

the demon princess
written by Kathleen Dale



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The Demon Princess

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Prologue

Black smoke poured from the temple for the twenty-first day in a row; soot covered the white city.

The good king was dead.

All mirrors in the city were covered, only the most vital of businesses opened in the dark moments before dawn so that the women might feed their children, the farmers their stock.

The cobbled streets were particularly empty this final day of mourning. The king's body would be taken by his only heir, the Prince Atreya, down to the sea, the body turned to ashes. It was the blackest of luck to look upon either the dead king or the future ruler on this day, so all the shutters were closed tight, all the citadel quiet, barring the ghostly pale seagulls that flew about the city walls.

It was only one of these pale seagulls that saw the prince -- lean and dark, eyes as dark as holes burned into a tapestry -- slowly draw the wrapped body down toward the sea. The prince was dressed simply, hands sure as they navigated the wagon.

The prince had been gone from the citadel for most of his young life, leading a massive army against the Peline hoards, driving them back into the Spider Mountains, returning in the dead of winter victorious, only to find a dying king, a kingdom in disarray.

Even the birds had heard the rejoicing when the prince returned. The order could be returned. The line continued.

That joy could not be silenced, even as the king slipped away in the first blush of spring.

The prince drew the wrapped body onto the pyre, the seagull watching, blinking from the branch of a stunted tree. The prince pulled a small, sharp dagger from his belt, looking all about carefully before unlacing the heavy tunic.

The lean chest was wrapped in a fine cream cloth, the prince tugging the binding down to expose his heart, one firm, full breast was pricked, the blood gathered on long fingers, a sigil drawn upon the king's wrapped face.

"I love you, Baba. Rest well and await your Atreya in the heavens."

The soft sob startled the bird and he flew off over the sea, keeping the secrets of all he had seen.

The cave was damp and cold, the stone wet with water and slime. A tiny fire sat deep within it, sheltered from the elements outside. Over it lay a cauldron that bubbled darkly.

The demoness muttered as she put in ingredients, saving the best for last.

She limped over to the young man chained to the wall, head lolling. Still drugged, good. She was far too old and decrepit to do this if he fought.

She held an ewer beneath one wrist and slit the skin, capturing the dark, warm blood in the vessel. Eventually the boy's blood was drained, her ewer full and she returned to her pitiful fire.

She stripped out of her simple tunic, her skin wrinkled and sagging over twisted bones. Dipping her hand into the ewer, she began to anoint herself with the virgin blood, painting her face, her arms and legs, her belly.

She traced sigils on her sagging breasts, her dried up sex, slathered her aching hands in the sticky, red liquid.

The balance of the ewer she poured into her cauldron, watching the bubbles hiss, the liquid going dark. Then she poured herself a cup and drank, tossing the rest into the fire.

The walls of the cave changed first, rough stone becoming hewn, the low ceiling becoming a thatched roof. Her fire became a hearth, warmth replacing the cold that had made her bones ache so. Or perhaps it was just that the bones themselves had changed, straightened, the skin over them becoming smooth and soft, supple.

Her fingers straightened as she watched, her hair going a deep, dark red and lengthening, thickening.

Her breasts became firm, nipples peaked, her sex warm and damp, inviting.

A look into the glass that had appeared along one wall confirmed that she was beautiful, her virgin sacrifice's youth and beauty becoming her own.

The newly born wardrobe yielded her a forest green robe that fit her form perfectly.

Matching slippers and a cape lined with golden material completed her outfit. She stepped out onto the hillside. The windows of the temple were finally empty, the time of mourning passed.

There was a skip to her gait as she made her way down the hill toward the city.

Chapter One

Atreya sat at her father's desk, a light cloak draped over her shoulders to keep the damp cold of the stone walls from sinking into her bones.

So much to do, so many things to decide, to read, to arrange. She had been training for this day for her entire life, since her mother had passed in childbirth, leaving only a deaf-mute nurse and a grieving king to know the baby born was a girl and not a boychild.

Now that the nurse and her father had passed, there were none that knew.

None.

And, goddess willing, until someone insisted she marry? None would.

A member of the guard appeared at the door. "There is a woman here to see you, Sire. Says her name is Bittera."

"Bittera? Who sends her? I am not taking callers today."

"She says she is a messenger from your mother, Sire."

Atreya's eyes went wide. "My mother is twenty-three winters dead."

"And yet she has my ear." The voice was husky and sweet, the woman it belonged to quite beautiful and elegantly dressed. "My message is for your ears alone, Atreya."

Atreya stood, head nodding to a chair on the far side of the stone desk. Her dagger was always close. "Leave us then, so I might have my message."

The guard nodded and left, closing the door behind him.

Her visitor came forward slowly, regarding her carefully, dark eyes seeming to see look right through her.

"Have a seat, Madame. What message have you?"

The woman moved the chair, brought it closer to her and sat so that the velvet of her skirts brushed against Atreya's legs. "Your kingdom is in disarray. Your mother would have you build it back to glory and splendor. I have been dispatched to aid you in this." So close Atreya could see that the dark hair was actually a deep red, this Bittera's eyes an impossible black.

"My mother never knew me and all kingdoms tremble when an old king dies and a young man takes the throne."

Bittera laughed softly. "You believe I am bluffing? Is it so surprising that a mother would send someone to aid her only daughter when such a daunting task is put before her?"

The world stilled for a moment. Just simply stopped, then Atreya lifted her chin. "Then surely she sent you on a fool's errand, for my mother bore only a single son.

"We both know that is not true, *Princess*." Bittera leaned forward, the pretty face like stone, hard and pale, the dark eyes otherworldly. "You would not survive should a rumor circulate. They would demand proof of your manhood and you have none to give."

Atreya slid her dagger along her calf, the motion practiced and easy, just looking for a chance to strike. "I do not know what you speak of..."

"You cannot hurt me, Atreya, but I can ruin you. I have no desire to do so." Bittera leaned closer still, as if daring her to attempt her strike. "We have the same goal, darling. To make this kingdom the most powerful in the land."

She moved, fast as a snake, reaching for the alabaster throat.

Her knife shattered against Bittera's neck, soft laughter filling the air as her arm was taken, held in a grip of stone.

"Let me put it this way -- I am your new advisor. You will take my advice and together we will lead the White City to glory." Bittera sneered as her hand was dropped as if it were something vile. "Your secret remains safe, I attain power as your right hand, the kingdom becomes prosperous. There is no loser here."

"You... You are a monster." Atreya blinked, the empty hilt falling from her hand.

Bittera's fingers slid along her hair, smoothing it. "No more a monster than you, my dear girl. After all, you have deceived your people your entire life."

"I am no one's girl. I am King Atreya of the North Shores." She pulled away, head pounding. "Who are you?"

"The one who is to become your best friend, your closest companion." Bittera followed her, not giving her any quarter. "The one who knows your secret."

"I have no secret." No one who lived knew. No one.

"Then let us go to the center square and I shall make my accusation and you shall prove to them that you are indeed a man." Those black eyes glittered at her, sure and confident.

"I am King. I need not prove myself. These lands are mine." Her heart was pounding, confusion and worry filling her.

"Have it your way." Bittera reached out with both hands, tearing apart the front of Atreya's blouse and the binding beneath it. Her breasts spilled, suddenly free, nipples going hard in the cold air as Bittera raised an alarm.

"Guards! Help! Help!"

Atreya sprang into action, hitting Bittera with both hands, hard enough to stun, swirling the cape about her in a practiced motion as the guards rushed in. "The lady is ill. Have someone bring her tea."

Those dark eyes never left hers, promised retribution.

"Yes, your majesty. Shall we have the physician summoned?"

"Not at this time, no. Leave us."

Bittera watched her so closely and yet the woman seemed to know the moment the guards left. "Well, Atreya? You have decided to acquiesce to your mother's wishes then?"

"I will kill you before I allow you to harm my lands, do not doubt that for a moment."
Father, who is this person? Why is she here?

"I have no desire to harm your lands, Atreya. I will help you make them great again. I will make you great." Bittera sat back, her dress seeming to absorb all the light and warmth in the room. "You will owe me a great debt, you shall see."

"What do you want, Lady?" Her words were clipped, short, the fury dripping from them.

"I thought I had made myself quite clear. I will be your chief advisor. I will have your ear. Indeed," Bittera's eyes traveled her from head to toe, seemed almost to strip her naked and leave her exposed. "I would have your entire body at my disposal. Someone needs to teach you how to use it, after all."

"My body is not yours to do anything with." She stood, binding her breasts. "My lady mother would not have sent one such as you."

"And yet who else knew the truth?" Bittera asked, smug smile on her face.

"A demon, perhaps? Some beast from the pits?"

Bittera's smile faded, but she shrugged. "Does it matter? I know the truth and you must do as I wish or your secret will be forfeit."

Atreya stood, rang the bell. When the porter arrived, she nodded. "Have the lady settled in the ruby room, post guards at her door, in case her illness strikes anew."

"Yes, your majesty.""

"I wish to be close to your own quarters, Atreya." Bittera's voice was quiet, for the two of them alone.

"Only the queen's rooms are close and you are not my queen."

Bittera tilted her head and then smiled, the look wicked. "Not yet."

The urge to fly at Bittera was strong and it was only the appearance of another page that stopped her. "The lady's rooms are prepared, your majesty."

"Excellent. Lead her there." She turned, settled back at her desk. She had work to do.

Bittera leaned over and pressed their lips together. "I am honored, your Majesty. I cannot wait for you to announce our marriage to your subjects." Bittera then curtsied nicely, eyes on the page.

Bitch.

"Take the lady away. Now."

Fortunately her word was law, for her fist flew as the door shut, slamming into the stone wall hard enough to bruise.

Bittera was up with the dawn, the sun itching at her skin.

She applied her make-up and brushed her hair, settled her gown over her body. When she was queen, she would have servants to perform these tasks for her.

She laughed softly. It was too delicious, really, and she should have thought of it sooner, but as soon as Atreya had mentioned the Queen's quarters, she knew that that would be her role here. She would even produce an heir for the kingdom, bring forth a demon offspring to one day rule the land.

She closed her eyes and moaned as she remembered the sight of those young, firm breasts spilling from their binding. Atreya was very beautiful, succulent even and Bittera could not wait to have her.

She flung open her doors, smiling at the guards. "I must thank King Atreya for taking such good care of me, making sure I was not disturbed during my night's sleep. You will take me to him now."

"The king is with his advisors, lady, and left orders that he not be disturbed."

"Well as his future queen, I should be with him. Take me to him now." She let the stone inside her show in her voice.

"I... His majesty left orders..." The young man stared at her, torn.

"Not to be disturbed, yes, I heard you. However, it would hardly disturb him to have his future queen brought to him, now would it?" She looked up at him through her eyelashes. "You wouldn't want to get in trouble for not having brought me to him, would you?"

"No. No. Of course not. Of course not, my lady. Please follow me."

She smiled and nodded and followed him. She liked this, liked having these humans at her beck and call.

The throne room was emptying as she arrived, Atreya sitting on the throne, dark shadows beneath her eyes.

"You are not taking care of yourself, Majesty," she complained for the benefit of the men and women who were leaving. "When we are married, I will insist you eat better, sleep more."

"Lady." The word was sharp, curt. "I left instructions not to be disturbed."

"I was sure you did not mean your future queen, Majesty." She bowed, but her eyes met Atreya's, warning the girl not to forget that she knew the dangerous secret.

"Do you have something you needed, lady? Perhaps a minstrel to sing for you, occupy your time?"

She waited until the doors had closed behind the last of Atreya's advisors. "You know very well I am to be included in any meetings with your advisors. I will rule at your side, *with* you. I will not be a pretty thing to hang from your arm."

"I know nothing. We have had a single conversation. Watch your tongue."

She drew herself up. "Watch *my* tongue? Yes, you had better care whether or not I mention your unfortunate gender problem to anyone."

"It would be a challenge to mention anything if you were beheaded."

She hissed at the girl. "You do remember what happened to your blade, Atreya?"

"Your fangs are showing, my Lady."

Atreya was truly a strong, strong woman. It would be a pleasure to break her.

"Why don't you tell me what this morning's meeting was about."

"The coffers, the grain stores, the armies."

"Will I have to ask specific questions, or will you deign to tell me *what* about these things was said?" Atreya would come to understand that they were both working toward the same goal. More or less.

"The coffers need money, the grain stores need wheat, the armies need armor. It is the same discussion we have every morning." Atreya shrugged.

"And are there never any suggestions on how to make any of this happen? Or do you all sit around, wringing your hands and wailing?"

Atreya rolled her dark eyes. "No. There is little wringing of hands. War is an expensive hobby for a land to involve itself in."

"Yes, but more so for the losing side than the victorious. You should be proud of the job you did leading the army, Atreya. Of course they would not have followed you if they'd known..."

Those eyes flashed, eyebrows raising. "In battle, I hold my own, I killed many men on my own accord."

"Tsk, ts. Touchy, touchy. That was a compliment, Lady Atreya."

The girl came up off the throne, hand hard upon her arm. "My title is your Majesty, *Lady*."

"We are alone."

"I am never absolutely alone."

Bittera chuckled. "If that is what you wish to believe, your Majesty."

Atreya rolled her eyes. "I have duties. If you'll excuse me."

"No need to excuse you, I will join you."

Atreya blinked over at her. "You have quarters in the citadel. What else do you require of me?"

"I did not come here merely to house myself beneath your roof, Atreya. I truly do wish to rule the kingdom with you. When will you believe me on that point?" She'd get to the

part where she took her pleasures in Atreya's body once she well and truly had the girl upon her hook.

"When I have reason to." Atreya slid behind the tapestries that hung to the rear of the throne, the citadel's hidden passages twisting and turning.

Bittera followed, memorizing the way as they went, knowing it would come in handy in the future.

"When will you announce our marriage?" she asked.

"It would be inappropriate so close to my father's death."

"On the other hand, it would give the people reason to celebrate, to hope."

"In the autumn. Not a moment before."

"As you wish, your Majesty." Bittera hoped they would be through the passages soon, the stone walls close, distressingly familiar.

The passages opened into the same silent, stone room that she had been led to the day before.

"This was your father's study before you, yes?" It obviously had meaning for the girl for her to make it her base of operations.

"It was." Atreya settled in the cushioned chair, poring over one parchment after another, brown hair tousled around her face.

Bittera stood, really looking at Atreya. The girl was lovely, even disguised as a boy. There was a fineness in her face, those dark blue eyes like jewels, the lips would look lovely with red paint.

Those blue eyes glanced over at her, periodically giving her a curious once over, then looking away.

Finally she moved to lean against the heavy wood table, picking a parchment at random and reading through it. She then picked another and scanned it as well.

"You're disrupting my piles." Oh, there was a low growl, a flash in those eyes.

She hid her grin. "I'm terribly sorry. Perhaps you should explain your system to me."

Those pretty lips parted and then Atreya nodded. "There are different piles for the different demesnes. There are five."

Bittera wondered suddenly if Atreya had ever been allowed friendship, companionship, if perhaps that was the secret to sliding inside the girl's defenses.

"So by demesnes, not by subject?" She pulled a chair over, sitting close.

"No. The lordlings marry and war and die. The land is always the same."

"Good point." She smiled at Atreya.

Atreya leaned away, lips quirking in an almost-smile back. "I'm not stupid. I am a very good general."

"I never accused you of being a bad general, your Majesty. Nor stupid." Just not a man.

"Oh." The second smile was more honest, and the dark head bent back toward the scrolls.

Smiling, Bittera continued to pick and choose scrolls to read, being more careful as to where she put them down when she was done with them. Atreya slowly relaxed, feet curling beneath her, chewing her bottom lip as she read. It was very endearing. Bittera, slid her hand over to rest on Atreya's thigh.

Atreya jumped, eyes going wide. "Can I help you?"

"Me? No, I'm fine, thank you." She gave Atreya her best innocent smile.

"Uh. I. Your hand?"

She stroked Atreya's thigh. "Yes?"

"You cannot." Atreya swallowed hard.

She frowned, pretending she didn't know what Atreya was talking about. "I cannot what, your Majesty?"

"Touch me. It is not allowed."

She let her hand still. "Oh. Even for the king's intended?"

"I..." Those eyes went wide, the look suddenly confused. "I am not... capable."

Now she truly was confused, no artifice in her frown. "Not capable of what?"

"Of. Uh. Giving you an heir?"

"But we can still find pleasure together, can we not?" She smiled gently, fingers stroking again.

"No." The look in Atreya's eyes was pure confusion.

She laughed softly. "Why not?"

"You know. You should not mock me!" Atreya stood. "I am retiring to my bedchambers. I will see you at the latemeal!"

Bittera watched Atreya go, mouth hanging open in surprise. She would have expected such a reaction if she had been mocking the girl, but she wasn't. Her desires for Atreya were perfectly simple. She wanted the girl.

It was obvious she would have to make her desires more plainly known in the future.

Chapter Two

Atreya locked herself in her chambers, hid in the center of her big bed. Her head pounded and she desperately needed to speak with her father, with someone to advise her about this... interloper who knew her secrets.

She stripped down, dressed herself in the voluminous tunic and leggings that she slept in, allowing her to sleep unbound, but undetected if some valet entered.

The coverlets were heavy, weighing her down, holding her down. Helping her lose herself in the ease of sleep.

Her dreams were invaded by Bittera, the black eyes staring at her as cool fingers slid over her skin in forbidden caresses. She shivered, curled in tighter, wrapping the blankets closer around her.

It didn't deter the phantom touch though, Bittera's fingers cupping her breasts, touching her nipples. The skin was almost unbearably sensitive and she pulled away, gasping. Lips covered hers, hard and cool, but the breath that breathed into her mouth was warm.

Her eyes flew open and she struggled to grab the dagger that slept beneath her pillow.

There was no one there though, only a draft that caressed her cheek, slid over her lips.

"Oh. Oh." She slid out of her bed, opening a window, letting the air in.

There was a knock on her door. "Your Majesty? Will you indulge your future queen? I cannot sleep."

"I... Indulge you?" She wrapped a huge cloak around herself and unlocked the door.

There was Bittera, dressed in something silky and flowing that outlined her breasts, the nipples standing hard and pointy in the cold. She was flanked by her guards, who wore twin apologetic looks.

"I was so upset by the way we parted ways this evening, your Majesty. You misunderstood me and took offense where none was meant. And so I cannot sleep with that hanging over us."

"I... Come in." She looked at the guard. "Have tea brought."

"Yes, your Majesty."

The doors closed behind them and Bittera gave her a smile before shivering. "It certainly is cold in the evenings here. So drafty."

"Yes." Of course Bittera would be cold. Hell was fiery. Atreya pulled a spare cloak from the wardrobe, handing it over.

"Oh, thank you," murmured Bittera, fingers lingering against her own as the cloak was taken. They were warmer than Atreya had thought they would be.

Atreya went back to the window, sitting in the sill, cheek on the pane. Her city was beautiful.

Bittera came to stand at her side, looking out as well. "The white city looks so peaceful when it sleeps."

"Yes. It is a beautiful kingdom." And she was responsible for keeping it that way.

Bittera leaned against her, hand on her arm. "Yes, it is. And soon it will be prosperous as well."

She looked over. "At what cost?"

Those black eyes looked at her, looked into her in that way they did. "Is there anything you would not give for your kingdom, your Majesty?"

"No. I live solely for its benefit."

Bittera nodded. "Then you have already paid the price."

Atreya considered that a moment, then nodded. She supposed she had.

Bittera gave her a smile. "So you have no dreams for yourself then, Majesty?"

"Dreams are for merchants and sailors. I am a soldier and king."

"Then perhaps you will allow me to dream for you."

"Hmm?" She looked up, surprised when the door opened, a tray of tea and sweets placed on a low table.

"Thank you," murmured Bittera to the serving boy. "Take a sweet for yourself."

The little boy bounced, nodded, just beamed. "Thank you, m'lady. Thank you. Good night!"

Atreya chuckled, smiled over. "Good night, lad."

Bittera took her hand. "Come, your Majesty, join me."

The boy left and Atreya nodded. She would have tea and then everyone could return to their beds.

Bittera let her sit first and then sat at her feet, leaning against her legs and smiling up at her. "Shall I pour, Majesty?"

"I... Yes. Yes, of course." Bittera kept her off balance, confused.

The tea was poured, a single lemon slice placed in it before it was handed to her. Exactly how she liked it.

"Thank you." She smiled, then drank deep, humming at the warmth, the hint of spice.

Bittera poured her own, taking it with a touch of honey and a cinnamon stick stirred through it twice.

A small cookie was held up, close to her mouth, Bittera obviously intending to feed her. Atreya breathed in the steam from her tea, and closed her eyes, listening to her own heartbeat.

"You aren't hungry?" asked Bittera and when she opened her eyes, the sweet was still at her lips. All she needed to do was lean forward. Her lips parted, the cookie crumbly and sweet, her favorite. Bittera's fingers slid between her lips, feeding the crumbs into her mouth so she didn't lose any.

"Thank you." She was hot and chilled all at once, as if fevered.

Those dark eyes just stared at her, a small smile playing about Bittera's lips. "You're welcome, Majesty."

She nodded, went back to her tea, losing her discomfort in her thoughts.

Bittera rested her head against Atreya's knee. "This is pleasant. It could become a tradition."

"Having tea? It is relaxing." It was. It shouldn't have been, but it was.

"Yes, I see." Bittera smiled up at her, cheek rubbing softly now.

She smiled back, eyelids heavy. "We should have the guards escort you to your chambers, lady. The night fades."

Bittera nodded and yawned. "There must be something to your tea and relaxing for I don't know if I can keep my eyes open long enough to make to my own bed."

"The walk is not far, Lady." She grinned. "I am sure my father walked it many nights."

"And will you walk it, Majesty? When we are wed?"

She blinked down, confused again. This demon knew her most private secret, knew she was not male, knew she could not provide a child.

"We could find pleasure together," whispered Bittera.

"I don't not believe you know of which you speak, Lady. I will not visit your bed. Surely you know this?"

"But why not? Even if only for appearances sake you must do so. But more than that, I could show you so many pleasures."

"Lady? My... condition? Prohibits me from performing for you."

Bittera rolled her eyes. "Performing for me? Not at all, Majesty. Our carnal pleasures will be shared. And I assure you, it can be done. It will be done."

The woman was insane.

Completely.

"It is late. I will have the guards escort you."

Bittera bent her head in a bow. "As you wish, Majesty." Those dark eyes met hers again though, burning into her.

"Pleasant dreams." Atreya moved across to the door, the guards dozing there. "Escort the lady Bittera to her rooms."

"Yes, your majesty."

She found a smile for Bittera as they passed, nodding.

Bittera smiled back and then ran to her, pressing a soft kiss on her lips. "Thank you for the tea, your Majesty."

"You're welcome, my Lady." She blinked, locked the door behind Bittera.

Then she curled up in her bedclothes to sleep, telling herself firmly that she would not dream.

Bittera could scarce believe that not only was Atreya a virgin, but she was innocent in mind and heart as well as body. Such purity would be delicious on first taste and the flavor would only grow as Atreya's experience did.

She spent the next couple of weeks wooing Atreya's friendship, not pushing the touches. Oh, she touched, but on the whole she kept those touches innocent, friendly.

And she invaded the girl's dreams.

She'd slip the bonds of her flesh, leave the bone and skin and blood behind to whisper through the stone until she found Atreya. Atreya's skin was hot enough to burn her in this form, and she reveled in the pain, in the wanting it set to burning in her loins. She knew it made Atreya's sleep restless, knew the girl was growing weary, that her defenses were growing thin.

Bittera had to hide her smile as she made her way to Atreya's quarters, her guard following her sleepily. She knocked on the door. "It is I, Majesty."

The door opened, Atreya's eyes bruised and dark. "What do you need, Lady?"

"I've come for our evening tea." She reached out to stroke the thin skin beneath Atreya's eyes. "You look as if you are in need of companionship and tea tonight more than ever, Majesty."

"Evening tea, then you must retire. I am afraid I'm not completely well."

"You don't look your best, I must admit." She gave Atreya her most solicitous smile. "Perhaps a massage would help? Something to ease your burden?"

Atreya stepped back, allowed her in before closing the door. "How does the evening find you?"

"Worried about you, if you must know the truth, Majesty."

"Oh, I simply have an ague. The physicians have been contacted."

"I could doctor you well enough myself," Bittera noted. "I have knowledge of the healing arts."

And, after all, she knew the true nature of Atreya's unrest.

"Yes?" Those beautiful eyes were so tired, so weary.

"Yes, Majesty. And it would be my pleasure to help you. Especially if it were to prove my loyalty to you and your kingdom." A little mumbo jumbo and a few night's rest and then when she again invaded Atreya's dreams, she would be the one the girl turned to.

"That would be most welcome, Lady. I ache with the need to rest." She was led to the same well-padded chair.

"It would work best if you were to lie in bed, Majesty. For it is your dreams that have driven your ague, is it not?"

"I. It is not proper, Lady..." Still Atreya followed her lead, moved to the massive bedstead covered in blankets of purple and gold.

"Get comfortable and I will bring you your tea."

She gave Atreya a bit of privacy as the girl crawled up into her bed, pouring the tea and setting the piece of lemon in it. She waved her hand over it and murmured nonsense before bringing it over to Atreya.

"Drink up, lady and I will sing a protection over you."

Atreya took the cup, drank deep, long fingers wrapped around the porcelain.

Bittera pushed her luck and climbed onto the bed, sitting close to Atreya, but above the covers. She placed her hand on Atreya's thigh and began to sing in the language of stone. It was merely a lullaby, for there was no magic needed to stop her nightly visits, but it added nicely to the artifice.

It took little before Atreya's eyelids drooped, a soft sigh filling the air. In sleep, Atreya looked like the lovely girl she was, fingers curled into the coverlet.

The urge to ravage the girl where she lay was strong, but Bittera knew that if she stayed her hand, her reward for patience would be well worth the waiting.

She bent and placed a kiss on Atreya's forehead. "Sleep well, Atreya."

She then took her leave. She would not invade Atreya's dreams this night, not the next, perhaps not even the two after that. Instead she would focus on the king's advisors, plant suggestions in their minds so that things might go in the direction she was wanting.

There was definitely no rest for the wicked.

By the end of a three-day, Atreya was feeling well-rested again, relaxed, energized. She woke with the dawn and headed to oversee the troops, speak to the generals, get a feeling for morale. Her afternoon was spent doing the same with the merchants' guilds, the mage's guild, the temple prefects.

Finally she was well enough to do her work.

Bittera insisted on joining her on each of her visits, but aside from that one demand, remained circumspect and quiet hour after hour. It was like having a shadow.

At last the meetings were concluded, the royal party returning to the citadel to dine, to relax.

Bittera rode at her side and it was only then that the long day's silence was broken. "You are looking much better."

"Thank you. Your tea and words seemed to ease me. I am in your debt." Her sleep had been deep and dreamless, the visions gone.

Bittera bent her head in a small bow. "I am glad I was able to help in some small way. I hope you will ask next time you are in need."

"Hopefully the furies that plagued me are disappeared." She slipped from the carriage, heading to her private bathing chambers. "If I do not see you at late meal, Lady, please have a fine evening."

Bittera kept in step with her, almost running to keep up. "Surely you desire to have a dining companion this evening? You must get very lonely."

"I have need of the bathing chambers, my Lady." She offered Bittera a very real smile. The woman had a most engaging way of speaking, was a great conversationalist. "I hope to attend the latemeal."

"I also have need of the bathing chambers, Majesty." Bittera looked at her from beneath lashes, obviously wishing for an invitation to join her.

"The women's chambers will be readied immediately." They could not be seen bathing. Together.

Bittera sighed softly but only inclined her head. "As your Majesty wishes."

She leaned close, taking a sudden pity on the woman. "We cannot. You know this. You know why."

"If you were to announce our engagement, it would be allowed," whispered Bittera.

"The summer has just begun..." Still, the elders were pressuring her to marry and Bittera held no surprises.

"I am your best choice, Majesty. For I will keep your secret, where another will not."

She nodded. "I do not wish to disrespect my father. The lands are still in mourning."

"No disrespect to you or your father, Majesty, but the lands would welcome the celebration with open arms. They are tired of mourning. They are tired of war. They are *tired* and wish to be lifted up by their new king."

Atreya sighed, nodded. "I will discuss it with the High Priest Yten. He will be my advisor in the gods' will in this."

Bittera inclined her head again. "Thank you, Majesty. I will keep a seat warm for you at latemeal."

"Thank you." She smiled, headed into the bathing chambers where she could finally relax, allow the water to envelop her.

Where she could float and rest.

Bittera spent the next few hours deciding how best to deal with Atreya's impending discussion with the High Priest regarding their nuptials. She wavered between influencing the man now and waiting to see how things played out. If she could do nothing and still arrive at the outcome she wanted, that was her best course.

If only she had an inkling as to where the High Priest's thoughts lay... perhaps tonight she wouldn't begin anew her invasion of Atreya's dreams, but would instead see if she couldn't divine which way Yten was going to go.

By the time latemeal began, she was clean, dressed in finery and calm to all outward appearances.

Her only disappointment would be if Atreya chose not to join her. Aside from the growing closeness between them that she wished to continue to cultivate, the girl was an interesting conversationalist, indeed an excellent companion.

To her surprise, the high priest, with his thin face and grasping hands, was evident at the dining hall, as well as a corpulent toad of a lackey and two generals. "Lady."

She inclined her head and gave them her haughtiest look. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"The king has been speaking of betrothal. We came to dine with his intended." Oily and slimy both.

She smiled at them. She hated the politics. It was so much easier to just take what she wanted, but with a kingdom of this size, she needed allies, needed to be careful and her best choice was still to become Atreya's right hand. "Excellent."

She gestured toward the seats across from her and called the page over. "Please have three places set for my guests." Let them see how suited for the role she was.

Atreya did indeed join them, just past the soup course, looking handsome and well-rested. "Gentlemen. Lady. Forgive my tardiness."

"There is nothing to forgive, Majesty." She played the role of gracious hostess to the hilt.

Atreya nodded, smiled, then sat, immediately diving into a discussion of tactics with her generals.

That left Bittera the task of entertaining Yten, which would allow her to influence him without trickery or magic.

"How long have you been High Priest?" she asked.

"The late king appointed me when Atreya left for the wars. My predecessor was lost."

"That loss was the kingdom's gain," she replied softly.

The priest reddened, moved closer. "You are most wise, my Lady."

She gave him another smile. "I only try to emulate the example of the men and women his Majesty has surrounded himself with. Such as yourself."

It was amusing, really. Atreya would have seen through such artifice immediately, but Yten was like most men, prone to flattery. Especially when it came from a pretty woman.

Atreya's laughter sounded, the deeper laughter of the generals loud.

The priest looked over. "He is most favored, most sought after. No prince was loved so by his king."

She looked over as well, allowed herself a warm smile. "Is there any doubt as to the reason why? His Majesty is most fair of face. Such a dashing figure. Brave. Intelligent. He will bring this kingdom to glory."

"With the right people guiding him, indeed. He is young, untried. He requires guidance."

"Of course. And he has chosen well in that regard." She turned her gaze back to Yten, making it clear she meant him.

"He is most fortunate to have people around to support him."

She nodded and gave him another smile. "Oh, yes. And such a high caliber of people."

"You are most kind; the gods will be pleased to have a queen in the citadel again."

"Thank you, Yten. It means so much to me that you think so."

The stupid priest just beamed and simpered, the king and generals steadfastly ignoring him.

She knew she would have to deal with the generals eventually, but it was Yten to whom Atreya had given dominion over this decision.

Finally Atreya stood. "Yten? I wish to speak with you in confidence."

Bittera smiled at the man. "It has been a pleasure talking to you. I do hope it is a pleasure that will be repeated." As little as possible.

"Indeed, Lady. Perhaps I can arrange some spiritual guidance..."

"I will have to seek you out." She inclined her head as in acquiescence, hiding her sneer.

"Yten." Atreya's tone was firm. Sure. "Come."

Yes, go, you self-important fool, before she decides that your opinion is too biased.

The priest disappeared into a small antechamber, the generals going silent and stern in her presence.

She offered them a smile. "Have you enjoyed your meal?" They would have intimidated her if she had not known that she could tear them all to pieces if she chose to do so.

Two silent nods, neither welcoming nor threatening, answered her.

She tried another approach. "The visit to the troops today was very informative. I was glad to be along."

The elder soldier nodded. "It is not often a woman enjoys listening to the ways of war."

She hid her smile, he would not understand, how could he as he did not know a woman led him? "I feel it is important to understand such things if one is to understand how a kingdom works."

"A kingdom works because its armies protect it from its enemies."

"Exactly." She nodded, smiling now.

The old soldier didn't smile back, but the lines beside the dour mouth eased, the look in the soldier's eyes less wary.

"I imagine you have served many times as protector for this land?"

"For many many years, my Lady."

"Then I am in your debt."

The soldier smiled, pleased. "We all are in the debt of my men."

Atreya returned, face serious, scroll in hand. "In the morning, have the proclamation read. The king has chosen a bride."

"Majesty?" Happiness swelled inside her. She kept it inside her.

Atreya's eyes met hers, solemn and quiet. "Indeed, my Lady. The gods have said it is a good match."

She allowed herself a smile. "Then I thank the gods for blessing our union."

"Indeed." Atreya offered her a small box, an emerald ring held inside. "It was my lady mother's."

"Thank you, Majesty. I am honored." She held out her hand. "Will you put it on me?"

Her hand was taken, the ring slipped upon her finger, a betrothal, a promise.

"I have your ring now and you have my heart. May our union be strong and bring prosperity to our people." Yes! Yes, Atreya and the kingdom were hers!

"Indeed." Atreya leaned down and kissed her hand, lips soft and sweet.

She closed her eyes for a moment as if overcome. "Thank you, my liege."

Atreya made a soft snorting noise and when she looked, those eyes were dancing, laughing. "It is my... honor, Lady."

"Is it necessary for us to attend this reading of the proclamation?"

"No, the runners will spread the word throughout the lands."

"Then you and I are free to have breakfast together, to begin to merge our schedules."

Atreya nodded. "If it pleases you. You will have need to meet with the staff; they have waited long for a queen.

She nodded. "I will do what I must, but you know that it is for you that I wanted this."

Atreya looked at her, nodded once. "I will see you upon the morning then."

She nodded. "Yes, Majesty."

She watched Atreya go and then looked down at the ring upon her finger. A sign of ownership. She belonged to the king now. Which meant the king belonged to her.

Exactly as she wished.

Bittera headed for her chambers, grinning as she realized she would soon be changing to the rooms that were closer to the king.

Chapter Three

The next few days had been incredibly busy -- the lands taking the marriage announcement as a sign to stop mourning. Atreya was both disturbed and pleased by this. Things needed to continue on, however, her father was most dear to her and she resisted moving on.

The dining hall was filled with well-wishers and generals, priests and wealthy men, and Atreya ate, listened, watched.

Bittera sat at her side, smiling and offering a kind word to each person who came to see them. The woman was distressingly good at it.

Every now and then those black eyes would turn to her, a hand sliding along her arm or just touching her fingers. The green emerald of her ring glinted, warmer than those dark eyes.

It was unnerving, strange. Uncomfortable and yet somehow dear. She frowned a bit, lecturing herself. At best Bittera was a power-hungry witch, a demon from the pits of Hell at worst and regardless, simply wanted power. This affection was all for show.

There was a moment when the High Priest held the court, expounding on some issue or other and Bittera smiled and stole a kiss, tongue licking at the corner of her mouth.

Atreya pulled away, eyes wide. "Lady!"

Bittera gave her an arch look. "Your subjects are expecting some affection between us, Majesty. A simple kiss is surely not too much to expect?"

"I..." She had never seen regents show affection to one another, but she had not known many.

Another kiss was pressed to the side of her mouth. "It will make them happy," whispered Bittera.

Atreya was still for the kiss, then stood, grabbing her goblet. "A toast to the prosperity of our fine lands!"

Bittera stood along with the rest of the company, lifting her own goblet and drinking deeply. Those dark eyes glittered at her above the rim of the cup.

The toast went well and Atreya stayed out of reach of Bittera, visiting easily with her advisors, her generals. The winter was coming quickly this year, her heavy cloak lined with furs, the wind howling against the white city's stones.

It was growing late when Bittera caught her, hand sliding around her arm in a proprietary manner. "It grows late, Majesty. And you look tired."

"Be easy, Bittera. I have rested well." She patted Bittera's hand, stepped away. "Shall I call your escort so you might retire?"

Undeterred, Bittera stayed close. "I was hoping you might escort me, Majesty. My things were moved this morning to the queen's chambers and I am unfamiliar with the way."

Atreya arched an eyebrow, but nodded. It was time to find her own bed, to loosen the bindings that held her. "Come, I will show you the way."

"Thank you, my liege." Bittera inclined her head and then wrapped a hand back through Atreya's arm.

The hallways towards the royal wing were empty, chilled, the torch in her hand a welcome warmth.

Bittera pressed close to her, shivered. "I look forward to the warmth of your fire, Majesty. At least... I hope we will continue our tradition of tea together in the evening now that we are to be wed."

Atreya nodded. "I enjoy our tea together."

That was a truth, the time with Bittera in the nights was pleasant, interesting. Bittera smiled at her, perhaps the first honest smile she'd seen all evening.

"Me, too."

She pointed to two dark sets of doors, sconces burning beside both. "The ones on the right are mine, the left yours. Come to my quarters, I will show you the connecting passage." The door beside the hearth was simple, inconspicuous.

"Thank you, Majesty." Bittera pressed closer, and Atreya could feel her curves beneath the thin furs she wore.

"You're welcome." They ended up in the violet queen's chambers, the room aired and readied. "Your maids are close, just ring if you have need of them."

Bittera nodded. "I believe I will change into my nightclothes before joining you for tea, Majesty."

"Oh. Well, I will leave you then." She backpedaled, disappearing into her own, simpler rooms.

It seemed no time at all before Bittera joined her again. Indeed, the tea and sweets had still not arrived. She was bundled in her furs and perched on her favorite spot, watching her city ready itself for sleep.

Bittera joined her, sitting on the wide sill with her and slipping her feet beneath Atreya's furs. "The white city is more beautiful under snow than I have ever seen it."

Atreya nodded. "It always appears pure. I remind myself that there are those less fortunate that regret the cold."

Bittera nodded. "Beauty is often a terrible thing."

Atreya considered this, then nodded. "Yes. Yes, I believe you are right."

"I often am, Majesty." Bittera spoke softly, voice suggestive.

She laughed, tickled. "Only often? How your song has changed in the past moons."

"I am pleased I amuse you, Majesty."

She rolled her eyes and stuck her tongue out. "We need few games between us, Bittera."

Bittera leaned in quickly and grabbed her tongue between soft lips, sucking. She pulled back quick enough that her head whacked against the stones, lights flashing in her eyes.

"Majesty!" Bittera went to her knees, leaning against Atreya, hands sliding over her head.

She blinked, dazed, dizzy, the room wavering.

"Oh, Treya, I'm so sorry." Bittera's face was so close to hers.

"I'm well. Just startled." She found a wan smile. "Stone is harder than bone."

"Treya..." Bittera started into her eyes, moving closer, pressing their lips together softly.

She gasped, lips parting, the touch strange, warm, exciting. Bittera's tongue slid along the bottom of her lips and then into her mouth, just for a moment.

She leaned away. "What are you doing?"

"Kissing you, Treya."

"Why?"

Bittera looked genuinely surprised at the question. "Did it not feel pleasurable? It is what adults, especially adults who are wed, do together."

"Bittera? I am not a man. Even after I wed you I will not be a man."

"I have no desires for a man, Treya. Only for you. For your full lips and your warm tongue. For your heavy breasts with their peaked nipples and the heat at your heart."

She searched Bittera's eyes, completely confused. Surely the woman understood... "I do not understand..."

"Open your mind to new things, Majesty. Open your body to pleasures such as you've never imagined." Bittera's lips pressed against hers again, tongue sweeping through her mouth again and again.

She burned, entire body on fire as if Bittera's mouth was attached to the flames of Hell itself. Bittera's breath filled her mouth, breathed right onto her as the slender, yet surprisingly solid body pressed her back against the stone.

It was the tap on the door that rescued her, "Tea. Our tea, Lady." She slid down, hurried across the cold floor.

Bittera followed her slowly, sat at her feet as usual, cheeks flushed, eyes glittering.

Atreya curled into herself, drinking the warm tea, forcing herself to relax, make idle conversation. Bittera's cheek rested on her knee and she could see the woman's breasts rising and falling rapidly within her silk covering.

Her eyes continued to be drawn to the long line of Bittera's neck, the hard bumps of nipple beneath the silk. Those black eyes glittered up at her, deep and bottomless, almost drawing her in, drawing her down. She found herself bending for a kiss and stopped herself, brushing her lips against Bittera's forehead.

Bittera smiled, fingers reaching to slide along her lips. "You hide your sensuality as surely as you hide your gender."

"I have... there is no use for it." She spoke against Bittera's fingers, the motions like a kiss.

"I have a use for it, Treya."

"But... Intimate touches are intended to create a child..." Surely the gods would protest.

"Oh, Treya, do you really think such rules are intended for the king? It is tales told to the rabble, to keep them in line."

"I... Perhaps I could confer with the priests..." But how could she and keep her secret...

"And what will you ask them, Majesty? If you are allowed to lie with your wife? You know they will tell you yes."

Atreya nodded, everything was so complicated now, so confusing.

"Trust me, Treya. I can make you fly. I can give you relief for an hour or two from all your burdens."

"I..." Again the choice was taken from her, the door to her chamber thrown open.

"Your majesty! The maids say your lady is gone..." The words trailed off as the guard saw Bittera.

Bittera gave her a secretive little smile. "And pray tell what were my maids doing snooping in my rooms?"

"N...not snooping, my lady. We heard you move about and thought to help you undress and get abed. I swear it." The girl was young, pale, hands wringing.

Bittera looked up at Atreya. "Do you believe her, my liege?"

"It has been many years since the maids had a queen to care for. They are simply trying to assist you."

"Very well. But in the future, unless I call for you, I expect you to stay out of my chambers." Bittera simpered suddenly, like a girl herself. "Why what if his Majesty had been... visiting me."

The girl's pale eyes went wide, terrified. "Y...yes. Y...yes, my queen."

Atreya chuckled, shook her head. "Good night, Lady. Your maids are awake, you may as well make use of them."

Bittera sighed. "Yes, Majesty. Though as always, leaving you causes an ache inside of me." Bittera stood and leaned over her to kiss her softly.

"Sleep well, Lady." She smiled, nodded. Another night that she didn't have to deal with this strangeness building between them.

Bittera bowed and quickly took her leave, the quiet and stillness thick as the room emptied.

Atreya cuddled into the covers, slowly removing the bindings around her chest and settling in for the night. She was no sooner asleep than the dreams began again, phantom touches by flesh as cold as stone.

Atreya shifted, moaning low, body sliding on the sheets. Lips, like Bittera's but cold where warmth should be pressed against hers, a soft, insistent tongue pushing into her mouth. She struggled to wake, to open her eyes and find herself alone.

Instead of waking, she felt as if she were being dragged deeper into sleep, her body rolled onto her back. Feminine curves fit against her own, cold and heavy. Her nipples drew up tight, so tight they ached, almost burned.

Those lips pressed against hers again, tongue sliding into her mouth, body moving against hers. She arched, gasped, rocking instinctively. Cold fingers pushed into her clothing, wrapping around one nipple and tugging.

Oh.

She bucked, belly going white-hot and needy. A solid thigh slid between her legs, giving her something to rub against. Heat and ice both seemed to fill her, rub against her and she bucked over and over.

The cool fingers continued to tug and pinch at her nipple, that tongue filling her mouth. Her phantom lover was everywhere, pushed against her, pushing into her. She shuddered, shook, heart pounding as her body moved in an unnatural rhythm, seeking something she didn't understand.

The tongue in her mouth moved in and out, stabbing into her again and again, the leg between her thighs rubbed, slid against her most private places. The burn within her crested, filled her skin, every bit of her aflame.

Then one of those cool fingers pushed between her sex and the leg that she moved against, finding a bundle of nerves that just screamed at the touch. Her body shook, the dreamworld shattering into a thousand sparkles of light.

When they cleared she was alone but for the draft that slid through the room, an echo of the touches she'd been... enduring.

Her heart pounded and she slid from the bed, shaking, then she saw a mark on one breast, a mark that looked like a kiss.

By the gods, she was losing her mind.

Bittera had insisted on a short engagement. She wished to cement her position with Atreya as quickly as possible.

She also wished to follow up on her invasions of Atreya's dreams and knew she would have better luck once they were wed and outsiders would expect them to share a bed.

She was dressed in an elegant, simple, but stunning robe, a veil hiding her face as she walked along the corridors to the chapel, flanked by Atreya's senior advisor and the High Priest. There had been some shock when she'd proven to have no living relatives to attend the wedding, but she'd planted a bug in Yten's ear about being sent by the gods themselves especially for Atreya. It was amazing how quickly a rumor could be spread.

The music began to swell as she approached and when the doors to the chapel were open, she caught her first glimpse of Atreya. Atreya wore white, the color of the city, the gold seal emblazoned on her chest. The plain crown was upon her head, the sword at her side. Simple and striking,

Bittera thought that Atreya looked handsome, woman or man, simply stunning and wonderful.

The smile on her face was genuine. Yes, she was here for the power, to make this kingdom hers, but she was not an unfeeling being and those feelings had become wrapped up in Atreya.

Atreya's eyes were warm, fond, welcoming her.

She walked with pride and grace, doing her king proud as she moved to join him.

The ceremony was quick, the priest not dragging it on and on, Atreya strong and solid beside her. She accepted her crown and Atreya's ring upon her finger and turned with her King to greet her new people.

Inside she laughed and cheered. Her plan had come to fruition. She was victorious. Atreya waved and nodded, leading her into the huge ballroom for the feast, the celebration. Even the old general deigned to dance with her, all smiles and good wishes.

Atreya was kept from her, kept busy with dignitary after dignitary. It was maddening, to be wed and still kept apart. She did her duty though, for the kingdom. After all, it was hers now, too. But this evening, when the revelers had gone, her time with Atreya would start.

They shared a single dance before Atreya retired with the soldiers and other men for drinking and carousing. Her husband leaned close, "I will not stay late, I cannot hold as much ale as they."

"I will await you in your bedchamber, my liege." She offered Atreya a kiss, smiling at the cheers from the crowd. "I will await you."

"I. Yes. Excellent." Atreya was swept away in a tide of well-wishers.

Bittera watched her go and then turned to the merchant who wished for her attention. Oh, she was gracious and sweet and everything a good queen should be.

Finally it was time to retire and she let her maids fuss over her before she shoed them all away. Dressed only in the silks of her nightgown, she made her way through the secret passage that joined her bedchamber to Atreya's.

There she settled in Atreya's bed to await her husband.

Atreya's laugh sounded as the door opened. "Guard...guard the hallway. I do not wish to be disturbed."

Bittera blinked awake from her doze, burying her giggles in her hands. Atreya stumbled in, hair in disarray, cheeks flushed, singing a bawdy song. She looked stunning. And more alive than Bittera had ever seen her.

"My liege," she murmured, all giggles silenced.

"My queen." She received a sweet, happy smile. "You were beautiful this evening. Marriage vows become you."

And just like that this night was not about power or kingdoms but about her and Atreya. "And you were very handsome, my king. Very handsome indeed."

"Thank you." Atreya sat in the window seat, smiling over at her. "I received much advice on filling your womb with child that I fear will be difficult if not impossible to follow."

"We shall find a way, Majesty. To get you an heir." She pulled back the covers of Atreya's bed. "Come. Lie with me."

Atreya shrugged off the heavy cloak, the tunics, sliding quickly into the lighter nightshirt that hid the layers of bandages that bound her breasts.

"Come here and let me free you, my liege. Your poor breasts, hidden away all day."

The heavy boots were removed, then the leggings. "It is necessary. I have always had them such, except in the bath."

"I will guard your secret with my body, Treya." She slid her hands beneath the tunic and loosened the bindings.

She could feel the tremors under Atreya's skin, see the latent passion in those sky-blue eyes. Sliding her hands beneath the loosened binding, she massaged the small, round breasts.

"Oh. I. Lady..." Those little nipples went immediately hard, pushing into her fingers as if demanding attention.

"Poor things, bound so tight night and day. Let me ease you."

"Ease me?" Atreya pulled the warm blankets about them, closed the curtains about the bed.

"Do they not ache, Treya?" She continued to caress, thumbs sliding across the hard nipples.

"Oh!" Atreya's eyes went wide, legs shifting. "Oh, Bittera. They... they do."

She pushed open Atreya's tunic and bent to place soft kisses on the tender flesh.

"You mustn't..." Those sweet breasts trembled, nipples drawn into tiny points.

"It is not right that the king cannot find peace and soothing in his own bed, Treya." She continued to kiss the sweet skin, licking and lapping.

The sweetest moan sounded, the noise enough to make her ache, "Your lips..."

"Do they please you, Majesty?"

"Yes. Yes, they... Yes, my lady." Atreya's fingers trembled, stroking her hair.

"Good." She looked up into Atreya's eyes and smiled before returning to her duty, lips wrapping around one nipple and tugging gently.

"Bittera!" The innocence was heady, sweet.

She hummed, refusing to let her prize go. Atreya arched, shook, shifted, flesh so hot in her lips. She slid one hand down along Atreya's belly. Such fine skin, such wonderful fine skin.

And never touched, never pleased, never made to shudder and shake. All hers. Smiling, she let the nipple slip from her mouth and moved to take in the other one.

Atreya gasped, shuddered, rocking against her. "I dreamed..."

"Dreamed, Treya?" she murmured, knowing exactly what Atreya had dreamed.

"I dreamed, but it was cold. You're not cold."

"I don't feel cold. I feel hot. You make me hot, Treya."

"Is that good?" Atreya slid against her, moaning low.

"Oh, yes, I think so." Very good.

Atreya's lips met hers, wet and warm, the kiss untutored, sweet, but freely offered. She whimpered, heat flooding her belly.

Never had contact with someone affected her so, made her feel so much. She took hold of Atreya's hand, brought it to her own body. That sword-callused hand stroked along her side, her hip, the touch trembling.

She moaned softly. "Majesty... you make me shiver."

"Call me by my name here?"

"Yes, Treya. Yes." She nodded, bringing her lips to Atreya's again.

Atreya pushed close, rocking and rubbing against her, so gentle, so hesitant.

"Oh, don't stop, Treya. Don't stop."

"I. Bittera." Atreya moaned, tongue sliding against her own.

"Yes," she whispered, pushing the word into Atreya's mouth.

Her fingers stroked those little breasts again, hands cupping them. A perfect fit. Atreya's hand slid around her spine, drew her closer, fingers petting her hip.

She cuddled into Atreya, wishing they were directly skin on skin, but not willing to push it, Atreya was already giving her so much more than she had expected.

Atreya's eyes closed, fingers moving slowly, feather light. She didn't close her own eyes though, instead she watched Atreya's face, watched the pleasure and wonder there. It made her moan, and she shivered under the light touches.

Atreya smiled softly. "Are you cold?"

"Oh, no. I am not cold. Just the opposite, I feel as if I am aflame. Your touches... so good."

"Oh, good." She received another kiss, sweet and slow, but eager, freely given.

She met Atreya's tongue with her own, ignoring her urge to deepen the kiss. The more that Atreya did this on her own, the better. For now.

"You taste like winter berries..."

"And you taste like sunshine and snow," she murmured, finger reaching up to slide along Atreya's lower lip.

Atreya moaned, kissed her finger, tongue so gentle as it stroked across the tip.

"Oh." She gasped softly and rolled her hips against Atreya.

Atreya made a soft sound, snuggled close. "My lady."

"Yours," murmured Bittera. It was more true than Atreya could know and enough that Atreya knew some of it.

"My liege."

"Yes." Atreya nodded, brought their hands together.

She squeezed Atreya's hand and leaned up with her lips parted, mutely asking for another kiss. Atreya gave it, one soft brush of lips becoming another and another.

She moaned, leaning back slightly, encouraging Atreya to follow, to lie on her and trying to make it look like an accidental happenstance. Atreya followed, one strong arm holding her up, keeping their weight apart.

So circumspect. It was maddening, even as it was endearing.

Bittera slid her hands along Atreya's shoulders, down her back. Atreya shook, arms tensing with the effort to keep them apart. She tugged on Atreya's loose tunic, pulling it up over her skin until it was bunched beneath Atreya's underarms. Then she took advantage of the space between their bodies, fingers exploring the exposed flesh, sliding over breasts and belly, hips, thighs and stroking the curls that hid Atreya's mound.

"Oh! Oh, Bittera, I..." Atreya's eyes were wide, shocked, wanton.

"You are beautiful," she murmured, finishing Atreya's sentence for her.

"No... You are fine and I am..." She shrugged. "A soldier."

"On the surface perhaps, but beneath the layers and the bindings? Your skin is like silk. And so warm. It calls to my fingers, Treya. You make me want."

She reached around, fingers tickling along Atreya's spine. Atreya jerked, laughing, hips pushing down against her own. Moaning, she bucked up, unable to stop herself from meeting that touch. Atreya arched, rubbed against her, eyes rolling.

"Treya. Oh. More, please. I need..." She let the words trail off, let herself be believed as innocent in this as Atreya herself.

"Need... What do you need?"

"Just... keep touching me? I need to be close to you, to feel your warmth. It makes me ache in my belly, but such a good ache, Treya."

Atreya's weight eased down against her, so careful, so gentle.

"Oh. Treya." She whimpered softly, pushing to meet Atreya's weight again. "Yes. That feels so good."

"Good..." Atreya's kisses were flavored with wine and ale and a growing need.

She nodded, hands landing on Atreya's ass, cupping the firm globes, squeezing them. Atreya cried out, hips moving faster and faster, rolling against her. She managed to get her leg between Atreya's, so they both had thighs to rub against, her moans increasing.

"I... Bittera. Lady..." The kiss was wild, sloppy, those eyes burning into her.

"Treya!" She moved faster, rubbing her thigh between Atreya's legs as well as rubbing herself against Atreya's, pushing them both toward the edge.

Atreya's cry spread through the air, thighs squeezing hers, holding tight. She rubbed harder, wishing to take her own pleasure close on the heels of Atreya's. With a cry of her own, the pleasure shook her, leaving her limp and sated beneath Atreya's weight.

Atreya slumped, resting heavy atop her. "Oh."

Bittera purred, body rippling.

"So warm..." Atreya petted her, fingers clumsy.

"Yes. You make this cold night so hot." She nuzzled into each touch, slid her own fingers over Atreya's body.

Atreya smiled, eyes fluttering closed. "Yes."

She slid her hands along Atreya's short hair, petting. "May I rest here with you this night, Treya?"

"Yes. Yes, please. Your bed will be cold."

"Thank you, Majesty," she murmured, settling deep into the feather ticking.

Exactly where she wanted to be.

Chapter Four

Atreya woke the morning after her wedding shocked and shamed by what she had done -- to rub against another like an animal, to desire those touches in forbidden places.

She had dressed before her lady-wife awoke and begun to work, burying herself under piles of scrolls and proclamations and such, explaining to herself that the gods had dealt her a lucky hand, allowing her to rule, she should not act poorly for it.

The smell of warm rolls and hot cider tempted her some time later, a guard admitting Bittera and a boy carrying a tray of mugs and two plates with rolls and sweets on them. Bittera sat across from her and dismissed the servant. "Majesty. I thought you might hunger."

She blushed dark, nodded. "Good morning, my queen."

Bittera smiled, hand reaching out to brush briefly across her own. "Your bed is lonely without you, my liege."

Her blush deepened, but she found a smile. "You seemed at peace, resting well."

Bittera's head ducked. "I have heard it said that what we did is the best sleeping draught available to man."

Her cheeks would catch fire, so hot, burning. "I had not heard such."

"I have heard the healers say so. It would seem in my case they are right." Bittera's fingers slid against hers again, the touch warm, intimate.

"Bittera..." She leaned close, whispering low. "I fear the gods' retribution..."

Bittera's fingers slid across her cheek, cupped it, those dark eyes soft. "Majesty, they sanctioned your marriage to me and while the High Priest did not know your secret, the gods he consulted surely must have."

Oh.

Oh, perhaps the gods sent Bittera as a reward for keeping her secret close.

She nodded, smiled. "They are all-knowing."

Bittera smiled. "Yes. They are."

Atreya nodded once, then settled back, again focusing on her work, smile wide.

"You look happy," murmured Bittera.

"I am." Atreya dared to reach out, hand in Bittera's hair for a moment.

Bittera made a soft noise and moved the chair, came around to sit next to her, close enough she could feel the warmth of Bittera's body. "You know, Majesty, a newly wed king would be forgiven for not working all morning..."

Atreya looked into fascinating dark eyes, the temptation to lean forward for a kiss unmistakable.

The longer she looked, the deeper the temptation pulled her and she thought that Bittera had moved forward, brought their mouths closer together, but when she blinked and took her bearings, she found that it was she who had moved.

She blushed, then allowed their lips to brush, the kiss soft, slow. Bittera hummed, one hand sliding onto her knee, resting there, warm and soft. Things heated within her, made her shift and ache.

Bittera's tongue slid along her lips, a soft request to deepen the kiss.

"We should not." She cupped the back of Bittera's head, tongue pressing in.

Bittera opened to her, pliant in her hands. The fingers on her leg curled, held onto her. The kiss went on and on, stealing her breath, making her gasp. Bittera melted against her, body pressing awkwardly against hers.

She wrapped her hands around Bittera's waist, holding on tight, holding them close together. Bittera's hand was more hesitant, touching her lightly before dancing shyly away. She eased her own touch, eyes closing to focus on the soft slide of their tongues together.

Soft moans filled her mouth along with Bittera's breath, the gentle touches continuing, lighting on her like a little bird.

The tap on the door broke them apart, Atreya gasping as her valet entered. "Your Majesty. Today's scrolls."

Bittera kept her eyes down, fingers sliding through her hair, cheeks red. She was the very picture of a demure queen.

"Thank you." Atreya took the scrolls with steady fingers. "What news?"

"The King of the Widdart is arming troops, the southern pass is buried under the early snow. The grain stores are full."

"Alert the generals that we may have need to ride, come spring thaw."

"Widdart," murmured Bittera. "They are those weaselly folk in the woods beyond the pass, are they not, Majesty?"

"They are. They hope we are weak with the loss of my father."

"They would be wrong, though it is not a good time for a war, we are not weak. *You* are not weak."

"No. I am not." In this she knew herself. Her generals had trained her well. "No one will move until the spring."

"Will our troops be ready then, Majesty?"

"They will be." She stood, looked at her valet. "Fetch my winter cloak and have Coraline saddled. I will speak to the generals today."

"May I come with you, Majesty? You know I am interested in the details of running the country." Bittera stood with her, hand on her arm.

"The weather is cold, Lady, and the generals' quarters rough." She worried about her lover, her queen, her wife.

"I will not melt at a little cold weather, Majesty. And I have proved myself with the generals before."

She frowned. "No. I would not have any spies know that you are more than a figurehead. Have the generals brought here, a meal arranged. We will retire after and speak together."

Bittera bent her head. "As you wish, my liege."

Atreya scribbled a note, sealed it. "Have this delivered and return with haste."

Bittera smiled as the valet left. "Will you stay then? Spend the afternoon with me before our meeting with the generals?"

"Yes." She nodded, searching through the correspondence, worrying over the coming spring.

Bittera leaned against her, arm sliding around her waist. "Then let me do my job as your queen and distract you from your worries until you need to return to them."

Atreya chuckled, instinctively pressing close, snuggling in.

Bittera's fingers slid across her belly, their lips meeting in a soft kiss. "We could retire back to your chambers..."

"You are a distraction." A welcome one, a beautiful one.

"That is my duty, is it not?"

"Is it?" She chuckled, smiled.

"I believe so." Bittera smiled and slid one hand up along her chest, palm rubbing hard across her bound breasts.

"Bittera!" Her eyes went wide, hips jerking, nipples suddenly aching.

Bittera gave her a wide-eyed look. And did it again.

She danced away, laughing. "Take care."

"I'm *trying* to." Bittera grinned at her, face young with the smile.

"Lady..." She headed from the room, heading for the hall.

"Are we going back to your bedchamber?" Bittera asked, following on her heels.

"I don't know, am I?" She laughed, moving faster.

Bittera giggled. "Well it could be the stables, but that would truly be perversion."

"Wench!" She chuckled, leading the chase.

"Is that the way you speak to your queen?" Bittera's tone was mock shock, the giggles there beneath the playful words.

She turned, grabbed Bittera's waist, tickling. Bittera's giggles came out in full force, a soft shriek ringing in the halls as Bittera tried to duck her fingers. They played and laughed until they reached her chambers, the chambermaids giggling and watching behind their hands.

"Send them away," Bittera whispered. "And bar the door."

"I wish to be alone with my Queen. Be gone." Atreya waved her hand, the door closing behind the last girl.

Bittera giggled again. "That looks like fun." She waved her hand. "Be gone."

Atreya laughed, reaching to tickle again. Bittera stumbled into her, body rubbing along hers. Bittera was warm, even through all the layers of clothes. Atreya's hands circled the thin waist, hugged her Queen tightly.

Those black eyes were warm as they gazed up at her, Bittera's smile warmer still.

"You look happy." Atreya leaned down, kissed Bittera gently.

"You have made me so."

"I have? Honestly?"

Bittera nodded. "Yes, Treya. You have."

"Oh." She smiled, offered another kiss. "Good."

"Love me, Treya? Please?"

"But I do, Bittera."

Bittera smiled and melted against her. "Oh. I love you, too, Treya."

"Did you honestly speak to my mother? Did she truly send you to me?"

"Would I have known if I had not?"

"I don't know." She wasn't sure she cared.

She stroked Bittera's cheek, fingers in love with the smooth, soft skin. Bittera nuzzled into the touch, moaning softly, eyes soft.

"So lovely..." She leaned, took a soft kiss.

Bittera opened to her like a flower to the sun, mouth enticing her tongue. The kisses flowed, one into another, again and again. Atreya was shivering, a pit of heat in her belly. Bittera tugged her toward the bed, lying down on it and pulling her on top of the slender body.

She moaned, eyes going wide. "Lady! We are in full sun!"

"Then let us close the curtains if you are worried the sun will peek at us and tell tales."

"So wicked." She reached back, pulled the curtains closed.

Bittera laughed. "I just want you. If that is wicked, then that is what I am."

"Want me for what? More kisses?"

"Kisses, touches, you make me feel so good." Bittera's fingers tried to slide into her clothing.

"Bittera, you... You can *see*..." No one ever looked upon her skin.

Ever.

Bittera leaned up, looking at her, stroking her cheek. "Would you feel more comfortable if I were unclothed?"

Her eyes were going to fall out of her head. "If you were..."

Bittera nodded. "If I went first."

"But..." She shook her head. "No one has ever seen me..."

"No one? Ever?"

"No one. Ever."

"Oh, then I will be the first. Please."

"But... What... What if you find me lacking?" For the first time in her recent memory, Atreya was frightened.

"I cannot imagine that I would." Bittera began to undress herself, baring her body.

"What if someone comes to the door?" Atreya was fascinated, eyes wide as the fine skin was exposed.

"You've barred it, have you not?" Bittera kept disrobing, not stopping until she was completely naked.

"Yes. Yes, I have..." Atreya's heart was pounding, eyes unsure where to land.

Bittera reached for her, lying wanton and bare on the bed. "Come touch me, Treya."

She groaned, hand on Bittera's belly, lips brushing her lover's again and again. Bittera moaned softly, body rippling beneath her.

Her skin burned, her fingertips tingling and warm, exploring as they drew slow circles. Bittera didn't seem concerned that she was the only one naked, indeed the lovely body writhed beneath her touches, Bittera's moans soft, quite wanton.

She settled close, covering Bittera's skin with her body, fingers sliding up along Bittera's ribs.

"Your touch is a magic," Bittera told her. "You make me tremble."

"No one has called me magic before." Her fingertips brushed the bottoms of Bittera's breasts, just stroking the warm swells.

"Then I am the only one who is not blind," murmured Bittera, each deep breath pushing Bittera's breasts against her fingers.

"Flatterer." Atreya's fingers slowly circled one peaked nipple, the touch so careful.

Bittera moaned, eyes closing as a shiver went through her body.

"This pleases you?" The skin was so soft, so fine; Atreya's fingers were fascinated.

"Very much." Bittera's voice was husky, the need there like a thread of gold among silver.

She leaned her head on Bittera's shoulder, touched again and again and again. Bittera's legs wrapped around her waist, her queen rocking up against her. She purred softly, heat a dull ache in her belly.

Bittera's fingers were trembling as they began to undo the sash on her tunic. Atreya hid her hot cheek against Bittera's shoulder, fingers rubbing the very tip of one hard nipple.

Bittera's cries were sweet, making the ache in her belly grow, become warm and moist. She leaned to kiss Bittera's lips, feed on the soft sounds. Bittera's mouth opened immediately to hers, drawing her tongue into the warm depths.

Her fingers stuttered over the warm flesh for a moment, then stroked harder, almost pulling. Bittera shuddered beneath her, another cry feeding into her mouth. The sweet body writhed and wriggled, Bittera panting.

Her own heat grew and grew, near unbearable.

"I need, Treya," begged Bittera, voice hoarse, fingers opening and closing on her arms.

"Need, Bittera?" She shivered, kissed harder, unsure what she should do.

"Will you be naked with me, Treya? Please."

"I..." She groaned, lips covering Bittera's, silencing the temptation.

Bittera's fingers went back to working open her clothes as if she'd given permission, the sash undone completely, the ties at the neck of her tunic opened. Atreya swallowed, eyes meeting the dark heat of Bittera's.

"I will stop if you ask me to," Bittera told her.

"I don't know what I am supposed to do."

"Let me undress you. Your body will know what to do, Treya. Your heart will." Bittera's fingers pushed beneath her tunic, drew it up over her head.

She shuddered, hands covering her breasts, hiding them from the light.

Bittera was relentless though, removing the bindings, tugging her hands away. "You are beautiful."

Her breasts ached, nipples so hard they burned. "Oh. I. Bittera..."

Bittera pushed her leggings down as well, sliding them off her legs and then rolling her onto the bed, leaning over her. "So beautiful. I want to touch you, Treya. All over. Say that you will allow it."

"I ache within, Lady. Like a fire is built there."

"Let me stoke it higher."

Bittera's head dipped, the kiss she thought coming her way bestowed upon her breast instead of her lips. Her cry escaped her, body arching beneath Bittera.

"You see. Your body knows." The words were whispered against her skin, Bittera's lips closing over her nipple, tugging.

Her legs moved restlessly, belly tight as a board. "Lady."

"That wasn't a stop," murmured Bittera, fingers sliding on her belly, mouth moving to wrap around her other nipple.

How fast Bittera shifted from sweet flower to seductress. How it made Treya's head spin. Bittera's knees pushed between her legs, spreading her open as Bittera settled on her.

"I. Bittera. I." Oh, this was wicked, so exposed, she ached so.

Bittera's fingers slid down, touched her intimately between her legs.

She pulled away, shocked. "What are you doing?"

"What feels right, Treya. What you and I both want." Those dark eyes gazed up at her, into her.

"I..." Her heart was pounding, sex burning, thighs taut and trembling.

Bittera held her eyes, fingers moving again, sliding into her body, invading her. The pressure was strange, not unwelcome, but strange.

A single finger slid in and out gently, Bittera's thumb touching some bundle of nerves down there, making everything flash brightly. Her breath panted from her, entire body arching, aching.

"You're hot as any fire," murmured Bittera, finger slipping away and then returning, thumb sliding on those nerves.

"Oh. Oh, I... My Lady..." She needed -- she didn't know -- more, less, something.

Bittera gave her more, a second finger sliding in with the first, those black eyes glittering at her as they moved in and out in a rhythm her hips ached to echo.

She shifted, Bittera's fingers hitting a barrier that twinged, made her still and gasp.

"Treya?" murmured Bittera, fingers stilling, her lady attuned to her.

"I... That ached. Startled me."

"It is the sign of your purity." Bittera's fingers slid away, only one thumb staying to rub against her.

"Oh. Oh, Bittera..." Her hips began to shift, to move, body shaking in time with that touch.

Bittera's lips returned to her nipples, tongue wrapping around them, lips sucking, tugging. And all the while that thumb moved, slid, rocked her world.

"I... I need. Bittera. I..." She shuddered, hips rising from the mattress.

"It will hurt, Treya. For an instant."

"I ache. Please." She needed this tension to ease.

Bittera's fingers teased inside her again, three this time, just dancing at the entrance to her body. Her legs went still, then spread, the heat in her belly unbearable.

"Now, Treya," whispered Bittera, teeth threatening and then biting on her nipple, the pain inside her sharp, but brief.

She gasped, eyes wide for a moment, hips still. "Lady, you... you are touching inside me."

"I am. You are so hot and silky." Bittera's fingers moved, sliding again.

"Oh..." She arched, shifting, moving upon Bittera's touch.

"Yes. Does it feel good, Treya?"

"Necessary." She leaned up, lips against Bittera's cheek. "It feels necessary."

Bittera's face turned, bringing their lips together. The fingers inside her moved faster, slid into her in sure, solid glides. She groaned, moving into the touches, gasping into her lady's lips.

Bittera gave her what she needed, what she didn't even know she wanted. Her cries were sharper, stronger, hips jerking, begging for the touches.

Bittera's other hand cupped her breast, fingers moving across her nipples. Heat flooded her, the sensation leaving her spinning and breathless. Bittera's fingers slowed, stroking, bringing her slowly back to herself.

The tears on her cheeks surprised her, shocked her. Bittera's mouth was soft, tongue sliding on her face, licking and cleaning her.

"I... I'm sorry. I'm not sad."

"It's okay, Treya, it's okay."

The soft licks and kisses continued, Bittera holding her, rocking her. She relaxed, floated, hands tracing Bittera's form.

"Love you, my liege," murmured Bittera. "Love you."

Oh.

She tilted Bittera's face, took a long kiss. "My beloved Queen."

Bittera nodded, smiled, black eyes almost sad. "Yes. Yours."

"What? What is wrong?" She searched Bittera's eyes. "Tell me."

Bittera shook her head. "Nothing."

"No. No, there is something. Tell me."

She would not let this go.

"It truly is nothing, Majesty. Only... it is... a little scary, loving someone."

"Yes. Yes, it is." She held Bittera close, nodding. "It is."

Bittera nuzzled against her, body soft and warm, pliant in her arms. She smiled, fingers sliding down along her lover's form. Bittera purred, pushed closer to her.

"Beautiful lady." She moaned, held them close together.

"Yours," whispered Bittera, rubbing against her.

"Yes." She reached down, fingers sliding through the slick, dark hair.

Bittera moaned, nuzzling into each touch.

"You're wet..." She stroked, trying to make Bittera feel good.

"You made me wet." Bittera began to kiss her skin again.

"Is that good?" She moaned, fingers gentle, exploring.

Bittera whimpered and nodded, hand sliding down to guide hers, to push her fingers inside.

"Hot..." She began to move, hips sliding her sex against Bittera's thigh.

Bittera whimpered, hips sawing.

"Is it good?" She took another kiss. "I'm not hurting?"

Bittera shook her head. "No. Only good. Good."

"My beauty. My queen..." She kept licking, fingers rubbing.

Bittera's eyes went suddenly wide, body shaking. "Treya!"

"Yes. Yes, Bittera." She nodded, watching.

Bittera shook for a moment longer and then shivered several more times before settling against her, a light coating of sweat making Bittera's skin shine.

She moaned, nuzzling Bittera's neck. "You smell good, lady-mine."

"Your smell," Bittera told her. "I only smell like this for you."

"Oh..." She met Bittera's eyes, pleased deep down. "For me."

"Yes."

Bittera smiled and kissed her softly before settling again at her side, hand splayed over her belly.

"You look happy." She reached for the blankets, covering herself.

Bittera slid beneath them with her, refusing to be parted from her. Their skin slid together, warm and damp. "I am, Treya."

"Mmm... I am, too." She settled in, sighing happily. "I am, too."

"Good."

A kiss was pressed against her shoulder, Bittera settling in, warm and cozy.

She relaxed, allowing her mind to quiet, to rest before the evening came, with its talk of war.

Chapter Five

She was in love.

Bittera paced in her chambers, railing at herself.

Stupid.

Idiotic.

Not at all in the plan.

Oh, she'd been intending to **enjoy** being with Atreya.

That had definitely been in the plan.

But falling in love?

So very much not in the plan.

So idiotic.

So stupid.

Sighing, she called for her maids-in-waiting, had them help her get dressed. She needed to look her best when they met with the generals, she mustn't be a disappointment to Atreya.

She rolled her eyes at herself. Damn her stupid emotions. They would only get in her way. She was here to bring the kingdom to greatness and to sit next to Atreya and rule it.

Once the girls had her ready, she'd gotten her head together. She did **not** love Atreya, she was simply taken with the girl's innocence and beauty and her smile and... She was **not** in love.

Glowering, she strode from her room.

Atreya met her in the hallway, the girl looking regal in purple, short curls neatly brushed. "You look fine, my lady."

She found a smile for her king, though it was forced. "And you look every inch a king. As always, Majesty."

"Thank you." Atreya looked at her closely, eyes sharp, clever. "All is well?"

"One of the girls nearly balded me with the brush. It was such a sharp contrast to our wonderful afternoon together." The lie fell easily from her lips and she reveled in it, in the fact that she had not lost her ability to say what she needed to in order to get what she wanted. It made her feel a little better and the next smile she offered Atreya was more genuine.

"One benefit to the shorter hair, I imagine. The tugging and the weight."

She laughed at that, the sound tinkling and light in the old stone hallways. She earned herself a dour look or two from the generals as they entered Atreya's study. Lord, they were stuffy. Oh, she knew theirs was a serious business, but really. Raping and pillaging and killing and all **could** be fun if one went in with the right attitude.

She kept that little tidbit to herself though, she was playing the innocent but earnest queen here. She let her laughter fade, but not her smile, and stayed close to Atreya's side. Let them see her, see that she would not be moved from where she belonged.

They settled around the table, maps and information spread about. Atreya was suddenly fierce, in her element. Stunning. "How soon should we move, Nadir? I will not lose a single foot of land."

"Widdart is planning to move as soon as the pass is clear. If we circle around the mountain now, we can catch him unawares from the west. We'll leave enough men to defend the pass should it thaw early this year, but if he's marching his men there, then his western flank will be undefended and we can just move in. By the time we meet up with the bulk of his force, the pass should be ready and we'll bring our troops in from there, take him on both fronts."

It was a bold plan and Bittera was impressed.

Atreya nodded. "I will gather my horse guard and circle west. It will take us... two moons to cross the barrens undetected. Nadir, you will take the main army and circle eastward. Willhelm? You will take the foot soldiers to the pass."

"East **and** West, your Majesty? Three fronts? Is it wise to split our forces so?" Nadir was bold, but also cautious.

"We know Widdart. He will ride with his troops. If we cut the head from the snake, the body follows."

"It is a sound plan. Simple, but it should be effective." Nadir nodded, obviously pleased.

Bittera remained quiet. It seemed too easy, somehow. "Do we know for sure that Widdart is committing all his forces to the pass? If he is surprised this plan will take him down relatively easily, but if he is preparing something similar himself, it will be a hard fight."

"If he does the same, we will meet in the mountains." Atreya drew a path on the map. "If they take either army, it will not matter, because the foot soldiers will hold the pass."

Nadir glared at her. "I do not think you should speak on matters you know nothing about, Madame."

"It's your Majesty, Nadir," she snapped at him. She would have her due, their respect.

"Queen or not, you are no soldier, no man."

"Enough. We have no time to bicker. I have a war to plan." Atreya glared, staring Nadir down.

Bittera allowed herself a small, satisfied smile as she watched her king stand up for her.

"The Queen has final control of the castle in my absence; we must assure the safety of those that remain."

"How many soldiers will be left with us?" Bittera asked. Not that she couldn't do a decent job of defense on her own if need be.

Atreya looked at Wilhelm, who tilted his head. "A garrison and the trainees. If things go poorly, the trainees can be sent to the pass."

"It will not come to that, Majesty. I have every confidence in you and your soldiers." Bittera offered Atreya a smile.

Atreya nodded, eyes distant, worried. "How soon can you ready the troops?"

"They could be ready tomorrow, Majesty. But it would be better if they had three weeks to be ready in." Boran was the youngest of the generals, newly minted after the last wars, his hair not entirely silver.

"They have until the new moon. Then we will ride." Atreya pulled out some parchment and they began planning, plotting.

Bittera sat back, not feeling the need to be involved with the particulars. She had plans of her own to make. The new moon. Nearly two weeks to ingratiate herself completely with Atreya, to make sure that the girl missed her while she was away.

She got to look her fill -- the tunic fell along the slim back nicely, accentuating the barest curves.

In many ways it was too bad that Atreya could not reveal herself as the beautiful young woman she was. The kingdom would fall in love with her.

Of course then there would be no place for Bittera herself.

The night was nearly gone when all the plans were finished, the plot laid out.

Bittera had stayed for it all, watching her Atreya move, listen, plan. There was something very sexy about Atreya when she was giving orders and making decisions.

Finally Atreya stood, yawned. "Come now. We must rest. Tomorrow brings much to do."

She stood as well, falling easily into step with Atreya, waiting until they had taken their leave of the generals and were in the halls on their own before speaking. "You were most impressive, Majesty."

"I have been a soldier most of my life." Atreya looked worn, tired, worried.

She slipped her arm around Atreya's waist. "Let me ease your mind for an hour or two, Treya? Let me *distract* you."

"Again?" She got a warm, welcoming smile. "Should I order tea?"

"Do you want, tea, Majesty? Or just me?" She teased gently, enjoying that smile far more than she should. She was *not* in love, dammit, she merely admired Treya's abilities, found the girl very attractive and enjoyed her company.

Treya chuckled. "I am only so fond of tea, my lady."

She giggled and took Treya's hand, tugging her toward the bed.

Atreya pulled back long enough to bar the door and step out of the soft indoor shoes. Then she was met at the bed again, Treya's eyes warm.

"Oh, Treya, you are so beautiful and you make me yearn for you."

"Flattery." Treya moved closer, lips brushing hers.

She tilted her head. "No. Flattery would be to tell you that your hair shines in the moonlight and that your eyes are like jewels, your skin pure milk." She grinned. "They are no less true than what I originally said, but still flattery."

Treya's laugh filled the room, lit it up. And that increased her desire and need more than the lovely body did.

Oh, she was in so much trouble. Emotions had no place, she reminded herself as she pushed into Treya's arms and took a soft, wonderful kiss.

Treya's hands slid around her waist, holding her, fingers drawing lazy circles. She purred softly. Oh, **this** wasn't love, this was lust, pure and simple and good.

"You sound good." The words were whispered into her lips.

"Oh..." She opened her lips, letting Treya's tongue into her mouth.

Atreya kissed her, tongue sliding in and out, so gentle. She moaned, fingers burying in Atreya's hair, sliding through the short, silken curls. It felt lovely, hot, incredibly arousing, Atreya warm, eager, close.

Now they just needed to lose the clothes. She ran her hand down along Atreya's back and then around to undo the ties at her throat. She could feel Atreya swallow against her fingers, feel her shiver.

Humming, she met Atreya's eyes, let her desires show. Atreya blushed, but held her gaze, pretty eyes heated.

"Do you want me?" she asked, voice low and husky.

"Yes." Atreya moaned, nodded. "I do."

"Oh. Oh, Majesty." She pushed up against her lover. "I'm right here. Take me."

"Take you where?" Atreya held her close, their bodies rubbing.

"Have me, I mean. I'm yours." Oh, she kept forgetting she was supposed to be playing the innocent.

"Oh." She got a warm smile, Atreya's hands sliding over her heavy skirts.

"Too many clothes," she murmured, pouting, fingers tugging again at Atreya's tunic.

"You have more than I do." Atreya chuckled, plucking at the heavy material.

"Yes, it must go, too. All these silly layers."

"They keep your legs warm?"

"Not as well as your leggings and tights do, Treya. In many, many ways it is a man's world, isn't it?"

"My father said so, yes." Atreya started helping her undress, actions clumsy.

She giggled. "Yes, a man would."

"Well, I haven't known many women to ask."

"Oh. Yes." She reached up to stroke Atreya's cheeks. "You have lived as a man in a man's world for so long, haven't you. My dear lady."

"Since as long as I can remember..." Atreya nuzzled into the touch, almost purring.

"You needed me then, needed a woman's touch, a woman to touch."

Those pretty eyes sparkled at her. "I did. I do."

"Then I'm glad I'm here to serve you, Majesty."

"Is that what they call this? Serving?" Her Treya did have a clever sense of humor.

She giggled, stroked Atreya's face again. "Yes, Majesty, I believe they do."

"Are there spoons involved?"

"Oh, Majesty! You **are** wicked!" She giggled louder, pushing up against Atreya's body.

Atreya released the ties of her corset, the boning loosening quickly.

She moaned as everything above her waist breathed in. "Oh... "

"Those things look like torture."

"Oh, I think you know a thing or two about such torture." She pushed her hands beneath Atreya's tunic, tugged at the bindings.

"Mine are softer." Oh, the husky tone in Treya's voice was addictive.

"Your breasts?" She pushed her fingers beneath the loosening bindings and stroked Treya's flesh.

"I... No. No, the..." Treya's eyes closed, lips parted.

She chuckled softly. "Oh, I think they're pretty soft..."

"Not all of them, Bittera."

"Oh, no. Not all of them." Her fingers slid and found Treya's hard nipples, tugged on them.

"I... Oh..." She could see the way Atreya's body tensed, hips bucking.

"Let me feel your pleasure, Treya." She kicked her leg free of her skirts and wrapped it around the back of Atreya's thighs, tugging Atreya down.

Atreya untied her skirts, her petticoats, easing the voluminous material down.

"Bittera. So beautiful."

"All for you, Treya. All for you."

It took time, both of them distracted by touches and kisses, but eventually they were nude and together beneath the covers.

Bittera fought the urge to roll Atreya onto her back and make her scream from pleasure. Instead, she continued to slide and move beneath Atreya's body, let Atreya lead.

Atreya's kisses, her touches, were more and more confident, more sure. Bittera let Atreya know how much she enjoyed each one, arching and moaning, begging softly for more.

"Beauty..." Atreya moaned, lips soft against her throat.

She moaned at the compliment, fingers sliding on Atreya's beautiful skin, letting her nails scrape occasionally.

Every scrape made Treya shiver, press closer.

Oh, yes, her Treya was sensual and fine and soon enough she would be able to show Atreya just how much she could take and enjoy.

Those heated lips slid lower, brushing her collarbone, her chest.

"Oh. Oh, yes, Treya. Please." Her fingers slid through Atreya's hair, pushing her lower suggestively.

Those warm lips wrapped around one of her nipples, pulling nice and firm and steady.

"Treya!" She cried out, body bucking. "Yes. Oh! Please."

Treya moaned, sucking harder, the look on her face pure bliss. Each suck tugged at her belly, flooded her with warmth, moisture. Treya's hands slid over her hips, down her thighs, rubbing, massaging her skin.

"Each touch of your fingers enflames me further," she murmured, moaned, pushing into the touches, legs spreading as she searched for the touch at her center that she needed.

Atreya moaned, nodded, fingers sliding on the wet skin on her inner thighs. Whimpering, Bittera pushed, shifted, trying to get Atreya's fingers higher -- against her clit, within her folds.

"Wanton one..." Oh, if Atreya only knew.

"For you," she replied.

Her own hands moved in seeming random patterns, but really, she was searching out sweet spots, seeing what touches would make Atreya tremble, make her cry out.

Atreya's fingers found her center, stroking her clit, her skin, the motions untutored and sweet. She shivered and shuddered, concentrated on the sensations, letting them take her. She bit her lip to keep from begging for more, to keep from demanding it harder and faster.

The touches continued, Atreya drawing faster and faster circles around her skin. She cried out, begging now, not able to stop, wordless, pleading sounds as her hips moved upon Atreya's fingers.

Atreya groaned, fingers moving faster, slipping deep inside her.

"Treya! Oh, so good." She moaned and whimpered, writhing. "You make me feel so alive."

"Good." Treya smiled against her skin, fingers and lips sending her soaring.

"Oh!" She cried out as her orgasm began, pleasure crashing along her skin like a wave.

Atreya's cheek was soft, warm on her belly.

She moaned softly, fingers sliding through Atreya's hair. "Oh, Treya... that was. Oh."

"Mmm... yes. Oh." Atreya's eyes closed.

"Such pleasure..."

She purred, floated in it a moment or two. There would be time enough to return the pleasure to Atreya.

It amazed Atreya, how fast the time passed with her days filled with planning and training and strategizing and her nights filled with Bittera and their ever-growing need.

She wasn't sure which was more distracting, more all-encompassing. Bittera was lovely and addictive, with skin as smooth as silk; the little sounds wanton and passionate. The preparations for war, though, were intense, necessary, familiar as breathing.

Atreya moved down the hall, cloak heavy around her shoulders, intending to bathe before another late meal where the state of the kingdom was discussed.

When she arrived there, a blindfold was placed over her eyes, the fingers that tied it were soft and familiar.

"Bittera?" Her eyes darted, trying to see beyond the blindfold.

"Sh, sh, no speaking," whispered her queen, the sound of the door closing and locking loud.

Her heart pounded, ears feeling as if they were twitching, listening for every sound.

Bittera's fingers slid along her back and then around to her front, slowly undoing the ties on her tunic. "There is no one but us here, Majesty," whispered Bittera.

"I..." She reached back, searching for her queen.

"No, Treya. No touching. Just feel."

She trembled, tongue slipping out to wet her lips, skin awake, alive.

She was stripped from head to toe, even her bindings and all her undergarments.

"This way," murmured Bittera, taking her hands and tugging.

"Bittera! I'm *naked*!" She followed, their fingers twined together.

There was a soft laugh. "Yes, I did notice."

Her hand was tugged, slid through warm water. "Nothing nefarious here, Treya. It's just your bath."

"Oh..." She moaned, nodded, eager to slide into the water.

Bittera helped her, guided her in. "Does the water feel good?"

"Mmm... yes. Warm. What is the blindfold for?"

"You wouldn't have noticed without it."

"Noticed?" She stretched, sliding in the water.

"How the water felt," murmured Bittera, right into her ear, breath warm. "How I feel."

Bittera slid against her in the water, body warm.

Warmer than the water.

"Oh." She moaned, the worries of the day fading, falling away.

Soft kisses slid over her lips, along her jaw. "That's it, Treya, just relax and feel it, let me do everything."

"My lady." Oh, so sweet. So heated.

"Yours, Treya."

Bittera began to wash her, a soft cloth running over her body before Bittera's hands returned, slippery with soap as they moved upon her skin. The sensation was sweet and erotic, causing a dull ache in the pit of her belly.

Then Bittera's hands slid across her breasts, not once, not twice, but three and four times, fingers trailing, lingering, sliding over her nipples.

"Oh. Oh, I... I think they're clean, lady." Clean and so hard they throbbed.

"I don't know..." Bittera's voice was soft, wicked and she wished she could see the look in those black eyes.

She moaned, shifted, breasts heavy in her lady's hands. Water splashed over them and then they were cupped again, raised a little and Bittera's lips closed over one nipple, drawing it into heat and sucking on it.

"Bittera!" She gasped, shifting, hands reaching to draw her lady-wife closer.

A sweet moan vibrated around her nipple and then Bittera let it go, treated the other one to the same sweet tugging between warm lips. The heat in her belly blossomed, soft cries filling the air.

Bittera's lips left her nipple again, pressing against her own this time as those soap-slicked fingers slid down her body, rubbing her belly and hips, pressing between her legs. She spread, eager and wanton as any whore, lips parting to accept Bittera's tongue.

Bittera's fingers had long lost their soap beneath the water of the tub, but they still slid across her mound several times, as if washing, before they parted the lips of her entrance and pushed right in. She gasped, eyes wide behind the blindfold.

Bittera's thumb found that little bundle of nerves that just made everything else increase tenfold, the fingers inside her moving hard, fast, unlike the gentle explorations they'd indulged in before. Lights sparked behind her eyes, her hips bucking, begging for more.

A moan filled her mouth, Bittera's breasts sliding against her own, Bittera's nipples hard points of flesh, digging in as if demanding notice. Her fingers found the hard nipples, rolling and tugging, whimpering as that made Bittera's touch deeper, more insistent.

"I knew you'd be like this," murmured Bittera, fingers sliding in her, pushing her higher.

"How?" The word was almost a cry, the water splashing around them.

"You were so repressed, Treya. Bound and held tight. I knew there had to be something to hold in so hard."

"I do what...what I must, love."

"As do I, Atreya. As do I."

Then Bittera's lips closed over her again, hard and sure, like the fingers inside her, drawing her pleasure out, insisting on it. Heat washed over her, her entire body bowing with the pleasure, the pressure.

"That's it, my king. Feel it, feel your body."

Lightning seemed to flash, sparking every nerve within her.

Bittera moaned softly, fingers still moving, thumb working hard, keeping that lightning flashing.

Her head rolled, the pleasure slowly building again. "Bittera..."

"Yes, Treya?" Bittera's fingers never stopped.

"I... Oh..." She didn't have words for the sensations moving through her.

Bittera just purred and those lips were back around one of her nipples, Bittera's teeth sharp for a second before disappearing and the warm tugging beginning again. She gasped, the bite a sweet, bright shock.

Her gasp seemed to drive Bittera's fingers harder, faster, thumb just driving her wild. Her knees drew up, spreading farther, offering more.

"Oh, Treya, you offer me yourself so beautifully. So wantonly." Bittera made a sound that she thought was maybe a purr, mouth sliding along her neck.

"You fill me with such need..."

Bittera made the purring noise again, fingers sliding on her, spreading her and playing inside her. Her own fingers drew Bittera close, stroked the long damp hair.

"Will you trust me, Treya?" Bittera asked, rubbing against her.

"Always, lady-mine." Beyond all good sense or reason.

"Good, good. I'm going to make you fly."

Bittera's fingers continued to tease inside her and then they slid away and something else pressed against her, something solid, hard, pushing into her.

She went still, gasping, thighs trembling. "Love?"

"Trust me, Treya. I will not harm you, I swear it. Only pleasure."

One of Bittera's hands slid along her thighs, soothing.

The words and touch relaxed her, eased her. "Only, pleasure."

"Yes, Treya. Only pleasure."

Her lips were taken, one nipple tugged, distracting her from the hard, blunt object sliding into her. The pressure stretched her, made the dull ache in her body stronger, fiercer. The object slid away and was pushed back in again. Then again.

Her shoulders curled, lips parting on a groan. So good. So much.

Bittera's teeth slid along her earlobe and then Bittera sucked on it, the thing inside her moving and moving, one of Bittera's fingers hitting that small bundle of nerves again and again.

Everything inside her tightened, rippled, thighs hard as stones. "Oh, please..."

Bittera purred. "So beautiful. You're flushed with heat and pleasure. Need."

"Yes. Yes. I need." She nodded, face turning, seeking Bittera's mouth.

Bittera gave her the kisses she wanted, feeding them to her one after the other, that hardness inside her sliding relentlessly, driving her higher and higher. When the pressure released, it was as if stars had exploded behind her eyes, entire body relaxing.

The thing inside her was gone, Bittera resting against her, fingers smoothing over her belly, her sides, just soothing, gentle touches, like the soft kisses that anointed her lips.

She had no words, just soft, happy, satisfied sounds, arms and legs floating in the water. Bittera seemed content to float with her, gentle touches continuing until the water grew cool and Bittera helped her from the tub.

The blindfold was removed as they pressed together, kissing as they dried one another.

"Shall we take the passageway and sneak into your chambers, Majesty?"

Atreya nodded, eyes searching for her clothes. "We should."

Bittera plucked them from near the door, grinning mischievously as she handed them over.

Atreya felt her cheeks heat. "Wicked woman."

"You make me want all manner of wicked things, Treya," murmured Bittera, black eyes lowering coquettishly.

She let her eyes go wide, shocked. "There is **more**?"

Bittera laughed and grinned and took her hand, squeezing it. "My maids? Ladies of the world."

"Yes, and you are an innocent."

"Indeed, I am." Bittera gave her a wee curtsy, eyes teasing.

She swatted Bittera's hind end gently, her own laugh fond.

Bittera giggled. "Oh, I see you have some ideas of your own, Majesty."

Their laughter echoed against the stones, the flicker of the sconces making Bittera look mysterious.

Bittera dressed her, binding her breasts loosely and pulling her robe around her, closing it tightly in front.

"Come with me, Majesty."

Atreya nodded, fingers twining with Bittera's.

Bittera gave her a warm smile, pressing close as they made their way to her rooms.

Atreya stayed cuddled against Bittera, enjoying the peace between them, the warm melted peace that their lovemaking brought her.

This taking a queen business was turning out quite well.

Chapter Six

Bittera waited in Atreya's chambers, quite naked beneath the covers. The armies left in the morning, Atreya at their head. This was supposed to be their last night together.

So far, Bittera had been alone.

Bittera was getting angry, too. Atreya had promised her a last night, and now Atreya was with her generals. The same generals who would be leaving with her.

Bittera growled and got out of bed, wrapping herself in a blanket and beginning to pace. The moon was already up, the night would be fading quickly.

Atreya came through the doors, curls shorn to the scalp, dragon-lord helmet huge and black in her hands.

Bittera gasped. "Atreya!" She hurried to her lover's side, hand reaching out, but not touching the poor scalp.

"They had to go. I won't have much chance to wash them." Atreya reached out, took one of her hands.

"You look so... stark." She squeezed Atreya's hand and then took the helmet and put it on the low table by the fire. "No matter. Tonight you are mine."

"Yes. Yours." Atreya sighed softly. "I have never regretted leaving for war before."

Bittera hummed softly. "I wish you didn't have to go."

"I will return and if I do not, the lands will be in your care."

Bittera nodded. Only a few short months ago, she would have prayed for her king to die upon the battlefield. "You will return."

"I will." Atreya tilted her face, leaned down to take a slow, sweet kiss, the act eager and dear.

She pressed herself close, this time letting her fingers slide over Atreya's shorn head, moaning softly at the way the stubble scratched against her skin.

"It will grow, lady-mine. When I return, it will be as before."

"I know. I would have had you as you were one last time, Treya. You are no man," she whispered.

"No, but I am no woman either. I am... a King."

"My king," she murmured, pressing another kiss upon Atreya.

"Yes, Bittera. Your own, so long as I live."

"You will live, Atreya. For a very long time." She would assure it, her incantations and sigils of protection all ready to be whispered and written on Atreya's skin.

Bittera began to undress her lover, fingers sure, confident. There was no room for the blushing bride here this night. Atreya's hands found her hair, combing through it, draping it over her shoulders. She let the sheet fall from her body as she stripped Atreya, pushed her lover down onto the bed and climbed up after.

"You're beautiful... I would fight a thousand battles for you." Atreya's eyes shone.

"And I would have you home with me, safe, sexy, sensual. In my bed."

"That sounds like heaven." Atreya nuzzled into her throat, tongue sliding against her skin.

"No, Treya, this is heaven, right here, right now."

Her fingers explored Atreya's skin, the smooth warmth like silk under her skin. Atreya's hands echoed hers, stroking and petting.

"Mmm, love you, my king." She lay down against Atreya, undulating, sliding.

"As I love you, my queen." Atreya pressed against her, shoulder to hip, so close.

Their loving was slow and sweet, bodies moving together, rolling together.

"I will dream of this, of us, again and again..." Atreya's lips were soft on her breasts, her shoulders.

"Yes, Treya. As will I. If we dream together? We will be together in our dreams."

"Swear it." The words were almost a moan.

She laughed softly, oh, she would guarantee it indeed. "I swear it, my king."

"Good." Atreya surged up, lips covering hers, tongue pressing deep.

She moaned, rolling them so Atreya was on top of her. She slid her hands along the long spine, the rounded ass. Atreya rubbed against her, curls soft and damp against her thigh. She parted her legs, rolling her hips up against Atreya.

Their passion flared, heat blazing between them, Atreya pressing her down into the mattress. She moaned and pushed up against Atreya, meeting passion for passion.

"My love." Her hands were kissed, her wrists.

"Yours. All yours." She stroked Atreya's lips, her cheeks. Heat filled her, Atreya's passion washing over her in waves.

She drew her sigils of protection and ownership over Atreya's skin, breathing the incantations into Atreya's lips. Each level of magic made Atreya arch, twist.

"I love you," she murmured, fingers sliding into Atreya, painting the symbols there in Atreya's own juices.

"I love you. My Queen. My Bittera."

"Good," she answered, voice fierce.

Her magics finished, she rolled Atreya onto her back, attacking the lovely lips, tongue pushing in. Atreya's hands tangled in her hair, tugging them closer together, keeping them joined.

She rubbed against Atreya's body, shifting so they each rubbed up against a thigh. Her fingers found the small, hard nipples that seemed to be waiting just for her, pushing into her touch. Atreya arched, moaning into her mouth, tongue sliding against hers over and over, so hungry. She pinched Atreya's nipples, her own hunger lit by Atreya's, enflamed by Atreya's need.

They thrust and rubbed, both so wet, so hot, the scent of them sweet and heady upon the air. She bit at Atreya's lips, drawing blood and sucking it, licking and lapping and taking that essence, the proof of her Atreya's life, into herself.

"Hungry. Will you starve without me?"

"Yes. You will come back to find me so ravenous I will eat you up."

"There are much worse fates, my lady." Atreya's eyes twinkled up at her.

She laughed. "Oh, I will miss this, miss your humor along with everything else, Treya."

Atreya kissed her jaw, her chin. "And I will miss your smile, your eyes."

"Just close your eyes and think on me and they will be with you again, Majesty."

"I hope so, lady-mine." Then Treya took her lips, conversation over, words unnecessary.

She rubbed and stroked and pinched and moaned, writhing atop her King. No longer a shrinking virgin, her Atreya made her fly, sent her higher and higher.

When she came it was a shaking, shuddering, trembling affair, Atreya's name on her lips. Atreya tumbled along after her, eyes dark with need, lips parted.

She moaned softly, hands moving on Atreya's face, fingers tracing the much-loved features.

Oh yes, this would have been so much easier if her emotions had not become involved, if she had been rooting for the White City to lose its King and leave her as Queen to rule in Atreya's stead.

Atreya kissed and nuzzled her fingers, smiling and quiet.

"I love you, Atreya," she murmured. She might not like it, but given it was true, she would not let Atreya go without knowing she meant it.

"I know, lady-mine. You are my heart."

"Yes. Do not forget while you attend the heartless business of war."

"I will not. Our armies will overcome."

"Yes. I believe you will." Bittera gazed down at her lover, memorizing Atreya's features once again.

"Rest with me; tomorrow will be here too soon."

"Yes, my Treya. I will stay awake for what is left of the night and hold you until you must go." Atreya kissed her again, eyes so serious. "Beware the younger captains. They hunger for power and believe you an easy target."

"Do you think I can be so easily swayed from your side, my king?" She would have the captains for breakfast.

"No, lady, but I would not be kind not to mention it."

"Thank you for the warning, Majesty. Perhaps you should mention to them that I will brook no insubordination or any act that could be considered treason against my King."

Atreya nodded. "It has been done."

"Good."

She settled next to Atreya, touching and stroking the fine skin, committing it to memory as well.

Tomorrow would come too soon.

They made good time into the mountains, the horses fresh, morale high. They sang as they rode, bawdy songs, war tunes, songs of home and victory. Atreya led the troops higher and higher, the winds beginning to whip, the snows threatening, clouds heavy and dark.

Atreya enjoyed this part -- the camaraderie, the noise, the hours in the saddle.

Of course, the food cooked in the fire? The cold bed roll? The bitter tea that they all drank to keep their strength up?

Those she could do without.

She was beginning to worry that going without Bittera was going to be the biggest challenge. Ridiculous, given that Bittera was a witch and she was a soldier and they weren't fools and...

Atreya missed her.

She missed the sex and the touching, the conversation, the laughter.

She missed being able to be herself.

She missed...

"Your majesty!"

She looked up into the face of one of the runners. "Yes?"

"General Reia says the snows are coming. We should camp early."

She looked into the sky, the clouds threatening, the winds beginning to blow, and she nodded. "Yes. Halt the troops."

It was time for another long night.

Bittera sat behind the big table in Atreya's office pondering the fact that she was not particularly happy.

She should have been.

She was in charge of the kingdom.

The King had, naturally, left his Queen behind to run things. She had absolute power until the time Atreya returned. For longer should Atreya not return. It was the reason she had come to the White City, after all.

The perfect scenario had presented itself. She could have even assured that the King would not return. She found herself terribly reluctant to do so.

It wasn't that she disliked the work. It wasn't that she found ruling to be tedious. It wasn't even that her bed was cold and lonely, she could have remedied that had she wished.

No, it was because she had indeed fallen in love with Atreya.

She missed their evening tea and discussions. She missed the warm, smooth skin pressed against her own. She missed Atreya's smile, her laughter.

Following the custom of Atreya's people, she lit a candle in the window of Atreya's bedchamber. "A light to keep your hearth warm until your return, my love," she murmured, staring out into the darkness as it began to snow.

The dreams started as the snows grew deeper, each day less and less ground covered, another mount lost. They huddled together for warmth -- all but her, she remained alone, in solitude, protecting her secret. In her dreams, though, she reached for Bittera, for the warmth and softness of the pale skin.

Atreya would remember all the things she could every night before she slept -- the darkness of Bittera's eyes, the way their nightly tea tasted, the smell of the soap her Queen worked into the long hair.

Atreya wrapped the furs tight about her, Bittera's name on her lips as she dozed.

Atreya Her name whispered around her, stroked along her spine like fingers.

She moaned, stretched, heart and soul reaching out for her lady. Fingers slid over her skin, chilling her back, breath warm against her neck. *Atreya, my love*

Yours. She burned, ached for that touch.

A soft moan vibrated against her, breath sliding into her mouth, warm and tasting of Bittera.

Oh, yes. She could feel Bittera, soft and smooth against her. Warm. Perfect. Bittera's tongue slid between her lips, fingers roaming her chest, pushing beneath the bindings to tease her breasts, pinch her nipples.

Oh. Hot. So hot. She shivered, hand sliding down her body, dipping into her leggings. Another moan from Bittera filled her, the soft body pressing close, rubbing against her.

She needed, ached for the touch, that soft, hot tongue. Bittera seemed to read her needs, her dream lover sliding down her body, mouth open on her skin. One nipple was found, taken between warm lips and tugged.

"Love." The word slipped from her, unbidden, needy.

"Yours," said Bittera, the word a whisper against her skin. Then her other nipple was given the same treatment, Bittera's fingers loving the skin of her belly, her back, her ass.

It wasn't perfect, because it wasn't real, but it was enough.

For now.

A sharp nip to her breast pulled her away from those thoughts, brought her focus quickly back to the dream woman who pleased her. She arched, gasped, hands burying in soft, silken hair.

Bittera's mouth slid on her, moved along her belly, tongue stopping to play in her navel, to taste and touch and pleasure her.

"Bittera..." She wasn't cold anymore, she was burning alive.

"My king..."

Those lips and tongue, so hot and soft, driving her mad, continued down, slipped past the barrier of her leggings as if they were non-existent. Her curls were licked, combed by Bittera's teeth and then... oh, she had never even dreamed of such a thing!

She spread and arched, aching at the touch, body shuddering. Bittera's moan was loud, breath hot against her most private place.

Oh, heavens. She needed. So badly. Now. Lover.

As if Bittera could read her thoughts, her lover's hot tongue slid along her flesh, teasing the bundle of nerves that made her writhe before pushing right into her body. Heat flooded her, hips jerking in quick, sharp motions, nipples tight as stones.

Bittera's tongue picked up her rhythm, pushing into her over and over again. One of Bittera's fingers slid across the small mound of flesh with its nerves, playing her. Oh, she needed, the sensation perfect and she gave herself over to it.

Bittera seemed to need to take no breath, tongue slipping and sliding and pushing deep, lapping at her. Moans filled her, the sounds pushed into her along with Bittera's tongue. Everything around her slid away until there was only Bittera's tongue which opened her, shattered her. Higher and higher Bittera pushed her, tongue relentless, as were the fingers that slid across the center of her need.

Everything inside her shattered into a million stars, her breath gasping from her. Bittera stole it, lips hard on hers, fingers seeming to cling.

It felt as if someone was tearing her queen from her arms and she thought she heard a soft whisper. "Call for me, Treya."

She nodded, almost sobbing as the beloved heat faded.

"Love..." The winds whispered and then wailed, blowing freezing air against her cheeks and she was most definitely alone.

The winter seemed as if it would never end.

The city was quite snowed in, winter having returned with a vengeance just when they thought it was waning.

Bittera put everyone on rations, generous rations as surely the cold and bitter wind would cease soon enough, but rations nonetheless. It was better to be cautious now than to fail to provide for the city until the snows were gone and new crops yielding their fruit.

It also proved to the denizens of the city that she could make the hard decisions in Atreya's absence. That she *would* make them.

And now she had this oh so earnest -- at least so he would have her believe -- young captain attempting to get into her skirts.

Oh, he was there under the guise of apprising her of the reserve guard's progress, but this one had been pressing his luck from the start. She had grown more and more obvious in her refusals, but she feared she would soon be forced to ensure some unfortunate accident befell the lad.

"If there was nothing else, Selrick, I have other business to attend to." It was a pointed enough dismissal. She expected it to go quite over his head.

"Do you not need attendants, my lady? Someone to assure your every need is met."

"I really do not see how my needs are any of your concern, Selrick." She looked down her nose at the young man. It would be so satisfying to fly at him, teeth and claws bared, to rend his flesh from his bones and fill a need long banked.

She did not.

"I care for you, my queen. You are the most perfect among women."

She bit back her snort. "And that is why your King chose me as his consort. And now I must continue his business."

Dismissal number two. In the past it had taken at least three before Selrick would go. Once it had been as high as seven.

"It is unhealthy to dwell upon his absence alone, my queen." She could simply drown him.

"I am hardly alone, Selrick. There are wives enough in my same plight that we can support each other for an eternity. In fact I should be assuring myself that the rations will last us through the rest of this snowy season. Shall I call someone to escort you back to the barracks?" She had no time for this, it grew dark and she wished to sleep, to dream herself into Atreya's arms again.

"No. No, indeed. I will keep watch outside your door, lest you find need of me."

She drew herself up, bit back her hiss. "I **have** a guard, Selrick. And ladies-in-waiting. Your services are **not** needed."

Selrick blushed dark and nodded. "Yes, yes of course. I did not mean to offend."

"Of course not, but I trust that in the future you will not **presume** to know your queen's mind." She stood, looking down at him, nose high. Silly twit.

"Yes. Yes, of course. Forgive me."

"Forgiven, Selrick. See that you do not need my forgiveness again." With that she turned her back to him, dismissing him utterly as she picked up a scroll from the table.

"Yes, my queen. Thank you." The door shut, leaving her in silence.

She shook her head and cleared the desk of its scrolls, shutting them in the big chest and locking it. Then, pocketing the keys, she hurried out, taking the secret passages that would lead her to Atreya's bedchamber. She needed to ready herself for her journey into Atreya's dreams. It took time and effort, this far away.

She had no time for lackeys and silly captains who thought they could achieve greatness through her. She was no one's path to success but her own.

Once in Atreya's rooms, she barred the door and stripped, sliding the bodice dagger she'd begun to carry since Atreya's departure beneath the pillows. She pulled the curtains closed, burying herself beneath the warmth of Atreya's sheets and blankets and furs.

It still smelled of her lover, though that scent was growing fainter each day. Clinging to it, she slid into sleep, mind already searching for her lover's call.

Atreya wasn't well, was cold and struggling, but those dream-lips turned up toward her, begging a kiss.

She licked her way across them, tongue leaving a wet trail behind.

She could hear the gasp, feel the heat of Atreya against her. *Bittera.*

Yes, my love. You called for me and I came. Just like she'd promised.

In truth, these clandestine dream-meetings were her rewards for dealing with idiots like Selrick all day long, day after day.

Moaning, she pressed against Atreya's body, sharing her warmth, her need. Atreya's hands were eager, sliding over her skin, stroking and holding her. She wormed her own fingers beneath the clothing Atreya wore, finding the small breasts with their delightful nipples. Moaning, she tugged them, pulling them to hardness.

So eager, so responsive, she could feel Atreya's need surrounding her. She pushed her tongue into Atreya's mouth, warming her lover with her very breath. Atreya's lips surrounded her tongue, sucking gently, then more and more desperately.

She moved against Atreya, sliding one leg between her lover's, giving Atreya something to rub against. Oh. So hot. So wet. So needy. Atreya's desire was a palpable thing, making her soar. She moved against Atreya, building the desire, the need.

Her mouth left her lover's and she found one of those nipples, wrapping her tongue around it, sucking.

My Lady! Please! Long fingers slid between them, slipping and sliding into her folds.

She echoed the movements, giving her Treya what she herself was given. Her fingers sank inside Atreya's heat. Love and need, devotion and pleasure -- they were offered to her without hesitation. She returned them with her own, Atreya had indeed taken her heart, her soul.

She gloried in Treya's passion, in the eager desperation obvious in the dream. She fed that passion, slid her fingers eagerly inside Atreya, palm rubbing on the small bundle of nerves.

Love! Atreya's pleasure tasted of honey within her.

Yes! Mine!

Atreya's pleasure flowed through her as if it were her own.

Atreya's forehead seemed to rest against her own. *Yours.*

My own Treya

She breathed into her lover's lips again, fighting the pull back into her own body -- once they'd spent, it was not easy to remain.

Miss you.

I'm just a thought away, Atreya.

Then you are oft close.

Yes, Majesty.

She felt her lover fade away, the distance between them growing and then she was once again in Atreya's bed, safe and warm in the castle.

Chapter Seven

Exhausted.

She was exhausted. The enemy had waited for them -- she'd known it was a chance and only the fact that the main armies were split eased the agony of losing so many.

Their final fight would come at dawn. Atreya was outnumbered, outflanked. Her men were wounded and broken; the horses lame. Still, it would be a strong showing. It would be a proud thing, her last stand.

She curled into her blankets, the night before battle never long enough, never dark enough.

There was a soft whisper of air through her hair, almost a name. She sighed, reaching out for her lady, reaching out for one last touch.

Atreya Bittera purred and slid into her arms, somehow there as she had been night after night.

She drew Bittera close, hands moving as if she was going to memorize every inch, remember it forever. Soft and silken, smooth, her Lady. Her Queen. Her Love.

Soft lips pressed against her own, Bittera's tongue hot inside her mouth. She kissed, tongue pushing against her lover's, sliding against the sweet heat. Bittera's body was hot atop her own, pushing her down into her furs.

*I need you, beloved. So badly."

I'm here. I'm yours. Bittera's fingers were warm, sliding over her skin knowingly.

She nodded and gasped, pushing into the touch.

You are the finest instrument, my Treya

Miss you. I will... I love you.

You'll be home soon, I can feel it.

She smiled, nodded in her dream, although she knew it to be a lie. *The battle is soon over.*

Yes, Treya. You wear my mark. You will not be harmed. Bittera's body moved, slid, pushed against her.

You are my love, my heart. She was wet, needing, nipples tight.

Yes. Yours. Always. Bittera slid down her body, mouth attaching to one nipple, fingers sliding on her stomach, her sides, thumbs pressing against her hips.

Until the end of time. She nodded, arched, pushed into the touch.

Bittera made no reply, but the soft body moved against hers, hands sliding and slipping, finding all the places that made her cry out and shiver. She left behind her fear and sorrow, focused on the pleasure, the heat all around her.

Slender fingers pushed between her legs, slid against her wetness, the touches teasing. She spread, hips riding Bittera's fingers. Bittera's purrs slipped along her skin like another caress, her lover's breath warm on her nipple.

I miss you. She arched, nipple drawing up tight.

I am always with you. Her nipple was taken in again, sucked, as Bittera's fingers pushed unerringly into her.

Yes... Oh, she ached, body burning.

Three fingers pushed into her, playing against the inner walls of her body, sending pleasure out from wherever they touched her. Oh, yes. Yes, she needed. She would take this pleasure with her into the dawn.

Then I must make it as much as I can Bittera had read her mind, fingers driving her harder, palm rubbing against the bundle of nerves at the apex of her folds. *Do not forget that I go with you.*

Never. You are forever on my mind. She bucked, breath catching.

Bittera's fingers pushed and twisted. *Inside you*

In me. Yes. Her body clenched, went tight.

Bittera's palm rubbed relentlessly against the small bundle of nerves, sending pleasure through her whole body.

I... Heat washed through her, sweeter than anything.

We. The word whispered in her mind, Bittera's pleasure a share of her own, making it larger instead of diminishing it.

She nodded. Yes. We. Them. Forever.

Always.

She held onto that as Bittera's phantom presence drifted away.

Bittera hurried to the study to meet with the general who waited for her.

She knew what he was going to say. Atreya had been wounded, her spirits were low. They were losing this war. Her lover had not even been calling for her, some strange fog separating them, though Bittera could feel Atreya's presence still, it was muted. She could only assume it was the drugs the healer was giving Atreya.

Her crown was heavy upon her head as she swept into the room. The general looked old, looked as if he had ridden hard and long, his face haggard, his hair gone pure white.

"What news?" she demanded, ignoring the usual niceties.

The general dropped to one knee. "Your majesty. I... The king is dead. Long live the queen."

She could feel the color drain from her face. "What!" It could not be! She could still feel Atreya within her.

"The enemy took him at the final battle. The prisoners were searched by our spies, the camp, Atreya was not among them."

She shook her head. "Then they took him and hid him so that no one would know he still lived."

"No, my queen. Our relief arrived, the camp was razed. Our king was not among them."

"I tell you he is still alive." She drew herself up, back stiff. "I can feel him still."

"Yes, your majesty. Still, he cannot rule."

"Well. There is that." She nodded and pointed to a chair at Atreya's desk as she went and sat on the other side. "Come and tell me where we stand. And I would hear your advice as to what moves we should make next."

She would not believe Atreya was dead. Would **not**.

The general smelled of horse and sorrow. "The troops hold the pass; the cavalry backed them beyond the Maika Pass. The thaws will hit us hard. We cannot be in the pass when the rivers run."

"So what you are saying is that we must retreat at just the right moment. If we time it right, Widdart's men will attempt to follow us through the pass and be washed away by the thaw-swollen rivers, yes?"

"We can hope it will be so, yes."

"Do we have any alternatives?" It was a risky move -- brilliant if they succeeded, foolish if they failed.

"We can push into the pass and beyond. The losses will be great, but the chance of success increased."

"Can you wait for the reserve forces to catch up to you?" That too would increase their chances, though it would leave the castle and city virtually undefended.

"My orders are to protect the castle, my queen."

"Orders from whom?" She was Queen now, that made her word law, even among the generals.

"From our lost King, your majesty."

"Oh." She could countermand the order, but she truly believed Atreya was still alive and did not want to countermand her orders. Not if they could win this war and she could effect a rescue of their king.

"What course of action would you suggest, General?"

"Atreya would have drawn the enemy in and drowned them."

She nodded. Minimize the loss of life and if it failed, they still had the army to fight, the reserves back home. "Then that is what we shall do. I want you to organize a small rescue party. I will lead them into the enemy's capital myself and find out where they are keeping Atreya, effect a rescue."

"A rescue, my lady?"

"The king is not dead. I know this. They must have taken him to the capital city. We will rescue him."

She got a look of pure incredulousness. "My lady..."

"Yes, General? You tell me your king was taken. You tell me your spies did not see him among the prisoners in their camp. You tell me he was not among those freed when the camp was taken. Then they must have taken him to the capital city."

"You are a woman, my queen. The trip is treacherous."

"And who am I to trust to make the trip if I do not make it myself? Who do I trust to bring our king back to us?"

"I will go, my lady. I will see if he lives."

"No. You believe he is dead, whereas I know he lives. I do not see the point of sending you."

"You cannot make the trip, Lady. Women do not war."

"Then find me someone who believes my king is alive," she snapped. She was better equipped for this mission than any man, little though they knew.

"Yes, my queen. I will send your advisors immediately." The general almost ran from the room, heavy riding boots clacking upon the stones.

She began to pace. She needed to return to Atreya's rooms. To push into her lover's dreams and assure herself that the haze between them these last days had been injury and drugs, not death's hold. Instead she was stuck waiting for her advisors.

There were twelve of them -- old men to the last of them, some still mourning Atreya's lost father.

She quickly outlined the situation to them. "The General is assembling a team to go rescue the king. I believe our best course of action is to send the rescue party out right away, quietly and without fanfare. Meanwhile our troops that hold the pass will retreat just in time to avoid the flooding. When Widdart's troops follow, they will be caught in the thaws and our troops will finish off the rest."

"Rescue? My lady? The king is dead."

"No. He most certainly is not. That is what the enemy would have us believe but it is not true. A wife knows these things."

At this rate she would have to call upon Selrick and effect the rescue herself. And when Atreya returned, she would suggest decimating this group of boobs and finding some younger, bolder advisors to help guide the kingdom.

"Perhaps, my lady," The eldest advisor, a gentle man with kind eyes, touched her hand. "It is a wife's fondest wish."

"It is my fondest wish, Broyan. It is also truth. There is a bond between us. And it has not yet been severed. Besides, would any of you take the risk that our King is still alive, in

the clutches of the enemy? I do not speak of sending a whole battalion on this mission. Only a few people."

"Then we will send a few soldiers to search for Atreya, to ease your mind, your heart."

"Hand picked by the general for their abilities as spies and assassins," she insisted. And if they refused? She would go herself. Even if it meant she had to return to her original form.

"Anything you require, your Majesty." Twelve grey heads nodded in unison.

"Very well. We will follow Atreya's course with the addition of a rescue party. You are dismissed until morning."

"Yes, my lady." They filed out, clucking and wagging their beards.

She rolled her eyes at them. No wonder Atreya had spent her life as a man.

She composed a letter for a runner to take to the troops at the pass, ordering them to stay until they risked drowning themselves, and then to abandon the pass and wait for anyone not caught in the thaw.

Then she hurried to Atreya's chambers, desperate to reach out to her lover, her king.

She moved through her routine as if in a dream, but then could not settle, could not sink into the trance she needed to find Atreya, too wound up, too worried.

Growling at herself, she paced until she was exhausted and then began again, curled naked in the sheets that no longer smelled of her lover.

Atreya

The flutter against her mind was almost nonexistent. She latched onto it, following it, flying through the night, through time and space, searching for her Atreya. The connection faded in and out, as if Atreya was unwilling to be found.

Atreya!

She grew more frantic, the longer she searched.

Leave me. A wave of shame and agony struck her.

No. Always. Remember. Always. She followed the wave, searching for the heat of her lover.

She found Atreya naked, bloody and bruised, chained against a stone in the snows.

"Atreya!* She flew to her lover, wrapping around Atreya, sharing her heat.

The king is dead, beloved. Go.

No. I am coming for you. She pressed their lips together, letting Atreya have her breath.

Atreya's eyes were filled with tears. "I will never lead troops again. Never."

We come to rescue you. She kissed away the tears, taking the salt into herself.

*And when they find me? Better to leave my h... honor... my memory intact."

Then I will come alone and they will never know.

I love you. The words were low, simple. Heartfelt.

*Yes, my Treya. As I love you. And you must trust me, even if I am something... terrible."

Nothing you are is more terrible than what they have done to me.

She cried out, wrapping around Atreya. *I will take your revenge for you, my king."

Atreya nodded, chains clanking as they moved together. *Yours.*

You must hold on, beloved. I will come for you.

You may not want me, in the end.

No, Treya, you will find me a consistent lover. She gave Atreya as much strength and warmth as she could.

Atreya's lips brushed her cheek. *I would have faced it again. For you.*

I pray you still feel the same way upon the next sundown.

Love is eternal.

Yes And they would see upon the morrow, would they not? See if Atreya would truly be able to look past appearances and see who Bittera truly was. *Sleep now, my king. Look for me with the dawn.*

Yes, beloved. Yes. Her Treya sounded stronger, more sure.

Love you, Treya. Love you. She stroked Atreya's cheeks and pressed one last kiss upon her lover's lips.

She didn't want to slip away, didn't want to leave, but she could not go to Atreya's rescue unless she was back in her own body.

She ended up back in Atreya's bed, curled in the blankets. There were tears on her cheeks she had no memory of shedding and her skin was cold.

And she knew what she must do.

Her orders were rewritten, taking the rescue team out of the picture - Atreya could not be found by anyone but her in that condition.

She burned the original set of orders, put her seal on the second and left a note for the staff that she was not to be disturbed. There was no reason why she should not be back in a day or two. Then she would just need a virgin's blood. Hopefully there were one or two left in the castle.

Bittera locked herself once again in Atreya's rooms and removed her clothing. She pushed open the window, readying it.

Then she took a knife and a bowl and slit her wrist.

Chapter Eight

Atreya stopped trying to open her eyes as the sun rose. She had never hurt so, within and without, never been so eager to cross the veil and embrace death.

She would never lead soldiers again, never look at their faces and take joy in planning attack.

Never.

It took a few moments for the screams of horror and pain to register, to realize they grew closer.

She cracked an eye, looking, almost curious.

The soldiers' camp was in the distance, and it seemed to be in chaos. People were screaming, shouting, running. There was black smoke everywhere and something large and dark and winged flew over it.

She supposed she should be horrified, but she lacked the energy, so she didn't bother. She simply called out to her lover. The dark thing over the camp turned sharply, made a sound that hurt her ears and headed in her direction.

Her eyes did open then, wide and shocked, searching.

It was hard to make it out as anything more than black and twisted until it stopped and landed in front of her, the ground shaking for a moment.

A demon, for surely you could call it nothing else, stood before her. Smaller now that it was no longer in the air, misshapen, skin black, as if burned, and bumpy. The thing's mouth was twisted, dark toothed, its gnarled hands curled, ragged nails at the end of each finger.

Its eyes... she knew those eyes.

"Bittera." She smiled, slumped in her bonds. One way or another, the men would not hurt her again; she was saved as her lady had promised.

"Yesssssss." The sound was little more than a hiss, the grimace on the beast's face known to her as a smile only because she knew how to read those eyes.

The demon came close, her Bittera's skin cold against her own as Bittera grabbed the chains that bound her and broke them. She would have fallen, but her lady caught her, broken bones screaming.

Bittera put her head back and cried out, the sound terrifying and yet, to her, oddly soothing -- she knew that sound was not aimed at her.

"Love. Please." She wanted to leave this place, go far away.

"Yesssss." Great, huge wings unfolded and they were lifted into the air in choppy bursts.

They flew over the soldiers' encampment, the entire place razed to the ground, corpses burning. The only men left alive were still screaming, many with their eyes missing, open mouths revealing no tongue.

She curled into Bittera, moaning low. She felt...

Avenged.

They circled the camp twice, the first time Bittera swooped down, one huge, clawed hand knocking the fire into a tent, sending it aflame. The second pass proved there were none left unharmed.

They turned toward her lands, seeming to float with great speed.

"Love." Her head spun, breath catching in her chest.

"Looove." The word was strange, but recognizable and she was held closer, tighter, their speed increasing. "Huuuurt baaaaad."

She nodded, crying softly, holding on.

"Hooooome."

They kept moving, her lands flying by beneath them, the city growing larger ahead of them.

"They can't see me."

"Yesssss."

They flew higher into the skies, higher and higher, the air growing as cold as her beloved's body.

When the castle lay beneath them, Bittera's wings wrapped around her and they plummeted down toward the tower that held her chambers.

She closed her eyes, trusted implicitly in her lover, her demon, her Queen.

Down and down they went, Bittera aiming them directly for the window. They flew through it, Bittera landing quietly, softly.

She was set down carefully in the middle of her bed, one clawed hand stroking at her cheek, those eyes full of love and sadness and wild fury.

"Don't leave me. Stay with me."

Bittera held out a hand. "Uuuugllly."

She held out her own hand, bloodied and broken. "Love."

Those eyes grew soft and the bent and twisted, blackened form of her lover climbed into the bed and wrapped around her.

Atreya cuddled in, eyes closing. Her lady. Her savior.

Bittera made a growling, rumbling noise, clawed hand gentle, sliding on her hip, and she realized her lover was crooning to her.

Oh. Home. She kissed the rough skin, thanking Bittera before sinking, falling into a deep sleep and escaping her pain.

Bittera was angry.

Furious.

Were her love not wrapped in her arms she would fly to the skies and scream until blood flowed freely from the ears of every one of Widdart's people. The revenge she had taken upon the soldiers who'd harmed her Treya, that had not been enough to feed her lust for revenge, for blood.

She knew her rage was enhanced by wearing the skin of the demon. That was the reason she wore it.

But her king was returned, the men who did this to her punished, it was time to return to the more shapely form that would allow her to care for her King, to prepare the way for Atreya's triumphant return.

She rolled out of the bed, feeling heavy as stone, feeling as ancient as she was. She needed that virgin.

The stones were cold against her feet, chilling her. She could hear people walking about, beginning to wake. She slipped along the hidden passageways to her chambers. The

youngest of her maids-in-waiting, a sweet girl with shy eyes was surely a virgin. Bittera would use her.

Opening the door to her antechamber, she hissed the girl's name.

It didn't take long, but it was a messy, messy business and once she was again wearing the smooth, perfect skin of Bittera, the dead girl's body lay on the floor in a large puddle of her own blood.

Atreya moaned softly, distracting her. The hearth was dead and cold; their rooms chilled. Things were threatening to slide out of her control. She bit her lip. How was she going to explain the dead girl in her chambers? The fact that Atreya was suddenly back.

She would take Atreya to her cave above the city, she had potions there, it was quiet, they could hide until it was safe to come back. With the dead body in her chambers and a bit of blood on her bed, Atreya's bed, her people would surely believe she had been kidnapped.

She nodded to herself and unlatched her door, beginning her preparations.

Cold. It was cold. She opened her eyes, blinking slowly, trying to figure out where she was, what had happened. Why she couldn't move.

"Bi...Bittera?"

Her lady's lovely face appeared, dark eyes warm, as was the hand that rested on her cheek.

"Atreya. I'm here, Majesty. Easy now. You were badly hurt."

"I can't move." She leaned into the touch, shaking violently. "You came for me."

"Of course I came for you. Forever, remember? Those were no dreams, Treya."

Furs were tugged up around her chin. "And you can't move because I've bound you. So many broken bones, I could think of no other way to let you heal than to hinder all movement."

"My love." She moaned, watching Bittera, drinking in the sight of her lady.

"Still? Even after seeing my true form?"

"Your eyes were the same. Your eyes loved me. Bodies are... fragile things."

Bittera gave her a sad smile. "Indeed, Treya, they are."

Bending, Bittera pressed their lips softly together. "I could not avenge you in this form, my king. But without this pretty skin... they had no chance against my rage."

"Good. They hurt me. I never knew one could hurt so. I needed you."

"I'm sorry I couldn't stop them. I didn't know. I would have come sooner." Bittera's voice was thick with self-recrimination.

"You came." That was what mattered.

"I did. I will always come for you, Atreya. We are linked."

Again Bittera pressed against her lips. "Do you hurt? I have herbs, potions to take away the pain."

"I do. Where are we? Where is this place?"

"It is the place I live when I am not like this. My... home."

She looked about, tried to smile. "You need some tapestries to color the walls, my Lady."

Bittera laughed, the sound surprised. "Yes, I suppose it is a little grim."

"Just a touch." She winked, the simple action aching.

Bittera made a soft noise. "Let me get you something for the pain, my king. I would not have you suffering needlessly. Your people believe you lost and me kidnapped, there is no need to stay awake until you are better."

"I don't want to waste time when I could be with you."

"I'm not going anywhere, Atreya." Bittera gave her a soft smile. "I could read to you. I have a book or two."

"That would be pleasant."

"It will be if you take a small draught first."

She nodded, letting her love show in her eyes. "As you will, love."

Bittera kissed her forehead. "I will be back in a moment."

"Swear it." She was... She had learned terror.

Bittera made a soft sound and touched her cheek again. "I swear it, Atreya. I swear that I will always come for you, no matter what."

"Thank you." She kissed Bittera's palm.

"There is no need to thank me for doing that which comes naturally."

Bittera kissed her again and then disappeared, though she could hear her lover moving around.

She relaxed into the furs, closing her eyes, trusting in her queen.

Healing.

They fell into a pattern.

Bittera would make a healing broth and feed it to Atreya along with something to dull her king's pain. Then she would sit and read softly to Atreya until the poor girl fell asleep.

Every day Atreya seemed a tiny bit stronger, seemed to hurt a little bit less. Bittera would wait though, as long as it took for her Atreya to again be well.

Today she would unwrap Atreya and they would see if her bones had healed.

She gave her lover a smile. "Are you ready, my king?"

"I am no one's king, beloved." Atreya was pale, face brave and jaw set.

"You are mine." She kissed Atreya's cheek. "And you must tell me what hurts and where."

Atreya nodded, eyes clinging. "Should it hurt?"

"Only what isn't healed yet. I'm hoping there is no pain at all."

She smiled encouragingly and cut through some of the binding before beginning to unravel the rest.

Her Atreya had been savaged, torn and beaten, cut and violated. It was enough to drive her fury again.

She moved her hands over Atreya's skin, sliding just above it. "I did not make them suffer enough," she muttered through gritted teeth.

"Touch me. Prove I do not horrify you."

"You do not. I am scared to hurt you."

"You would never hurt me." The faith in Atreya's voice frightened her.

She let her hand drop to Atreya's body, sliding it so carefully along the pale, scarred skin.

"Oh." Atreya did not move, but the low moan was pleased, happy.

"You will never horrify me, Atreya. You forget who I am." She traced Atreya's shoulders, her breasts, teased the sweet little nipples.

"I was afraid. Afraid I would never see you again."

"I told you I would not abandon you. That I would come for you."

"I know. I failed. I fell."

She bent and kissed Atreya's lips. "You fell leading your troops to victory. They have returned home, the enemy vanquished."

"In truth? The pass held?"

"Not exactly, but it held until the thaws came and then the enemy was wiped out. Most of them drowned from what I've heard. Your troops finished up the rest."

"Excellent." Her Treya's eyes flashed, voice triumphant. Oh. Yes, there was her king. It seemed Atreya wasn't completely beaten after all.

"I hear they shouted your name as their battle cry."

"They are brave men. All of them."

"And they love and respect their king."

"I..." Atreya's eyes closed. "I am no one's king."

"You are mine." She repeated the words she'd spoken earlier, bending to press their lips together. "My Majesty. My King. My Treya."

Tears filled Atreya's eyes. "They... took me. Touched me. Am I still yours?"

"I was the first. I am the most constant. I will be the last." She climbed into the bed, pressing against Atreya. "You think a few puny men can take what is mine?"

Atreya moaned, shivered, pressed against her.

"How are your bones, Atreya? Is there any pain?" She would not allow her lover to have pain.

"Just an ache within, a shame."

"I will love you until it is gone, Atreya." She pressed their lips together, breathing into her lover.

Atreya groaned, lips parting, eyes watching and wide.

She smiled. "So beautiful."

"Still?"

"Always." She ran a hand along Atreya's side, her lover's skin warm, familiar, despite the new scars.

Atreya smiled, relaxing a bit. "Oh."

"Will you let me make love to you, Treya?"

"Will..." She was tugged down, Atreya's lips at her ear. "Will it still work?"

"Oh, my sweet Atreya. Just relax and let me love you and you shall see."

"Yes. Love me. Please. Love me."

"I do. I will."

She slid her tongue between Atreya's lips. Atreya opened slowly, the flavor of her tinged with potions, with herbs. Beneath them though, she could taste the sweetness, the need that was familiar, loved.

Trembling fingers stroked her hair, petted her. She moaned, turning her head, nuzzling into the touch, licking Atreya's fingers.

"Yours. Forever. Please."

"Yes, mine. As I am yours."

She put another kiss on Atreya's lips and then began to lick her way down, exploring Atreya. Each new scar was kissed, caressed, made her own. She tugged a nipple into her mouth, licking and sucking it, searching for a moan or whimper from her king.

"Bittera." Her name sounded like a hymn in Atreya's voice.

"Yes!" She moaned and licked her way over to Atreya's other nipple.

"Need. You make me need." Oh, yes. That nipple went tight and hard, perking up for her.

"Because you are mine." She sucked on Atreya's nipple for a few moments and then licked her way down to Atreya's pretty belly.

"I love you." Atreya shifted, moving so carefully, so gently.

She looked up, smiled, fingers stroking Atreya's abdomen. "As I love you."

Those beautiful eyes closed, Atreya nodding. "Yes. Love."

She hummed a little and turned back to Atreya's pale skin, went back to kissing and licking the scars, making them hers. She rubbed her cheeks against Atreya's hips, resting her head in the cradle of her love's body.

Atreya took a deep breath, sighing, the sound satisfied and sweet. Oh yes, she knew how to touch her lover, how to make her feel beautiful and wanted. How to make her **want**.

She spread Atreya's legs carefully and settled between them. Atreya trembled, shivered for her.

"Yes," she whispered. "That's it, my Treya." She blew on Atreya's private places, licked gently at the outer lips of her folds.

"I... Bittera..." The response was slow, hesitant, but there, hers.

She hummed, moaned softly. "Yes, my Treya."

"Your own." Atreya spread further, hips shifting.

"Oh yes, my very own."

She licked again, dragging her tongue along Atreya's lips, along the bundle of nerves at their apex. The soft cry echoed along the stones, Atreya going tense and then easing.

"I will not hurt you, my love. Trust me as you have in the past." She licked a finger and slid it in.

Atreya went still and quiet, but allowed her entrance, trusted her. She licked the little bundle of nerves, letting those sensations be stronger than the gentle pushes with her finger.

Finally -- finally -- Atreya began to respond, growing warm and wet, hips shifting. Humming, she kept working slowly, easily, finding patience from all corners.

"Bittera..." Oh, yes. She knew that sound, that soft cry.

She let another finger slide in, licking and sucking on the little mound of nerves.

Atreya reached down, fingers stroking her hair. "Lady! Beloved. I. Such heat."

She nuzzled against Atreya's fingers, delighted to have brought pleasure back into her lover's voice. Then she focused again on what she was doing, nuzzling, licking, finger-fucking. Atreya moved, riding the pleasure, her fingers, her tongue. The lean thighs trembled, shook beneath her.

She whispered words of healing, of love and binding, reminding Atreya's body to whom it belonged, that it should heal and feel pleasure.

"Love..." Yes. Yes, Treya, offer it to me. The passion flavored the air.

Another finger made three inside Treya and she moved them quickly, tongue working hard, vibrating against Treya's flesh as she hummed. Her lover's body convulsed, squeezed her fingers, gripped them tight, rippling around them.

She moaned, still licking, drawing out Atreya's pleasure. Atreya shuddered, relaxing into the furs, eyes closed.

She slowly kissed her way back up Atreya's body, settling again next to her king. Her fingers stroked through Atreya's short hair, and she hummed softly.

Atreya was asleep already, worn like a tired child, trusting her implicitly.

She pulled the covers up, settling close and warm. She could afford to spend some time indulging herself with her lady.

Chapter Nine

The aches faded. She slowly regained the ability to move, to stand, to walk in an uneven, crooked gait from bedding to hearth. The dreams eased, Bittera waking her from each one, crooning and calling to her soul.

The fury? It simply grew and grew, gnawing at her, filling every spot that Bittera did not.

Bittera wrapped an arm around her this morning and helped her to stand and slowly work her way over to the mouth of this cave that her lover called home. Once seated, she was given a cup of steaming broth.

"Look," Bittera told her. "The snows have returned. You can see the smoke from the houses in the White City over the tops of the trees."

Atreya nodded. "Who runs the kingdom now?"

She wasn't sure she cared.

"My spies tell me General Tornel runs things in your name. That he has every confidence you will be rescued and I will be found. And yet..." Bittera's mouth twisted bitterly. "From what I can see, he has spared no one to search for either of us."

Atreya reached up, stroked Bittera's lips. "Be at ease, lady. You could return, rule."

Bittera smiled, lips capturing her fingers for a moment, tongue flicking across the tips. "It would be nothing without you, my Treya. You will be well enough one day for us to return together."

She shook her head. "I fear I will never be strong enough to return, that I cannot lead."

"Nonsense. It was what you were born to." Bittera fussed with the blankets over her. "Now if you choose not to return, this is definitely your chance."

She lifted her face to Bittera's, frowning. "I felt so vulnerable, so... empty."

"You are barely on your feet again, Atreya, of course you feel vulnerable." Those hands slid over her cheeks, leaving trails of warmth behind them. "And in time you will find yourself filled as well. With life and courage and power and love."

"You swear it?"

"Yes, my Treya. For you I will swear it." Those black eyes glittered, dark and harsh and she was reminded of the beast who had come to her, who had saved her.

Instead of being horrified, she was comforted, warmed and she moved closer. Bittera purred softly, pressing her head to the soft breasts. Soft songs began, Bittera's fingers sliding over her hair, which fell almost to her shoulders now.

Atreya slid her hand inside Bittera's robe, stroking the soft, soft skin of her lady's belly.

"Oh, my Treya, you make me need."

"Good. You are my soul, Bittera."

"Oh, no, my love. I am an old and black demon. Perhaps it is you who are my soul."

"You are all I need." Demon or not.

The top of her head was kissed. "Thank you."

She lifted her face, hand moving up to cup one breast. "Thank me again."

Bittera giggled. "I don't think it is words you are asking for, my love."

Atreya smiled. "Words. You say some pretty words, my lady."

"Do I? Atreya? This form gives birth to them and your form inspires me so." Bending again, Bittera kissed her forehead. "Thank you, Atreya."

She pouted, lips offered yet again. "More, lady?"

Bittera giggled again. "Oh, I was right. It is not my words you wish for. At least not unless they are fed into your mouth." As Bittera spoke this last, her lips pressed against Atreya's, indeed feeding them directly into her along with sweet breath.

She moaned, thumb rubbing Bittera's nipple to stiffness.

"Oh, Treya. Come back to the blankets with me so that I can thank you properly."

"Yes." She nodded, tugging that nipple firmly.

Bittera moaned, pushing into her touch. "Oh. You make me tremble."

"I wish to make you need."

"You do, Treya. No one has ever made me need as you do." Bittera tugged her to her feet. "Come. Come with me and let me show you."

She followed, moving with her lady.

Bittera let her robe fall from her shoulders, revealing the pale curves.

"My beautiful lady." Her own body was less than beautiful now, scarred and marred.

Bittera reached out and began to loosen her own robe. "As you are mine."

"You believe that? In truth?"

"What?" Bittera frowned, fingers smoothing her robe off her shoulders.

"That I am still beautiful."

"Oh, Atreya, I do!" Bittera pressed close and then stood back again, eyes on her body. One hand reached out, sliding along her skin, whole and marked alike. "I think I have never seen one as beautiful as you, Treya."

"Thank you." She leaned in for a kiss, purring softly, pleased.

Bittera's lips met hers, opening, inviting her into the heat of Bittera's mouth. She pushed in, eager, hungry, needed Bittera to fill her and remove the fury inside her. Bittera's fingers slid on her skin, slowly circling around to her back.

"Love." She shuddered, their bodies rubbing together.

"Oh yes, Treya. Love." Bittera's tongue teased the inside of her mouth, sliding along the roof, along her teeth, soft moans following.

They eased down onto the soft furs, curling together with shared moans. Bittera's fingers loved her, slid on her skin and made it Bittera's own.

"Love. Need you. Always need you." Her skin heated, body arching into each touch. "My Lady."

"Yours, Atreya. I was made for you." Those black eyes glittered, spoke of the truth of Bittera's words.

She nodded. "Yes. Yes, I believe you."

"You should. It is truth."

Bittera's fingers burned trails along her skin, over her ribs and up to cup her breasts, to tease and pinch her nipples. She luxuriated in the touch, in the freedom, the ability to be bare and loved and female. Bittera's soft moans and panting breaths echoed in the cave, filling the air with the noise of their passion.

She coated her fingers with the wet heat, the proof of Bittera's passion, painted symbols of love upon her lover's soft thighs.

"Your touch... oh, my Atreya." Bittera pushed closer, mouth finding her nipple and tugging on it, the sensations touching her deep inside.

"Mmm..." She bit her bottom lip, body pushing up into Bittera's lips. "Please."

"You beg so prettily," murmured Bittera, smiling up at her. Warm fingers slid over her belly and pushed between her legs.

She spread, hungry for the touch. "Me? Beg?"

"Indeed. So very unmajesty like." Bittera winked at her, one finger teasing between her legs.

Atreya chuckled, her own fingers finding the bundle of nerves hidden within Bittera's folds and rubbing.

Bittera moaned, body shivering as she pressed closer. "You will have me begging as well."

She chuckled, licked Bittera's lips. "Very unmajesty like."

Bittera might have had a clever response for her, but instead her lover moaned, hips pushing down onto her fingers. The heat and wet of her lover, her lady, her queen, amazed her, fascinated her.

"Oh yes, do not stop, Atreya. Please." Bittera was moving faster, riding her fingers eagerly, wantonly. Bittera's generous breasts rubbed against hers, nipples hard.

"No. I won't. I won't stop." She pushed harder, fingers sliding into Bittera's body.

Her lady's eyes rolled back in her head, sweet cries sounding from Bittera's mouth. "Oh! Love. Oh."

She scooted down, lips wrapping around Bittera's nipples, sucking hard.

"Treya!" Bittera moved faster, becoming almost wild.

She did everything she knew to bring her lady pleasure, drive Bittera to ferocious pleasure. Bittera cried out, shuddering, the walls around her fingers fluttering as Bittera came. Atreya hummed around Bittera's nipple, touches gentling, petting.

So beautiful. So passionate.

Bittera's sounds grew quieter, her body stilling. "Oh. You bring me such pleasure, Atreya."

She leaned in, took a slow, sweet kiss. Bittera's tongue slid with hers, warm and eager, a sweet hum filling her mouth. Atreya cuddled in, rocking and rubbing.

"Mmm... your need tastes sweet upon my tongue, Atreya." Bittera rubbed their noses together gently, fingers sliding to pluck gently at her nipples.

She moaned, skin goosepimpling. "Love..."

"Right here," murmured Bittera, mouth sliding down her neck, going straight for her nipples.

Bittera's warm tongue wrapped around one, the wet heat glorious. She reached down, fingers sliding against her own heat. Bittera made a soft sound and her lover's agile fingers slid with hers. Her cry echoed, thighs parting slowly, spreading.

"Oh, Treya, you're so hot." One of Bittera's fingers slipped into her, almost teasing, sliding quickly out again.

"More, my lady. I need."

"Anything for you, my Treya, anything." Bittera's finger slid back into her, was joined by a second and then a third. Bittera stroked her inner walls, fingers sliding and hot inside her.

She rode the sensations, head thrown back, throat working.

"Oh, so beautiful."

Bittera's lips went back to her breast, the suction on her nipple delicious. Bittera's thumb pushed against the bundle of nerves, stimulating it as her fingers continued their delightful dance.

"Yours. Please, love. I need..." She jerked, pushed, heat flooding her.

Bittera's fingers kept moving, her lips kept tugging, keeping the pleasure moving through her.

"Love you." It was so good, so warm, so full.

Bittera settled next to her. "Yes, Treya. As I love you."

Atreya nodded, humming softly, fingers dancing slowly over soft skin.

"Do I make you happy, Atreya?"

"All of me, beloved lady. All of me."

Bittera made a soft, happy noise and cuddled close. "Good. Then I too am happy."

"Good." She relaxed, closed her eyes.

Bittera's fingers slid randomly along her skin. "Sleep, love. I will watch over your dreams."

"Thank you, my lady. You have my heart."

"I shall keep it safe, Atreya."

Yes. Safe and held by her own personal demon.

Atreya seemed to be getting better and yet they were still here in her cave instead of heading back and taking up their rightful places and king and queen. Bittera was trying to work up some ire about that fact, something that would have her pushing Atreya to that end. After all, it was part of her plan and this... this falling in love and living in her cave was not the plan.

Every time she decided she was angry at this turn of affairs, she would catch sight of Atreya and her heart would melt. And she knew, she would spend an eternity here with her lady if that was what Atreya wanted.

Smiling, she brought Atreya a bowl of broth and some bread. "Are you hungry, my love?"

Atreya was staring, looking out the cave mouth, fingers idly braiding her lengthening hair. "Hmm?"

"Food, Atreya?"

"Yes, lady. Of course, thank you."

"What are you thinking about so intently, my Treya?" She pushed a strand of hair that Atreya had missed from her lover's face.

"The castle, the people. I would like to know they were cared for."

"We could return and take care of things ourselves. I could arrange it if you wished it." She would do anything for her Atreya.

"I do not know if I wish to return to hiding, Bittera."

She sat next to Atreya and looked out. "Is that not what we are doing here?"

"I meant hiding how I am, who I am." Atreya motioned to her breast.

"I know, but as long as we stay here, just you and I, you are still doing that." She leaned her head on Atreya's shoulder. "I will stay here with you until the end of time if it is what you wish, my Treya, but I think you will grow bored with the quiet life. You were born to lead."

Atreya sighed, eyes closing as she nodded.

She turned and placed a kiss on Atreya's neck. "Be at ease, my love, there is no need to make a decision now."

Atreya smiled, hand stroking her hair, petting her. She purred, letting her own ambitions go, not even mourning them really. She had made herself for Atreya, and now she would serve her.

"I love you, Lady. Are you happy? Do I make you happy?"

Bittera smiled and nodded. "Happiness was never a part of my plans, my Treya. You changed all that."

"Never? How long have you lived in these lands, Lady? How long have you been waiting for me?"

"Oh, I have bided my time for several decades. I knew your mother's mother. She made promises to me that you were to fulfill."

"Yes? Tell me about her, about what happened?"

"Your grandmother was not of noble blood, but she had fallen in love with the king. Not his position, or his power, but the man himself. I arranged it so that they would meet.

"Your grandfather fell in love as soon as he saw her and married her. The agreement was that I would marry not his heir, but the man who took the throne after him, that I would have my chance to rule the kingdom as I had given your grandmother her chance.

"When your grandfather learned of my involvement and the price his queen had agreed to pay for their union, he became incensed. He went to a witch and put a curse upon his own son, that he would produce no male heirs." She chuckled. "We worked our way around that one though, didn't we, my love? You cannot change fate and you cannot renege on a deal made with a demon."

Atreya's laugh echoed, warm and amused. "No, things are as they must be."

She smiled, pleased to have made her lover laugh. "That is a beautiful sound, my love."

"You flatter me." Atreya leaned into her, relaxing.

"Hmmm... maybe. It is nonetheless true." She picked up the spoon and dipped it into the soup, offering it to Atreya. "You must eat."

"You spoil me." The pale lips parted, taking the bite.

She nodded. "I like spoiling you."

"Did you know you would love me?"

"No. There was no place in my plans for love," she answered honestly.

"I am glad your plans changed, my lady."

"Me, too." She fed Atreya another bite, smiling, rubbing her cheek against Atreya's shoulder.

"Shall we venture out? The snows are melting and the sun seems warm."

"As you wish, my love."

She took the food back to the hearth and picked up one of the furs on their bed, settling it around Atreya's shoulders. Atreya moved out into the sunshine, into the open air for the first time since they had arrived, wincing and huddling beneath the furs.

She wrapped her arm around Atreya's waist. "It's bright."

"It is. And so... open."

She laughed. "We should walk every day, my love, or we will both turn into cave dwellers."

Atreya chuckled, grunting playfully. "Cave bears, perhaps? Growling and shaggy?"

Her laughter increased. "You never could be a bear, my love. You are too beautiful."

She got a snort, Atreya's head tossing. "Me?"

"You, my love, have no resemblance to a bear. Not even at your most growly." That lovely laugh sounded again, bright and happy.

She kissed Atreya's mouth, unable to resist tasting that happiness. Atreya moaned, reaching up to circle her neck, hold her close. She murmured happily, the need between them was never far from the surface and had not abated over time. Her kisses grew deeper, the pleasure warm inside, the sun warm outside.

"We have never touched beneath the sun."

"I'm not sure the time to start is with snow on the ground, my Treya. It is *cold* to lie in." She winked at her lady, but she knew if Atreya wished to make love under the sun's touch, she would.

Atreya chuckled, nodded. "It is something to remember in the future, yes?"

She rubbed their cheeks together. "Yes. Although the sun will color your pure skin," she noted, finger tracing along the pale flesh from Atreya's neck to her navel.

"Do you find that unattractive, my Lady?"

She smiled. "I don't know. I like the way it looks now. I like that it is so because only I, not even the sun, have seen you without clothes."

That earned her a sweet blush, Atreya stepping closer, face lifted for a kiss. She gave it easily. Who knew she could be such a romantic fool? Atreya opened, tongue sliding against her own, so soft.

"Oh, I love you," she whispered, the feelings so strong inside her, bigger than anything she knew. It was no wonder she was lost to them.

"Yes." Atreya nodded, offering her another kiss and another.

Moaning, she took Atreya's mouth hard, the need rising in her, building and cresting over her like a wave in an enormous ocean. Atreya's body was cool against her, mouth heated. She pressed close, hands sliding, tracing Atreya's shape.

"My lady..." Atreya shivered, gasped, nipples hard as stones.

She tweaked Atreya's nipples, palms cupping the small globes. Atreya bucked, pushing closer, demanding more. She slid one hand around behind Atreya, grabbing the sweet bottom and encouraging Atreya's movements against her.

"I thought it... oh... was too cold."

"Maybe not for a quick rubbing together."

Atreya chuckled. "Fast enough that the sun cannot see us."

She giggled. "Yes. Yes, fast like a man."

Atreya's laugh was rich, sweet. Perfect enough that it frightened her. She pressed their lips together again, hand pushing between Atreya's legs, burying the emotions in need.

"C...cold. Cold." Atreya gasped, wriggled, wet folds burning her fingers.

"It is just that you are hot like a fire, my Treya." She pushed her fingers in, her lover so wet for her.

Atreya pushed down, whimpering, sweet and eager.

"Oh, I love you." So much. More each moment. That too was frightening.

"Mmm... love." Atreya kissed her, tongue pressing into her, sharing the sweet flavors.

She wanted to sink down and roll with Atreya, rub against her thigh, but the snow... With a whimper, she sped her fingers, fucking Atreya with them. Atreya arched, eyes rolling, bucking up toward her touch.

"Let me see your face, love, let me see your pleasure."

"Bittera..." Those muscles tightened against her fingers, gripping her, squeezing as Atreya's voice rang through the sky.

She whimpered, the beauty of Atreya's passion overwhelming. Atreya shivered, lips fastened onto her throat.

"Come inside, my love," she murmured, not wanting her Treya to catch cold.

"Mmm... yes. Inside in our furs." Atreya reached up, fingers tweaking her nipple.

She moaned, shivering. "Yes. Oh, yes."

"My lady..." Another touch, Atreya's lips brushing her throat.

"Yours, Atreya. All yours." She took Atreya's hand and tugged her along, back to their furs.

She would spend the rest of her life here if it was what her lover wanted, needed. She would do anything.

Epilogue

The king drank deep from his cup, laughing with the people at his table.

The fete had gone on for a fortnight -- the winter holidays were a time to relax, to celebrate the full storehouses, the full coffers. King Darian had overseen only three Solit celebrations, each one more decadent than the last.

The main table was crowded with his generals, his advisors, those courtiers who considered themselves close friends to the throne. More tables littered the dining hall, more courtiers there, merchants, and peasants alike, all wearing their best finery for this final eve of celebration.

"Tell us, your majesty, will you take your armies to the mountains next? Rout the spirits that haunt there?" The corpulent duke made Darian laugh, shake his head and smile.

"Why would I? Demons live there, have for generations upon generations. You know, don't you, that my great-great grandparents were stolen by them, dragged from the palace in payment for their protection."

"Surely that is simply a fairy tale," suggested one of the generals. "A story invented to assuage the peasants of your lineage?"

"Are you suggesting, for a moment, that I might not belong upon the throne, General?" There was more than a hint of steel in his voice, the words slicing across the table.

The general blanched and shook his head vigorously. "No, your majesty, of course not. I would never suggest such a thing. At all. No. No."

"I didn't think so." He didn't smile, but didn't frown either. Nort was a good general, if a bit loose-tongued after a few drinks. "I assure you, no armies would survive the demons. They protect us from outsiders and we respect their space."

"Can we trust the demons, your Majesty?" The question was asked by a mousy looking man -- Trafid, who did the accounts.

"They have kept their word for generations, longer than any man I know."

"Did they truly steal your great, great grandparents?" asked one of the young courtiers at a far table.

"They did, tore them from the bed chambers. The great king Atreya had been captured, assumed dead, and his Queen kidnapped. They returned victorious, the crown prince wailing in his mother's arms. They ruled for years before the demons came on the brink of war, requiring their lives in exchange for peace."

The ladies of the court all exclaimed and the men grumbled, all swearing such a thing would never happen again, that they would not let it.

The young man who had asked the question was brave enough to ask another. "What if they return and make the same demands?"

He smiled, tilted his head. "There is nothing my Queen and I would not do, for the health and well-being of my people. And, speaking of, she awaits me in our chambers, so I bid you good dreams."

The old general stood and raised his glass. "A toast to your majesty! To King Darian!"

"To King Darian!" called out the rest of the court.

Darian drank deep, saluting his guests, before heading down the long hallway to the royal suite.

The corridor seemed endless, but at last he was entering his chambers, two guards standing on either side of the door.

"Good morrow, men." He nodded, sealing the door behind him. "You owe me, Lady, for begging off the court meal."

Bittera laughed softly, coming near. "I could not tolerate those bores for another moment, my Treya."

She laughed, stepping up to the beautiful dark eyes of her lady. "They wanted to hear of the demons that stole Atreya and Bittera away, my Lady."

Bittera giggled like a girl. "And did you tell them they were fearsome demons, love?"

"Vicious and toothy, nightmarish beasts." She leaned in, kissed her mate, her eternal partner.

Bittera hummed, mouth opening to her, inviting her in for an ages old dance they both still enjoyed.

Generation after generation they found ways to take their places here before leaving to spend years in the caves, making chaos and love and trouble. It was... perfection.

And whether here or there, it was this, Bittera's love and passion that was the true thread of her happiness.

Quick, knowing fingers found the little clasps that held her robes together and once they were undone, Bittera went for the bindings that held her breasts in, loosening them, searching for her nipples.

"Hungry..." She threw her head back, laughed, fingers brushing through hair that was white-blond in this form, eyes green as jade.

"For you? Always, my love." Bittera's head turned, her mouth wrapping around the soft flesh of Atreya's wrist and sucking. Sensations zipped through her, hot and fierce and right, melting her deep within.

"Beautiful," murmured Bittera, teeth scraping up along the inside of her arm. "That blush suits you, my darling."

"You draw it from me, always." She shivered, nipples tight as stones.

"And that is one of my greatest pleasures." Bittera's fingers found her nipples without fail, pinching each one lightly between cool fingers.

"Come, lady. Come to our bed and we will find pleasure, we will soar." She nipped Bittera's lip, eyes shining. Her own soul was eternally bound, willingly bound.

"I will go with you anywhere, my Treya." Bittera's hand warmed quickly in hers, her lady dropping her robe and climbing eagerly into the big bed, luscious curves displayed for her.

She crawled between Bittera's legs, tongue dragging along the soft skin. "And I would give you the world."

"I don't need it," moaned Bittera, legs spreading wide for her. "I have you."

They came together -- king and queen, demons, women, lovers, eternal.

"Yes. Yes, Bittera. You do."

end