttering such words. She was the kindest, most courageous woman he'd ever known. She'd risked her life for others and had cared for him at his worst. He'd fallen madly in love with her but suddenly she'd become a stranger.

"Sorry, Mica. Find someone who can give you the family you're looking for. I thought I loved you enough to marry you but I can't go through with it."

He touched her face gently with his fingertips. "I love you, Sun."

For a moment her gaze softened and he thought she would step toward him. Instead she shoved his hand aside and continued down the corridor, calling over her shoulder, "You'll get over it. *The Sparrow Song* leaves at the end of the week. I'll be aboard her."

"Dame Sun."

She didn't so much as glance over her shoulder before disappearing down the steps.

Pride stopped Mica from chasing her. If she'd pierced his heart with her sword she



couldn't have hurt him more. Since the moment he'd seen her he'd been attracted to her and he loved her more with each passing day. How could he have so misjudged her? Perhaps she was simply nervous and needed time. But she was leaving in a week. She would change her mind. She had to.

Deep in thought Mica walked to the chambers below to join the Priests in ritual. Yet that morning his mind wasn't on the dance or the prayers. His heart ached for a love he desperately wanted but had most likely lost forever.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Gaping holes left by stars torn from the majestic ebony cloth." Blaze shook his head. "Such foolishness."

He and Sun were sparring on the training ground behind the palace at Ademene.

"Sorry. I wasn't concentrating." Sun stepped back.

"I didn't mean your defense though I've seen your technique far better than this. I meant your parting with Mirrored Rock."

"I told you this is the best decision for both of us."

"You didn't supply all facts. How could he decide anything?"

Sun's gaze fixed on the Knight's. "Blaze, please don't interfere between me and Mica. If you do this time I don't think I'll forgive you."

"I'll obey your wish." The Knight shook his head in frustration. "Love is too precious a jewel to cast to the wind."

"Blaze, you know I can't make him happy."

Stepping closer to Sun, he took her hand. "Who better to supply joy than one's love?"

"Please, Blaze. Don't you think it's hard enough to walk away from him?"

He squeezed her hand. "Then you should not."

"I have to."

"You could tell him the truth and let him choose."

For a moment she closed her eyes, mourning a life without Mica yet fearful that given the choice he would marry her and end up miserable. "What if he chooses me?"

Blaze opened his arms and smiled. "Then all is well."

"No it's not. He wants children."

"He has a daughter and there are many other children—"

Breaking away from Blaze, she began pacing back and forth. "You didn't see the look on his face when he talked about having children."

"He was going to surrender his manhood for religion."

"Yes but now he's seen that becoming a Priest isn't really what he wants. He can find another woman. One more suitable for him."

"Feathers of soaring ones. Froth on the waves. Born partners forever entwined. Brightest Star, you know in your heart this is wrong."

"No. I know it's right. Now please, Blaze. I don't want to talk about it anymore."

The Knight nodded, hugging her close. "I wish I could ease your sadness."

Sun rested her head against his shoulder. "Thank you, Blaze."

\* \* \* \* \*

For the next several days Sun and Mica avoided one another. He worked with the Priests and assisted Bedouins who were preparing to move back to the desert. Sun either practiced on the training field or spent time with Sparrow and Lock who also accused her of making the wrong decision regarding Mica. Friends were wonderful most of the time but when it came to leaving the man who was perfect for her they did nothing but make the task more difficult.

Three afternoons before *The Sparrow Song* sailed, Sun visited Lock and Sparrow in their room. A servant knocked on the chamber door. Lock accepted a message written on a slip of sealed parchment. He broke the seal and read, his brow furrowing.

"What is it, love?" Sparrow stood on tiptoe, reading the message Lock held. She gasped. "I don't believe it."

"What?" Sun demanded, overcome by curiosity.

"It's an invitation to join a celebration of newly appointed Priests," Sparrow said. "Sent by Mica."

"Mica?"

"The crazy bastard's going to have his balls cut off in two days," Lock said, looking disgusted.

"Give me that." Sun tore the message from Lock's hand. She read the Kennian symbols then crushed the parchment in her fist. "Why the hell is he doing it? I thought he wanted a wife and family."

"Apparently the only wife he wants is you," Sparrow said.

"I need to talk to him. He's making a mistake."

"I'll go with you," Lock said.

"No. You irritate him, Lock."

The Knight had the nerve to look taken aback, though whether he was serious or teasing Sun couldn't decide. "Me?"

"Just mind your own business, Lock," Sparrow scolded as Sun left the room.

Sun found Mica practicing the ritual dance in the lowest chamber of the palace. She watched, captivated by every graceful movement of his sleekly muscled body. The idea that she'd never again make love with him drove her to near madness. Never in her life had she wanted a man so badly.

When the dance ended Mica approached, his expression stern.

“Why are you doing it?” Sun demanded. “Why are you becoming a Priest? I thought you enjoyed your freedom.”

“I’m becoming a Priest to better serve my Goddess.” His frustratingly serene expression made her want to shake some sense into him, mostly because she knew he was burying his true feelings. He had to be. Mica’s passions ran too deep for him to want to go through with this archaic ritual.

“One moment you want to marry me and the next you want to be a eunuch. As fickle as you are it surprises me that the High Advisor is even allowing you to undergo this ritual.”

“We never made a formal announcement of marriage and anyone can make a mistake.”

Though Sun had ended their relationship his words still hurt. She resisted the urge to run up the steps and out of the palace.

“You said you wanted a wife and children. How can you ever hope to have either if you castrate yourself?” Though she tried to sound reasonable, Sun’s emotions colored her words, making them sound almost accusing.

“The only woman I want is you.”

“So it’s either me or your balls get cut off?”

“You are no longer an option.”

“You can’t do this,” she said through clenched teeth.

“I’ve spent years training for Priesthood. Perhaps it was fate that you decided not to fulfill our plans. I should thank you for stopping me from making the wrong choice.”

“This is the wrong choice, Mica.”

“If you’ll excuse me, Dame Sun, I must continue with the ritual dance.”

Nodding, she stalked back upstairs, out of the palace and directly to the training field where she spent the next several hours practicing.

Just three more days and she’d be away from the Kennas. Just two more days and Mica would be a Priest.

She hadn’t given him up to be mutilated. There had to be a way to convince him his decision was wrong before it was too late.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that afternoon Sun visited Ebony Starr in the courtyard. Val was caring for the girl while Mica performed duties in one of the temples just outside of Ademene.

Though Val didn’t mention her split with Mica she sensed his curiosity. Still she wasn’t about to detail her most intimate moments to the Priest.

She sat on the ground and joined Ebony in playing with two carved toy horses.

Val perched on a stone bench and stroked Ebony's dark hair. "Mica was so looking forward to raising her with you."

"I'll miss her," Sun admitted. Ebony and Mica were the closest she'd ever had to family of her own and she doubted another such opportunity would ever drift her way.

"You'd make a good mother."

"I'm not the motherly kind. Believe me."

"But—"

"Val, I'd rather not talk about this..." Her voice trailed off when she noticed Val staring toward the gates.

Mica approached, his brow furrowed and his expression irritated.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded, picking up Ebony who squirmed in his arms, reaching for Sun, apparently wanting to finish their game.

Sun stood along with Val. The Priest's gaze darted from her to Mica.

"I was just visiting—"

"I don't want you spending any more time with her."

Sun wondered if she appeared as stunned as she felt. "Why not?"

"Because you're leaving."

"That's why I want—"

He glared. "You want. You're seeing her because *you* want to, not even considering how she'll feel after you're gone."

"Perhaps I should take Ebony if you're going to argue." Val reached for the girl.

"We're not arguing," Mica stated but passed Ebony to Val who left them alone.

"Leaving me is one thing," Mica said. "I can handle it. She's just a child."

Sun folded her arms beneath her breasts. "You're handling it exactly like a bratty child. You can't have what you want so you're cutting off your balls for spite. And you're using Ebony as an excuse to vent your anger on me."

"I've been part of Ebony's life since the day she was born. I might not have physically created her but she is my daughter. I would never do anything to hurt her nor would I use her for my own purposes. And if you hadn't noticed, Dame Sun, I have spent the past several years training for Priesthood. This is not some whim."

"Like I was?"

Hurt flickered beneath his angry expression. "You were not a whim and you know it. You were the only person who could have kept me from the Priesthood."

"Mica, if you wanted me then you can find someone else you want just as much."

"I don't want anyone else. The only piece of good advice my father ever gave me was never love anyone especially a woman."

"And we all know what an excellent model of a man your father was," she said, her voice dripping bitterness.

The two glared at each other before Mica turned and stalked toward the palace, leaving Sun cursing under her breath.

\* \* \* \* \*

“You’re sure you want to do this?” Lock asked Sun.

The Knight and Dame stood together outside a temple in Ademene.

In moments the Ceremony for Priesthood would begin. Initially it had been decided that the ceremony would take place in the Palace, however due to some heavy renovations the ritual had been moved to one of the smaller temples in the city square. High Advisor Kado was presiding over Mica’s ceremony.

“I’m sure. He’s making a terrible mistake.”

Lock snorted. “That’s an understatement. You know he’s probably going to want to kill both of us.”

“He’ll get over it.”

Shaking his head, Lock said, “Sparrow’s going to roast my ass after this.”

“She’ll get over it too. Now are you sure you can do it?”

“Don’t worry about me. Just make sure the horses are ready.”

“They’ll be ready. Thank goodness the ceremony isn’t taking place in the Palace. The ritual table there is built directly into the floor. At least in this temple it’s just wooden.” A tingling feeling spread through her. She knew this was the right thing to do but regretted that it would probably add to the bitterness already festering between her and Mica. She forced such thoughts from her mind. It didn’t matter if he hated her in the end. At least she would have stopped him from making a terrible mistake.

Lock grinned. “You know there won’t be much left of his dignity.”

“Better than there not being much left of his manhood.”

“This isn’t the best idea for me. He can’t stand the sight of me as it is.”

“That’s because you goad him.”

“Traditional people like him are the most fun to goad.”

Raising an eyebrow, Sun said, “Sparrow’s right.”

“About what?”

“You are incorrigible”

“I do my best.” Lock glanced through the window. “They’re getting ready.”

“You’d just better make it tight.”

“It’s a metal lock. They’ll be no worries.”

*No worries.* Sun drew a deep breath. The only real worry would be whether or not Mica killed her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mica's stomach clenched and he willed himself not to tremble. The ceremony hadn't really bothered him until moments ago. All of a sudden the idea of being castrated made him weaker than an attack of bog tremors.

Val handed him a goblet. "Drink this."

"What is it?"

"It'll dull the pain."

"Completely?"

Val laughed. "Nothing short of death dulls that pain completely."

"Thank you for the encouragement."

"At least you have a choice. I was castrated as a boy. Just think, you'll be closer to the Goddess' image."

Another Priest glanced in the tiny chamber adjoined to the main temple where Kado and several witnessing Priests waited. "The ritual is beginning. Enter immediately."

"Go," Val whispered, shoving Mica who seemed rooted in one spot.

Mica only had time for a quick swallow of wine before he shrugged off his robe and stepped naked through the door.

"That won't be nearly enough wine," Val whispered beside him.

"Will you be silent?" Mica snapped, his heart pounding so hard he thought it would burst through his chest. What the hell was he doing?

Pausing, he drew a deep breath and reprimanded himself for his cowardice. He'd just survived bog tremors, fought the Blood War and lost the love of his life. Castration should be nothing compared to all that.

The Priests began their loud chanting and Mica glanced at Kado who stood at the head of the ritual table. A smaller, round table filled with gleaming metal clamps and surgical blades stood beside him.

He stopped in front of Kado who placed firm hands on Mica's shoulders.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Kado whispered so only Mica could hear.

Nodding, Mica lay on the ritual table. Priests bound his hands and ankles so that he was stretched, immobile.

The chanting increased in speed and volume as Kado reached for a clamp.

The temple's double doors burst open. Carrying the ends of two long chains, Sir Lock rushed toward the table.

The Priests shouted and attacked the Knight who fastened the chains around the wooden legs at the foot of the table.

"Lock, what the hell are you doing?" Mica bellowed, struggling against the bonds but he was held fast.

"I'm helping you, fool," Lock shouted, knocking aside two Priests and kicking a third into Kado. "I'm sorry, men, but this has to be done."

By the time the Priests formed a second attack Lock had sprung toward the window and shouted, "Now, Sun. Go."

The table jerked, pulled directly through the temple doors.

Mica managed to lift his neck enough to see two horses dragging him off, Sun mounted on one of them.

"Sun, stop," he bellowed. People ran from shops and houses, shouting and pointing at the spectacle he made, shackled naked to a ritual table being dragged down the streets of Ademene. "Stop the horses!"

The bitch ignored him and continued all the way to Marta's stable just beside her tavern. Inside the horses and the table stopped. The animals stood blowing and whinnying while Sun and Marta closed the stable doors to curious outsiders.

"Thank you, Marta." Sun and the tavern owner shook hands.

"It was the least I could do."

"When I get up I'm going to kill you, Dame Sun," Mica roared, struggling so hard against his bonds that his wrists and ankles nearly bled. "And you, Marta. How could you do this?"

"It's for your own good," said the tavern owner, her gaze lingering over his sizeable cock and balls. "And the good of womankind."

Struggling, Mica gritted his teeth.

Marta left by the back door of the stable.

Sun approached, her gaze sweeping Mica. By the Spirit the man had a perfect body. Long, hard muscles strained beneath dark skin. The gold ring glittered in his sac yet the adornment wasn't nearly as gorgeous as the testicles themselves. How could he have considered castration?

"What the hell were you thinking?" he growled. "Dame Sun, this is beyond even your crudity."

"Me? Crude? You're the one who was about to get your balls sliced off."

"It was my decision. Let me up."

"Only if you promise to calm down."

"Yes." Mica's voice softened though his eyes still flashed and his chest heaved with agitated breathing. "I am calm."

"No you're not."

"Let me up."

She narrowed her eyes, folded her arms beneath her breasts and tapped her booted foot.

"You can't keep me here forever."

"That's true." She sighed, releasing his ankles then his wrists. He leapt up so quickly that she scarcely had a chance to think before she found herself thrown onto her back, his big body pinning hers to the table.

"How do you explain this?" Mica snarled through clenched teeth, his nose nearly touching hers.

"I didn't want you to make a mistake and ruin your life. Let me up."

"Why should you care what I do with my life? You're no longer part of it. But maybe you should be. You ruined my ritual so I'm going to take my revenge."

"What are you talking about?"

"You wanted my manhood so much. Here it is." Mica grasped both of her wrists in one hand and held them above her head while he used his free hand to jerk down her trousers. She struggled but he was strong as steel. Still she managed to shove him slightly aside. With Mica still clinging to her she stumbled off the table.

"Oh no you don't," he hissed.

Sun kicked at his mid-section. He dodged her foot and blocked two strikes aimed at his face before shoving her against the stable wall. His body pressed hers to the wood. His lips hovered over hers and their panting breaths filled the otherwise quiet stable.

"So you're going to rape me like the rest of the swine?" she snarled. "I always knew you were a vicious liar just like your damn father."

Anger faded from Mica's eyes and he loosened his grip. "I could never hurt you, Dame Sun. You should know that."

The familiar tenderness in his expression and the gentleness in his voice reached the deepest part of her soul. She wanted to be with him so badly it was a physical ache but she couldn't. Tears sprang into her eyes.

"What is it, Sun?" Mica stroked her face. "Please tell me what's wrong. Please tell me why you rejected me."

Sun shook her head, furious when tears began trickling from her eyes.

"Sun?" He kissed her temple, his fingers brushing moisture from her face.

"I can't be with you, Mica."

"Why?"

"Because you want children."

"I don't need to have children other than Ebony if you don't want them."

Wiping her face with the back of her hand, she tried to look away, but he wouldn't let her. "No, I want them."

"I don't understand."

"When I was a child and my village was attacked...Mica, after what they did I can never have children." Sun's throat constricted and she couldn't speak, only sob. What was wrong with her? She was a Dame of the Opal Order, not some sniveling, weak little maiden.



“My love,” Mica whispered, his arms slipping around her.

Sun closed her eyes and pressed her face against his smooth, warm shoulder. He stroked her hair.

“You should find someone who can give you a family. Don’t destroy your body with that ritual.”

“I won’t be happy without you.”

“But—”

“Sun, there are thousands of children in need of parents. We have Ebony and we can foster others if you would like. I want a family but only with you.”

She looked at him, wiping her nose on her sleeve. “You still want to marry me?”

“Goddess yes.” He smiled, kissing her forehead then her mouth. “I love you, Sun. I want you to be my wife.”

“Mica.” Sun embraced him, kissing his neck. Her hands caressed his back and ribs. Suddenly she became very aware of his nudity.

Apparently so did he. He slipped her shirt over her head and kissed her bare breasts. Sun sighed, her eyes slipping shut as he drew one of her nipples into his mouth and laved it with his tongue. Pleasure darted through her, weakening her legs. Mica’s tongue trailed beneath her breasts and across her stomach. He slid down her body and tugged her trousers to her ankles. She kicked them off, her heart pounding with desire.

Mica’s lips, tongue and hands thrust all coherent thoughts from her mind. All she could do was feel.

“I want you so badly, Dame Sun.” His mouth trailed over her hips and thighs, relishing their softness.

Sighing with pleasure, she thought how wonderful it felt to be in his arms again.

She ran her hands over his smooth, beautifully shaped head. His tongue teased her clit, running down one side then the other. Sun gasped, her legs weakening. Tenderly he licked the delicate folds of her moist, pink flesh. The rough, sensual tickle of his goatee was enough to drive her mad with desire.

“Mica. Oh yes. I want you so much.” She leaned heavily against the wall, her legs trembling as his tongue thrust inside her then returned to her swollen, throbbing clit. She’d dreamed of being with him again. Now it was happening and happiness overwhelmed her. The soft, rhythmic pressure flung her headlong into a breath-stealing climax. She slid downward but his arms held her upright, his body pressing hers to the wall. Her arms locked around his neck, Sun purred with contentment. The smooth, warm tip of his cock teased first her clit then her slick pussy lips.

“Dame Sun,” he sighed, grasping her hands and pinning them beside her head. His cock slipped slowly into her. “I love you.”

Sun’s eyes opened and she nodded. His expression was filled with tenderness and affection but also desire. Their hearts pounded in unison. His chest rose and fell with excited breathing. Bending his knees, he teased her with slow, steady thrusts.

She gripped his back, savoring the rippling of powerful muscles beneath smooth skin. His thrusting increased and her long, sleek legs wrapped around him. No matter how close they were, she wanted him closer still. His panting breath fanned her neck. Their pelvises ground together with frantic motions, igniting sensations that sent their hearts racing out of control.

“Mica. Oh by the Spirit. Mica.”

Lunging hard, he groaned deep in his throat. Her pussy clenched and quaked around his stiff cock until he burst in an orgasm that tore a cry of raw male passion from his throat, the sound of it thrilling her.

“Dame Sun,” he breathed against her lips.

Slowly she loosened her grip on him but he refused to let her go.

Sated, they leaned against the wall.

“And to think you wanted your balls cut off.”

“I must have been crazy,” he murmured.

They slipped to the floor, wrapped in each other’s arms.

“I brought Mica some clothes—” Lock burst into the stable, caught sight of the naked lovers in the hay and turned his back. “Bloody hell. Sun, if you were going to hump him you could have had the courtesy to let me know.”

“Well excuse me, Lock.” Sun stood, pulling on her clothes. “Next time I’ll make sure my lovemaking accommodates you.”

Mica strode across the stable and took the robe from Lock’s hand.

“Thank you, Sir Lock,” he said. “And you may turn around. Sun is clothed.”

“Now at least we can—” Lock turned just as Mica’s fist flew at his face. The Knight staggered against the stable doors, pressing a hand to his bloody lips. He spat in the hay. “What the hell was that for?”

“For helping Sun with that humiliating plan.”

“You didn’t look any worse for wear a few moments ago.”

“That’s beside the point.”

“Will you both stop arguing?” Sun snapped. “You’re like a couple of old hens. Lock, can’t you just call it even so can we go back to the palace?”

“Call it even? I do this to help the two of you and I end up with a bloody lip for my trouble.”

“I’m sure it’s not the first you’ve ever had,” Mica quipped.

“I should have let them hack off your balls.”

“Now I have to go explain all this to Kado and the others. After this display I’ll be lucky if they even let me become a Messenger.”

“You could become a Knight,” Sun ventured.

“A Knight?”

“Not a bad idea.” Lock wiped his lips on his sleeve. “Blaze has been talking about asking Sir Mahir if we can set up a mission to lend aid in the Kennas. It would be good to have a Knight stationed here who’s actually from the Kennas.”

“A Knight,” Mica repeated, looking thoughtful. “It is a worthy consideration.”

“You could most likely work with the Bedouins and continue training as a warrior. Joining the Order was the best decision I ever made,” Lock told him. “Think about it.”

“I will.” Mica wrapped an arm around Sun and kissed her cheek. He glanced over his shoulder at the ritual table. “We’d better return that.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Lock said. “It seems you two have a marriage to announce.”

Mica grinned at Sun. “Yes. That would be a wise idea.”

## Chapter Nineteen

Before returning to the palace Mica and Sun decided to stop at the temple to apologize to the Priests.

In spite of his lingering feelings of embarrassment Mica walked proudly through the streets, meeting the gazes of those who dared to stare. Some wore amused expressions while others hid their laughing faces.

By the time he reached the temple Mica began to see the humor of the situation.

"I *am* sorry if you were embarrassed," Sun told him after she'd glared at two giggling women.

Mica winked at her. "It was worth the humiliation."

Inside the temple they spoke to the Priests. Kado still waited there, a stern expression on his face until he, Mica and Sun stepped out of the temple and began walking home.

"I am sorry, Mica, but now I must laugh." The High Advisor's voice quivered with amusement.

"I don't think it was *that* funny," Mica said.

"Yet it was well deserved. For you to have loved this woman enough to marry her yet decide to take the vows of Priesthood was a farce. And it was a decision you would have spent your life regretting. Not that I condone disrespecting a Temple of the Goddess but I'm glad Dame Sun and Sir Lock disrupted the ceremony."

"So am I."

Turning to Mica, Kado asked, "Now what is your decision? Will you become a Messenger?"

"You'd still have me?"

"Of course though I wonder if a Messenger's life would fit you either. I know you're loyal to the Goddess but she can be served in many ways, not just by becoming a Priest or a Messenger."

Mica glanced at Kado. "I've been considering joining the Ruby Order."

His expression thoughtful, Kado said, "Sir Blaze and I have been discussing a mission of Knights serving the Kennas. It would be best if they're guided by one of us. As a Knight all your skills could be put to use."

"If I'm accepted," Mica said.

"It would be their loss to deny you. I know we'll regret losing you in the temples, however if it is agreed that you will be stationed here the wound will heal more quickly."

"If you are sent here I could ask to be stationed to represent the Dames," Sun said. "Many couples work together."

"We should discuss it with Sir Blaze over dinner," Mica suggested.

"Yes. I can't wait to tell him about the wedding and ask him to give me away."

"I hope he'll be pleased," Mica said.

Sun smiled. "I know he will. He's been trying to pair us off for months. The thing about Blaze is he's always a matchmaker but when it comes to romance for himself he's too elusive for his own good."

"Just wait until he finds the right woman."

"When he does she better be good to him or she'll have to answer to me."

Mica laughed. "The poor woman."

"Should I make you pay for that comment?"

Mica dragged her to his chest and kissed her. "I certainly hope you'll try."

\* \* \* \* \*

"My daughter." Blaze smiled, embracing Sun tightly. "I wish you and Mirrored Rock a lifetime of happiness."

Sun kissed Blaze's cheek. She'd never dreamed of finding a man as kind, gentle and strong as the auburn-haired Knight. Now she had Mica. "You knew all along didn't you?"

The Knight shrugged. "The spirits speak."

"Did they tell you about Mica's decision?"

Blaze turned a questioning gaze to Mica.

"He wants to join the Ruby Order." Sun slipped her arm through Mica's, pressing close to his side.

Blaze's smile broadened. "Perfection. I will speak with our leader of swords and sewing needles. I'm sure he will agree to the mission and the man best to lead it."

"Excellent." Sun glanced up at Mica. "He's going to speak with Sir Mahir who runs the Ruby Order."

"You will come to us with vast knowledge," Blaze told Mica. "I need not tell you about the hardships of Knighthood. Similar trials you've already endured. Once your two years of training are complete I am certain you will be stationed here."

Sun looked worried. "Now if I can convince Dame Neila to do the same for me."

"Fear not," Blaze said. "The spirits speak well for you."

"Lock's ship leaves the day after tomorrow," Sun told Mica. "You'll be joining us then?"

He nodded, his arm tightening around her. "I will. Unless you prefer otherwise, I would like to marry you before we leave."

Sun embraced him tightly, her stomach fluttering with happiness. "I can scarcely wait."

That evening High Advisor Kado married Mica and Sun in the great hall at the palace of Ademene. The emperor, his daughter, Knights and several Priests bore witness. In the tradition of Sun's culture Sir Blaze gave her away.

After the ceremony Val offered to watch Ebony Starr so Sun and Mica could enjoy their wedding night.

As they stepped into Sun's chamber Mica swept her into his arms and carried her to the bed. She grinned, hugging his neck.

He smiled and kissed her, placing her on the bed and unraveling the ties on the front of her billowy shirt.

"You're so beautiful, Sun. I love you more than I can say."

"Then show me," she whispered against his lips.

His mouth claimed hers, his tongue teasing and tasting while his hands tugged off her shirt. Warm palms cupped her breasts, kneading them. His thumbs caressed her nipples before he swept his hand across her ribs and abdomen. He slid down her body, pulling off her boots and trousers, until she lay naked on the bedcovers.

Mica quickly shed his clothes and joined her on the bed. Sun turned to him, her fingertips drawing random shapes across his chest, loving the sensation of hard muscle beneath smooth skin. She touched one of his nipples and caressed the circle of dark brown flesh.

With a tender smile on his lips he mimicked her motion, stroking one of her nipples to a hard, sensitive peak.

Edging closer he whispered in her ear, "I love you, Sun."

"I love you too, Mica." She tightened her arms around him and slipped one of her long, smooth legs between his, relishing the warmth and hardness of his body. Touching him felt marvelous.

Burying his face in the hollow of her shoulder, he breathed deeply, his warm breath fanning her skin. Nearly overwhelmed by pleasure she edged even closer. The pressure of his steely cock against her ignited her passion. She wondered if she'd ever grow tired of him. Doubtful when she loved him more with each passing day. They would grow old together. As fabulous as the passion between them was, it had already blossomed into emotions even deeper and more exciting.

Rising to his knees, Mica moved to the end of the bed and parted her thighs. He stroked the golden flesh over lithe muscle.

"On the day we met, Dame Sun, I believe you stole a piece of my heart. Now it is completely yours."

Pouring all her love into a single look, she said, "As mine is yours, Mica. All my life I've tried to believe that nothing is fated and everything is decided by our choices but I was wrong. I wanted to hate you yet I couldn't. Not once I discovered the kind of man

you are.”

“My love,” he whispered, his hand trailing between her breasts, down her belly and sifting through the thatch of dark blonde hair between her legs.

He cupped her pelvis and kneaded gently, using his palm to apply subtle pressure to her clit. His free hand closed over one of her breasts, squeezing and stroking tenderly. Using his thumb and forefinger, he pinched and rolled her nipple, sending little ripples of passion through her entire body. Beneath his caress her clit ached. Her pussy grew wet with need that he increased by sliding one long finger into her slit. The teasing finger explored, rubbing and stroking her soft, damp flesh. Another finger joined that one then another.

Sun’s eyes slipped shut and her breathing deepened. Her nipples, taut with desire, strained for his caress. If only these moments with him could last forever.

“Oh, Mica. Oh,” she gasped, her body aflame. His fingers slipped out of her and he ran one up and down the side of her clit, evoking almost unendurable pleasure. More than anything she wanted his thick, velvet-skinned cock buried deep inside her.

As if sensing her desire, he grasped her hips and tugged her closer. Sun moaned as every delectable inch of his erection slid into her with frustrating slowness. Was it possible that she felt every ridge of flesh, each swollen vein beneath his big, pulsing cock? Yes it was. He was deep inside her now, buried to the hilt.

Sun arched her head into the pillows and thrust her hips, crossing her ankles behind his back. Her pulse thundered in her ears as he rubbed her clit with one hand while keeping a firm grip on her hip with his other.

“Yes, Sun. That’s it, my love. You look so gorgeous with your lips parted and your breasts quivering.”

“Mica,” she gasped.

“I’m here.”

The pleasure was almost overwhelming. “I can’t take much more.”

“I know. I want to see you come. Come now, Sun. Come with my cock hard within you and my thumb teasing you.”

Sun stroked her nipples and wiggled her hips. Her clit pulsed in time with her heartbeat. Closer, closer. Tighter, tighter.

“Oh by the Spirit, Mica. Yes, oh yes.”

With a cry of utter fulfillment she came, shaking and writhing from head to toe, her breathing raw and her heart pounding out of control.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Two years, three months later*  
*The desert of Upper Kenna*

"You're going to what?" Sun curled her lip at Mica from where she sat on the floor of the tent they called home. Ebony Starr and their foster son Sansom played with wooden blocks while Sun crushed herbs for storage.

They'd been permanently stationed in the Kennas almost since Mica entered the Knighthood. The first several months of his basic training had been spent in Rubyshire then he'd fulfilled his duty in the company of the Knights sent on their mission to the Kennas. Dame Neila had agreed that Sun should accompany the Knights to Ademene and remain there with her husband as a representative of the Opal Order.

Several months ago she, Mica and their children had traveled to Rubyshire for Mica's dubbing. Afterward they returned to their home on an oasis several miles from Ademene. Mica and Sun had taken over the mission. Each year several Knights and Dames would serve in the Kennas then be replaced by fresh recruits. Lock and Sparrow docked in the Kennas as often as they could, always stopping to visit and bring messages and supplies from Travelle.

"We're going to teach dance for the next two weeks Lock is here. We've blended traditional Kennian dance with SothSea movements. If we can keep clothes on Lock everything should work well."

"The two of you can't spend a moment together without fighting."

"We won't argue." He grinned and added, "Much. Here. Lock brought this for you."

He handed Sparrow a folded piece of parchment.

Sun looked up as she took the letter from him. She gazed at his tall, lean body draped in the traditional black tunic of a Knight, a circle of red thorns embroidered around a ruby over his heart. He was the most striking Knight she'd ever seen.

Turning her attention to the message, she broke the seal and glanced at the bold, familiar writing spread across the page.

Smiling she glanced at Mica. "It's from Blaze. You'll never guess what happened. He's getting married."

"Really?" Mica stooped behind her and tugged her to his chest. "To whom?"

"A Dame of the Opal Order. Her name is Melody." Sun's brow furrowed. "I don't know her. She must have been stationed outside of Travelle for a long time."

"I'm pleased for him. Blaze deserves a companion."

"Yes. She'd better treat him well. I wish him all the happiness that I've found with you."

Cupping her face in his hand, he gazed deeply into her eyes. "Then you are content with our life, Dame Sun?"

"I have everything I've ever wanted and never imagined possible. I am more than content, Sir Mica." She kissed him.

"I'll do all in my power to keep you so."

"Being with you is enough to make me happy forever."



“I love you, Sun.”

“And I love you, Mica of Ademene.”

It seemed so long ago Sun had traveled to the Kennas to destroy a man she hated. Instead she'd found her truest friend and her greatest love.

## **About the Author**

Kate Hill is a thirty-something vegetarian New Englander who likes heroes with a touch of something wicked and wild. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in publications both on and off the Internet. When she's not working on her books, Kate enjoys reading, working out, and researching vampires and Viking history.

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