

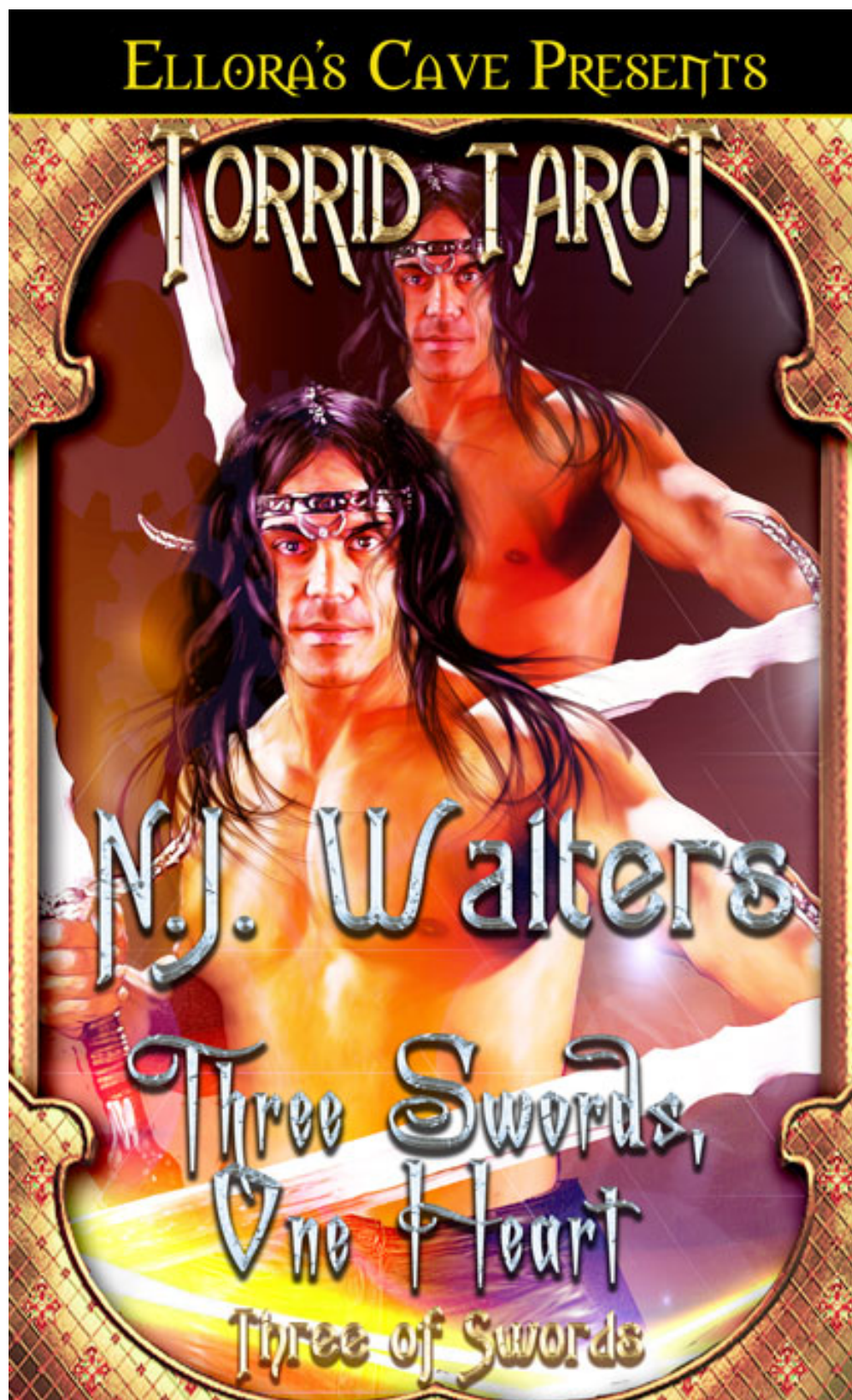
ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

TORRID TAROT

N.J. Walters

Three Swords,
One Heart

Three of Swords



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Three Swords, One Heart

ISBN 9781419910883

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Three Swords, One Heart Copyright© 2007 N.J. Walters

Edited by Mary Altman.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication May 2007

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

Content Advisory:

S - ENSUOUS

E - ROTIC

X - TREME

Ellora's Cave Publishing offers three levels of Romantica™ reading entertainment: S (S-ensuous), E (E-rotic), and X (X-treme).

The following material contains graphic sexual content meant for mature readers. This story has been rated E-rotic.

S-ensuous love scenes are explicit and leave nothing to the imagination.

E-rotic love scenes are explicit, leave nothing to the imagination, and are high in volume per the overall word count. E-rated titles might contain material that some readers find objectionable – in other words, almost anything goes, sexually. E-rated titles are the most graphic titles we carry in terms of both sexual language and descriptiveness in these works of literature.

X-treme titles differ from E-rated titles only in plot premise and storyline execution. Stories designated with the letter X tend to contain difficult or controversial subject matter not for the faint of heart.

THREE SWORDS, ONE HEART

N.J. Walters

Dedication

My incredible husband, there are not enough words to thank you for all that you do for me. I wouldn't be having this amazing adventure without you.

To Mary Altman, editor extraordinaire, thank you for all that you do. Your keen eye for details and your continued hard work has helped make me a better writer.

To all of you who have read and enjoyed my books, thank you for your continued support and encouragement.

Author Note

The Three of Swords depicts a heart with three swords piercing it from the top. One of the swords comes straight down through the center. The other two swords pierce either side of the top of the heart and all three swords intersect in the middle of the heart before coming out at the bottom.

The Three of Swords is the card of heartache. The card indicates that there may be stress or sadness because of an emotional hurt that may involve separation from a loved one.

Key words: loss, woe, love lost, conflict, severance, stress, grieving, separation, abandonment, loss of a lover, darkness before the dawn.

In Three Swords, One Heart, the image on the card is a tattoo that permanently marks Malik and Kalis, the two warriors. It is a symbol of the curse that has come down through their family for seven generations. They roam the world, cut off from their family, unable to even visit them for fear of bringing them harm. They are ever searching for the one woman who might be able to break this curse.

The heroine, Zarina, although not marked with the same symbol as the brothers, has known her share of loss, conflict, grief and separation. Now alone in the world, she seeks to survive, never knowing that her life is about to change when her path crosses those of the warrior brothers.

Prologue

"I'm pregnant." Hesabeth sucked in a deep breath as she stared at her lover. Surely he would be as thrilled about this as she was. By her calculations, she was about three months along. She'd put off telling her lover for as long as she dared, but the time had come for both of them to face the reality of the situation. She was overjoyed about the new life growing inside her. How could this be anything but a blessing?

"Are you?" Horris glanced at her belly, his expression one of mild disdain. Taking her by the arm, he tugged her farther away from the few men who were close by crafting new arrows for their hunting bows.

"Yes." Uncertainty began to creep into her mind for the first time. Perhaps she'd just taken him off guard with her announcement. "We have been blessed with a child."

"Blessed." He stalked closer, his expression growing even more distant and forbidding. "Is that what you call it?"

"What do you call it then?" Her own voice was flat as anger began to burn deep in her heart.

"A problem. But one that can be easily taken care of."

Hesabeth placed a hand defensively over her still flat stomach, trepidation growing within her mind as she stared at the man standing in front of her. Surely she was mishearing the torrent of words spewing from his mouth.

"I cannot have a child with you." He raked his fingers through his shoulder-length, dark hair. "I will not marry you," he spat, his eyes narrowing as he eyed her up and down. "It is unnatural, I tell you." The tall, bronzed warrior stood glaring at her with his legs braced apart, his hands on his hips and a look of disgust on his face. She knew the fact that they stood eye-to-eye perturbed him on occasion. "The way you persist in hunting, traveling and fighting with the men."

She swallowed back her growing horror and finally found her voice. "You did not seem to mind up until now. You always said that it gave us more time to be together." They had spent the past six months sharing each other's bed. She'd never worried about becoming pregnant and had just assumed that they would marry if it happened. Hesabeth had mistakenly believed that Horris had accepted her for what she was.

They'd kept their relationship a secret from the rest of the tribe, sneaking away to meet in private. Horris had assured her it was for her own protection. As an outsider, she was a guest in the tribe, not a true member, and many of the tribesmen were suspicious of her foreign ways. The fact that she dressed like the men and hunted alongside them made her an object of mistrust among both the men and women. Yet they had allowed her to stay, albeit on the fringes of their tribe. The fact that her own

tent was on the edges of the village made it easy for Horris to sneak into her blankets at night without anyone being the wiser.

"Bah." He dismissed her words with a swipe of his hand, his gaze moving insolently over her ripening body. "It is fine enough in a bedmate, but not in a wife. A man with an eye on the future needs the right kind of wife beside him—a wife who is demure and humble and knows her place."

Her stomach churned and she swallowed back the bile. "And you were ever ambitious, Horris." She'd seen the signs but had blithely chosen to ignore them.

She'd read her tarot cards in secret, studying their message. Her cards were old, made of parchment and imbued with the power of several generations of women who had held and used them before her. Crafted by her great-great-grandmother, the palm-sized rectangular pieces of parchment were filled with colorful images that hinted at the cards' meanings. The tarot was a useful tool for divination and Hesabeth used the cards regularly for guidance as she walked the path of her life.

The cards had been showing her this coming confrontation, but she had misread them, had not trusted in their clarity and in her own powers. She was now paying the price of her arrogance.

"A man needs to keep his eye on the future if he wants to have power, position and a legacy to leave his sons. His legitimate sons. A man does not need any bastards who might pose a problem to his legitimate heirs in the future, especially if they are firstborn."

Hesabeth rubbed her stomach. She hadn't yet felt the child flutter within her belly. It was too early for that yet, but she was already protective of the life growing inside her.

He noticed her action and scowled. "How do I even know if the bastard whelp is mine?"

He could not have hurt her more if he'd run her through with his sword, but not by so much as a blink of her eye did she let him know that he'd struck a deadly blow. She was a warrior and it was time to start acting as such.

She stared at him, seeing him clearly as if for the first time. He was handsome enough with his good-looking face and his pale blue eyes, but there was a weakness around his chin and a sly gleam in his eyes. This was a man who would do whatever it took to get what he wanted. And right now, he wanted a wife who would bring him property and wealth. But more than that, he wanted a woman who would help him gain his greatest desire—that of becoming chieftain of his tribe.

"You know full well that I have been with no other since we first shared each other's bed." She tilted her chin upward, pride in every inch of her body.

"It is your word against mine, and I have several warriors who will tell a different tale if it becomes necessary."

The extent of his treachery left her breathless.

"You would lie to get your own way. You would turn your back on your own child to feed your gluttony of ambition." Anger was replacing the hurt and sadness within her. It started as a trickle at first, but soon became a torrent. How could a man deny his own child?

He fingered the sword at his waist as he stared at her belly, and for an awful moment she could almost read his thoughts. If there was no babe, then there was no problem. The sound of a sword being drawn echoed through the air. Her knuckles were white as she clutched the hilt, holding the blade in front of her. "Try it and die." Gone was the soft woman who had allowed herself to be seduced by the lying tongue of a mortal man. He had no idea what she truly was, but he was about to find out.

Several men had stopped what they were doing and began to gather around, attracted by their raised voices and the fact that she'd drawn her sword. Horris sent her a dismissive look as he spread his arms wide and raised his voice. "You would threaten me in front of my tribesmen? You are the stranger, here but a little more than half a year." His eyes were filled with derision and growing anger. "You will leave here."

How like Horris to manipulate the situation to make it appear as if she were threatening him and not the other way around. She'd always thought him clever—now she began to realize there was a sly, ruthless man lurking beneath the affable façade. "And if I don't?" Hesabeth needed to know just how far Horris was willing to go in order to gain what he wanted.

He scratched his jaw with his hand and shot her a speculative look. The coldness in his eyes, the pure evil shining out of them, made a shiver run down her spine. "Many children die the first few months of their lives." He whispered the words low enough so that only the two of them could hear what he said.

How could she not have seen this side of him before?

The signs had been there, but she had been content to ignore them. It was past time for her to be honest with herself. It was in the disdainful way he treated people he thought lesser than him. It was in the way he always had to be the first and best at everything. She'd explained it away as a warrior's pride and competitive spirit. Caught up in her grand adventure in this new and foreign land, she had spent so much time enamored of her mortal lover and his sensual skills that she'd blinded herself to his true nature.

Her mother had warned her about men and their ways, but she'd disregarded all her mother had told her. Hesabeth was still young, as her people had lives that spanned hundreds of years, and her youthful mistake had cost her pride dearly, but it had also left her with a precious gift. A child.

She did not need him to help her raise her child, but she'd hoped he would be as thrilled as she was. Lost in her love of him, she'd planned to take him to meet her family and offer him a life of longevity with her and her kin. Such things were possible within her realm. But that was not to be, nor did she desire it any longer. The blinders were gone from her eyes. She would be returning home alone.

Well, not quite alone. She had her child, and her family would welcome her back with open arms.

His threat was clear. If she stayed, he would kill her child. Besides which, she no longer wanted to have anything to do with the man. He was truly a monster and not worthy of either of them. The time had come to protect the unborn babe.

Drawing herself up to her full height, she allowed her true self to shine through. Horris was not the only one who had hidden part of himself. Power flowed through her veins, and the air around her crackled with power. He stumbled backward, his eyes widening with growing understanding and fear.

"I am the warrior sorceress Hesabeth. Born of the sorceress Galina and the wizard Allisdar." Loud and clear, her voice rang throughout the village. Those gathered gasped with fear as they backed slowly away, and the rest of the villagers ceased their daily chores, helpless to do anything but watch the scene unfold in front of them.

She could feel the fires of revenge burning behind her golden eyes as she stared at her former lover. A soundless wind whipped up, blowing her long red hair behind her as she raised her arms toward the heavens. The sword in her right hand heated, its blade beginning to glow a fiery red. "You have denied your own child, Horris of Jallak, and for that you shall pay and pay dearly." Fury made her voice tremble.

He swallowed hard and reached out a placating hand to her. She laughed scornfully at him. "What? You have nothing to say now?" Dismissing him, she turned her attention skyward. "Hear me and hear me well. Your future you have cast yourself."

"No!" Horris yelled, but the growing wind pushed him further away from her. This time it was he who was helpless.

"Oh yes. You would easily sacrifice your child, so I will demand two of yours. But they will not die, for I am not so cruel as you. Twin boys will be born in every generation of your line. They will be strong and mighty warriors, sons a man will be proud of." She captured his gaze and smiled. "And you will cast them out the moment they reach manhood."

"No," he cried, his face paling.

"Yes," she countered. "They are destined to wander the world, never settling, without peace. Their lifetime will be spent searching for a woman, a warrior woman. They must do what you could not. They must accept her as she is, but more than that, they must convince her of their love. They must win her love in return."

"But that is unnatural," Horris screamed, spittle flying from his mouth.

"So is wanting to kill your own child," she countered, refusing to be moved by his anger. "Furthermore, they will both devote themselves to her." She saw the growing understanding in his eyes and nodded. "I know that sometimes men take two wives, but in this case, it is she who will have two husbands, totally devoted to her."

"I will not allow it," he raged.

"That is your choice," she agreed. "But for every day that they stay beyond the seventeenth year of their life, famine, pestilence and death shall be visited upon this village or any who harbor them. If you do not cast them out, the villagers will do so to save themselves and their own children. They will sacrifice your children as you were ready to sacrifice mine."

He drew his sword and lunged forward, his intent clear. Hesabeth moved not a muscle. The field of light surrounding her deflected his sword. A bolt of power streaked up his blade, knocking him backward. He lay sprawled in the dirt at her feet, but it gave her no true satisfaction to see him humbled in this manner.

"The curse will continue until it is broken. Year after year, generation after generation, until your line grows to dust. The twins will be your firstborn and they will be marked with their curse." She reached into the pocket of her cloak and drew forth a card from her tarot deck. She did not even glance at it as she held it high in her hand, the sword still clasped tight in the other.

The card, like all those in her deck, was as familiar to her as her own hand, and from the power emanating from it, she knew which one she'd drawn. It was most appropriate. It was marked with a blood red heart, pierced with three swords, blood dripping from the tips of the blades.

The words, cold and terrible, flowed from her mouth. "Cursed are ye with the swords of three, never more to rest. Wandering the lands of shadows and strife, you can never relinquish the quest. Cut off from all that you cherish and value, searching through long, lonely years. From mountain and desert and unto the sea, you must watch for The One to appear. Love must be bound and swords must be joined, to end the curse and the pain. But a heart given free is the way it must be, or else all will have been done in vain."

A jolt of power shot through her body and for the briefest of moments, she regretted what she had wrought. But it was too late now for second thoughts. The curse had been cast and could not be undone.

She placed her hand upon her belly, sensing the life growing within, and knew it was time for her to leave. She'd have many, many long years to consider the outcome of this day, but now it was time to go home. Concentrating all her power, she felt the familiar tingling throughout her body as she vanished from the villagers' sight. Their gasps and cries were all but drowned out by Horris' cry of despair.

Then she was gone.

Chapter One

Seven generations later

Hands on her hips with her legs braced wide on the hot, sifting sands of the vast Talkos desert, Zarina pulled herself up to her full height as she stared at the idiot warrior standing in front of her. Surely she was mishearing the torrent of words spewing from his mouth.

"It is unnatural, I tell you." The tall, bronzed warrior mirrored her stance as he stared at her, a look of disgust on his face. "The way you persist in hunting, traveling and fighting with the men."

She returned Illian's fierce glare, uncaring of the crowd beginning to gather around them. This confrontation had been brewing since her father had gasped his last breath a mere two days ago. Anger as hot as the desert wind blew through her, driving out the anguish and despair that had filled her since her sire's passing.

Jerome of Talkos, her father, chieftain and the mightiest warrior of the Danari tribe, was not yet cremated and Illian was already trying to solidify his position as his successor. The hot wind parched her throat, but she ignored her thirst and the ache in the pit of her stomach. As was their custom, she had been fasting for the past two days in preparation for the ceremony, taking only as much water as was necessary to survive.

Her father had been the only person who'd ever loved her, ever cared for her. The fact that he'd raised her like a son instead of a daughter and had taken pride in her many accomplishments meant nothing now. Less than nothing. The same female members of her tribe who had benefited from the bounty of her hunting skills now looked at her with growing disdain. The men she'd hunted, worked and fought alongside of now scorned her company. She was quickly learning that her place in this tribe had depended on her father, and he was no longer there to protect her with his presence.

"It is no business of yours what I do, Illian." A bead of sweat rolled down her back, dampening her knee-length tunic. Made of a lightweight, woven cloth, it was slit on both sides to the waist, covering her while at the same time allowing her greater range of movement. The light breeze molded her matching pants to her strong legs, while her feet were encased in sturdy leather boots that laced to just above her ankle. She had a similar outfit made of buttery-soft leather for hunting and fighting. In deference to the heat and the fact that she was in mourning, she wore the more traditional cloth garments. But even now she wore the unadorned pants and tunic instead of a bright, embellished woman's dress that was customary for any important ceremony.

Her hand automatically went to her side and she cursed herself for leaving her sword belt back in her father's tent. Its familiar weight was usually draped around her waist, but she had left it off in respect to her father. She could see, now that it was too late, that it had been a mistake on her part. Trust a weasel like Illian to strike when she was unarmed. She should have known better, for she'd been fighting off his unwanted advances since she'd passed the age of womanhood.

He drew himself up and puffed out his chest. "As new chieftain, it is my business."

His words stunned her, and in spite of the heat, Zarina's blood ran cold. She'd known that Illian was a master manipulator, but not even she had expected him to move quite this quickly. None of her trepidation showed on her face, however. Instead, she sneered at him, pouring all her contempt into her words. "You have not even enough respect to wait until your chieftain is laid to rest before you seek to replace him. And if the council was convened, why was I not called?"

"A council meeting is no place for a woman." He smiled coldly, knowing how his words would cut her. Zarina had been a member of the council since her seventeenth birthday. For the past five years, she had sat at her father's side, having her say in tribal matters and having her vote counted among them. Those days were clearly over.

"But it is obviously a place for a jackal." Even as she spoke, he struck quickly and unexpectedly, backhanding her. Her head snapped back and she stumbled slightly, but she did not fall. Locking her knees to help still their slight trembling, she let her tongue touch her lip where it was split and bleeding.

His insult was unmistakable. A fellow warrior he would have challenged honorably, but Zarina was a woman, and he plainly felt no need to treat her with such regard. Illian's lack of respect and his mistreatment of his woman were well known. It was a matter that he and her father had argued about on several occasions.

The fact that no one else had spoken up on her behalf was very telling. "Not bad, for one as weak as you," she taunted.

"I will allow that insult to pass because you are obviously not in your right mind at the moment. Grief from your father's death has addled your brains." He spread his arms wide as he addressed the crowd. "Out of respect for the mighty warrior Jerome, I will not only ignore his daughter's slight, I will offer her my protection." When he turned back to her, she could see the malicious glee in his eyes. "I will take her as my second wife."

Zarina wished she could awaken from the nightmare that her life had become. She'd die before she'd become this man's wife, share his bed. That is, if she didn't kill him first. "Obviously you are the one who has taken leave of your senses, Illian."

A small black cloud drifted over the blazing sun, partially covering it and darkening the ground where Zarina stood. She knew as surely as she was standing there that it was a portent from the gods. Her life as she knew it was over and there were dark days ahead. Ignoring the growing dread in the pit of her stomach, she focused on trying to figure out a way to deflect Illian's interest from her.

"You have no father." His voice was almost gentle as he continued to project his image of concerned benefactor to the crowd. "If you have no husband, how will you survive?"

She snorted at his words. "I am not without means and I will hunt as I always have."

He was shaking his head in mock sorrow. "A woman does not own property, nor does she hunt."

The dread was now an icy ball that congealed in her stomach and started to grow outward until it encompassed her entire body. "Of course I have property. The horses, my father's tent and his belongings are all mine now."

"No, Zarina, they are forfeit to me as the new chieftain of the clan. Your only claim to them is through me as my second wife. It has been agreed upon by the council." He hid his smug smile behind a guise of concern as he made his pronouncement, but she was not fooled. It shone from his beady eyes as he scrubbed his hand through his scraggy beard as if in deep concern for her wellbeing.

"Your greed knows no bounds, Illian." She allowed her gaze to drift over the crowd watching them. People she'd known her whole life and who had called her father friend and leader were quick to turn on his daughter.

She'd known that some of them, both male and female, had resented her unique place in the tribe, but she'd had no idea that their rancor had run so deep. Some of the women looked away, shame filling their faces, but they would not speak out against the decision of the husbands, fathers and brothers. Warriors she'd trained alongside her entire life now cast their hatred upon her. And the one warrior she'd shared her body with would not even meet her gaze.

"How well you all respect my father's memory and his wishes." Caution was beyond her now, even as she could hear her father's voice in her head, urging her to curb her tongue and to think before she spoke. But her grief over his loss and her village's betrayal was too great.

She saw Illian's great fist coming toward her again, but this time she was ready. Leaning back, she could feel the breeze against her cheek as his hand narrowly missed her face. With hands fisted, she struck back. Hard and fast, she drove her fist into his gut, and when he doubled over, she came up with her knee, driving it into his chin. He fell into the dirt, rolling over and moaning as he struggled back to his feet, murder blazing in his eyes. She had shamed him in front of the crowd and now she would pay. Still, she could not regret what she had done, no matter the outcome.

With a roar, he ran at her again, his hands outstretched. Quickly, she sidestepped him and stuck out her foot. Illian's weakness was his temper, which made him act rashly. It was why she'd always been able to best him in a one-on-one contest. She was one of the few who could.

He stumbled but did not fall, whirling around to face her. "You will accept your place in this tribe," he snarled.

"No, I will not." Her stance wide and her knees slightly bent, she waited for his next attack.

"You will not accept the decree of the council?"

"I will not accept you as husband," she snapped.

He shook his head with mock pity. "You have been left undisciplined for too long, Zarina. That is about to change."

Before she knew what was happening, two warriors grabbed her arms. She managed to free herself, blackening one warrior's eye in the process, but several more stepped forward to help and she was overwhelmed. Without her weapons to aid her, they were able to subdue her. The warrior whose eye she had blackened took great pleasure in twisting her arm up behind her body until she thought it might snap. She clenched her teeth, refusing to cry out in pain.

As his men held her, Illian moved closer until his nose was almost touching hers. "Give it up, Zarina. I will have you."

"Never." Gathering what little moisture there was in her mouth, she spit on him.

He smiled as he wiped it from his face. "Such spirit you have. I shall enjoy breaking it." His fist struck hard and fast, sinking into her gut and knocking the wind from her. The men holding her released her and she fell forward, landing on her hands and knees, gasping for breath. Illian didn't waste any time as he landed a hard kick with his boot. She managed to roll away, still trying to suck air into her lungs.

She could have beaten him in a fair fight. Even with the fact that she'd had no food and little water the past two days, and that she'd barely slept either, she could have beaten him. But Illian's actions spoke for themselves. He had no intention of making this a fair fight. His only goal was to break her, and that she would not do.

Dodging a kick to her ribs, she rolled to her feet, ignoring the pain that clutched her stomach. She fainted right and was able to sneak a fist past his guard, but it lacked power as it grazed his face. Normally, she would have been fast on her feet, ducking and weaving away from him, but she was unable to avoid his fist as it came toward her. He caught the edge of her chin with a blow and she felt herself falling, unable to keep herself on her feet.

The ground rose up to meet her, hard beneath the layer of sand. The grit filled her mouth and scratched her face as she tried to roll away from him. But once again, she was not quite fast enough. He kicked out, his booted foot connecting with her midsection. She tried to protect herself, but all she could do was pull her knees close to her chest, cover her head with her arms and wait for it to be over.

Voices raised in anger filled the air around her, but the ringing in her ears was so loud she could not make out what any of them were saying. Not that it mattered to her. Her life was over.

Then the beating stopped.

Someone grabbed her under her armpits and dragged her to her feet. She spit out a mouthful of sand and blood as she steadied herself. Several men had hold of Illian's arms, but he shook them off. Regaining his composure, he pointed his finger at her. "You have not accepted your punishment as is due for defying the council's decree. Furthermore, you have attacked your chieftain. Once again, you have proven yourself not only to be an unnatural creature but a danger to the tribe."

The buzzing in Zarina's ears grew louder as she realized what was coming. "No," she whispered, but it was lost in the wind that was whipping up around them. She'd rather he killed her.

"You are banished from this tribe. Cut off from all who know you. No longer can you call yourself Zarina of Talkos, daughter of the Danari tribe. From this moment forth, you are an outcast." She could see the growing satisfaction in Illian's face with each word he uttered. "You have no name. You have no people."

Tears of pain and anger burned her eyes but she blinked them back, refusing to shed them. "I want no people who would turn traitor so quickly." It was hard to force the words out of her dry mouth, but she would not give them the satisfaction of thinking her cowed or totally beaten. Fury gave her strength as she glared at Illian. "My father's spirit will give you no peace for what you have done. Enjoy your tribe. You are welcome to them."

Turning away, she put one foot in front of the other as she trudged past the crowd, which silently parted to let her pass. She ignored the colorful tents and makeshift huts that made up the nomadic village. It hurt too much to look at them. She knew who lived in each one, had shared food and laughter with them all. Her boots dug into the drifting sand, making it harder to walk, but she did not falter. She passed the pens with the horses and goats, the cooking fires and children who looked on with wide, curious eyes.

Gradually, the sounds of the village died away, but still she continued to put one foot in front of the other. It was foolhardy to walk the sand of the desert during the day, but she did so because she knew she had no choice. She was weak and she was injured. The only hope of survival was to reach the shelter of the canyons. She'd hunted there with her father before and knew that all she needed to sustain her could be found there.

Beyond that, Zarina needed to be alone to nurse her wounds and to shed her grief. Her father was gone and her home taken from her. Her body was so devoid of moisture, her eyes were too parched for tears. Dry-eyed and determined, she persevered through the worst of the afternoon heat.

Late in the afternoon, she came across a small patch of wild *leffa*, sheltered by a stand of large stones. The leafy green plants were indigenous to the Talkos desert and its bulbous roots contained life-giving moisture. Dropping to her knees, she dug with her fingers, sinking them deep into the sandy soil. Barely bothering to brush the dirt from the plant, she tore off the bottom of the root, held it to her mouth and sucked. There wasn't much moisture, but it sank into the parched tissue of her mouth. Tossing it aside, she grabbed the next, not stopping until she'd sucked every plant dry.

Feeling slightly better, she took stock of her situation. She had another two days' walk until she reached her destination and she was starting to really feel the effects of the beating now that the adrenaline had worn off. It might only be early spring in the mighty Talkos desert, but already the days were hot, even though the nights were cool. Resting in the slight shade of the stones, she waited until the sun went down before resuming her trek.

On and on she plodded until the sun began to peek over the horizon, heralding the beginning of a new day. She walked on into the morning, searching for shelter of any kind. It was almost midday when she came across two stones that came to her waist and stood two feet apart. They weren't much, but they would have to do. After only a moment's hesitation, she drew off her woven tunic and draped it between the two rocks. Kneeling down, she squeezed her body between the stones so that the stretched fabric offered her some protection from the blazing sun.

When the sun finally sank behind the desert sands, she dragged herself from between the rocks and pulled her tunic back over her head. The fabric was hot, practically burning her flesh, but she couldn't afford to tarry any longer. Without water, her strength was waning fast. Her only hope was to push onward toward the canyons and hope she came across some more *leffa* plants.

Placing one foot in front of the other, she stumbled forward, weaving like a drunken fool over the uneven ground, but she kept going. Stopping meant certain death and if death would have her, then it would have to reach out and take her. She would not easily give herself over to its clutches. She had to keep going until she reached the canyons farther north. There she knew where to find shelter and a small underground stream in one of the caves.

The moon was high in the sky when she tripped on her own feet and fell hard to the ground. Lying there, she gasped for breath. Her body ached and throbbed, so she knew that she was still alive. In the distance, a coyote howled. She knew she had to move or she would become food for the denizens of the night. And she would move. Soon. But she just needed to rest for a moment.

Exhaustion claimed her, and she never heard the exclamation from the old man who found her sprawled in the sand some time later. Did not hear his cry of dismay. When she finally came back to her senses, she could hear the crackle of a nearby fire. Keeping her eyes closed, she tried to survey her injuries and her surroundings.

A dry chuckle reached her ear. "I know you are awake, child."

"Pyatt?" She cracked open one dry, swollen eyelid, unable to believe her ears.

His gnarled hand cupped the back of her head as he put a cup to her lips. "Drink first, then we will talk."

Water. Cool, life-giving water trickled down her throat and out of her mouth, spilling down her chin. She gave a small cry of distress over her wastefulness. As a daughter of a desert tribe, she knew how precious water was.

"Do not worry, child," he soothed. "I have plenty." His patience was unending as he poured more water into her cup and helped her to drink. Finally, she'd had enough and he eased her head back down onto the pallet he had made out of several blankets.

"How did you find me?" Her voice was little more than a harsh croak.

"I am a son of the desert, my child." His eyes twinkled with humor. "I may be old and a little slow, but I am still able to follow your trail."

She realized she'd asked a silly question and blamed it on the fact that she was lightheaded with lack of food and water. Pyatt had been one of the best trackers in his prime. It was said he could find an oasis in the middle of a raging sandstorm.

"I heard what happened. I knew it was coming but could not stop any of it." He sighed. "I am not a young man. Twenty, even fifteen years ago, I would have challenged Illian and won." She could see the gleam of pride in his eye as he settled back into his seat next to the fire. Carefully, she rolled to her side, swallowing a moan of pain as she tried not to wince. But Pyatt's eyes were still sharp and she could not hide her discomfort from him. "They are not broken, but I fear one or two may be cracked. I wrapped them as best I could." It was only then that she felt the tight binding around her midsection.

"Thank you."

His eyes were solemn. "It is the least I could do for the child of my best friend." He shook his head and sighed as he gazed off into the dark of the night. Neither of them stared directly into the fire, not wanting to adversely affect their night vision.

Zarina waited, knowing he would speak when he was ready. She valued his counsel and his friendship. Eventually, he brought his gaze back to her. "You cannot go back, child. Illian would kill you. He has taken all that is rightfully yours and no one will gainsay him." His lip curled. "He has cultivated his cronies well and they bully any who would speak against them."

"I knew I could not go back." She wanted to ease any discomfort or guilt he felt over that fact. "I sealed my own fate when I hit him."

The old man cackled with glee. "It was a good hit too. Your father would have boasted about it for days."

She tried to smile, but her lip was too sore. "Yes, he would have." It felt good to talk about her father to someone who had loved him as much as she.

"They burned his body after you left, scattering his ashes, returning him to the desert that birthed him. I attended the ceremony to make sure all was as it should be." He swiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. "Illian is not totally without sense. He made sure Jerome was dispatched with all the pomp and ceremony he deserved. The people would have stood for no less and it gives him the appearance of being a right and just leader."

Zarina nodded, happy to know that at least her father's remains had been taken care of properly. It gave her some comfort.

"The past is gone and you must go forward." Pyatt reached behind him and dragged out a satchel. "I would have been here sooner, but it took some time to gather what I needed without bringing any unwanted attention my way."

Her eyes stung as he unpacked the bag. He laid her sword, bow and arrows, hunting knife, two sets of leather hunting clothes and some basic food supplies in front of her. Rummaging around, he unpacked a necklace that had belonged to her mother and a rare seashell her father had given her on her eighth birthday. Zarina was overwhelmed by his kindness.

"Pyatt..." She licked her parched lips and stared in wonder. How did you thank a man for such a gift?

Reaching over, he patted her arm. "No need to say any more about it, child." She stared at the wrinkled, arthritic hand, knowing what he had risked for her.

"Does anyone know what you've done?" Fear for him leapt to her breast. Illian would kill Pyatt if he found out.

He shook his head. "I am fasting in the wilderness at the moment, in memory of my friend who has died. It is my right and no one will question that. Nor did anyone follow me." He offered her a smile. "Age does have some benefits." But his smile quickly faded. "You must go far from here, Zarina. Illian will hunt you down if you stay."

"I know."

Patting her on the arm one final time, he pushed himself to his feet. She could hear his bones cracking with protest as he stood. He left the circle of the fire. She could hear him talking to his horse and knew he was leaving her. She bit her lip to keep from crying out to him not to leave. He had to go back. A man of his advanced age could not survive outside the confines of the village and she could not take care of them both. It was understood even though neither of them would say it aloud.

"Grow strong and keep well, daughter of Jerome." His voice drifted back on the wind along with the whinny of a horse. Then she was alone.

Her fingers wrapped around her mother's necklace, the precious gems and silver digging into her palm until it bled. Carefully, she unlocked her fingers and laid the treasure back on the blanket that covered her. Reaching for the water, she uncapped the container and filled her cup. She took a sip, careful this time not to spill a drop. She had no idea how long it would have to last her.

But at least she had a chance now. She had no idea where she was going, but with her weapons, she could at least feed and protect herself. Dragging her sword into her arms, she settled back against the ground. Clutching it tight against her breast, she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Two

Four months later

The warrior sprawled out next to the fire, his eyes closed, his body seemingly relaxed. Layers of muscles stretched over sinew and bone, every inch of him honed like the deadliest of blades. He enjoyed the heat of the blaze but could easily survive without it. Cold, hunger and hardship were not new to him, but rather a way of life.

But not tonight.

Tonight, he was enjoying a rare moment of peace, relaxing by the fire, the smell of fresh meat roasting over its flame. A man took his pleasures where he could.

“Are you going to eat or just laze about?”

He opened one eye and peered at the man crouched on the other side of the flame. It was like looking at a mirror image of himself. They shared the same height and massive build, gained from their years of training and the rigors of daily life. Both had shoulder-length dark brown hair, which they usually kept tied back with a leather thong. Their faces were long, their foreheads high, their eyes pale blue. Square jaws, which bespoke of a stubborn nature, sat just below their full lips.

He closed his eye again and settled back.

“Malik?” His brother nudged the side of his leg with his boot.

His brother was obviously in the mood to talk and Malik knew he would have no peace until his twin had his say. Rolling up to a seated position, he held out his hand and his brother handed him a portion of the cooked meat. It was hot, so he blew on it before popping a chunk into his mouth, savoring the taste as he chewed. His brother was a fair enough cook. “You’ll make someone a good wife, Kalis,” he teased.

Kalis just snorted and settled back to eat, the dimple in the right side of his cheek flashing as he grinned. The more even-tempered of the two, Kalis was slow to anger but held a grudge forever.

It wasn’t often Malik thought about the strangeness of their life, but on nights like this, there was almost too much peace, too much time to think. As boys they’d been inseparable, spending every moment of the day together and sleeping side by side at night. Many of the people in their childhood village hadn’t been able to tell them apart. That is until they picked up their swords to fight.

In a quirk of nature, they were mirror images in true. The first time Malik had picked up a play wooden sword, he’d gripped it eagerly in his left hand. His brother Kalis had been right beside him and had grabbed his with his right. Their sword arms and the dimples that appeared on the opposite sides of their faces were the only

differences in the two men. What had begun in childhood had strengthened into adulthood. The curse had seen to that.

"Do you ever think about her?" Kalis' question was casual, but Malik wasn't fooled.

"You've been dreaming of her." It was not a question but a statement. He'd suspected as much, as he'd been having heated, erotic dreams the past week himself. It seemed natural that Kalis would be having them too.

The corner of Kalis' mouth kicked up as his eyes heated. "I've been dreaming."

Malik grunted, not wanting to even think about the dreams, much less talk about them. His cock had started to throb at the mere mention of them. It had been several months since they'd been to a large town and paid the local prostitutes for relief. Maybe it was time to remedy that.

"Do you ever think we'll break the curse?" Kalis picked up a water skin, tipped it and drank deeply. Swiping the back of his hand over his mouth, he gazed up into the starlit night.

Malik could see the longing in his brother's eyes. This was a ritual that played itself out every few months, usually when they had too much time to stop and think. It was one of the many reasons they stayed constantly on the move, ever busy. They'd had this conversation too many times to count, but they never came up with any satisfactory answers.

It was easy to follow his brother's train of thought. It was impossible to think about the unknown woman who haunted their dreams without thinking about the curse that had set them on this path.

Kalis swung his gaze back toward him and it was filled with anger and pain. "It is not fair that we should pay for another's mistake."

"No, it is not." His easy agreement seemed to drain the sudden burst of anger from his brother, leaving behind a yearning that went bone deep. "But we cannot change the fact that Horris was our ancestor. Nor can we change the fact that we were firstborn sons and bear the mark of the sorceress." Malik absently rubbed his hand across the fist-sized tattoo that sat directly above his heart. The red heart seemed to throb with sorrow as the three swords pierced it. Several drops of blood dripped from the tips of the blades where they extended from the bottom of the heart.

"No," Kalis agreed. "We cannot."

They continued to eat in silence, automatically chewing and swallowing. What must it be like to have a home of your own, Malik wondered. To have your own roof and hearth, your own woman and children. He swallowed back his longing, but the images remained.

"Do you think we shall ever find her?" Kalis voiced the question that Malik did not want to even think about.

"I don't know." He would not lie to his brother. It would be like lying to himself—stupid and futile. "It has been thirteen years since we were cast out from the village."

Bitterness filled his heart. At seventeen, they'd been considered men, but they'd still been so young. He could see that now, looking back over all the long, hard years that had piled one upon the other. At first it had seemed like a grand adventure. Now it was more of an unending torture.

Survival had been their biggest concern. Unable to settle in one place, they traveled continually. The fates had quickly shown them that there was no outwitting the curse. If they stayed in a village or town for more than one night, disaster soon struck. If the villagers didn't run them out of town, their own sense of fairness did. They could not inflict the curse on the innocent.

They could camp outside in the wilderness, but if they tried to build a more permanent shelter, the winds and weather destroyed it. Lightning burnt the first hut they built. Their tent was ripped to shreds by a giant windstorm. It was fine if they wintered in a natural cave, but that was as much shelter they were allowed.

So they'd traveled over much of their world of Amanas. They'd been to the far north where the mountains of Varkas towered over the land below. A large mountain range, it spanned thousands of miles. Some even said that there were vast lands beyond it, but there was no living record of anyone ever making the trek over the mountains and returning alive.

Below the great expanse of the mountains, the land was fairly fertile and many farmed for a living. But gradually the land changed as you traveled south, breaking into three separate regions. The vast forest of Jallak was to the east, its tall trees and abundant forests providing readily for its people. To the west lay the unending desert of Talkos, filled with canyons, oases and never-ending sand. The forest and desert were split by the thin band of land known as the Lesser Plains of Utas. The land gradually gave way from the harsh sands of the desert, sturdy grasses poking up through the soil, and grassy meadows flourished as it reached the edges of the Jallak forest.

Still farther south lay the Great Plains of Yamantu. Fertile and green, plants flourished with abundance. People farmed with great success and many came to buy the food that grew there. The land slowly changed, becoming less fertile and more rugged, scattered with rocks and shrubs the farther south you traveled, eventually ending at the great sea of Sephanas. Fishermen on the coast cast their nets into the turquoise waters, hauling back fish of all kinds. Others dove into its depths, prying shellfish from the bottom.

Over the past thirteen years, they'd traveled extensively, but they'd never ventured more than a day or two ride beyond the edges of the Talkos desert. It was an inhospitable place where only the knowledgeable survived. They'd hired their swords for short-term jobs, but their main source of income had come from trade. They'd been lucky when they left home that their mother had pressed several gold coins, along with her tears of grief, into their hands.

At first they'd spent the coins on food and supplies, but they had quickly seen the error of their ways. Trade was the key. They bought rich fabrics from the forest tribes and sold them to the people by the great sea. In turn, they purchased precious salt and

pearls from the sea tribes and bartered it for food from the villages at the base of the Varkas Mountain. Both he and his brother, it seemed, had the hearts of merchants.

A small smile played at the corners of his mouth as he wondered what his warrior father would say about that. He missed his father and his mother, as well as his younger siblings. The curse actually came down through the third son in the family. Since the firstborn were always twins and always banished, the next generation of the curse came through the next male born in the family whose wife would bear the next set of accursed twins. It was complicated in many ways, but simple in others. His family would continue to pay until the curse was broken.

Some of his ancestors had come close to breaking the curse, finding and returning home with the woman who could break it. But still they had failed. Their father was a wise man and had talked to his young sons at length about the history of the curse. The key, he'd told them many times, was in the free giving of the heart. His ancestors had failed because they'd tried to force the woman to accept them.

Shaking himself out of his reverie, Malik washed down the meat with some water. It was definitely time to find a large town. Not only did he need to lose himself in the soft, silky body of a woman, but he also wanted to eat fresh bread and vegetables cooked by someone other than himself or his brother. He thought he'd probably enjoy the meal more than the woman.

Oh he enjoyed women—the softness and the texture of their skin, the sighs of their pleasure, the hot grip of their body. But the encounters always left him with a cold, empty feeling in his gut. There was always that knowledge deep inside that he was paying for the woman. She did not belong to him, nor he to her. There was only one woman out there who could fill the empty void within him, within them both.

"We'll head south tomorrow, toward Ankaris?" Kalis rose from his seat by the fire and began to pack away the remains of the meal.

As always, he and his brother shared similar thoughts. Ankaris was a large town situated near the center of the Lesser Plains of Utas. It was a prosperous trading town, serving both those of the surrounding desert and the forest tribes, as well as the small group of hardy farmers who eked out a living on the plains itself. It was four days' trek from here, but it was a town where a man could get both a hot meal and an even hotter woman. For the right price. "Aye. That would be best."

Working in silence, they cleared away the campsite, checked on their horses, doused the fire and settled onto their bedrolls for the night. Malik stacked his hands under his head and stared up at the brightly lit sky. Somewhere out there, she was waiting for them, perhaps even staring at the same stars. The moment of sentimentality made him uncomfortable. He had no time for these kinds of thoughts. The only way to survive and not go completely mad was to take one day at a time and not think about her.

Closing his eyes, he shut all thought from his mind and drifted off to sleep. Not five feet from him, Kalis did the same.

The few remaining embers from the fire reignited, the flames reaching high into the sky. Malik's eyes shot open, all his senses alert, but he perceived no danger. His heart pounded in his chest and his breathing deepened. But it was a sense of anticipation that fired his blood.

She was here!

The night seemed to part, allowing her to slide through the mists. Her rich, dark brown hair flowed down to her slender waist. She was tall, strong and proud as she strode forward. There was no hesitation in her step as she tilted her chin and met his unwavering gaze. Her nose was straight, her cheekbones high and he longed to touch her skin to see if it was as soft as it appeared.

He made no move toward her, not wanting to frighten her. Not that she seemed the least bit afraid of him, he thought ruefully, but he didn't want to take any chances. Neither of them spoke as she stopped at the foot of his bedroll. He flipped back the blanket, not the least surprised by the fact that he was naked. He knew this was just another dream, but he didn't care. Malik wanted this unknown woman with a need so deep it bordered on madness.

"What is your name?" The sound of his voice surprised him. He'd never spoken to her in his dreams before.

She frowned slightly, furrowing her brow, as if she were as surprised by his words as he was. She hesitated slightly but answered his question. "Zarina." Her voice was husky and deeper than he expected. His groin tightened painfully as he repeated her name in his head. Zarina. He would not forget it.

"Come." He held back the covers and made room for her next to him.

Again she hesitated, and he sensed her mistrust of him. But he was patient and would wait as long as it took to gain her trust. A rustling behind her had her spinning around. Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped as she watched Kalis approach from the other side of the fire. Her gaze shot back to Malik before returning to his brother. He watched the long column of her neck ripple as she swallowed hard.

"You have nothing to fear from us." It was imperative that she trust them. Deep in his gut, Malik knew that trust was the key.

Kalis was behind her now, his hands resting lightly on her shoulders as he leaned down and kissed the side of her neck. She tilted her head to the side, allowing him better access, moaning as his mouth slid upward toward her ear. "Let us pleasure you."

Malik's entire body was throbbing with need and a deep restlessness. The compulsion to take this woman, to drive his cock into her waiting heat and to mark her as his was overwhelming. She belonged to him and to Kalis.

His brother nipped at Zarina's ear, and she sucked in a quick breath. Then Kalis stepped away and tossed down a blanket next to his, stretching out his naked form upon it. There was a space between the two of them just waiting for Zarina. They both stared up at her, awaiting her decision.

She licked her lips and Malik was unable to pull his eyes away from her pink tongue as it traced the contours of her full mouth. He was filled with the urge to taste those lips, to discover their shape and their texture. And he would. Patience was the key and he was an excellent hunter.

Slowly, her hands went to her waist and she unbuckled her sword belt, laying it carefully aside. Then she slipped her hands beneath her tunic and a moment later her leggings fell to the ground. Carefully, she tugged off her short boots and kicked the leather leggings aside. She drew in a deep breath as her shaking fingers pulled on the laces of her tunic. The leather parted and she drew it over her head, holding the garment in front of her. Her eyes gleamed in the firelight in a combination of longing and fear.

He held his hand out to her. "Come." He almost howled with pleasure when she dropped the tunic, ignoring it as it fell to the hard ground at her feet. Quite simply, she was the most beautiful creature he'd ever beheld in his life.

Her skin was tinged a tawny golden color. Sun-kissed, he thought. But it appeared smooth as silk, not rough or coarse. Her legs were long, supple muscles rippling beneath her flesh as she stepped toward them. Her hips were wide, her waist narrow. Dark curls covered her woman's mound, guarding her treasure from view. Malik yearned to part her folds with his fingers and explore every hot, pink inch of her.

Her torso was slender, but her breasts were substantial, high and full and tipped with large, dusky pink nipples. Under his intense stare, her nipples pebbled and hardened. Satisfaction filled him. She wanted them. Her body could not hide the truth. Still, he let out a sigh when she lowered herself to the blanket between them. Now that he had her, he would never let her go.

She lay on her back, waiting to see what they would do. Malik propped himself on his right hand and placed his left hand on her stomach as he leaned over her. The golden-brown of her eyes darkened slightly as he lowered his mouth to hers. Ever so gently, he grazed her lips with his. She gasped lightly, opening her mouth further. Malik beat back the impulse to devour her. Instead, he traced her plump lips with his tongue. He slid it just inside her mouth before quickly withdrawing again. Keeping his touch light and undemanding, he continued to tease her mouth. He could not ignore the tiny cry of need that erupted from the back of her throat or the way she arched up to meet him. Growling deep in his chest, he deepened the kiss, plunging his tongue into her silken depths, claiming it as his own.

He could feel Kalis moving on the other side of the blanket and knew what his brother intended to do. Tearing his lips from hers, he stared down at her. Her eyes were glazed with passion, her lips wet from his kisses. She searched his face, looking for what, he did not know, but whatever it was she seemed to find it there. Nodding slightly, she smiled softly, first at him and then at Kalis. Then she settled back against the blankets and relaxed her body. Her thighs parted slightly, but it was enough. Permission had been given.

Both brothers moved as one. They lowered their heads toward her breasts, Malik on her left side and Kalis on her right. Malik shifted closer to her, pressing his swollen cock against her thigh, hoping for some relief. His testicles were heavy and tight and the need to spill his seed was great. It bordered on painful, but there was so much pleasure, so much anticipation. Malik couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so alive.

He stroked his tongue over the swollen tip of her breast before covering it with his mouth and sucking hard. Her fingers tangled in his hair, at first trying to tug him away but then trying to tug him closer as he continued to suckle her nipple. Pleasure filled him, expanding his chest, enhancing his own growing need.

Hooking his leg beneath hers, he tugged it outward. Kalis did the same on her other side. The action spread her legs apart, opening her sex wide, allowing them full access to her. She tilted her hips upward and moaned. Malik could smell her arousal – musky yet sweet. His cock was swollen and throbbed so hard, he was surprised he hadn't exploded. He'd never experienced anything quite like this before.

Malik slid his hand over her stomach, allowing his fingers to sift through the soft curls at the apex of her thighs. His fingers brushed his brother's as they both stroked over the swollen folds of her cunt before surging past her slit and plunging deep into her body. Zarina cried out, pumping her hips upward, pushing their fingers deeper. With their feet hooked around hers, pinning her legs open, she was unable to brace herself with her feet. She was at the mercy of their sexual whims.

Malik smiled slightly as he caught her nipple between his teeth and carefully flicked the tight bud with his tongue. He liked the idea of keeping her captive to his sexual whims.

But this woman was a warrior and fought back. There was no warning before her hand slipped around his cock, squeezing tight. Malik groaned and heard his brother's voice echoing his cry. With her hands wrapped around both their cocks, she began to stroke up and down.

When she got to the head of his erection, she rubbed her palm across the top, spreading the moisture seeping from the tip. Malik tore his mouth from her breast and nipped at the base of her neck. "Harder," he urged. She began to pump harder, covering every inch of flesh from the tip to the base, allowing her fingers to lightly scrape over his scrotum before surging upward again.

They both began to match the inward and outward thrust of their fingers to the rhythm of her hand. Her inner muscles tightened around them, squeezing. The thought of having his cock buried inside her, having her silken flesh clamping down hard, just about drove him mad.

He had to have her. And he would. Just as soon as she'd gained her pleasure and found her release. Then he'd thrust inside her and drive his cock so deep, there would be no her or him, just them, together. He imagined that Kalis was planning on doing the exact same thing. Even the image of watching his brother take her, both of them finding pleasure, aroused him. He could enjoy her full breasts or taste her sweet mouth while

his brother fucked her to pleasure. His entire body tightened painfully. Even his scalp hurt.

Zarina tipped back her head and cried out. He could feel her cunt tightening hard. He nipped at the lobe of her ear. "Come for us, Zarina." His tongue swirled around the whorls of her ear. "Give yourself into our keeping."

He sensed her momentary hesitation, her fear. But he wouldn't allow it. Surging over her, he captured her mouth with his as he drove his finger deep inside her. Her hands tightened around his cock and he forgot everything as pleasure rocked him. He swallowed her frantic cries as her body bucked and convulsed. When her fingers slid upward, squeezing the head of his cock, he tore his mouth from hers, yelling his release as he spilled his seed over her flesh.

Kalis' cry of release mingled with his own.

The smell of sex, the scent of completion, permeated the air around them. Underlying it all was a deep feeling of satisfaction. He slid his finger from her shivering body and felt Kalis do the same. Her body was sticky with her own sweat and juices, as well as their cum. Malik grunted with primal satisfaction. She was their woman, marked by their seed.

Zarina opened her eyes, and they were filled with such sadness that it shocked him. He reached out to push a lock of her hair out of her face, but before he could touch her, she began to fade. He roared out his displeasure, reaching for her. But the harder he tried to grip her, the faster she faded until all that remained was a memory.

Malik surged to his feet, sword in hand, and released a battle cry. But there was no foe to fight, no enemy to vanquish. The only sound he could hear was the dying echo of his cry and the harsh gasp of his breathing. His chest hurt, the mark above his heart throbbing painfully.

He glanced toward his brother and was not surprised to see Kalis also standing, sword drawn and ready. Their eyes met through the darkness and then Kalis swore, threw down his sword and buried his face in his hands. Malik knew exactly how his brother felt.

Something precious had been given to them and then ripped from their grasp. That was unacceptable. They were warriors and they would fight for what they wanted. They would win.

But how could you fight a dream?

"I haven't spilled my seed in a dream since I was a boy." Malik could hear his brother's disgust and it matched his own. He could feel the stickiness of his own release on his belly.

The sun was beginning to rise over the edge of the forest and the sight of it sent a thrum of anticipation through his bones. She was out there. He knew that as certain as he knew that Kalis had just realized the same thing. Suddenly, he was in a hurry to pack up the camp and head out. But first things first.

"We passed a stream about a quarter mile back." He picked up his blankets, shook them out and began to roll them quickly and expertly.

Kalis laughed and began to pack up his own bed. "That, my brother, is the best idea you've had in a while." He paused, his laughter dying. "Was she not the most beautiful woman?" His voice hitched and Malik saw his brother shudder.

"Aye, she was." More determined now than ever, he continued to clear the campsite. "And she is ours." The certainty in his voice matched his implacable will. She was out there and they would find her. Anything less was not acceptable.

A soft gust of wind wafted over his body, bringing with it the scent of sex. For the briefest of moments, he could smell her and a memory surfaced.

Zarina. Her name was Zarina.

Chapter Three

A bead of sweat rolled down her temple and Zarina absently swiped it away with the back of her hand. Keeping her eyes narrowed against the glare of the late morning sun, she continued to pick her way through the forest. Her gait was smooth, her muscles supple as she moved. She resembled a sleek mountain cat tracking prey more than a former chieftain's daughter of a prosperous desert tribe.

She'd thought she was tough, battle-hardened and well trained. She snorted under her breath. But that was before she was cast out on her own. It was only when there was no one but herself to depend upon for survival that she realized how hard life truly could be. Her only choice was to toughen up or die, and since she was still living, her decision was obvious.

But it had been hard. Especially in those first weeks she'd been on her own. She'd spent a week hiding in the desert canyons, recovering her strength. The day she'd almost stumbled upon a hunting party from her former tribe, she'd known it was time to leave.

She'd known gnawing hunger—the kind that ate at your soul as well as your belly. She'd known bone-numbing fear as she'd trekked across unknown terrain by herself. Zarina had also come to realize just how much she missed her father's company and his counsel. More than once, she'd heard his voice in her head giving her advice or issuing orders. A smile played at her lips. Even in death, he was trying to take care of her.

Her soft leather boots made no sound on the forest floor as she continued to lope forward, trailing the pack of wild deer whose tracks she'd found this morning. Like her, the animals stayed along the edge of the Lesser Plains of Utas and the great forest beyond. To hunt and kill a young deer would mean food for a long time for Zarina. But more than that, she could cure some of the meat. She'd been trying to amass some supplies for the coming of the cold, dry season, knowing that game would be scarce during those long months. This would be a wonderful addition to her stores.

Not for the first time, she cursed the fact that she didn't have a horse. She missed Talkin, the fine golden mare her father had gifted her with to mark the seventeenth year of her life. It made her heart hurt to think about the treatment of the strong but gentle creature at Illian's cruel hands. But she knew that Pyatt could not steal a horse from the tribe. They might overlook her sword and the few supplies if they suspected him, but to steal a horse was a crime punishable by death.

But still, she could not complain. She was alive and, better still, she had discovered a small, well-hidden cave at the edge of the plains, just inside the boundaries of the forest. There was a stream nearby and for the first time in her life, fresh, life-giving water was not an issue. She was still getting used to the fact that she didn't have to

conserve every single drop of water and that more was available within a ten-minute stroll.

The most enjoyable aspect of her new home was the ability to bathe in fresh water every day. Zarina relished her bath time and no matter how cold the water, she took a dip in the stream daily. It was invigorating, and on days like today, when the hot sun was scorching her skin, it would help revive her at the end of the hunt.

Bringing her mind back to the task at hand, she crouched low and checked the ground for signs. Sure enough, the small herd was still ahead of her. She hoped they'd stop and rest soon. She was at the edge of what she considered her personal boundaries. Much farther and she wouldn't make it back to her cave before nightfall, and while she didn't mind camping out, she wasn't as well equipped for it as she'd like to be. She hadn't been expecting her hunting expedition to lead her so far afield today.

She crept forward, carefully placing each footstep, as she peered through the thick copse of trees. There! Just off to her right was a small herd of deer. Easing down, she watched them as she drew her bow and an arrow from the quiver strapped across her back. As she notched her arrow, she scanned the group, ignoring the babies and the mothers. She finally found what she was searching for. An older male, past his prime, hung around the edges of the group. Perfect.

Drawing back, she said a silent prayer for the spirit of the animal and released her arrow. It flew straight and sure, piercing the animal's hide, killing it instantly. The herd reacted swiftly, bleating a warning and stampeding into the forest. Zarina ignored their retreat as she made her way toward the fallen deer. She made sure the animal was indeed dead before removing her arrow. Examining the tip, she noticed it was blunted slightly and made a mental note to herself to sharpen it and to check all her other arrows as well. She returned the arrow to her quiver and then reached for her knife.

The snap of a twig brought her head up quick. Fool, she castigated herself. She'd been so focused on the animal, she'd forgotten to keep her attention on her surroundings. She sheathed her dagger and quickly drew her sword as she took a step back toward the cover of the woods. She'd hate to leave the deer behind, but her safety came first.

"What do we have here?" Her head swiveled to the right, toward the sound of the voice. A man stepped out from behind a tree and began to amble toward her.

"What do you want?" Zarina's sharp reply stopped him.

He arched an eyebrow, his eyes going cold beneath his bushy brows. "No need to be unfriendly. We'll just take the deer and be on our way."

Zarina immediately noticed he'd used the word "we". But where were the others? Keeping one eye on the man, she scanned the area, searching for his companions. "The deer is mine."

His smile was cruel. "The animal—and indeed, everything in these woods—is mine." His gaze flowed insolently over her body. "In fact," he continued, his hand crudely cupping the crotch of his pants, "I think I'll take you as well."

Balancing on her feet, she took a fighter's stance, her sword held in front of her. Moving slightly to the right, she drew her knife with her left hand. "I think not."

A slight whisper of a sword being drawn was all the warning she got and she whirled, sword high, just in time to deflect the blade aimed at her head. Behind her, the first man made his move. "Don't kill her," he admonished his partner. "I want to fuck her first. This woman needs to learn her place."

Zarina gave no indication that his words had any impact on her, but her insides turned to ice as a third man stepped from behind a tree. He looked as unkempt as his companions and lust gleamed in his eyes as he licked his lips and stalked forward. She would fight to the death, using her knife on herself if she had to, before she would allow them to defile her body in such a way.

Her muscles tensed and she forced herself to relax, knowing she'd not only fight better, but she wouldn't tire quite so quickly. She kept her feet moving across the grassy field, trying to keep all three men in her line of vision, not allowing them to encircle her. She clenched her teeth as she deflected one well-aimed strike after another.

They continued to attack and she countered blow after blow. Sweat rolled down her forehead, into her eyes, and she blinked away the sting. Every muscle in her upper body burned and her entire body ached from the force of the blows until finally she was forced to sheath her knife and hold her sword with both hands.

She fought hard and well, but there were three of them, all big, strong men in their prime. Their bushy beards gave them a wild look, more animal than man as they continued to circle her. They were toying with her now, lunging occasionally before drawing back. She knew their game. They were trying to tire her before moving in for the kill.

And it was working.

"Are you ready to submit to your new masters yet?" the first man taunted her as he laughed. "You stink of sweat." He sniffed the air. "But I don't mind. I'll take you from behind like a stallion mounts a mare. Or more like how a wolf takes his bitch."

Zarina swung wildly, fear and rage flowing through her, giving her extra strength. But her sword went wide and his came up inside, nicking her arm and drawing first blood. She tightened her fingers around her sword, her knuckles white on the hilt. Her shoulders ached and she could feel the blood dripping down the inside of her upper arm where he'd cut her.

This time when he came at her she was ready. Ducking under his blade, she swung hard. He swore as he jumped back, but he wasn't quite quick enough. The cloth of his shirt ripped and a thin line of blood appeared on his chest. The cruel humor faded from his eyes, replaced by bloodlust. But that suited Zarina just fine. She'd rather they'd kill her than rape her. Either way, she knew that unless she got lucky, her life would end here in this small forest glade.

It seemed unfair somehow, but then no one ever said that life was fair. Indeed, from her experience life was often more cruel than kind. There were still so many things she

wanted to do, wanted to experience. Dreams that she'd thought long forgotten surged forward, forcing their way through her fear.

Once, many years ago, she'd dreamed of having a husband and a family of her own. A man who would love her for who and what she was. Someone to share the burdens of the day as well as its joys, to wrap his arms tight around her and hold her close to his heart through a long winter's night.

More recent dreams seemed to shimmer before her eyes. Only two nights ago, she'd dreamed of not one man, but two. Two strong warriors whose only goal had been to bring her pleasure. She wished she could remember their faces, but they'd faded instantly the moment the dream had ended. She'd awoken drenched in sweat and shaking from an orgasm unlike anything she'd ever experienced. She'd known then that her few encounters with a fellow tribesman had left a lot to be desired. Now she'd never have a chance to find out if the sensations from her dreams could be real.

And she'd be dead within moments if she didn't keep her mind on the here and now!

The third man seemed to be focusing more on her breasts than her sword and she took advantage of his inattention, driving her sword toward his exposed belly in a hard and quick thrust. Yanking her sword away, she knew she'd struck home when he cried out and clutched his hand to his stomach before dropping his sword and falling to his knees.

One down.

But she knew she was fighting a losing battle. The two remaining men attacked with a vengeance. Two more cuts now covered her body, one on her right leg, the other, slightly deeper one on her right side. She knew the blood loss was beginning to affect her judgment. Time was short. She said a prayer to the gods for a quick end, gathering her waning strength for one final push.

The battle cry seemed to rock the very trees around her, and the ground beneath her feet shook with its fury. Two great horses erupted from the forest, each carrying a massive warrior. She blinked to try to clear her vision, thinking she must be seeing double. There were two horses and two warriors, but they were both alike. Each held a huge sword high over his head, the metal blades gleaming in the sunlight.

Laughter bubbled up Zarina's throat. It seemed the gods themselves had come in answer to her prayer. There was no other answer to what she was seeing. Unless, of course, she was already dead and these were two of the great warriors of Talkos legend come to carry her away. She didn't think she'd mind being swept away on a horse right about now. She was so tired.

She couldn't take her eyes off them they were so magnificent. And that was when her opponent struck. She felt cold at first, so very cold. Then there was pain as his sword pierced her left side, driving deep. Another roar of fury whipped through the clearing and Zarina stared at her opponent with pity in her eyes. She might be dying,

but obviously this man had angered the two gods. She wouldn't trade places with him for anything.

Her legs crumpled when he withdrew his blade and she fell to her knees before toppling forward. She thought she heard her name being yelled, but surely she was mistaken. She was so very tired. Closing her eyes, she succumbed to the growing darkness.

"Zarina!" The roar was torn from the depths of Malik's soul as he watched her fall to her knees and then pitch forward onto the ground. He could not believe that they'd found her too late—would not believe it. Narrowing his eyes on the man standing above her body, he gripped the sides of his horse with his thighs and held his sword high with both hands. Dead or alive, she would be avenged.

Kalis' roar of anguish shook the forest glade as he charged toward the other man who was running toward the cover of the thick trees. Malik knew that Kalis would not allow the man to slip from his grasp. He might run, but there was nowhere he could hide where Kalis would not find him. Satisfied, he focused on his own opponent.

The other man kept his eyes locked on Malik as he charged forward. Malik swung his sword and his opponent blocked it, but he'd swung with such force that the unknown man was knocked backward onto the dirt. Malik whirled his horse around, charging back for a second run. Scrabbling to his knees in the dirt, the stranger hefted his sword, but he was no match against Malik's skill or fury.

Blades clashed as Malik countered the other man's wild swing, and as his horse charged by, Malik jumped from his back. Years of experience and countless battles behind him, Malik knew his opponent's exact position. As he spun around, he threw all his weight behind his strike. The long blade, an extension of his arm, bit deep into flesh and bone, not stopping until it met air again. Blood spurted, showering everything in its path, but grim satisfaction filled him as the man's head hit the ground. As Malik watched, his body dropped into the dirt. Turning his back on the slain man, he hurried to the woman's body.

And it was Zarina. The moment they'd heard the cries of battle, heard the woman's yell, they'd looked at each other and known. The tattoo above Malik's heart had begun to burn his skin. It was the woman from their dreams. The one they had chased their entire lifetime, the one who could break the curse. They'd spurred their horses forward, and for the first time in years, Malik had prayed to the gods of his forefathers.

Dropping to his knees, he gently turned her still body until she was on her back. His fingers went to her neck and he sucked in a deep breath when he felt the faint beat beneath the skin. She was still alive!

Drawing his knife, he cut the leather of her tunic, exposing the nasty wound, which was still bleeding heavily. Cursing, he put his lips together and whistled as he pushed the stained leather over the wound and pushed down hard. They had to close the wound quickly. She'd already lost too much blood.

The clop of hooves stopped beside him as his horse leaned down and whinnied next to his ear. Malik jumped to his feet and dug through the pack on the animal's back, digging out a long strip of cloth he could use to bind the wound. Kneeling back next to her, he wrapped her injury as best he could. They had to move her quickly just in case these men were part of a larger hunting party still in the area. He glanced over his shoulder as the sound of another horse approaching reached his ears, but as he suspected, it was Kalis, his face a mask of grim satisfaction.

"She's alive. Barely." Malik tied off the cloth, knotting the bandage tight. Already, he could see blood seeping through. "We have to move her."

Kalis threw one leg over the side of his horse, quickly dismounting as he hurried toward them. His eyes scanned the forest. "I didn't see anyone else, but I can't be sure."

"Take the deer," Malik instructed. "We may need to hole up for a while and the meat will come in handy."

"She still has her sword." Wonder filled Kalis' voice as he stopped to look down at her still body.

"Aye, she does." Malik carefully pried her fingers from around the hilt of her sword and handed it to his brother. "She killed one of them herself." He stripped her bow and arrows from her, passing them to Kalis as well. As long as he lived, Malik knew he would never forget the sight of her valiantly defending herself against her attackers. She'd been outmatched and outnumbered, but she'd been absolutely magnificent. There had been no surrender in her.

Carefully pushing his hands beneath her, he lifted her into his arms, trying not to jar her side. Slowly, he gained his feet. Kalis had already slung the deer carcass over the back of his horse. With his brother's help, Malik mounted his horse with his precious burden held tight in his arms. If she died, all hope was lost.

Swinging the horse around, he led the way out of the meadow and deeper into the forest. There was a cave not too far from here that they'd used before. They needed the shelter and the nearby stream. There was no telling how long it would take until Zarina was well enough to travel. He did not even entertain the notion that she might not live. She had to live. He would settle for nothing less.

They traveled in silence. Malik knew his brother would watch their back trail to make sure they were not followed. They moved as fast as they dared, trying to balance the dual needs of getting her quickly to safety and not jarring her unnecessarily. She moaned softly, and Malik cradled her tightly to his heart. "You are safe, Zarina. We will not allow anyone else to harm you." He tried to infuse her with his strength, as if by his will alone, he could make her live.

Kalis took the lead as they neared the cave, spurring his horse ahead. Malik knew his brother would check for signs of animals and other men, making sure all was safe. When he joined his brother a few minutes later, Kalis already had a small blaze going in a quickly dug fire pit just outside the entrance of the cave and was pulling his packs off the back of his horse. The carcass of the deer had been laid to one side.

Malik dismounted and held Zarina in his arms while Kalis spread his blankets, making a pallet on the hard ground. "We'll need water," he murmured as he knelt next to the blankets, carefully depositing his precious burden.

Kalis nodded, grabbed his watertight skin bag and disappeared silently into the forest.

Malik placed his hand on her forehead and frowned. She was sweating now, her face hot. Fever was already beginning to set in. Rising, he grabbed his own packs from the back of his horse and quickly began to dig out supplies. They always kept a stock of healing herbs, never knowing where they might be if one of them was hurt or injured.

He sent a quiet prayer of thanks to his mother for teaching her sons the basics of healing. Although normally considered a woman's skill, his mother had had enough foresight to know that it was a skill both her sons would need to possess. By the time he'd laid out all the supplies he needed and covered her with his own blankets, Kalis was back.

Still silent, his brother set a pot of water on the fire to boil before he settled on the ground next to the pallet. His hand shook as he reached out to gently move a lock of her dark hair that was stuck to her forehead with sweat. Carefully, he pushed it back, allowing his fingers to stroke across her face. He frowned with growing concern. "She has a fever already."

"Aye," Malik sighed.

"She will live." Kalis' voice was as fierce as the expression on his face, but his eyes exuded fear.

Although he had fears of his own, he refused to acknowledge them. "She will live." The finality in his words seemed to reassure his brother and Kalis nodded, determination etched on his face.

The water boiled quickly and they began to work as a team. While Malik stripped her soiled tunic from her body, Kalis poured some of the water into a bowl and, when it was cooled slightly, he crumbled some dried herbs into it, mixing them well with his fingers.

Malik removed the blood-soaked bandage and quickly lifted Zarina into his arms and away from the pallet. Kalis tipped the bowl over her side, allowing the hot water and herb mixture to flow over and through her wound. Gritting his teeth against her cry of pain, Malik held Zarina tight, not allowing her to move. He regretted the pain, but it was necessary to help fight off the infection of her wound.

Kalis swiped the back of his hand over his forehead, watching intently as Malik laid her back on the pallet. The wound was still seeping heavily. The brothers' gaze met over her supine body and they knew what they had to do. "You hold her." Malik was already reaching for the knife at his belt as he spoke.

Plunging the blade into the flames, he watched as it began to heat. "We will have to seal both the front and the back."

"Aye." Kalis' voice was low and filled with concern as he shifted his body until he was kneeling at Zarina's head.

Malik stared into the fire, praying for the strength to do what he must do. He had prayed more these past few hours than he had in the past thirteen years. Whether or not the gods would answer his prayers remained to be seen. The blade was glowing now, so he turned and nodded at Kalis.

His brother took a deep, fortifying breath before slipping his hands beneath Zarina and raising her into a seated position. Taking her hands in his, Kalis crossed them over her chest and pulled her back tight against him. He nodded at Malik.

Yanking the knife from the fire, Malik moved swiftly, dragging the blade quickly over the gaping front opening of her wound. Her eyes shot open as she cried out in agony. The smell of burnt flesh filled the air as Malik plunged the blade back into the flame to reheat it. He was not finished yet.

Her eyes were dark and sightless with pain. "No more torture," she brokenly whispered. "Just kill me."

Kalis leaned his forehead down until it was touching hers. "We need to close the wound. You shall not die."

She seemed not to hear his words, struggling against Kalis' hold as Malik returned his attention to her side, red-hot blade in his hand. "Turn her." Malik hated himself for having to hurt her, even knowing he had no choice.

Kalis tightened his hold on her as he turned her. She struggled, but she was so weak that she had no effect on Kalis' grip. Malik ignored the fact that she tried to flinch away from him as he drew the blade over the ragged back edge of her wound, sealing it tight.

This time, she did not cry out, biting her lip to hold back her scream. Malik would have much rather heard her yell than the deep gulp of air she sucked in as the pain hit her. Tossing his dagger to the ground, he cupped her cheeks with his hands. "It is done now. The wound is sealed."

She blinked, and he could tell she was wavering on the edge of unconsciousness. "If you rape me, I will kill you." Her words were little more than a harsh gasp and it took Malik a moment to understand them. When he did, he was filled with both pain and pride.

Rubbing his thumbs gently across her cheeks, he leaned closer to her. "I will kill anyone who hurts you, little warrior. You are safe."

Kalis leaned over her and echoed his brother's words. "You are safe now."

As she absorbed their words, her eyes went from one brother to the other and her expression changed. She gifted them with a bemused smile. "You are gods." There was both wonder and a wistful quality in her whispered words. Her eyes suddenly rolled back in her head and she slumped to one side.

Kalis reluctantly laid her back on the pallet as he met Malik's gaze. In spite of the gravity of the moment, one corner of his mouth kicked up in a grin. "Gods?"

A chuckle escaped Malik as he shook his head. "I'm sure she'll think differently once she's awake and no longer out of her head in pain."

Kalis mixed up a poultice of healing herbs and spread it over her wound and then Malik placed a thick pad of fabric over the area before wrapping a fresh bandage around her waist. Her other injuries were more superficial, but the brothers cleaned and tended them as well before tucking her under the blankets.

Without a word, Kalis rolled to his feet, hefted the deer carcass into his arms and headed out into the woods. The sun would be going down in a few hours and there was much to do. Keeping one eye on Zarina's still body, Malik set to work tending the horses and setting up the camp. They would be here awhile.

Chapter Four

Zarina wished the voices would be quiet. Her head ached and she wanted to sleep. As if in answer to her thoughts, the voices stopped. But they were familiar, like something she'd heard in a dream. Maybe all this was a dream?

She kept her eyes closed and her breathing even as she examined her surroundings. The ground was fairly soft beneath her and the fresh smell of fragrant boughs drifted up to her nostrils. Warmth surrounded her and she fought the urge to snuggle deeper beneath the blankets covering her. They were scratchy, slightly rough, but not unpleasant.

There were other smells as well—the acrid tang of wood smoke mixed with the mouthwatering scent of fresh cooked meat. Her stomach rumbled in anticipation, announcing its hunger. Zarina ignored its complaint and focused on the rest of her body. Obviously, her stomach still worked properly.

Although her head still ached, it was manageable. The pounding pain that had plagued her was now a dull beat. She shifted slightly on the pallet, careful not to move the blankets or to make any sound. The burning in her side had subsided, leaving behind a throbbing stiffness. All in all, she felt almost herself again.

Now she just had to figure out where she was and what had happened!

Her memory was a bit fuzzy. She remembered tracking and killing the deer. Then she'd been surprised and attacked by three men. A shiver traced its way down her spine at that memory. But that's where it got confusing. Two men on horseback had broken through the trees. They too were strangers to her. Had they been real or just a product of her imagination?

No. She had more memories of those two men. Or was it one man and she was seeing double? She was sure they looked exactly alike. She remembered yelling and pain and a fire that scorched her flesh. Her memories became even more disjointed after that.

She remembered the voices most of all. Demanding, cajoling, soft and harsh, always encouraging her to eat or drink. Voices similar, yet slightly different. There were definitely two of them.

"It's been seven days." Zarina listened intently when the voices began again. It was time to learn as much as she could about her situation. Her mind whirled at his words. Had she really been incapacitated for that long?

"I know." This voice was slightly deeper and tinged with weariness.

"There must be something else we can do." Guilt filled her at their obvious frustration over her condition. But she shoved her concern aside and listened.

"We've done all we can, Kalis. Now it is up to the gods."

"But how long will we wait, Malik?"

"However long it takes," came the harsh reply.

Silence descended on the campsite and Zarina became aware of the sounds of the night birds in the surrounding forest and the slight rustle of wind in the leaves. She decided that it was time that she "awoke" from her deep sleep. But she'd keep the truth of her condition to herself. At least until she learned more about these men. Trust was not something to be given lightly. Not for a woman on her own.

Shifting her legs, she rustled the blankets and lightly moaned. Immediately, she heard the men move, could feel them hovering over her. A hand touched her forehead and it felt familiar, as if she'd felt that touch many times before. She frowned as she allowed her eyes to flutter open.

She stared at them, unable to tear her eyes away. Two pairs of pale blue eyes, the color of a summer's sky, were filled with concern. Identical faces with high foreheads, prominent cheekbones and strong jaws leaned over her. The longer she stared at them, the more she realized that there were slight differences. One of the men had more of a hook to his nose and the other had fuller lips. Or maybe she was imagining the differences. She blinked several times just to make sure she wasn't seeing double.

"Two," she croaked, surprised by how dry and raw her throat felt.

"Shh." The one with the slightly hooked nose slipped his arm around her back and eased her up into a seated position. Placing a wooden cup at her lips, he tilted it upward. "Drink."

The cool water touched her lips and she opened her mouth, gulping it down as fast as she could. She was so thirsty, her body parched. She cried out in protest when he pulled the cup away, but it was quickly refilled and returned to her lips. She relaxed slightly and began to drink more slowly when she realized they would allow her as much water as she wanted.

The cup was finally removed, but the warrior holding her in his arms made no move to ease her back down onto the pallet. Instead, he shifted his hold on her so that she was cradled in his arms. Zarina knew she should be frightened, but she was intrigued, filled with a curious need to learn more about them. After all, if they'd meant her harm, they'd had plenty of time to do so.

Resting her tired body against the man holding her, she stared at the one sitting across from them. There was no doubt in her mind that he was a warrior. One good look at him confirmed that. Even in repose, he was a formidable sight. Massive was the best word to describe him. Stripped to the waist, his chest gleaming in the firelight, muscles rippling with every move he made.

"Who are you?"

A dimple showed briefly in his right cheek when he grinned. "I am Kalis." He inclined his head respectfully toward her. "And the warrior taking all the liberties at the moment is my slightly older brother Malik."

She tilted her head back so she could gaze up at Malik and then back at Kalis. "You look alike." She'd heard of such things, but she'd never actually seen it before.

Kalis nodded. "We are twins. Malik is the elder by mere minutes."

"How do you feel?" She felt the deep rumble of Malik's words against her side as he spoke. She still wasn't sure how much she trusted the concern underlying his words.

"Much better." Zarina almost bit her tongue. She hadn't meant to be quite that honest with them about her condition. Better for her if they didn't quite know how strong she was, just in case she needed to make an escape.

"Good." Satisfaction filled that one word to overflowing. He eased her back down onto the pallet and she almost cried out at the loss of his heat, the feeling of his strength cradling her, protecting her.

Stop it, she admonished herself. It is but an illusion and not real. The time had come to get answers. "What happened?"

Malik narrowed his eyes and frowned, but he answered. As she listened, the brothers gave her the bare bones of the events that had transpired, most of which she remembered, if only vaguely. "So you have tended me for *seven* days." She wanted to make sure she had her facts straight.

Malik nodded.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

She could see his obvious confusion. "Why would you tend me?" In her experience, no one did something for nothing. She needed to know what they expected in return for their kindness. "I don't have much to trade or to give you."

"Because you belong to us." Malik's soft tone sent shivers down her spine even as his words struck terror in her heart.

"I belong to no man." She rolled to her feet, ignoring the pain the shot through her side. The blanket fell to her feet and she belatedly realized that she was naked.

Both men were on their feet, moving toward her. "Stop. You will hurt yourself." Zarina wasn't sure who spoke as she was too busy searching for a weapon. There! Just on the other side of the campsite was her sword.

She raced across the hard ground, swallowing back a yell as every bone in her body protested the sudden movement. But she did not stop. Reaching down, she grabbed the sword and held it in front of her. "Stay back," she ordered, but neither man paid her any heed.

"You may keep your sword if it gives you comfort, Zarina. But you need to rest or you will hurt yourself again." These men confused her. Instead of anger and threats, Kalis seemed concerned.

She swayed on her feet but held her ground. Kalis swore under his breath as he strode toward her. "Run me through if you must, but you must lie back down."

Swallowing hard, she prepared to face him. She didn't want to hurt him, but she didn't know what else to do. Confusion swamped her. "Don't come any closer." It was more a plea than an order, but he ignored her.

Strong arms enveloped her from behind, wrapping around her arms and removing the sword from her hand as easily as one would from a child. How could she have forgotten Malik? Defeat, bitter and sorrowful washed over her. She'd wasted her one chance to escape them. Now she would pay.

Malik cast her sword aside and swept her into his arms. She expected him to toss her to the ground. She had threatened his brother and now she knew there would be consequences. She prayed for the strength to endure whatever punishment he would mete out.

"Do not be concerned, little warrior. We will not harm you." He laid her carefully back on the pallet, tucking the blankets around her. His eyes were deep pools of concern as he laid his hand against her cheek.

Zarina didn't like feeling so weak. It put her at a disadvantage. "I'm not concerned," she boasted. It was silly to say such a thing, but she said it anyway.

Malik smiled at her as he stroked the line of her jaw. Zarina's insides clenched and a strange heat filled her. Kalis settled next to her, and she could not bear the concern in his eyes.

"I wouldn't really have hurt you, Kalis." Why had she said that? Her injuries must be worse than she originally thought. Somewhere along the way she seemed to have lost all her common sense.

"Don't worry, Zarina. We will take care of you now." Kalis brushed her hair from her face, stroking his hand over her scalp.

Her stomach roiled and her heart began to pound. "How do you know my name?" She could taste sheer terror on her tongue as she forced the words out of her mouth.

His slight smile transformed his austere face, and the dimple on his right cheek momentarily captured her attention. It was on the opposite side as his brother's. She forced herself to pay attention to what he was saying, but it was getting harder to focus. "You told me in a dream." His voice shook with emotion as his eyes heated with desire.

Heat shot through her. Surely he couldn't mean what she thought he did. Impossible! Kalis and Malik could not be the men from her dreams. Could they?

"Sleep, Zarina." He sprawled out next to her, propping his head on his hand.

Malik mirrored his movements on her other side and she was surrounded by their large, male bodies. Protected and warmed by them. She didn't understand this at all.

"Sleep," Kalis whispered to her. "We will talk more when you awaken."

Zarina closed her eyes and allowed the exhaustion of the encounter to take her. She knew she should be worried about her safety. Knew she should not trust the two men on either side of her. But common sense and logic had no place here. Somewhere deep inside, she knew that these men would do her no harm. In fact, they would protect her.

And had they not already killed for her, tended her wounds? Feeling safer and more secure than she had since the moment of her father's death, Zarina slept.

She knew she was dreaming even as the dream began. She had to be. Nothing in her life had ever felt so wonderful. Her head was no longer beating like a drum and she was nice and warm. Sighing, she soaked in the feeling of wellbeing.

The touch was as light as a feather upon her cheek before skimming over her neck and across the top of her shoulder. It didn't tickle, not exactly, but it did make the insides of her stomach flutter. She wanted more.

The touch moved lower, stroking the curve of her breast as it continued down her rib cage toward her belly. The action pushed the blanket aside and the warm night air brushed across her skin. Her nipples pebbled, as much from arousal as from the gentle caress of the wind.

Lips, soft and light, skimmed across her mouth. It was a searching caress, a gentle exploration, and she felt no fear or apprehension. She parted her lips, eager for more.

"Zarina." Her name was a whisper on the night breeze.

"Mmm." Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips.

A rueful male chuckle came from close to her ear. "You are not making this easy, little warrior." At the same time he spoke, she gasped as she felt another set of lips caressing the curve of her neck.

Her eyes fluttered open and her memory returned. This was no dream. She was no longer alone, but with Malik and Kalis. And it was them, not unknown dream men, who were touching her. Big and strong, both of them were propped up on one arm on either side of her.

Malik stroked his hand over the back of her head before cupping her cheek. "How do you feel?"

It amazed her just how quickly she'd learned to tell them apart. For now they were very different to her. It was in the way they held themselves, the way they talked. Yes, there were slight physical differences, but it was more than that. They were like two halves of a whole, each one different and unique, but somehow necessary to the other.

And she realized he was still waiting patiently for her reply. "I'm fine."

Kalis raised his head from where he'd been feasting on her neck and gave her a sensual smile. "We can make you feel even better."

Zarina's body was suffused with heat as his meaning became obvious. She was suddenly very aware of the fact that she was partly exposed to them, the blanket bunched down around her hips. But it wasn't embarrassment or fear that filled her, but a longing, a yearning for something that went deeper than the few quick couplings she'd had with one of her father's warriors.

These feelings left her shaken and unsure. She no longer knew herself. Her life had changed so much in the past few months. Who knew what tomorrow would bring? She trusted these men not to hurt her. Why then should she not indulge in some pleasure?

Both men were naked beside her, their massive chests gleaming in the firelight. Each one seemed to have a marking, a tattoo of some kind, just over his heart, and she wondered about the significance of having a heart pierced with swords in such a position.

She longed to touch the tattoo, to stroke the naked expanse of their chests, to touch the crisp covering of light hair that reached from nipple to nipple before trailing downward over ripples of muscles to disappear beneath the blankets. She wanted to touch their hard erections, stroke them with her hand and, eventually, take them, one at a time, inside her body.

Malik mistook her silence for refusal and tugged the blanket back up over her, covering her breasts. "We are pressuring you, and that is not fair." His blue eyes filled with sadness. "It is not right that we take advantage of your weakness." Leaning down, he placed a chaste kiss on her cheek. "Forgive us."

Now she was confused. She could feel their erections, long and thick, pressing against either side of her, so she knew they were aroused, knew they wanted her. But instead of pressing her harder, they were backing off. Perversely, that made her want them even more.

Lifting her hand, she touched the side of Malik's face. He leaned into her touch, his eyes closing as he gave a small hum of pleasure. The stubble on his jaw was rough against her palm, but it wasn't unpleasant at all. She fingered a strand of his dark brown hair, amazed at how soft it was. He turned his mouth into her hand, kissing the center of her palm. His tongue snaked out and licked along the base of her fingers. Goose bumps rose on her arms.

She could feel Kalis growing restlessness and knew she had to make a decision. "You wouldn't be taking advantage of me." The words she'd meant to be firm and forceful were more of a sultry whisper.

"Are you sure?" This from Kalis, who was already nibbling the lobe of her ear.

"Oh yes," she sighed, giving herself over to the pleasure they offered.

Malik's hand wrapped around her wrist, holding her hand to his mouth as he nipped at the pads of flesh at the base of her fingers. Zarina sucked in a breath as he drew his tongue up the length of her index finger before closing his mouth over it. The planes of his face were harsh in the dim light of the campfire, but desire blazed from his eyes. Closing his teeth gently around the base of her finger, he scraped the sides as he pulled it from his mouth.

She was unable to swallow back the moan of desire. She'd had no idea that her hand was such an erogenous zone. She also had a growing feeling that this was only the beginning.

Meanwhile, Kalis skimmed his tongue around the whorls of her ear before working his way down the side of her neck. The stubble of his beard rubbed the sensitive skin beneath her jaw and along her neck as he continued to move lower.

A fever was burning in her now that had nothing to do with her injury. She'd never felt desire so hot and so potent before. This need was unlike anything she'd ever experienced, except in her dreams. Fear awoke deep in her belly and in the back of her brain, warning her against getting in too far over her head, about beginning something she couldn't finish.

But then two hands cupped her breasts and the voices were silenced. As she watched, two heads lowered toward her straining nipples. Unable to stop herself, she arched up to meet them. Heat engulfed her as both men pleased her breasts. They flicked the tips with their tongues, making her nipples strain even tighter. Then her nipples were engulfed in a moist heat as they sucked them into their mouths.

Moisture flowed from between Zarina's thighs as her legs parted of their own accord. She felt wanton, needing more than they were giving her. Curling her toes into the pallet, she pushed her hips upward, searching. The blanket shifted lower, leaving her sex and thighs bare. "More," she gasped as they suckled harder.

Malik eased his mouth from her breast and began to work his way down her body. He took his time, driving the heat within her so high she could hardly bear it. Her head thrashed from side to side as he licked and kissed her rib cage. He dipped his tongue into her bellybutton, swirling it around before pausing to nip at her hipbones. Finally he settled himself between her thighs, shoving the blanket out of his way.

"Spread your legs, Zarina." His fingers skimmed up the inside of her thighs. "Show me how much you want me. I know you're hot and wet." His breath was a warm puff against her heated flesh. "Show me." His voice was like a wizard's, deep and mysterious, compelling her to obey.

Kalis flicked the tip of her breast with his tongue. "Show him," he encouraged her.

She opened her legs wide, uncaring that a man was looking at her sex for the first time in her life. Cream seeped from her core, moistening the folds, preparing her for Malik's cock. And she wanted it. She wanted to take it inside her, feel its strength pumping in and out of her body until they both exploded with pleasure. Then she wanted to do the same with Kalis.

Maybe she was wicked to want two men at the same time. But it didn't feel wrong. Not with them.

"Beautiful," Malik whispered. That one word flowed over her, and for the first time in her life she truly felt beautiful. She felt desirable and not like some freak of nature. She cried out as he stroked one finger over the slick folds of her sex, skimming the nub of nerves at the apex before sliding down the other side.

"I knew you'd be hot and wet." He picked up her hand and drew it between her thighs. "I'm going to eat you until you scream with pleasure, but first Kalis needs a taste." Zarina didn't resist as he pulled her hand deeper into the notch of her thighs.

"Touch yourself, little warrior. Rub your fingers over yourself so that Kalis can taste your sweet flavor."

As both men watched, she drew up her knees, widening her legs farther. Lowering her other hand between her legs, she spread her sex wide. Knowing they were both watching her every move heightened her own desires. Tracing her fingers over her sex, she coated them with her own cream.

Kalis wrapped his hand around her breast and plied her nipple with his fingers. "Dip your fingers deep." He pinched lightly on the swollen tip and pleasure shot from her breast to her core. Obeying him, she plunged her fingers deep, moaning as her inner muscles clamped down hard around them.

Kalis began to rhythmically pinch her nipple. It bordered on painful but never crossed the line. Instead, it started the same rhythm in her sheath as it clenched and relaxed in tandem to his movements. "Let me taste you." His voice was rough and deep with arousal.

Zarina pulled her fingers from her core and brought them to his lips. Kalis opened his mouth and drew them deep inside. Much like Malik had done earlier, he began to suck and lick at her fingers.

She cried out as a moist tongue stroked her sex. Obviously, Malik was through with waiting. The walls of her pussy contracted as he sucked lightly on her clitoris. Zarina could feel the explosion building inside her. No man had ever touched her this way before. She'd enjoyed the few couplings she'd experienced before, but she'd had no idea that such pleasure was even possible.

The waiting was painful and she threaded her fingers of her free hand through his hair and tugged him even closer. She felt his muffled laughter as it vibrated through her sex. Crying out, she arched her hips toward him.

Kalis gave one final suck on her fingers and released her hand. Keeping one hand on her breast, he lowered his head toward her. Capturing her mouth with his, he swallowed her cries of pleasure. He plunged his tongue into her mouth just as Malik pushed two thick fingers into her heated core.

Zarina felt like she was stretched on a wire between pain and pleasure. Every muscle of her body was straining toward release. As if they understood her dilemma, Kalis sucked hard on her tongue at the same time Malik drove his fingers deep.

Screaming, she came. Her hips bucked and her legs trembled as Malik continued to stroke his fingers in and out of her body. Her heated passage contracted around them, trying desperately to keep them inside her. She could feel the gush of liquid between her legs and the relief that it brought.

And through it all, Kalis drank from her mouth like a man starving for water. His tongue coaxed hers to play, his lips hard and demanding, then soft and encouraging.

The emotional release was too much for her and she pulled away, gritting her teeth to keep from moaning at the loss as Malik's fingers slipped from her body and Kalis' lips left hers. Sitting up, she drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms

around them. She buried her face against her knees and bit her lip to keep from crying. She didn't even know why she wanted to cry. They'd given her such incredible pleasure, the remnants of it still pulsing through her body.

"Shh." Two strong arms wrapped around her from behind, hugging her tight. When she finally began to relax, Malik eased her back down onto the pallet.

She didn't want to face them in her emotional state, but as her own body continued to thrum with pleasure, she suddenly realized that neither of them had come. Forcing her eyes open, she did what she knew she had to do. Relaxing as best she could, she opened her legs and met two concerned gazes. "I'm ready." She knew she owed them this much, and truly it was no hardship. She knew she'd enjoy herself, once she got control over her emotions.

Kalis picked up the blanket and drew it over her, tucking it around her body. "No, you're not." There was no accusation in his voice, only slight disappointment.

"I don't understand." These two men did not act like any others she'd ever encountered and she was left feeling unsure of herself. It was a feeling she despised.

"I can see that you don't," Malik softly reply. "We will wait until you are ready."

She shook her head, unable to believe that two men with engorged cocks would turn down a willing woman. As she watched, Kalis absently rubbed the tattoo on his chest as if it pained him. "Does it hurt?"

He grunted as he shifted his position and yanked a blanket over himself. "I will live."

In spite of her situation, a small smile played at her lips. He'd definitely misunderstood her question. "Not that." She indicated the bulge in the blanket. "This." She rolled over onto her right side and lightly touched the edge of the tattoo. Kalis hissed in a breath, his face filled with agony. Zarina quickly yanked her hand back. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"No." Capturing her hand, he drew it back to his chest and laid it over the intricate marking. Flattening her palm over it, he covered it with his own. His heart was pounding heavily against his chest. "You can touch it. After all, you are part of it."

Curiosity, confusion and exhaustion all warred within her. Part of her wanted answers—the other part warned her she wasn't going to like what she found out. But Zarina had never been a coward. "How? How am I part of it?"

Kalis sighed deeply but shook his head.

Malik stirred behind her, wrapping his arm around her midsection and pulling her bottom back against his hard cock. "In the morning. We will explain it all in the morning. For now, we all need sleep."

Kalis sprawled out next to her, his chest against hers. She could feel his erection against her belly, the moisture from the tip dampening her skin. Lying between the two brothers, feeling both of their cocks nestled against her, wicked visions of having both

of them take her at the same time filled her brain. She had to bite her lip to keep from moaning aloud.

Resting her head against Kalis' chest, she took one final look at his tattoo before closing her eyes. She'd get her answers in the morning. For now, she was content to be where she was.

As she drifted off to sleep, it occurred to her that during everything that had happened, not once had either man jarred her wounded side.

Chapter Five

"Tell me about the marking." Zarina finished the last of her morning meal and sat back, replete and well rested. She felt more like herself this morning than she had since the day of her injury. It was time for her to leave and return to her own cave, her own life.

She swallowed the pang of grief that rose up within her at the thought of leaving them. Their path was not hers. Yes, theirs and hers had crossed for this brief time, but it was time to move on. But first, she wanted to hear the story behind the tattoo that marked both their chests.

Kalis handed her a wooden cup filled with hot tea before settling back down with a cup of his own. Even though there was a chill in the early morning air, neither man wore a shirt. Zarina tugged the edges of the blanket around her shoulders, glad for its warmth, even though she was fully dressed. It was the first thing she'd done when she awoke this morning. She had seen the protest in both men's eyes, even though neither of them had said a word to stop her. Kalis had simply handed over her clean clothing when she'd asked about it and that had been that. She'd been surprised and touched to find that the tear in her leather tunic had been clumsily repaired.

"It is a long tale," Malik warned as he tipped his head back, closed his eyes and soaked up the early morning sun.

The long, thick column of his neck momentarily distracted Zarina. She was filled with the sudden urge to bite him, to lick the salty skin of his shoulder. As if he could feel her perusal, he tilted his head back up, blue eyes wide open as he met her gaze. Swallowing, she glanced away, embarrassed at her loss of concentration. She had to get a hold of herself. "I want to hear it."

Sighing, he made himself comfortable. With one knee bent, he rested his arm across it, his own cup dangling from his fingers. "Many generations ago, an ancestor of ours managed to anger a sorceress named Hesabeth. He didn't know she was a sorceress at the time. To him, she was just a woman he'd bedded, and now that she was pregnant, he wanted to be rid of her." Malik's scowl deepened as he continued. "He wanted to make an advantageous marriage and that did not include marrying a woman of no money or standing, and certainly not a woman who acted like a warrior instead of a woman."

Zarina could feel the heat climbing up her cheeks as she bowed her head, unable to keep his gaze. She was very familiar with what men thought of woman warriors regardless of their money or standing in the community.

Strong fingers caught her jaw, tilting it upward. Concerned blue eyes stared back at her. "I did not say this to shame you, Zarina. It is simply part of the story." His thumb

grazed her chin. "You have no reason to feel ashamed. If anything, I am the one shamed by my ancestor's actions."

Seeing nothing but honesty in his clear blue eyes, she nodded. Glancing toward Kalis, she saw the same open look in his face. "Continue. Please," she added when he hesitated.

Sighing, Malik sat back again and took a long sip from his cup. His hair fluttered in the breeze before settling back around his shoulders. Zarina clasped her hands together to keep from reaching out to touch it. She knew how soft it was, how it felt sliding through her fingers. And that was beside the point at the moment. Scolding herself, she sat up straight and hooked her arms around her bent legs.

"He threatened her." Malik's disgust was evident as he practically spit the offensive words out from between clenched teeth. "He threatened the mother of his child and the unborn child."

Zarina's stomach clenched. Such things happened, but that didn't make them any less vile. She leaned forward, captured by the emotion of his tale.

"She revealed she was a sorceress and cursed him for his action. Where he would have killed her child, she would demand two of his. But," he added as Zarina gasped, "his children would not die. Instead, in every generation, twin boys would be born of his line. They would be cast out at the age of seventeen, cut off from all that they know, unable to settle anywhere. They were doomed to wander until they found the one woman who could break the curse."

Malik broke off and Kalis took up the story. "And so for generations there have been twin boys born, each marked with this tattoo. The red heart is pierced with three swords, one to represent each of the twins and one for the unknown woman. The woman's sword pierces the heart straight through from the top because she owns the hearts of the warriors. The warriors' swords pierce it on either side of the woman's sword, so that they all cross in the center of the heart. There are three swords, but only one heart."

Zarina was enthralled. "How long ago was that?"

"Seven generations," Malik spat.

"So long," she whispered. "Has no one found a way to break the curse?"

Malik's smile held no humor. "Several times over the years, the two warriors have dragged home the woman who could break the curse, but they failed. You cannot force love and trust and that is the key to the curse."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"The sorceress was clever in her curse. It is not enough for the warriors to find the right woman, but they must devote themselves to her." He paused for effect. "Both of them."

"A woman with two husbands," she gasped. "That is unheard of."

"Aye." Kalis tossed his cup aside and raked his hands through his hair, his agitation obvious. "But there is more." Jumping to his feet, he began to clean up the remnants of their meal.

Zarina looked to Malik to finish it. "Since the sorceress was cast aside because she was a warrior, the only woman who can break the curse is a warrior woman."

"You said that I was part of it." She glared accusingly at Kalis, but he would not meet her gaze. A sick feeling settled in her belly, as she feared she knew where this story was leading.

"You are the woman, Zarina." Malik's eyes met hers but showed her nothing. She could read no emotion in his face.

"You are wrong." She bounded to her feet, the blanket dropping to the dirt as she backed away from them. They were out of their minds. They had to be. After all, who really believed in a curse? It was nothing more than a story.

A bead of sweat rolled down her back, making her shiver. The air around her was ripe with tension as she shook her head. "I won't believe this. I won't."

"Believe it or not, it is the truth." Malik's knuckles were white where they gripped the cup in his hand. She could see the muscles of his arms were clenched tight.

Swallowing hard, she shook her head again. "I am sorry for your plight, but I am not the right woman." She could not believe this. It was beyond rational thought. More likely, it was a clever way of keeping her with them so she would share their bed. That thought brought a pang to her heart. She'd been here too long already. She was beginning to care for the brothers, and that way would only lead to more heartache.

Malik shrugged. "You are the right woman." His hand covered the tattoo. "We both felt it from the moment we heard you screaming in the forest." He came to his feet in one fluid motion, looming large in front of her. "We saw you in our dreams."

Oh sweet heavens. The dreams. She refused to believe that they'd had the same dreams about her as she'd had about them. It was impossible. Wasn't it? Zarina's head was beginning to throb. There was just too much for her to absorb at the moment.

"You heard me in the forest?"

"We heard your screams." His hands flexed at his sides, opening and closing into fists.

"How far did we travel from there and what happened to the men?" Zarina needed to understand what had happened and up until now, she hadn't bothered to ask, content to just recover from her injuries.

Malik's jaw clenched tight, his face slowly becoming a hard mask of fury. "We killed them." Turning, he grabbed his shirt and stalked away, disappearing into the forest.

"I did not mean to upset him, but I need to know what happened." Bracing herself, she faced Kalis. There was tension in every line of his body as he watched her. She kept her own face as impassive as possible.

"We came south from where we found you. Not too far, but far enough to know if there were others trailing us." His eyes went to her injured side for a quick glance. "We could not afford to wait."

She swallowed again at the reminder of how close she'd come to dying. "I am grateful for the care you both have given me." As she spoke the word "grateful", his scowl deepened. She hurried on. "And I am sorry if I have upset you, but I cannot believe your story. I cannot."

Kalis stalked toward her, capturing her face between his large hands. Zarina stood her ground, proudly facing him even though her insides shook. "Little warrior, it matters not what you believe. It simply is. You will accept it in time."

Now it was her turn to scowl. Before she could reply, he swooped down and claimed her mouth. This was no gentle kiss to calm her, but a deep, hard kiss of possession. He was stamping her with his kiss, proclaiming that she belonged to him.

His lips covered hers, his tongue demanding entrance to her mouth. He tilted her head slightly, deepening his penetration. Her hands wrapped around his wrists, but it was not to push him away, but to pull him closer. She returned his kiss, reveling in his groan of pleasure as she stroked his tongue with hers. Then she gave him her moan in return when he sucked her tongue hard. She leaned into him, loving the hard feel of her breasts against his chest.

She longed to fight him, to be unmoved by his touch. But she feared that his kiss only showed what she already feared. She was too emotionally involved with these men. No matter what happened, they would always have a place in her heart. And she could not afford such attachment. It was fine for now, but what happened if she gave them her heart? They would not stay. Perhaps they thought they would, but life had taught her differently. Like their ancestor in the story, they too would someday want a "proper" woman for a wife. And then her heart would be broken.

Tearing her mouth from his, she turned her back on him. She couldn't look into his eyes after that kiss, not knowing what she had to do. She felt him behind her, the heat from his body drawing her, and she had to lock her knees to keep from leaning back against him. The air fluttered around her shoulder and she could feel his hand in the air above it, hesitating.

He swore under his breath and then he was gone. She could hear his footsteps as he walked into the forest. She spun around at the last second, longing to catch a final glimpse of him. But it was too late.

Biting her lip to keep from calling him back to her, she hurried around the camp, gathering her weapons. Strapping her sword around her waist, she slung her bow and arrows over her shoulder. She swiped at her eyes as she slipped her knife into its sheath and wrapped it around her upper thigh. She told herself that it was just dust in her eyes, nothing more.

Zarina glanced longingly at the food and blankets but took nothing that she had not come with. She could not take from them and, in fact, owed them her life. Bending

down, she picked up the blanket, folded it carefully and placed it next to the fire. Her hands smoothed across the rough fabric and she closed her eyes and breathed deep. She could smell both men, their masculine scent of leather, woods and musk. Hesitating for the briefest of moments, she unsheathed her dagger and laid it in the center of the blanket as a parting gift. A thank you for all that they'd done for her.

Whirling away from the camp, she headed north. She hoped Kalis had been telling her the truth when he'd told her they'd traveled south. If she could find the clearing where the fight had been, she could find her way back to her own camp and her own belongings. She could only hope that everything was still there. If not, she was in a great deal of trouble.

She would not think of that now. Her legs felt sluggish as she forced them to keep moving. Being bedridden for more than a week had left her weakened. She would have to work hard to build up her strength again. Ignoring the twinge of pain in her side, she kept moving.

Logic told her that Kalis and Malik would be upset to find her gone but would shrug it off, regretting only the fact that she hadn't slept with them. Her heart told her something very different. It warned her to hurry if she wanted to escape them, that they would be hard on her heels once they discovered her missing.

For the first time in many months, Zarina listened to her heart instead of her mind, picking up the pace, moving as fast as she dared through the forest. Her muscles were burning with fatigue and her heart was pounding hard as she gasped for every breath she took. But she did not slow down. Already, she could feel them behind her. Hunting her.

She had gone out hunting deer, but now she was the hunted. And they would be relentless in their pursuit.

"She is gone."

Kalis sensed his brother's disbelief. He blamed himself. He should have known that something was wrong when she questioned him about the fight and which direction they'd come from. She had been seeking information. He swore, angry with himself and with Zarina. She'd known she was leaving when she'd returned his ardent kiss, had been planning her escape even as she'd sucked his tongue deep into her mouth.

"We will find her." Kalis swallowed his growing worry as he began to quickly break camp. "She is on foot and we have the horses."

He saw it as soon as he bent down to pick up her blanket. His finger lightly traced the blade before he grabbed the dagger and tossed it lightly to his brother. "The little fool is out there without her dagger."

Malik caught the blade easily and tucked it into his belt. "We frightened her with our talk of the curse and the legend."

Kalis drew in a deep, cleansing breath. Anger would not serve him. "I know." He did not tell his brother that he compounded the problem further by kissing her. "I cannot believe she left us her dagger."

Malik scowled, fingering the weapon tucked safely at his waist. "She should not have done that." He made a quick sweep of the campsite. "At least she took her other weapons."

"Aye, but nothing else. No food, no water, nothing." Pride warred with worry as he bundled the blankets together and laid them aside. She was indeed a warrior, able to survive off her own wits and talents. But the man in him was appalled that his woman was out there with no protection, food or shelter. They would find her and they would make her understand.

No. Kalis dug the heels of his hands into his eyes, trying to contain his volatile emotions. They could not make her do anything. That path only led to disaster. But she would soon learn that they would take care of her whether she wished it or not. No matter what she thought, she belonged to them. It was their duty – indeed, their right – to care for her.

Time. They had nothing but time. Eventually, they would earn her trust and her love. There was no other choice. He rubbed the mark on his chest, feeling it burn deeper with every mile farther she went from him. Grabbing his shirt from the ground, he shook it out and slipped it over his head.

"Kalis?" His brother's voice jerked him away from his thoughts.

"I am fine." He kicked dirt over the few remaining embers in the fire pit and turned to find Malik waiting impatiently with the horses saddled. All their blankets and gear had been hastily packed and strapped to the backs of the animals.

"We will find her." Resolution was in every line of Malik's body.

Kalis recognized the intense determination that matched his own. Oh yes. They would find Zarina, and no matter how long it took, they would convince her that she belonged with them. Striding to his horse, Kalis threw himself up into his saddle and put his heels to the animal's flanks. She had a head start, but she could not have gotten too far ahead of them.

Behind him, Malik spurred his own horse forward. The camp was bare. The brothers never looked back.

Chapter Six

Zarina doubled over, wrapping her arm around her stomach as she leaned against the trunk of a large pine tree. Its bark was rough and dug into her palm, but she welcomed the small discomfort as it helped her to focus.

The scene from the meadow would haunt her dreams for years to come. She'd found the site of the fight easier than she'd expected. Practically stumbled upon it as she'd fled through the forest. The body of the man who'd stabbed her was still lying where it fell. It had begun to rot and decay and several animals had obviously helped themselves to his remains. It was a gruesome reminder of just how brutal the world was. She didn't know what had happened to the body of the man she'd slain. At this point, she wasn't sure she really wanted to.

But Zarina was still grateful. It could have been her body left there to rot.

Pushing away from the tree, she sucked in a deep breath, longing for water. It had been foolish and prideful not to at least take some water. But she'd wanted to take nothing from the warriors who had already given her so much. She shook her head in disgust. Pride had always been her biggest flaw. Her father had repeatedly told her that there was no shame in accepting help sometimes. But it hadn't been that easy for her. The other warriors had always watched her for signs of weakness. She'd always had to be much better than the rest just to be accepted. And, in truth, they'd never really accepted her at all, just tolerated her.

It was that same surfeit of pride that had made her leave her precious dagger behind for the brothers as payment for their kindness to her. Luckily for her, she'd found one lying in the clearing near the body. She'd paused long enough to scoop it up and keep going. She wouldn't have stopped at all if it hadn't been vital to her survival. The blade was smaller and not as well made as hers, but it was better than no knife at all.

Eyes burning, she put one foot in front of the other and pushed forward. She desperately needed to get back to her own campsite. Praying for strength, she tried not to think about the fact that her belongings might be long gone, either destroyed by animals or taken by others. It wasn't the food or blankets she would miss, but the few personal items that remained to remind her of her family. The shell her father had given her and her mother's necklace were her two biggest treasures.

Because she was so tired and her thoughts had wandered, it took her a few moments to realize that something was wrong. The birds of the forest no longer sang. The insects had all but ceased to buzz and hum. Someone was out there.

Stopping, she shrank back against the base of a large tree and concentrated on taking short, light breaths as she listened. At first the pounding in her ears blocked out

all sound, but she persevered and eventually the beating of her pulse slowed enough for her to hear. Nothing.

She waited patiently, knowing that if she moved first and gave away her location, all was lost. Time passed slowly for her even though she knew in her mind that only a few minutes had gone by before she heard a sound. *Horses!*

But was it Kalis and Malik or was it someone else? Crouching low, she eased her bow off her shoulder and notched an arrow. Drawing back the bowstring, she scanned the area, ready to shoot at a moment's notice.

The horses came into view, plodding slowly through the dense brush. She recognized the strong, handsome animals immediately. But there were no riders! Her heart almost stopped as dread filled the pit of her stomach and her blood ran cold. Had something happened to them?

Ever so slowly, she came to her feet and lowered her bow. She'd have to go and look for them. She couldn't leave without knowing if they were all right. She justified her actions by telling herself that it was the right thing to do to repay the fact that they had saved her life. In truth, the reason was much deeper than that. Just imagining them lying dead like her attacker in the meadow filled her with such heartbreaking sorrow that she swayed, dizzy with the mere thought.

She had to know.

The horses were almost close enough for her to touch. She'd grab one of them and go in search of her warriors. Her warriors. When had she begun to think of them in that way? There was no time to think about that now. No time to question. Bracing herself to grab the horse's bridle as it trotted by, she stepped forward. And was promptly yanked backward, captured in a pair of hard, muscled arms.

She didn't think, just reacted. Pulling her feet up, she made herself a dead weight. The trick was to roll away when your attacker dropped you and draw your sword. But her attacker didn't drop her. Instead, his grip tightened and he fell to his knees, clutching her tight.

"Zarina?"

Closing her eyes, she swore sharply in her mind as she recognized the voice. She should have known that it would be a trap. She'd allowed her emotions to overtake her common sense once again. Something that only seemed to happen around these men.

"Zarina?" The voice was harsher now as her body was carefully turned over and cradled in Malik's strong arms.

"Where is Kalis?" She didn't bother to open her eyes, not wanting to see the gloating expression. They'd caught her through her own foolishness and they all knew it.

"I am here." She heard the leaves near them crackle just before she felt a hand on her forehead.

"Open your eyes." Malik was becoming more impatient. She knew she'd have to face them eventually, so she steeled herself for the upcoming confrontation and lifted her eyelids. But it was not gloating that she saw in his eyes, nor male triumph. Instead, his forehead was creased with worry and his normally clear blue eyes now resembled a stormy sky. She was totally confused by their reaction. She'd expected anger, not concern.

"Drink, Zarina." Kalis held a water skin to her mouth, urging her to drink. Opening her mouth, she drank, once again amazed by their care for her. The water revived her parched body as she continued to swallow until he pulled it away. "Enough. You'll make yourself ill."

"You little fool." Her gaze snapped back to Malik. There was the anger she'd expected. She struggled to get out of his arms, but they tightened around her as he rose with her still clutched against his chest. "You had no water, no food and no protection." He stalked to the horses that were patiently waiting. "You could have been killed."

His fury grew with each word until it was like a living entity surrounding them all. But with each word he spoke, wonder began to grow within her. Yes, he was angry with her. But underlying all of it, she sensed he was angry with himself. She was reminded of her father, who would bluster and yell whenever she'd gotten herself into some kind of trouble and he hadn't been able to save her from harm.

"It is obvious that you cannot be trusted to take care of yourself," Malik continued as he swung them both up onto the back of his horse.

She glanced over at Kalis, who had mounted his own horse. He too appeared tense, but not quite as angry as his brother. He caught her staring and the corners of his mouth turned up in a small smile. Why was he smiling? Sometimes men made no sense at all.

"Not yet recovered from your wound and you go racing through the forest with no provisions at all." Her attention was drawn back to Malik. His scowl was black enough to frighten the heartiest of men, and Zarina would have been terrified if she hadn't sensed his underlying concern for her.

The warrior part of her wanted to argue with him that she could take care of herself. In fact, she had been doing so for months now with no help from anyone. But the female side of her wanted to soothe his ragged temper and reassure him that it wasn't his fault.

He opened his mouth to continue his tirade but snapped it shut again. Groaning, he lowered his forehead until it touched hers. His hands flexed, his fingers digging into her body where he held her. "Why did you run?"

Right then and there, she knew that was what had angered him the most. But more than that, it had hurt him. Zarina was stunned that he could care that much about her.

Raising her hand, she cradled the back of his head. He opened his eyes and stared at her. With their foreheads still touching, they were so close, she could see that his eyes were no longer stormy. Desire now burned in their depths.

"I didn't mean to scare you, but I had to leave." She didn't know what to say to make him understand her need to be away from them and all the turmoil they churned up within her. To be back amongst her own things, by herself, the way she was used to.

Pulling away slightly, he nodded. She didn't know if that meant he understood or if he was just accepting her words. He shifted her so that her legs were resting on his thighs and her back was cradled against his right arm. Raising his left hand, he picked a twig out of her hair and tossed it aside before caressing the side of her face. It was such a gentle touch for such a huge, rough-looking man.

All her senses were heightened. She could feel Kalis' eyes on them, watching and weighing every word spoken. The light breeze was warm against her skin, the rising sun heating her. Her breathing was deepening with each breath she took, as her body seemed to come alive under his touch.

His hand continued down the column of her throat and she tipped her head back against his strong chest. His features were harsh but handsome in a rough sort of way. Her heart began to pound hard against her chest. Her breasts tightened and began to ache. Between her thighs, a low throbbing began as she felt her sex begin to soften and moisten.

She still wanted him. Wanted both of them. As foolish and illogical as it seemed, she trusted these men, at least on a physical level.

Malik's hand strayed lower, hovering just above her breast. "You have run and we have found you. We will always find you, take care of you and keep you from harm. You belong to us."

Before she could protest his words, his mouth came down on hers as his hand cupped her breast. All her worry, all her fears and all her fatigue slipped away as she lost herself in his embrace. His thumb traced her pebbled nipple through her leather tunic as his tongue laid claim once again to her mouth.

Relief flowed through her. She hadn't truly wanted to leave them. At least not without first experiencing more of the sexual heat that flowed between them. She knew it couldn't last, but she could take her pleasure and enjoy them while it did. She ignored the tiny voice in the back of her head that cautioned her against such foolishness.

The kiss ended abruptly and Malik's eyes glittered with warning. "We will always find you."

Zarina swallowed hard, not sure if his words were a threat or a promise or both. Fortunately, he seemed to require no answer from her. Malik urged his horse forward and the animal began to move easily through the forest.

"Which way to your camp?"

Zarina lay back in the stream and allowed the cool water to race over her. It washed the dust from her skin, refreshing it after the hard trek through the woods. Neither man had spoken, other than to grunt when she'd given them directions. She just didn't understand these men.

It had taken them the better part of the day to reach her home, even with the horses. Within moments of arriving at her campsite, they'd set up their gear and laid out their bedrolls, practically taking over the small space. Somewhere along the way, she seemed to have lost total control over her life. Again.

Except this time she wasn't on her own. No, this time she had two stubborn, bossy warriors to contend with. Both of whom seemed determined to take care of her. She pressed a hand to her belly to try to still the jumpy sensation within her, but it did no good.

Sighing, she turned her attention to washing her hair. She hadn't had more than a wash since she was injured, and she'd definitely missed her daily baths. Sitting up, she reached beneath her thigh where she'd shoved the soap plant that she'd dug up earlier. She'd been delighted when she'd first settled here and discovered the plant growing in abundance along the bank of the stream. Laying it on top of a flat rock next to her, she reached into the water and grabbed a fist-sized rock. Carefully, she crushed the bulbous roots of the plant, revealing a pulpy white substance. Dropping the rock back into the water, she scooped some of the pulverized root into her palm and began to work it through her hair. She tried not to think as she massaged her scalp and soaped her hair. When she was satisfied, she lay back in the stream and rinsed the soap from her hair.

Standing, she made sure she had a firm foothold before she scooped up some more of the soapy pulp and began to work it over her entire body. The water flowed around her knees as she began to wash. She was looking forward to being clean from head to foot and to wearing clean clothing as well.

She'd left Malik and Kalis behind at the camp, needing some space and time to herself where she could think and relax. For someone who'd spent so much of the past four months by herself, she hadn't realized how much she would miss her alone time until she'd spent a week in the constant company of the two of them.

Not that she minded spending time with them. They were good companions and very easy on the eyes. Her sex began to throb just thinking about them. It had been a combination of pleasure and pain riding all the way here on horseback, cradled in Malik's arms. While she cherished the feeling of being cared for and protected, his nearness—indeed, his very presence—had made her very uncomfortable. It was all she could do to not start squirming in his arms. Her sex burned with need and her breasts had swollen, almost painfully.

She'd all but run away to the stream. She'd thought that at least one of them would follow her, but they hadn't. Probably they'd realized that she wasn't about to leave all her belongings behind just to get away from them. And they were right. She needed all her things to help her survive.

Her original dip in the cold water had calmed the need firing her blood. But now it was back with a vengeance. Zarina didn't know herself any longer. She'd never felt this hot, this needy before. It felt like her skin was stretched too tightly over her bones and if she didn't find relief soon, she might be torn apart.

Cupping the soapy mixture in her hands, she slid them over her neck. Then lower. She shivered when her slippery fingers touched her breasts. They felt fuller than usual, and her nipples were puckered into tight nubs.

A noise off to her right startled her and she whirled around to face the new danger. Kalis stood under a large tree, almost hidden by its lush leaves. "Don't stop, Zarina." He stepped out from the foliage and inched closer to the shoreline. His movements were slow and steady, as if he were afraid to frighten her. "Touch yourself."

He was so close now she could see the desire burning in the depths of his pale blue eyes. His nostrils flared as he waited and she could see the muscles in his jaw clench. As she watched him, he reached his hands back, grabbed fistfuls of his leather shirt and yanked it over his head, dropping it at his feet.

She swallowed hard. His chest was impossibly wide, tanned a golden-brown and heavily banded with muscle. His biceps were almost as large as her thighs. With his legs spread wide and his hands on his hips, he was an imposing figure.

Could she do as he asked? His gaze heated her skin more than the sun glaring down from the sky. The air was so thick she could barely breathe. She knew she wanted both brothers. But was she willing to reach out and take what she wanted?

Yes!

Not taking her eyes off him, she began to move her hands, rotating them around her breasts. The combination of the caress of her hands and the naked need in his eyes made her moan. She felt his eyes on her body as if it was a physical touch. The blood pumped through her faster and hotter than ever before as she scraped her thumbs across her swollen nipples.

Kalis reached his hand down to the front of his leather pants. His eyes never strayed as he slowly tugged at the lacing. His swollen cock sprang free from its confinement, long and thick, swollen with need. Wrapping his fist around it, he slowly pumped his hand up and down. As she watched, a bead of liquid seeped from the tip. Zarina licked her lips, longing to taste it.

"Spread your legs wide and show me your cunt." His words made her ache and she could feel herself getting wetter between her thighs. He slid his hand over his erection again. "You want my cock inside you. You need it."

The vein in her temple throbbed and her heart pounded against her chest. He was right. She did want his hard length inside her. Spreading her legs, she slid her hands over her torso and then down the front of her thighs. She hesitated.

"Do it." His command made her feel weak in the knees, but she locked her legs to keep from falling. Skimming her fingers up the inside of her thighs, she stroked the wet folds of her sex as she spread it wide. She stood there, totally exposed to him, wanting him to touch her.

The expression on his face was almost frightening. He looked brutal and deadly. There was no softness to be found. "Don't move." A bead of water rolled down her back, making her shiver. As she watched, he shucked his boots and pants and waded

into the knee-deep water. Keeping his eyes locked on hers, he cupped her mound, sliding two large fingers into her hot core.

Liquid seeped from within her as he held his fingers inside her, not moving them. "Beautiful," he whispered as he lowered his head and licked her lower lip. She opened her mouth, desperate for more. For anything. She was poised on the edge of orgasm, unable to go over.

A small sound of need escaped from the back of her throat and Kalis raised his head and smiled at her. "More." She barely recognized the husky voice as her own as she tried to raise herself on her toes to get closer to him. Her hands moved from between her legs as she clung to his arms for support.

She tried to push her hips toward him, needing him to move his fingers deeper within her body. He wrapped his other arm around her waist, clamping her tight to his body so she was unable to move. The puckered nubs of her breasts brushed against the hard planes of his chest and she could feel his erection pressing against her stomach. She swallowed another moan as she tried desperately to move against him.

"Be still."

"I don't understand," she all but wailed, her fingers digging into his upper arms.

"You will trust me." The arm around her waist moved lower until his hand was gripping her behind. His fingers dipped between the globes of her ass, tracing the puckered opening. "Don't move a muscle," he murmured as he once again lowered his mouth to hers, tracing the fullness of her lower lip with his tongue.

Zarina stayed still, willing to do what he wanted if it would get her what she needed. Her patience was rewarded when he slipped his tongue inside her mouth, stroking her tongue with his. The fingers buried inside her sex didn't move, but she could feel her inner muscles begin to pulse around them.

He began to rub his finger over the crease of her behind, taking care to circle the ring of muscles around the opening. Without warning, he pressed the tip of his finger inside. Zarina gasped and went stiff with shock. No man had ever touched her this way before.

He lifted his lips from hers and stared down at her. "It is your choice, Zarina. But if you want to have us both take you at once, your body needs to be prepared." He pushed his finger deeper. It burned slightly, but he held his finger still and gradually her body relaxed around it. The moment he sensed she was relaxed, he pushed his finger deeper. Then he waited. He did this over and over until his finger was buried deep inside her ass. Zarina struggled not to move.

"I want to be able to fuck your ass as Malik fucks your cunt." His words brought a fresh gush from between her legs. Kalis responded by slipping a third finger inside her sex. With his other finger inside her ass, she felt full almost to bursting. It was uncomfortable, yet at the same time, pleasurable.

"Please, Zarina." She could sense his desperation, his absolute need for her, and that fed her desire almost as much as his touch. "Do you want that too?"

"Yes," she moaned. Anything. Everything.

"Yes," he agreed. "Anything and everything." She hadn't realized she'd said those last words aloud.

"You have such a sexy mouth." Leaning down, he caught her lower lip between his teeth and nipped gently before releasing it. "I want to see your mouth take my cock. Licking it. Sucking it." His words alone were close to making her come. She could feel her sheath clenching and unclenching around his fingers.

She nodded, unable to speak. She licked her lips in anticipation, wanting to touch him, to taste him. Sliding her hands up his shoulders, she enjoyed the play of the hard muscles beneath her fingers. Gripping his face in her hands, she tugged him toward her. "I want that too." This time she didn't wait for him to kiss her. This time she kissed him, pouring all her need and frustration into it.

Kalis responded immediately, thrusting his tongue into her mouth. And with his fingers buried deep inside her and his tongue fucking her mouth, Zarina came. It was so sudden she wasn't expecting it. One moment she was burning up, poised on the brink of orgasm, and the next she was convulsing, locked in pleasure.

She cried out, clutching him tighter, shoving her hips toward him, moaning again when the action pushed his fingers even deeper. Her inner muscles squeezed his fingers again and again. She lost all sense of time and place as pure physical release took over. When it was over, she slumped against him.

Even though Kalis was careful when he removed his finger from her behind, she sucked in a breath. She felt slightly tender but not too uncomfortable. His fingers slid easily from her sex, coated with her cream.

He helped her to sit back in the water and then tenderly washed her. She was at a loss. She'd come, but Kalis was still aroused, his cock hard, a dark blue vein pulsing within it. "You didn't..." She really wasn't quite sure what to say.

"No, I didn't," he agreed. He pushed a lock of hair out of her eyes, his touch so incredibly gentle. "I want the first time to be the three of us together."

He must have caught the distress in her eyes for he was quick to reassure her. "I know I cannot take you from behind. It's too soon for that." He smiled and it softened the harsh planes of his face. "But I have other fantasies." He brushed his fingers across her lips and she knew what he wanted her to do.

Her body was beginning to burn again. Yes, she'd come, but already she could feel the need and anticipation building within her. She wanted both of them too. She'd already admitted that fact to herself and now the opportunity was within her grasp. "Yes." It was barely more than a whisper, so she cleared her throat and said it again. "Yes." This time it came out the way she wanted it to. Firm and decisive. This was her choice.

Beside her, Kalis stilled. "Are you sure?"

She nodded.

Without a word, he plucked her out of the water, lifting her into his arms. Leaving their clothing behind, he strode with her through the woods, back toward the camp. Back toward Malik.

Chapter Seven

Malik turned as he heard footsteps coming toward him. He'd seen Kalis follow Zarina to the stream, and it had taken all of his resolve not to follow them. He wanted Zarina. But he knew he had to be fair to his brother. He'd carried her before him on his horse the whole way here, so he owed Kalis some time with her. Still it burned within his gut. He knew he had to share her with his brother and he truly didn't mind that part of the arrangement as long as he got his share of time with her. And right now his body was on fire for her.

Having her in his lap for several hours had made him very uncomfortable. His cock had swollen quickly with her resting against him. He knew she'd felt it pressing against her side, but she'd said nothing. It had been a pleasurable kind of torture to inhale her woman's scent and to feel her softer body against his.

He watched the woods, his hands clenched at his sides. When he realized what he was doing, he forced himself to relax. But it wasn't easy. He was still angry over the fact that she'd run from them. Every time he thought about what could have happened to her, alone in the forest, he felt the fury rising within him again. It was his duty to protect her. He rubbed a hand across the back of his neck and took a deep, cleansing breath.

Nothing had happened to her. That was all that was important. They were with her now and would keep her safe. In time, she would accept them and maybe someday the curse would be broken. He took the dagger that she'd left behind from his belt and laid it back among her belongings.

The tattoo over his heart burned slightly and he rubbed his left hand over it, soothing the sting. It was doing that more frequently now. Ever since they'd found her. Malik knew that she was their one hope of ending the curse on his family. But in the short time he'd known Zarina, it had started to become about more than just that.

Before he could begin to follow that thought, Kalis stepped out of the forest, striding toward the camp with Zarina cradled in his arms. Any thought of controlling his desire disappeared. She was naked, her skin still glistening with drops of water. With her long, damp brown hair hanging down Kalis' arm, it looked as if his brother had just plucked some mythical siren from the depths of the stream.

Kalis was naked as well, and Malik closed his eyes and swallowed his disappointment. He'd hoped to share Zarina with his brother the first time either of them took her.

"Malik." He could hear the compassion in his brother's voice. Forcing himself to bury his disappointment, he opened his eyes. It was then that he noticed that Kalis was

still fully aroused. He caught his brother's gaze and Kalis nodded slightly. Elation filled Malik.

His eyes flew to Zarina. She stared at him, her gaze solemn as she nodded. Malik quickly spread their blankets by the campfire that he'd started. It was still light out and the air was warm, but he hadn't wanted Zarina to catch a chill when she'd returned from her bath in the stream.

When all was ready, Kalis strode over to the blanket and laid Zarina in the center. She licked her lips nervously as she watched them. Malik took his time, stripping off his clothing and setting it aside. He laid his sword within easy reach. He was not willing to take any chances with her safety. The small cave and clearing were well hidden, but anyone could come across them.

Kalis had naturally settled himself on her right side, so Malik lowered himself onto the other side of the blanket. Reaching out, he stroked the curve of her cheek with his thumb. "Don't be afraid, Zarina."

"I'm not." She smiled up at him and his blood began to burn.

"Good," he said as he lowered his head. He kissed her forehead, her nose, her cheeks and the strong line of her jaw before moving downward to her neck. She smelled fresh and clean, but underlying it was the scent of arousal, sweet and seductive. Aye, she was a mythical siren and he was more than willing to be captured by her.

He nipped at the curve of her neck and was rewarded with her moan of pleasure. As he kissed his way across her collarbone, he glanced up at Kalis who seemed content to just watch them for the moment. Malik knew that situation wouldn't last long, so he took advantage of it, wanting to touch and taste Zarina everywhere.

He cupped her breast in his hand, marveling at its softness. Unable to resist, he sucked the tight bud at the tip into his mouth and suckled. Her legs began to move restlessly against the blankets. His left hand covered her belly before he shifted it lower, his fingers sifting through the soft hair covering her mound. It was as dark as the hair on her head and Malik loved the way it felt between his fingers.

He pushed lower, parting her slick folds, reveling in the evidence of her need for them. His fingers grazed the nub of nerves at the apex of her sex and Zarina cried out, her hips rising toward him, silently begging him for more. Using one finger, he traced the skin around her distended clitoris, but not quite touching her where she wanted to be touched. Her hips shifted, searching for his finger, but he always moved it just out of reach.

"Touch me," she moaned. Reaching out, she wrapped her fingers around his erection and squeezed tight. Malik sucked in a breath as her hand moved over his swollen flesh. It seemed as if his warrior woman was about to fight back.

Malik removed her hand, tugging her into a kneeling position with him at her back. Kalis shifted until he was kneeling in front of her. Malik moved in close, his cock pressing against her back. Kalis did the same from the front. Zarina was sandwiched between them.

Scooping aside her long hair, he gently bit the nape of her neck. Kalis leaned down and kissed Zarina, devouring her like a man who was starving and she was a feast. And she was indeed a feast for the senses. Everything about her aroused him. He knew it was the same for his brother.

Her body was strong, muscles rippling beneath the surface of her skin. Her breasts were high and ample, her stomach flat. Her face, arms and neck were tanned a light gold from the sun, but the rest of her body was pale where it remained hidden beneath her clothing. Her long hair was brown, but it was shot through with threads of gold and auburn and every shade of brown in between. It seemed to shimmer in the firelight.

Her nose was straight, her cheekbones high and her jaw hinted at her stubborn nature. That made him smile. They were well suited then, for both he and Kalis were stubborn as well. But she'd already proven that she could more than hold her own with them. But it was her eyes that captivated him. She could hide her emotions well, like any warrior, but if you looked deep into her eyes, they gave her away. Her golden-brown eyes were filled with intelligence and courage but tinged with sadness. They still didn't know the whole story, why she was out here on her own, but they would. And the gods help those who had hurt her.

Malik slipped his hands around her sides and cupped her breasts as he pressed his erection harder against her back. He found her ear with his mouth, tracing the whorls with his tongue before teasing the lobe with his teeth. "It is time, Zarina. Do you take us both?"

She nodded, gasping for breath as Kalis broke their kiss. Malik needed the words. "Say it!" He wanted no doubt that this had been her willing choice. He would have it no other way.

She nodded again, but this time she spoke the words he longed to hear. "Yes. I take you both."

Zarina felt as if her body and emotions were totally out of control. Trapped between the two men, she could feel Kalis' erection prodding her stomach and Malik's pressing against her back. She felt hot and needy and wild, wanting them both with a fierceness that was almost frightening. All her senses were heightened. She could hear the wind in the trees making the leaves dance, the birds singing in the distance and the buzz of insects from the flowers at the edge of the small clearing.

She could feel the heat surrounding her, rolling off each man in waves of anticipation. Their flesh was warm against her fingertips wherever she touched them. She could smell their clean, masculine scent and underlying it the earthy smell of sexual arousal. Every gasp, every breath, every groan was music to her ears. Never had she felt so wanted in her life.

Kalis moved away from her, settling back on his haunches. He stroked his erection in his hand and she knew he was remembering what he'd said to her at the stream. As she watched, a bead of whitish liquid seeped from the slit at the top and he captured it

with his thumb, spreading it around the head. Her mouth went dry and she licked her lips. She'd wanted to taste him. Now was her chance.

Coming up on her hands and knees, she kissed him lightly on the lips before leaving a trail of kisses down the thick column of his neck. Moving lower, she nuzzled the light sprinkling of hair on his chest, stopping to rasp her tongue across his flat nipple. Kalis groaned and wrapped his hand around the back of her neck, holding her close. She smiled as she made her way to the other side and did the same to his other nipple. Zarina was fascinated by the way the dark hair angled down the center of his stomach toward his groin. The only other man she'd been with hadn't had chest hair. This was new and she very much liked it.

Resting her hands on Kalis' thighs, she scooted lower, realizing that as she did so, she was opening herself wide to Malik, giving him an unrestricted view of her behind and her sex. She spread her legs wider and arched her hips upward, exposing herself even further. The breeze was cool on her sex and she felt herself getting wetter in anticipation of what was to come. Her breasts felt heavy, her nipples tight.

Kalis' fingers tangled in her hair, drawing her mouth toward his cock. Zarina slid her hand over his thigh and wrapped it around his erection. At the same time, she dragged her tongue across the slit, licking off the fluid that continued to seep from it. It felt slightly salty as she savored it on her tongue. "Mmm," she hummed as she licked her way around the head of his cock, careful not to miss any part of it.

She drew her head back slightly, examining his erection. Thrusting up from the nest of dark curls at the base, it looked hard and strong and thick. The dark vein pulsed as she watched and she shivered at the thought of finally having it inside her. Or rather, having Malik's cock inside her at the same time she had Kalis' in her mouth. From what she'd seen, they were well matched in length and girth.

This time when she lowered her mouth, she covered the bulbous head, taking it deep. He was so large, she couldn't take very much of him, but she took as much as she could. His fingers stung slightly as he arched his hips upward, driving his cock deeper. His need for her fed her own and she could feel the liquid from her core begin to seep down the inside of her thigh.

She felt a warm breath on her sex. Before she could register what that meant, Malik's mouth was on her. She jumped slightly, moaning in pleasure as his tongue snaked across the swollen folds, lapping up the evidence of her arousal. Zarina tried to concentrate on pleasuring Kalis with her mouth, but it wasn't easy. Her pussy clenched with need. She felt empty, ready to be filled.

Stroking her hand up and down Kalis' thick erection, she moved her head upward until only the tip was still in her mouth. Then she lowered it again, taking him in once again. Kalis groaned. "Deeper. Take me deeper." He began to guide her head with his hands, encouraging her with actions as well as words. His fingers tangled in her hair as his hips surged forward. Zarina relaxed her throat, wanting to take as much of him as she possibly could.

Malik lifted his mouth from her sex and she felt him shifting behind her. His hands came around to cup her breasts as he slid his cock over the sex, coating himself in her cream. She rocked her hips backward, urging him inside her. He squeezed the head just inside her opening and paused. Zarina thought she'd go mad. Frantic mewling sounds came from deep inside her as she continued to suck Kalis' cock.

Malik pushed his way inside her, one slow inch at a time, stretching her as he went. She felt so full it was almost uncomfortable. Almost. She rocked her hips again, taking all of him. This time she moaned as pleasure shot through her. She felt totally surrounded by them, filled by them.

Kalis began to pump his hips harder, driving his cock deep into her mouth. She knew he was close to coming. She opened her mouth as wide as she could, taking him as deep as she could manage. He groaned as he pushed inside one final time. Hot liquid spurted down her throat and she swallowed reflexively. Kalis tightened his hold on her as he continued to spill his seed.

His whole body relaxed at once and the grip on her hair changed, his fingers combing through her long locks. She sucked him hard and he half-laughed, half-groaned. "Enough." He eased himself from her mouth.

As if that was all that Malik had been waiting for, he began to thrust. His hands on her breasts tightened as he began to pull back and then push forward. Zarina gasped as she laid her forehead on Kalis' lap and dug her fingers into his thighs.

Each thrust got harder and deeper. Her body was screaming for release and every nerve ending felt as if it was rubbed raw with anticipation. Her head swam as she pushed her hips back hard, meeting every one of Malik's thrusts. So close.

One of Malik's hands shifted from her breasts to down between her thighs. His finger barely grazed her clitoris when she exploded. Crying out, she arched her back as she came. Her body convulsed, her feminine muscles wrapping Malik's cock in a silken vise. She dimly heard him yell above the pounding in her ears. Then she was flooded with his hot seed. He continued to pound into her, prolonging her own release.

He slumped against her back and she could feel the heavy thud of his heart. It matched her own. Falling forward, she buried her face in Kalis' lap and gasped for breath. She didn't know how long they lay there like that, but Malik finally sat back, carefully withdrawing his semi-erect cock. The swollen tissues of her sex protested slightly and she couldn't quite bury her groan of discomfort.

"I did not mean to hurt you." Malik picked her up easily, turning her so that she was resting against his chest.

"You didn't," she murmured. When he only arched an eyebrow at her, she shifted to try to find a comfortable position. "I'm just a little sore."

"I am not sorry I made love to you, but I am sorry for your discomfort. You will become used to it in time."

His assumption that there would be more times raised her hackles. "Perhaps."

Malik cupped her jaw, his thumb tilting her chin upward until she was looking at him. "It is your choice, little warrior." He chuckled, amusement and satisfaction in his eyes. "But we will do all in our power to convince you."

Kalis brushed his fingers over her forehead and echoed his brother. "All."

She shivered at the sheer intensity in their eyes and had to close her own against their potent spell. Perhaps she had been right in her first assessment of them. Perhaps they really were gods come to life, for she seemed to have no defense against them. She didn't want to think about that. She didn't know what the future held. At this moment, all she wanted to do was to enjoy the sensations of their lovemaking.

She didn't bother to open her eyes when Malik stood with her in his arms. She still didn't completely understand why, but for some reason she trusted these men. Trusted them with her life and her safety. Trusted them not to harm her.

Malik chuckled. "We need not talk of this now." He began to walk and curiosity finally got the better of her. She opened her eyes to see where he was taking her. Kalis was in front of them, leading the way back to the stream. "Now all you need is another bath."

Chapter Eight

Zarina watched the sun as it began its slow descent from the sky. Shading her eyes with her hand, she determined she had about an hour until the men returned from their hunting expedition. They'd asked her to go along with them, but she'd declined, desperately needing some time alone to think. She'd seen the understanding in Kalis' eyes as he'd leaned down and brushed his lips across hers before turning and striding off into the woods. Not one to be outdone, Malik had taken the time to drop a quick kiss on her mouth before loping off after his brother.

They'd fallen into a routine of sorts the past two weeks, working and living together, their lives becoming seamlessly entwined. She wasn't quite sure how it had happened. There had been no big pronouncements, no male posturing, no arguments. She'd awakened the morning after their explosive sexual coming together to find a cook fire burning and the morning meal prepared. She'd been nervous at first, uncertain how to behave after what had happened the night before. She'd never behaved in such a sexually abandoned way and was still uncertain as to how she truly felt about it. As if they'd sensed her unease, the brothers had talked of mundane things like the weather and hunting.

After the morning meal was cleared away, they'd all gone hunting together. She'd said nothing about finding her dagger back amongst her belongings. She'd simply placed it back in its sheath and strapped it to her thigh. Both men had nodded with approval when they'd seen it back in its proper place.

Zarina had loved the feeling of being part of a group again, having someone to share the success or failure of the hunt with. And when she'd caught several rabbits on her own, both brothers had praised her skill. After the shunning and snide comments from many of the males in her village, it had been unexpected and had made her face heat with embarrassment. They were different from any males she'd ever met and she was still trying to figure them out.

One day faded into the next and two weeks had passed in the blink of an eye. Zarina was fully recovered from her wounds now and back to peak physical condition, so it surprised her when neither brother made any more sexual advances toward her. Oh they took every opportunity to touch and stroke and kiss her, but there had been no repeat of the night where they had all come together.

It surprised and bewildered her. They knew she was willing—there was no mistaking that fact. Yet they didn't push her. She knew they still desired her. After all, she slept next to them every night. She felt their erections pulsing against her body as they cuddled her close.

Sighing, she turned away from the sinking sun and knelt down beside the fire. Who knew the inner workings of a man's mind? Turning her attention to the fish baking on the bed of hot coals she'd made next to the fire, she checked them for readiness. Almost done. She hoped the men returned soon or her supper could be ruined.

She didn't know what had possessed her to cook for them. It was such a female thing to do. Other than her father, she'd never cooked for a man before. Usually they prepared the meals together, but for some reason she'd wanted to do this for them. Burying her face in her hands, she groaned. What was happening to her?

Scrubbing her hands over her face, she ignored the butterflies fluttering in her stomach as she took the dough she'd made with the last of her wheat flour and began to work it with her hands. The familiar task calmed her. She'd made flatbread many, many times for her father. He'd loved to drizzle it with fresh honey. It was one of his favorite foods and one of the hardest for them to get. Or it had been. Every time her father had traveled to one of the larger cities to trade, he'd brought home a large supply of the sweet treat.

It was still hard for her to reconcile his loss. She missed his calm presence and his subtle humor every day of her life. But time and life went forward and every day the ache was less. Kalis' and Malik's presence had helped ease it considerably.

When she had a half dozen flat cakes formed, she carefully laid them on top of the hot coals. They wouldn't take long to cook. Wiping her hands on a rag, she plucked a tart red berry out of the bowl she'd placed next to her. She'd been thrilled to find the drakonberries on a foray into the woods today. There hadn't been many bushes, but they'd been loaded down with berries. It hadn't taken her long to fill her pouch that she'd taken with her. It was a habit she'd developed early in her days alone. Never knowing what she'd find when she was scouting around, she always made sure she took a pouch so that she could carry home her find.

Sighing, she looked around the campsite. Everything was in readiness. There wasn't anything for her to do but relax. She'd been so long without any leisure time that she wasn't quite sure what to do with herself anymore. But having two men to hunt as well as share the work had changed that.

Today, she'd strolled down by the stream and spent the better part of the afternoon catching the fish she was going to serve for supper. She smiled as she remembered her first attempt at fishing. Growing up in the desert hadn't equipped her for that task. Fortunately, she did have memories of her father telling her about the many places he'd visited and how some people used nets to catch fish. She hadn't had a net, but her woven cloth pants and tunic were all but ruined, so she'd cut some of the cloth into long pieces to stretch across the stream in several places. She'd waited patiently and had been so excited when she'd snagged her first fish that she'd accidentally lost it.

She was much better at catching fish now and had had no problem capturing enough fish to feed them all for supper. Lolling by the stream in the afternoon sun had been most pleasurable, but unfortunately it had given her way too much time to think.

Sitting cross-legged on her folded blanket, she closed her eyes and just absorbed the late afternoon heat. The end of summer was almost upon them, but the days were still warm. For a child of the desert, it was the perfect weather. All was quiet, except for the normal sounds of the forest. A sense of peace and contentment filled her as her mind began to wander again.

Neither Malik nor Kalis had mentioned the prophecy—or curse or whatever it was—again. Although part of Zarina was dying with curiosity to know everything there was to know about it, the bigger part of her didn't want to know at all. Especially if they believed that she was part of it. That was just too much for her to take. She didn't want to have that kind of responsibility thrust upon her. She had nothing to do with their lives beyond the few weeks they'd shared, and she certainly wasn't responsible for what happened to future generations of their family.

She wasn't sure she even believed in the curse, but she was fascinated by the tattoo that adorned them both. Over and over again, her eyes were drawn to it whenever they were stripped to the waist or naked. Many nights she'd awakened to find her hand covering a hard chest and she could almost swear that the tattoo pulsed beneath her palm. And every time, she'd jerked her hand away, cradling it close to her own body. Whichever man she was touching at the time would always sigh in his sleep and rub the tattoo as if it pained him.

Zarina opened her eyes and bit her lip. She didn't want to hurt them, but neither could she believe that she was the woman meant to fulfill the prophecy. She looked down at herself, picking at her dusty leather pants with her rough and calloused hands. She was certainly no man's vision of the ideal female. Ignoring the pang in her stomach, she scooted over by the fire and carefully tested the flatbread before she flipped each thin cake over. The tops were nice and brown. A quick check of the fish assured her that it was cooked, so she moved it to the edges of the coals to keep it warm.

Rolling to her feet, she hurried into the cave. Neither Malik nor Kalis spent much time in here, leaving it almost exclusively for her use. They much preferred to sleep and live outside. The only time they'd spent in the cave together had been the two nights it had rained last week. The days were warm, but the evenings were beginning to cool and, although the cave wasn't very large, it had felt cozy to be snuggled against the two men as she'd slept. She laughed in spite of her down mood. She certainly hadn't been cold since she'd been with them.

Needing to ground herself, she plucked up her sack containing her few prized possessions and hurried back outside. The cave was dry and cool, but Zarina wanted to enjoy the last remnants of heat from the setting sun. Seating herself cross-legged on her blanket again, she took a deep breath and opened the sack. Reaching her hand inside, she drew out the shell. She could still remember the day that her father had gifted it to her. Many had scoffed at him, telling him that he was foolish to give a child such a valuable thing. But he had just laughed back at them and told them that it was his to give to whomever he chose.

Years ago, before her parents had wed, her father had gone on a journey, traveling as far as the mountains in the north and even making the long, arduous journey south to the sea. He had been gone from the village for a year and many had begun to think him dead. He'd told the story so many times, Zarina almost felt as if she'd witnessed it, even though she hadn't even been born yet. A soft smile curved her lips. Her father had been a wonderful storyteller, mesmerizing all the people of the village with his tales of what he'd seen on his journey.

He'd returned home exactly one year to the day of his leaving, laden down with treasures and goods from all the places he'd visited, and asked her mother to marry him. Zarina's finger rubbed the soft, pearly pink inside of the fan-shaped shell. She didn't remember her mother well, as she'd died when Zarina was still young, but she could remember the soft, delighted laughter that always occurred at this point in the story. "Not asked," her mother would say. "Demanded." Then both her parents would laugh and when Zarina was tucked in her bed later that night, she would hear them whispering together and hear the soft sounds and moans that she now knew meant that they were making love. As a child all she had known was that she felt secure in her own world, surrounded by her parents' love and acceptance.

Then her mother had died and everything had changed. Her father still told her stories of his travels, but the joy was gone from them. And never again did he tell her the story of his return to ask her mother to wed him. Sighing, Zarina turned the shell in her hand and traced the rough edges.

Her world had changed drastically too. The young child had felt as if she'd lost both parents that day. For although her father was still physically there, he'd never been quite the same again. Not that he hadn't been a good father. As far as Zarina was concerned, he had been the best father a girl could ever have. He'd never been too busy for her. Unlike most other females whose fathers basically ignored them much of the time, her father had taken her everywhere with him, teaching her all about hunting, living off the land and fighting. She owed her very survival to the early lessons he'd given her.

Placing her shell carefully to the side, she reached back into the sack and drew out her mother's necklace. Zarina was very grateful that Pyatt had been able to save this one piece of jewelry for her. Yes, her mother had possessed many finer pieces, but this one held the most value for her. It still burned in her gut to know that her mother's and father's possessions were now in the greedy clutches of Illian, but there was nothing she could do about that.

Holding it in front of her, she watched the silver shimmer. The sun was low in the sky, barely peeking over the trees, but its dying rays caught the gemstones, making them glitter like fire. There were amethysts, rose quartz and clear quartz stones all set into silver mountings and linked together. Her father had given it to her mother as a wedding gift and she'd worn it every day of her life, leaving it to her daughter when she'd died of a fever.

Zarina blinked back the tears that stung her eyes, refusing to shed them. Tears changed naught. The past was gone and nothing would bring it back. But twice now her life had changed when someone she'd loved had died. First, when her mother had died and then with her father's passing. She was on her own now and that was fine with her. It was better to just depend on yourself.

She would not allow anyone else to mean so much to her that their passing hurt her in such a way. And Kalis and Malik would leave. There was no doubt in her mind of that fact. Once they realized that she was not the woman they sought, they would leave. She clutched the necklace to her heart, rubbing it against the ache. She feared it was too late to save herself from hurt. Deep in her heart, she already knew that she loved them. Somehow they'd snuck past the barriers guarding her heart and claimed it.

If it hurt this much already to think of them leaving, how much worse would it be in two more weeks, a month, two months? No! The time had come to end this charade. She was selfish enough to want to spend one more night with them. But tomorrow she would send them away.

First, she wanted to share some of herself with them, so that maybe in years to come they would remember her fondly. She knew that she would never forget them. They might have tattoos on their flesh, but she felt as if they had marked her very soul. She would never be the same again.

Zarina was so intent on her thoughts, she missed the telltale signs and the men stepped out from between the trees before she realized someone was coming. "Is everything all right?" Malik hastened to her side, crouched down and tipped her face up to his.

"I'm fine." She gave a shaky laugh. "Just memories." She held up the necklace, showing it to them.

She could sense their shock and then their pleasure, and it shamed her that she'd shared so little of herself with them. They'd spent hours in the evening around the campfire entertaining her with stories of their travels and of their childhood. She'd experienced the world through their eyes as they painted a vivid picture of what they'd seen, patiently answering her endless questions. She'd laughed as they told stories of the wild escapades of their childhood. She could see them as children and then young men, getting into all kinds of scrapes and trouble. But their parents seemed to have been much like her own father—kind and patient, but firm.

It pained her to think of Malik's and Kalis' mother and father pining for their sons. She might not be certain she truly believed in the curse, but they all did. And for the men to stay away for so many years when it was so obvious that they loved their parents and siblings was almost enough to make her believe. But even if she accepted the fact that there was a curse, that didn't mean she believed that she was the woman they sought.

"It was my mother's. She died when I was just a child."

"It's very beautiful." Kalis stood, shucking his pack. It was only then that she noticed the brace of rabbits attached to it. Their hunt had obviously been successful.

"I'm sorry you lost your mother." Malik stroked his large hand over her head and down her back, soothing her.

"So am I. But my father was a wonderful man." Once again, both men stilled, almost as if they were afraid to move, as if any action might cause her to stop talking. They had shared so much of themselves with her it was time for her to repay that gift in kind.

Laying the necklace carefully on the blanket beside her, she traced the heavy silver one more time before she stood. "I'll dish up our meal and I'll tell you all about it while we eat."

Malik sat next to Zarina, trying to gauge her mood. He and Kalis had had a long talk while they were out hunting. In truth, they'd talked more than they'd hunted. It had been pure luck that some rabbits had gotten caught in the snares that they'd set. Both of them had agreed the morning after they had all come together for the first time not to pressure Zarina. It was up to her to come to them. They still agreed that it was the right thing to do, but so far it hadn't happened.

Malik felt as if he was slowly losing his mind. His cock was hard and swollen almost all the time now. Just her nearness, her scent, her smile was enough to fire his blood. His warrior instincts insisted he claim her in the most primitive way possible. So many times during the day he wanted to lower her to the ground and fuck her senseless, pleasuring her over and over until she wouldn't even consider leaving him. But that wouldn't help her learn to trust him. And in the end, it was all about trust.

Both he and Kalis had welcomed the opportunity to go hunting by themselves. It had been a relief just to ride through the forest and soak up the sunshine and warmth of the day. They'd tied the horses to a tree and walked for hours, both needing the physical exercise. They'd discussed strategy and possibilities, but in the end they decided to keep to the same course of action.

Zarina had to come to them.

When he'd entered the camp this evening and seen her sitting there with tears in her eyes, his heart had almost stopped in his chest. Fear for her safety had driven all else from his mind. Her sadness hurt him more than any physical wound he'd ever had. He'd known in that moment that he loved her.

His heart had started pounding rapidly again when she'd mentioned her past. Up until now, he and Kalis had done all the talking. They knew very little about where she had come from and why she was alone. But it seemed as if their patience had paid off. He just hoped that the mood wasn't broken and that she would tell them more. He wanted to know everything there was to know about her.

"It's very good." Kalis broke the comfortable silence.

"Th-thank you." Zarina smiled at him, a pinkish tinge covering her sun-kissed cheeks as she stammered out her reply.

Malik silently cursed himself for not being the first to compliment her on the fine meal she'd prepared. The fish was cooked to perfection and she'd stuffed them with some kind of greens she'd obviously found in the area. The flatbread was a welcome surprise, as were the tart berries. "No, thank you. The food is delicious."

She turned toward him, gifting him with a smile that softened her face. Both he and Kalis were sprawled out on their blankets on either side of the small fire and Zarina sat cross-legged on her own blanket, her gaze constantly being drawn back to her mother's necklace. She looked relaxed and Malik was loath to do anything to change her mood. But she'd opened the door to her past and he'd be a fool if he didn't take the opportunity to learn as much as he could.

He motioned to the necklace. "It belonged to your mother?"

She stiffened and Malik almost regretted bringing up the subject. Almost. The need to know more about her overrode his need not to make her uncomfortable in any way. Gradually, she relaxed again, giving her shoulders a shrug as she set aside the remains of her meal. Wiping her hands on a rag, she picked up the piece of jewelry and held it up in front of her. "It was a wedding gift from my father."

Kalis sat up very slowly and leaned forward, not wanting to miss a word. As much as Malik wanted to do the same, he stayed exactly as he was. Zarina's attention was focused on him and he didn't want to do anything to distract her from her story. He nodded and waited. The fire crackled and an owl hooted in the distance. Beyond the clearing, the horses nickered softly.

She took a deep breath and turned all her attention to the necklace. Malik took the opportunity to ease himself into a sitting position. "I don't remember her very well. I remember her smile and her laugh. She was very beautiful."

Zarina peeked at him from under her long, dark lashes. Like mother, like daughter, he thought. With the shadows of the evening closing in around them, the firelight illuminated her features, making her appear even more exotic and beautiful. His cock stirred and he shifted slightly, trying to make himself more comfortable.

"My father loved her deeply. He'd gone away on a year's journey and on the day he returned, he asked her to marry him." She laughed. "Or told her she was marrying him according to my mother's side of the story. It varied slightly depending on who was telling the tale."

Her parents' love for one another and Zarina's love for them shone through with every word she spoke. It reminded him of his own parents and siblings, who he tried not to think too much about. The mark on his chest burned and he absently rubbed it, knowing there was only one way to ease the ache that was a constant companion.

They had to break the curse!

Until then, neither he nor Kalis could go home. He wasn't even sure that his parents were still alive. It had been almost a year since they'd had word about them. They

asked the traders at every major town or city they visited if they had news from the village of Calla on the western side of the Jallak forest. It was painful to hear news about a family that was all but lost to him, but it was even worse not knowing.

Zarina's fingers traced the colorful stones lovingly as she touched them one by one. "My father changed after her death. He didn't smile or laugh the way he had. Many of the village elders chided him for the amount of time he spent with me." This time when she laughed there was no humor in it. "It got worse when he started teaching me to hunt and to fight alongside the other boys."

She straightened and stared first at Kalis and then at him as if wanting to make sure she had their full attention. "I was called 'unnatural' and 'an abomination' among other things. But," she smiled grimly, "my father was chieftain of the tribe, a strong and powerful man, and they would not risk protesting too loudly because they knew he would leave the village if they did. Instead, they focused their ire on me when he was not present."

Fury, the likes of which he had never known, rose up within Malik. He could picture a much younger Zarina constantly being tormented and ridiculed at the hands of her tribesmen. At the moment, he wanted to seek it out and raze the village to the ground in retribution for what they had done to her. But she wasn't finished yet, and Malik forced himself to swallow his anger and listen to the rest of her tale.

"Then my father died. A hunting accident." Her face was calm, unnaturally so, and it worried Malik. He glanced over at his brother and saw his worry mirrored there. "His body was barely cold when the challenge came. Illian had long coveted my father's position. He is young and he and many of his friends thought it was time for a change."

Malik nodded in understanding. It was the same in every tribe or clan. The young always wanted to challenge the elders for control. Sometimes it was for the good, but many times it was simply to gain power and wealth.

Zarina's expression hardened and she almost spat out her story, her disdain evident in every word. "I had left off my weapons in respect to my father and that was when Illian struck. He'd summoned the council and held a meeting during the two days I was fasting over my father's body." She drew her legs up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. "I had always had a voice on the council as a hunter and warrior, but I was excluded and my fate decided."

Malik had a burning deep in his gut. He knew he wasn't going to like what came next. He also knew that someday he would find Illian of Talkos and kill him.

"Illian was now the new chieftain of the Danari tribe and was offering to make me his second wife. When I challenged him and told him that I had no need of him, he laughed."

The pain in Zarina's eyes was almost too much for Malik to take. He longed to draw her into his arms and promise that he would avenge her. His hands clenched into fists, but he stayed where he was, knowing that at this moment she would reject his touch, thinking it pity.

"It was then he informed me that he'd confiscated all my father's belongings, all his wealth, his horses, his home, for his own. I was left with nothing, stripped of my warrior status. I now needed a man to survive in my village and Illian had long coveted me. Now it was his chance to make me pay for all the times I rejected his advances and bested him in the hunt."

A low growl came from deep in Malik's throat. His fingers itched to grip his sword, his body crying out for action. Still, he held himself motionless.

"I challenged his claim and he struck me." Zarina stared up at the night sky, silent for a moment as she gathered herself to finish her tale. "He claimed it was because I was overwrought over my father's death and offered to forgive me. Forgive me," she scoffed. "As if I needed forgiveness for anything. When he made to strike again, I attacked. I had him beat until several of his men grabbed me from behind and held me captive while Illian gained the upper hand."

She stopped again and stared past both him and Kalis as if she could not meet their gaze. "All the village stood by and watched as he beat me. Not one person raised a cry or a hand to stop him." Her words were barely a whisper, her pain a living, breathing thing.

To be so betrayed by the people around you, the ones you called friend... Malik could only imagine how such a thing would feel.

"I refused to marry him, so I was cast out of the tribe. Cut off from everything I'd ever known. Banished even before my father's body could be cremated and his ashes released into the desert winds."

"How did you survive?" Malik barely recognized his brother's voice, it was so tight with pain and anger.

"I put one foot in front of the other and walked out into the desert. I thought I would die. And truthfully, that didn't bother me at all. Part of me almost welcomed death. I knew I had to make it to the canyons to survive. I must have fallen and passed out at some point during the second night."

A sound of disbelief and anguish rumbled out of Kalis as he glanced over and he met his brother's eyes. They'd come so close to losing her even before they'd met her. It made Malik's blood run cold just to think of her lying alone and hurt in the harsh desert sands.

"But Pyatt wouldn't let me die." The corner of her mouth turned up slightly.

"Who is Pyatt?" Malik could not keep silent any longer.

"Pyatt is an old friend of my father's. He was away, fasting in the desert in respect for my father when this happened. It was Pyatt who gathered my weapons, some food and clothing and came looking for me." She picked up the necklace and carefully placed it back inside her sack. "He even managed to save my shell and my necklace for me."

"He is a good man." Malik would be in the man's debt for as long as he lived.

"Yes, he is. But he is old and this was a great risk to him. He could not take the horses or any of my father's wealth. Illian would miss it. He is a grasping, greedy soul." Zarina closed the sack and place it aside. "Pyatt only stayed until I was conscious once again. As far as the villagers were concerned, he told them he was going back into the desert for several more days of fasting and prayer for my father. Given his age and the respect most hold for him, none would gainsay him."

Malik could take the separation from her no longer. Cursing, he came to his feet, took the two steps to her side, reached down and plucked her into his arms. Settling back down by the fire, he cradled her close. He was startled by how cold she was and when she shivered, he held her tighter, trying to infuse her with his own heat and strength.

"Pyatt told me that my father was cremated and his remains scattered with all the ceremony befitting a man of his station. That gives me some comfort." Malik could barely make out her muffled words as she'd turned her face into his chest. But he did hear them. He cursed his inability to do anything to take away her pain.

Zarina gave a muffled laugh and raised her head. "So far all you have done is curse, Malik."

Her golden-brown eyes were large and moist, luminous with unshed tears. She raised her hand and cupped his cheek. "I did not tell you this story to upset you. I just wanted to share." She turned to Kalis. "Please forgive me."

Malik couldn't believe her words. She was apologizing to them. Trying to comfort them, when it was they who should be comforting her. Malik was struck not only by her physical beauty but also by the beauty of her soul, which shone in everything she did. She was so giving and generous, and he knew that he'd gladly spend the rest of his life protecting her. No matter what it took to keep her in his life, he would do it.

Kalis also seemed as struck by her words as he was. He stood and quickly prepared their bed for the night. As Kalis banked the fire, Malik laid Zarina down on the pallet and crawled in next to her. Kalis quickly joined them.

"Thank you for sharing your life with us, Zarina." Malik placed his hand on her stomach, drawing her closer to him.

"You've both shared so much with me. I just wanted to return the gift." Turning over onto her side, she sighed.

Malik tucked her back against his chest so that her bottom was tucked next to his groin. His cock stirred, but tonight was not about sex. Tonight went deeper than that, and for the first time in two weeks the hunger that had plagued him was silent. For tonight, he was content to just hold her, still shaken by how close he'd come to losing her before he'd ever met her.

As he drifted off to sleep, lulled by the whispering sound of her soft breath, he thanked the gods of his people for protecting her and bringing her to him.

Chapter Nine

Zarina raised her arms over her head and stretched. In spite of all the emotional turmoil of last evening, she'd slept surprisingly well. Then she remembered that today was the day she planned to ask Kalis and Malik to leave. Lowering her arms slowly back down to her sides, she ignored the knots forming in her belly. She was a warrior and a warrior always did what was necessary, no matter how distasteful.

As much as she wanted the brothers to stay with her, she had to set them free. She truly believed that she was not the woman they were seeking. After all, if she were, wouldn't the curse already be broken?

No! As much as it pained her, she had to make them leave. If they were indeed cursed—as they seemed to believe that they were—then she needed to set them free to find the woman who could break the curse.

She'd slept in her clothing last night, too worn out emotionally to even undress before she'd fallen asleep. Both men were gone when she'd awakened, but the blankets were still warm beside her and she'd wrapped them tight around her body, absorbing their heat and their scent. Finally, she'd dragged herself out from underneath the covers and hurried into the cave, grabbed a change of clothing and headed for the stream. She'd bathed swiftly, not taking her usual time or enjoyment in her morning ritual, dressed in a clean pair of leather pants and tunic and hurried back to camp.

Still there was no sign of the men. Perhaps they'd gone hunting. Shrugging, she'd folded all the blankets and cleared away the campsite. The fire pit was cold and that surprised her. Usually, one of the men started a small blaze as soon as they awoke. She'd quickly learned that they favored hot tea made from the leaves of some sweet-tasting forest plant in the morning. It was a treat that she hadn't had in many months before she'd met them. Tea was a luxury that she simply could not afford.

Slightly worried now, she picked up her sword and strapped it around her waist. Her dagger was already strapped to her thigh, as she never went anywhere unarmed, even somewhere as close as the stream. Usually she took her sword too, but she'd gotten lax about her own protection with the men around. It was a bad habit and one that she had to break, especially if they wouldn't be around for much longer.

She headed out to the west, knowing that there was a clearing where they liked to train. Zarina had not yet found the courage to ask to join them in their training, afraid of being denied, or worse, rebuked by them for her unwomanly behavior. It was one thing for them to say they admired her skills and quite another thing for her to believe what they said. The members of her village had seemed to respect her skills too—at least until her father had died. Words were easy and she did not quite trust them.

Maybe that was the best way to make them leave her. If she trained with them, maybe even bested them a time or two, they would finally understand who and what she really was. The morning was warm and lovely, but she barely noticed it. Her hand rested on the handle of her sword, caressing it lovingly as she strode confidently through the trees.

This was her home now and she knew the land well for several miles in every direction. But it didn't pay to get careless. She forced herself to slow down and to move with caution and control. A small, furry creature ran up a tall tree as she passed, chattering at her as it climbed higher into the branches. A bird dipped low as it flew past her, showing off its bright blue plumage. She didn't know the name of the tree, the creature or the bird, but all seemed to be plentiful in the woods.

The desert had been her home her entire life, but she'd quickly become accustomed to the sights and sounds of the forest. Yes, she was familiar with some of the larger game animals. On their rare long trips, she'd hunted with her father and the village men on the edges of the great forest. But never had she spent time within the forest itself and she'd quickly found that it was filled with strange and fascinating creatures. She really should have asked Malik and Kalis to tell her the names of as many of the bizarre and unusual creatures as she could before they left. Now it was too late.

Her feet made no sound as she stepped carefully on the forest floor. It was thick with moss and needles that muffled her footsteps, but there were also twigs and bushes, which she cautiously avoided.

Zarina heard the men before she saw them. The clash of metal rang through the trees, and it was quickly followed by several loud grunts. She was right. They were training.

She stopped at the edge of the meadow, in the shadows of the forest. Leaning against the large trunk of a tree, she watched, enthralled by their obvious mastery of the sword. Yes, she had a vague memory of them fighting the men who had attacked her, but this was different. For the first time, she was seeing them as they truly were.

And they were magnificent! Stripped to the waist, their broad shoulders glistening with sweat, they never took their eyes off one another. Bands of muscles sculpted their chests that rippled with every swing of the sword. Their biceps bulged with the effort it took to wield their massive swords. They made it look effortless, but Zarina knew the strength it took to keep that up for hours on end.

She watched them battle, neither giving the other any quarter or advantage. They were very evenly matched in skill. Watching them critically, she thought that Kalis might have a slight edge, but only because Malik seemed to lack his brother's patience.

Her fingers dug into the bark of the tree. She never tired of looking at them, of watching them. They were the epitome of the ideal warrior—strong, confident and incredibly skilled. But more than that, she'd never met another man to whom she responded so deeply or as easily as these two brothers. Her body responded to their mere presence. Even now her pants were damp with the cream from her body and her

breasts were heavy, her nipples hard points pushing against the fabric of her tunic. She shifted her stance, whimpering slightly when the leather of her pants rubbed her swollen clitoris.

Enough! She pushed away from the tree. Obviously they didn't find her as irresistible as she found them. Yes, they touched her constantly, stroking her hair or running their fingers over her cheek or arm, but not once since that one explosive night when she'd taken the two of them had they made any sexual overtures to her. She knew they still wanted her. She'd noticed their erections during the daytime and felt them pressing against her body at night.

Perhaps she'd repulsed them when she'd had sex with the two of them at the same time. She had found the experience beautiful and moving, but perhaps they had not felt the same way. Well, it had been Kalis' idea. And wasn't that just like a man to get what he wanted and then walk away! She allowed her anger at the two brothers to grow. It was either anger or despair and she much preferred anger.

"Zarina?"

Her head jerked back to the meadow. While she'd been distracted by her thoughts, they'd sensed her presence. How long had they been watching her? No matter. She drew her sword and strode forward, purpose in every footstep. "I want to train."

Malik raised an eyebrow at her tone. She had been unable to hide her anger. Ignoring his questioning look, she took the familiar fighting stance, bending her knees slightly and extending her sword in front of her. "Or are you afraid to fight a woman?" She was deliberately taunting them now as she turned to Kalis. "How about you? Will you fight me?"

Kalis shared a glance with his brother and that fired her anger even further. She didn't quite know how they did it, but they communicated much with a single glance. "Look at me, not at each other," she demanded. "Which of you will fight me?"

Holding out a placating hand, Kalis took a step toward her. "I do not wish to fight you, Zarina."

"I will fight." Malik raised his sword and motioned her forward with his free hand. The arrogant flick of his fingers made her clench her teeth.

She forced herself to relax her hold on her sword as she took a deep, calming breath. Anger was the quickest way to defeat, especially against one as skilled as Malik. His sword was longer than hers, as was his reach. She could not defeat him by sheer power. It would take guile and cunning to best him.

"If you lose, you will leave me and go."

The moment the words were out of her mouth, she wanted to recall them. But it was too late. She'd expected anger at her pronouncement, not hurt. She swallowed hard as she met Malik's sky-blue eyes. As she watched, they darkened until they became the color of a stormy sky. It took everything in her not to flinch from the pain in their depths.

She could feel Kalis' surprise before he made a sound of denial, but she did not look at him, keeping all her attention on Malik.

She could feel the sweat already gathering between her shoulder blades. Her fingers tightened reflexively, gripping her sword tight. She could barely swallow past the dry lump in her throat as his eyes turned icy cold. Finally, here was the anger she'd sought. His face looked as if it were carved in stone. All expression wiped clean.

"Why?" His question made her flinch, but she steadied herself. She had started this and would see it through to the bitter end.

"Why not?" she taunted. "I believe that you are cursed, as you say you are." As she spoke her thoughts aloud, she realized that she truly did believe them. She'd come to know them well in the past weeks and knew that only some kind of magical curse could keep them from their family. "But I am obviously not the woman you seek."

Malik began to circle her and she turned with him, keeping him in front of her at all times. "Why do you say you are not the right woman?"

He seemed to have leashed his temper and Zarina cursed herself for not goading him while she'd had the chance. He was the more volatile of the two brothers. She'd just have to provoke him further. "The tattoo is still there, is it not?" She raised the tip of her blade, pointing it at the mark just above his heart.

"That means nothing. You have to return with us to our village in order to break the curse."

This was the first she'd heard of that. At least she thought it was. She'd been so ill when they'd first mentioned the curse that she couldn't be sure she had all of the facts straight. "It matters not. No village will accept me in its midst. I am a warrior woman—unnatural, an abomination against nature." The hateful words spewed from her mouth and her eyes burned with humiliation and anger. Those words had been thrown at her for her entire life and it was only now that she was emotionally open and raw that she could admit to herself how much they'd hurt and shamed her.

"You are not an abomination!" Malik roared as he stalked closer.

Zarina raised her sword, but he knocked it away. She backed up quickly, swinging her blade again and again. He countered every stroke she made, swatting her blade easily aside. Her plan had worked better than she'd ever imagined. She'd never seen a man so enraged. Not even Illian when he'd beaten her and banished her from the village had been this wild.

Zarina stared death in the eyes, wondering if she'd truly pushed him too hard. When he raised his arm to counter her blow, she spun beneath it. His side was wide open and vulnerable for the briefest of seconds, but she could not bring herself to strike.

Then he attacked.

Zarina quickly realized that he hadn't been fighting with her at all. He'd merely been blocking her blows. Now she was facing a warrior who was intent on the fight. One he intended to win.

A bead of sweat rolled down her brow and she blinked the sting from her eyes. She was gasping hard for breath, but she pushed him harder. "You must think I am an abomination," she panted. "Or certainly unnatural. For neither of you have wanted to touch me since the night I took you both."

There! The words had finally been spoken aloud. Now they knew the truth about her. She was not a normal woman. She was a warrior, a fighter, and she had enjoyed the unique sexual encounter with the two of them. She would not call it making love. Zarina knew that she loved them both, but was under no illusion that they returned the emotion. She was important to them because they thought she was the woman to break their curse. It was no more than that.

"Not want you." Malik shook his head and whispered his disbelief. "Not want you!" This time he roared the words. "We were trying to be considerate. But no more." With grim determination etched on his face, he pushed forward, striking hard and swift. She barely had time to defend herself against the onslaught.

"Malik!" She heard Kalis' cry, felt his fear. It mirrored her own.

"Your words shame not only yourself but me and Kalis as well. You are not an abomination." His blade was little more than a blur as he drove it down hard. Zarina's strength could not hold against such a blow and the blade dropped from her hand, falling to the ground at her feet. The tip of his sword rested against her flesh, poised right over her heart.

Zarina held her breath and prayed—for life or death, she wasn't quite sure, but she prayed. Malik cursed, yanked his sword away and thrust it in the ground at her feet. The blade sank deep, the shaft vibrating with the force of Malik's anger. She gulped in a breath of air as relief filled her.

Her eyes met his and she realized that she'd relaxed too soon. Swooping down, he scooped her up and tossed her over his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her legs, holding her easily as her upper body and head hung down his back. She glimpsed Kalis with his arms crossed over his chest, looking both fierce and worried. Well, she was worried too.

"Where are you taking me?" She reared up in protest.

He pressed his large hand against her back, holding her steady as he ignored her and kept walking. He handled her weight and her struggles easily.

She stopped trying to escape him and started to think. What surprised her was that at no time had she *truly* feared Malik. She'd been able to face him bravely because deep down in her gut she trusted him not to hurt her. But she had hurt him and that shamed her.

He stopped suddenly and bent down until her feet were touching the ground. When he straightened, she looked him square in the eyes. "I'm sorry if I hurt you, but I am not the woman you think I am. Not the woman you need me to be."

Chapter Ten

Malik stared down at Zarina in disbelief. No other woman had been able to do to him what she had done. He'd never in his life lost his temper to that extent. His hands were still shaking with his rage and the fear that he might have hurt her in his anger. He didn't think he'd ever forget the image of her standing there with his sword pressed against her heart.

The words "unnatural" and "abomination" still rang in his ears, threatening his tenuous control. She stared up at him, her golden-brown eyes solemn as she waited for him to respond to her ridiculous pronouncement.

Malik was through with talking. The time had come for action.

Crossing his arms across his chest to keep from reaching out and yanking her into his arms, he ruthlessly leashed his temper. For the longest time they stared at one another, saying nothing. Zarina shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

"So you think that I don't want you." It was not a question. Nor did he expect an answer. Malik was still shocked that she could think such a thing. Didn't she feel his cock pressing hard against her every night, seeking her warmth?

She shrugged and glanced away.

"Look at me." He didn't raise his voice, but there was no doubt that it was a command. He almost smiled when she lifted her gaze, glaring at him as she tilted her chin arrogantly. His little warrior obviously didn't like to be seen as cowardly.

Reaching out, he captured her hand with his and brought it to the bulge in the front of his pants, allowing her to feel his erection. She made a sound of disbelief as she glanced quickly down before returning her gaze to his face. Her fingers automatically closed around his length. Malik stifled a groan of pleasure. It had been two weeks since he'd had her.

"Why?" He could sense her confusion and knew that she really didn't understand why he and Kalis had left her alone.

He lifted his hands and framed her face, marveling once again at the softness of her skin. "It had to be your choice." He stroked his thumbs over the curve of her cheeks. "But don't for a single moment think that I do not want you. That *we* do not want you."

He moved one hand lower, stroking his thumb over her full lower lip. "I have not slept well these past weeks. Every night my nostrils fill with your scent." Bending his head, he nuzzled her neck, breathing deep. "My flesh felt as if it were flayed every time it brushed against yours." His lips trailed kisses up the long column of her neck.

"Malik," she groaned as she placed her hands flat on his chest. For a moment, he wasn't sure if she meant to push him away or pull him closer. He wasn't sure if *she*

knew what she meant to do. He nipped at the sensitive skin just behind her ear. Her fingers curled into his chest and he reveled in the feel of her short nails lightly scoring his skin.

He caught the lobe of her ear between his teeth and gently bit it. "I want you every waking moment, Zarina." He stroked his tongue over the whorls of her ear before he forced himself to step back. Her hands fell from his chest. "Make your choice."

Zarina stared at him as if she didn't quite understand him. Every muscle in his body was tense as he waited for her to make her decision. His cock was hard and the sac between his legs uncomfortably heavy. She licked her lips as she stared at him. He didn't think she was aware of the hungry look on her face.

Gods, he wanted to claim her body, to lose himself in her feminine warmth. He wanted to take her right now in the middle of the forest, the land of his birth, and fuck her until they were both mindless with pleasure. He wanted to mark her in a way that would proclaim to the world that she belonged to him.

Although his soul and his body screamed for him to take her, he waited. His fingers curled and uncurled at his sides. The heat from the day and the exertion from the fight had covered his skin in a fine sheen of sweat. He pushed his shoulder-length hair out of his face. Somewhere along the way it had come loose from its leather thong.

A lone bird trilled in the distance and Malik stiffened slightly. It was a sign from Kalis that he was watching them. So be it. He knew his brother was thinking of Zarina's protection, as he'd stalked off with her without his sword with which to defend her. He reached down and adjusted his erection.

Zarina hadn't taken her eyes from him. He did not know what kind of internal battle she fought, but he could see it in her eyes the moment that she came to a decision. She stepped back and it took all his control not to reach out and keep her from moving further away from him. He would not let her leave him. Somehow he would convince her to stay. He all but ceased to breathe as he waited.

Her fingers rose to the lacing at the front of her tunic, loosening it. Ever so slowly, she wrapped her fingers around the bottom of the garment and raised it over her head. He caught a glimpse of her pale, full breasts before she crossed her arms over her chest, still gripping the tunic in her hands.

"This does not mean I think I am the right woman to break the curse," she said. Malik growled deep in his throat, barely stifling his retort. "All it means is that I want you." The leather tunic fell to the ground at her feet as she released it from her grip.

"Finish it." Malik barely recognized the deep, guttural voice as his own. He wanted to see her naked. *Had* to see her naked in the full light of the sun so he could examine every inch of her perfect body.

Zarina's fingers trembled as they went to the laces at the front of her leather pants. Her chest rose and fell with every deep breath she took. Her nipples were a rosy beige and were hard, tight nubs just begging to be touched, licked and suckled. Malik licked his lips in anticipation. He could feel his scalp tingle, as if his skin were too tight.

His gaze flowed down her torso to her waist, where her fingers were hooked inside the band of her pants. "Do it."

It was the most pleasant of tortures to watch her push the leather down her body. First, her flat tummy was exposed, then her hipbones. Finally the pants slipped down her legs, uncovering the curls between her thighs. She pushed the fabric over her knees and then, one foot at a time, tugged off her boots and then shoved the pants off. Kicking them aside, she stood in front of him, proud and naked.

"What are you waiting for?"

Her challenge brought a faint grin to his face and a smile to his heart. What, indeed? He felt the sudden urge to laugh but held it in. He did not want her to think he was laughing at her. His warrior woman was impatient now that she'd made her choice.

Malik made quick work of his own clothing, yanking off his boots and discarding his pants. It was a relief to be rid of both. His cock was heavy and thick as it jutted out from the nest of hair at the base.

Zarina cupped her breasts with her hands, shivering when her fingers skimmed across her nipples. Reaching out, he nudged her hands aside and covered her breasts with his larger hands. The hard points pushed against his palms as he rotated his hands in a circular motion. She moaned and swayed, her body leaning toward his.

"You have lost the challenge and belong to the victor." He didn't know why he felt compelled to point that fact out to her. He shook his head at his own foolishness. Of course, he knew why he was challenging her. He wanted her to admit that she belonged to him, that she was the right woman, the only woman, for him.

Malik could see the turmoil swirling in her eyes and could have kicked himself. Before she could speak, he swooped down and captured her lips with his. She was more than willing and he was more than ready to take her.

Her lips parted easily beneath his and he sighed with relief. Slanting his mouth over hers, he deepened the kiss, slipping his tongue inside to play with hers. She returned his caress, touch for touch, until all words were forgotten and only the sexual heat between them remained. There was no denying the connection between them.

Splaying his hands across her back, he gradually gentled the kiss, finally breaking away from her luscious lips, placing hot, open-mouthed kisses down her neck as he forged a path to her breasts. Her fingers tangled in his hair, tugging him closer to her straining nipples. He nuzzled the soft, plump flesh before closing his mouth over the tip and sucking hard.

Zarina gasped as the heat of Malik's mouth wrapped around the tip of her breast, her fingers digging into his skull to keep him there. His long hair was loose and the silky, dark brown strands brushed against her skin in a gentle caress.

Malik had surprised her once again. He'd been so angry with her, but underlying it she had sensed the lust as well. She'd expected him to take her roughly, tossing her

down onto the ground and mounting her quickly. It was what she would have expected from any other man. Instead, he had once again given her a choice.

Once she'd gotten over her initial surprise, she'd been shocked by how swiftly the heat had risen within her, dampening her core until she ached with need. Her choice had been surprisingly easy. She still wanted Malik. His tongue swirled around her nipple and she bit back a groan.

One of his hands slid down to her behind while he brought his other hand to her breast, his clever fingers stroking and gently pulling on the distended tip until she thought she'd go mad. She looked down at the top of his head and sighed. She would always want him.

Zarina jerked her head up when a sound intruded on her pleasure. It was not a normal sound of the forest, but manmade. At first, she saw nothing, as it was almost impossible to focus with Malik's hands and mouth pleasuring her body.

She scanned the area and found the source of the noise just off to her right. He was so still, he almost blended with the trees around him. Kalis was watching them. She opened her mouth to speak, but he held a finger to his lips. She closed her mouth, swallowing back her words.

Kalis leaned his back against the large trunk of a tree and unlaced the front of his pants. His cock sprang free, hard and ready. Zarina licked her lips, remembering the taste of him on her tongue. Even from this distance, she could see the change in his expression, feel the rising heat within him. Fisting his right hand around his erection, he pumped up and down.

As if sensing her distraction, Malik dropped to his knees in front of her, opened the folds of her sex with his fingers and brought his mouth to her. She cried out as his tongue stroked across her clitoris. The swiftness and unexpectedness of the caress made her knees buckle. Malik caught her in his arms, dragging her mouth to his for another of his mind-numbing kisses. Oh how the man could kiss! Malik's kisses were as good as the sex she'd shared with the warrior from her tribe.

They were both gasping for breath when he finally dragged his mouth from hers. He hooked a strand of her long hair that had escaped from her braid tenderly over her ear. She thought he would take her then, lowering her to the forest floor and driving himself deep within her. But again, he surprised her.

Lifting her easily, he turned her so that she was facing away from him, his erection pressed hard against her back. Once again, she was reminded of just how strong he was—indeed, how strong both of the brothers were. Their strength made her feel more feminine somehow, which surprised her. Then she forgot about thinking when his hands wrapped around her from behind, one of them cupping her breast, the other sliding between her spread thighs.

She tilted her head back against his shoulder as he slipped his fingers over her wet folds, teasing the nub of nerves at the very apex of her sex. She undulated her hips, trying to move them, but held as she was in his arms, she could barely move at all.

"I want your fingers inside me." Her husky request stilled his fingers and then he drove two of them deep in one swift thrust. She gasped, sitting upright, and might have fallen forward if not for his unbreakable hold on her. His hand tightened around her breast as he pulled his two fingers almost all the way out of her tight sheath before thrusting them in again.

"Look at him." At first, Malik's whispered words made no sense to her and she struggled to understand. Then it hit her. He knew that Kalis was watching them.

Her eyes flew back to the tree and sure enough, Kalis' hand was moving quicker as he pumped up and down his swollen cock. His eyes burned her flesh, scorching her soul as he watched her and Malik.

Malik spread his own legs wide, pushing hers open farther as he continued to fuck her with his fingers. The hand at her breast continued to stroke her swollen nipple, his fingers plucking at it, pinching it lightly.

"Come for him."

Kalis' hand was almost a blur as she struggled to keep her eyes open to watch him. His eyes watched Malik's hands as they pleased her. His chest was heaving as he gasped for breath, but he didn't stop.

"Come for him." Malik thrust a third finger into her core, stretching her unbelievably. It bordered on pain, but it was still all pleasure as he worked his fingers in and out of her. Her inner muscles gripped his fingers in a wet vise as they contracted around him.

She was so close. She rocked her hips back and forth, frantically trying to drive his fingers deeper into her. His thumb grazed her clitoris as he pinched her nipple tight. A high keening sound broke from her throat as she felt her entire body tighten unbearably from her scalp to her toes.

Then her body exploded. She jerked in Malik's arms as she came, tipping her head back and closing her eyes. A gush of liquid flooded from her core as her inner muscles spasmed around his fingers.

"Watch him."

Blindly, she opened her eyes and watched as Kalis came. His hand continued to pump up and down as he emptied himself onto the forest floor. He slumped back against the trunk of the tree and bowed his head, gasping for breath.

She could hear the pounding of her own heart in her ears as she struggled to find a breath of her own. Malik continued to touch her, stroke her, until she slumped forward, unable to hold herself up any longer. She felt totally drained.

Carefully, he withdrew his fingers and lowered her to the ground in front of him. The earth was warm and the moss and pine needles not too uncomfortable. The air around her was redolent with the smell of sex. The sun's rays reached through the high branches of the trees to the forest floor below and the combination of sex and its heat made her feel lethargic.

But Malik wasn't finished.

He leaned over her until his body was all but covering hers. He kissed the nape of her neck, making her sigh with pleasure. As he drifted lower, he covered every inch of her back with kisses, his tongue occasionally snaking out to stroke her skin. Her legs shifted restlessly as desire began to build again between her thighs. She was already soaked with her own juices, sticky with sweat, but still her cream seeped from her core.

His large hands cupped the globes of her behind, squeezing and kneading the plump flesh. His thumbs grazed down the dark cleft and she buried her face in the crook of her arms trying to muffle a groan.

Malik laughed, the sound low and incredibly sexy, as he wrapped his hands around her hips and pulled them back toward him until she was half-kneeling, half-lying on the ground. He stroked a finger over her wet folds, dipping inside her opening before dragging it back up to the puckered hole of her behind.

Inserting his finger past the tight band of muscles, he began to push. He took his time, pausing on occasion, but not stopping until his finger was buried deep in her behind. This time it didn't hurt as much. Not like it had when Kalis had done it that day in the stream. She felt stretched and full, but it felt pleasurable now.

"Good," he praised. "You can take more." He carefully began to insert a second finger in to join the first. Zarina whimpered as her ass began to burn with this new intrusion. Malik stilled his finger at her first cry and began to withdraw it.

"No," she moaned. "I want to be able to take you both." She'd had daydreams and fantasies about having both brothers fuck her at once and she knew that the only way that would happen was if her body was prepared for it.

Malik stilled behind her and she wished she could see his face. With her forehead resting on a soft bed of moss, she held her breath as she pushed her behind back toward him. The action drove his finger deeper and she gritted her teeth against the pain, not stopping until his second finger was deep.

He made a sound somewhere between pleasure and pain as he rested his head on the small of her back. His free hand came around her stomach, sifting through her damp pubic hair as he caressed her.

The pressure and pain eased as her desire began to grow again. His fingers worked their magic, stroking in and out of her core until she was mindless with need, bucking back against him, all but begging him to take her. And then she was begging.

"Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me." The words poured from her like a torrent. She needed him inside her, not his fingers.

He carefully worked his fingers out of her behind and she moaned with relief as the pressure and pain finally eased. The next second she was flipped over onto her back, the sun shining in her eyes. Malik spread her thighs wide with his hands and drove into her with one hard thrust.

She squeezed her eyes shut against the glare of the sun and the overwhelming emotion in Malik's face. He looked as desperate as she felt, his features tight with need, his blue eyes blazing with lust.

Hooking her thighs over his arms, he planted his hands on the ground. The action spread her wide open to him, leaving her helpless, totally in his control as he began to pound into her. He fucked her harder and faster with each stroke. Still it wasn't enough and she tried to pump her hips to take him deeper.

"More," she cried as he hammered into her. "Harder," she pleaded. She was so close to coming again.

She sensed Kalis before she saw him. He knelt over her and took her mouth, claiming it ruthlessly. She could barely breathe as he devoured her, his tongue searching out every part of her mouth and making it his. His hands covered her breasts and he rolled her nipples between his fingers.

Malik continued to slam into her core. Her desire burned out of control, exploding. She cried out, the sound all but lost as Kalis swallowed her moans of release, taking them into his own body. Her inner muscles convulsed around Malik as he drove his cock deep one final time. Her body spasmed again as she felt him come deep within her, the warmth of his cum flooding her.

Zarina lost all sense of time as she lay spent on the ground. Gradually Kalis' kisses changed, becoming softer until finally he pulled back. There was a tender smile on his face as he brushed a damp piece of hair from her forehead.

"I need a bath." Her words made him laugh, and she smiled at him. She felt hot and sticky and in desperate need of a soak in the stream.

She sucked in a breath as Malik withdrew from her. Her legs flopped to the ground and she was too tired to move them. Closing her eyes, she sighed.

She heard both men laugh, but she was too exhausted to care. Kalis lifted her into his arms and began to walk. Zarina allowed herself to doze, trusting them to take care of her. For a woman who had always valued her independence so highly and who had learned from an early age to not show any weakness around men, that was a huge concession.

If she hadn't already known that she loved these men, she would have known it at this moment. She trusted them enough to be emotionally and physically vulnerable around them. That could only happen because she loved them. No other reason would be compelling enough for her to do so.

So be it.

When she came to her senses again, the cool water of the stream enveloped her. Sighing with pleasure, she relaxed and let the water wash away all the sweat and grime. Four soapy hands rubbed her body, cleansing her. Zarina drifted in a state where she was half awake and asleep, enjoying the way they cared for her.

She didn't even open her eyes when they dried her off and carried her back to camp. When she felt the familiar blankets cover her, she heaved a deep sigh and snuggled down into their warmth.

Soft lips covered hers in the briefest of kisses. Malik. It was amazing, but she could easily tell their kisses apart. To her they were as distinct as each man was. She felt his finger on the curve of her cheek and felt his breath against her ear.

"It matters not what you think, little warrior. You are the right woman."

Zarina fell into a deep, dreamless sleep with his words still echoing in her ear.

Chapter Eleven

"I think we should make a trip to Ankaris." Kalis made his pronouncement over a hearty breakfast of berries and flatbread.

Zarina chewed slowly, swallowing carefully before speaking. "When would you go?" She couldn't bear the thought of them leaving, but she supposed it was inevitable after yesterday's confrontation. She'd slept the rest of the day away and all through the night as well, totally exhausted mentally and physically, only to awaken to the smells of breakfast being cooked this morning. So far, none of them had spoken of the events of yesterday.

Kalis shook his head at her and sighed. "When would *we* go, Zarina?" he gently corrected her. "We would not go without you."

She felt like a child being chastised and didn't like the feeling. "I did not wish to assume anything," she retorted, lifting her chin defiantly. She was no mind reader to know what they were thinking.

His eyes were bleak as he turned from her to Malik. Zarina's breakfast curdled in her stomach. Once again it seemed she had hurt one of them without meaning to. Always, she spoke first and thought after. She put the rest of her breakfast aside and rubbed at her temples, which were beginning to throb.

"Are you all right?" Kalis rolled to his feet, walked to her side and crouched down next to her. He cupped her chin in his hand, tilting her face toward his, his expression one of concern.

"I am fine. But thank you," she added to soften her words.

"You are sure?" The pad of his thumb grazed her bottom lip.

"Yes." She looked away as the familiar heat pooled low in her belly. She sucked in a breath and changed the subject. "I have never been to Ankaris. Is it far?"

She could feel Kalis staring at her, watching her, but finally he sat back down and continued to eat. "It is about two days' ride to the south."

"Is it a large place?" So far she had avoided the larger towns and villages, keeping to herself.

"It is a fair size, but it is no city." Malik finally broke his silence. His gaze was unnerving as he focused all his attention on her. Zarina felt as if he were trying to search her soul to discover all her secret thoughts. She could have told him it was no use. Her thoughts were too jumbled and confused. They made no sense to her, so they would be of little use to him.

"We have been there before and it is a good market town." Kalis picked up where Malik had left off. "Traders come from all around to trade and sell their wares. We were

headed there when we first ran into you that day in the meadow." He ripped off a piece of the bread and popped it into his mouth. Chewing thoughtfully, he swallowed before continuing. "We have goods to trade and supplies to buy."

They had mentioned the fact that they survived by trading. Zarina was intrigued by the concept. Her people raised horses. Were, in fact, renowned for their skill with the animals. The desert horses were a unique breed, strong and sturdy and able to withstand tough conditions. But they were also extremely intelligent and well trained. A horse trained by her people would fetch a high price. They did not even have to take the animals to market to be sold. Once a year, men came from far and wide to attend an auction for a chance to bid on the horses.

Because the horses needed to be shod, they also had skilled blacksmiths, many of whom were also skilled at the making of blades. Desert knives and swords were among the best to be had anywhere, and whenever any of the men went to trade, that was what they bartered. Zarina thought of her own collection of knives and her two other swords. Pyatt had only been able to take the plainest and oldest of the lot. Otherwise, Illian would have missed them. They were not only magnificent weapons, but they were valuable as well.

"What kinds of things do you trade?"

"We have skins from animals we've hunted as well as spices and bits and pieces of fabrics and jewelry that we've picked up along the way." Kalis finished eating and sat back with his back propped against a rock. He stretched his legs out in front of him and clasped his hands over his bare stomach. He seemed totally relaxed.

She, on the other hand, was trying not to look at his hands where they rested on his hard belly. He was wearing only his leather pants and boots, leaving the wide expanse of his chest bare. The light tufts of hair almost blended with his golden-brown flesh and his flat nipples were pebbled into tight nubs. The bands of muscle were evident even when he was at rest. And below his hands...well, one quick glance was all she needed to know that he was seriously aroused. She swallowed hard and tried not to think about it.

Ignoring the dampness between her thighs, she brought her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them to hide the fact that her own nipples were outlined against the fabric of her tunic. "Do you trade outright for goods or do you trade for money?"

The corner of his mouth kicked upward as he eyed her protective posture, but he made no mention of it as he continued to answer her questions. "Both. It depends on whether or not the merchant has the goods we want. Right now, we need to restock our basic food staples as well as medical supplies."

Zarina nodded thoughtfully. She was the reason their stock was low. They'd used their medicines to heal her and she'd gotten all too accustomed to helping herself to their food when she was making meals. The flour she'd used this morning to make the

flatbread had belonged to them, as hers was gone. She chewed on her bottom lip as she pondered the problem. She had to find some way to repay them.

A low groan shook her from her thoughts. Both men were staring at her—or rather, at her mouth. She stopped worrying her lip with her teeth and cleared her throat. “When would we leave?”

Kalis shrugged. “We could be ready to leave within the hour. There is no need to delay.” He stood, stretching his long arms above his head, muscles rippling as he moved. She stared at the huge bulge in the front of his pants. He gave her a self-deprecating grin. “I think we could all use a change of scenery.”

Zarina rolled to her feet. “I’ll be ready.” She didn’t look back as she headed toward her cave. She had time to search through her meager belongings before they left. Unfortunately, she already knew that she had little to trade. What few skins she had, she needed to survive the upcoming winter season. By next year she would have a stock of skins to trade. But right now, she desperately needed food supplies if she wanted to live during the cold months to come.

The rays from the morning sun gave her enough light to see by as she pulled out her sack and dug through the contents. Her heart hurt as she touched the two items in the rough cloth bag. Ignoring the ache, she rolled up her extra pair of pants and tunic and shoved them in the sack.

Quickly, she took the few fur pelts that she had and rolled them safely into the hide of a deer. She carried them to the back of the small cave and laid them aside before shoving the rock from the top of the enclosure that she’d dug into the floor. Lined with rocks and with a rock placed on top of it, her goods should be safe from animals and hidden from any human travelers while she was gone.

With nothing left to do in here, she picked up her sack, turned her back on the only home she’d known since her father’s death and walked back out into the early morning light. Laying her pack on the ground, she shook out her blankets, rolled them tight and tied them securely with several leather thongs. Then she strapped her knife on her thigh and her sword around her waist.

Her bow and arrows were leaning against a rock just outside the cave. She debated leaving them behind, but she could not. Her warrior’s instincts would not allow such a thing. She’d rather be prepared in case she had to defend or feed herself. When her bow and arrows were placed alongside her sack and blankets, she surveyed the campsite.

The fire was out, the embers smothered in dirt. Zarina gingerly moved the hot stones that circled the campfire, scattering them in a random fashion. She didn’t want her cave to look as if anyone lived there. If someone passed by, the most they would see would be the remains of a fire, if that. She scraped more dirt over the fire pit and even went so far as to dig up a small, leafy bush and plant it right on top of it. That way she’d know where to dig when she returned home.

Satisfied, she stood and brushed the dirt from her hands. Both men watched her from the edge of the forest. Massive and unyielding, they stood with their fists resting

on their hips and their legs in a wide stance. They were an imposing sight clad in snug-fitting leather pants that showed the strength and muscles of their thighs and the evidence of their arousal. Their leather shirts strained at the seams, barely containing their shoulders.

No expression showed on their faces as they watched her. Kalis hadn't bothered to tie back his hair and it flowed to his shoulders. Malik had tied his back and it emphasized the harsh planes of his face. Both horses were packed and ready. Nothing of theirs remained behind. But, she reminded herself, they might not be coming back. Nothing had been said about their future plans. Straightening her shoulders, she hefted her belongings into her arms and walked toward them.

Kalis met her halfway, taking her sack and blankets from her. Without a word, he strode to his horse and began to stow her belongings.

"Are you ready?" Malik reached out as she approached and plucked her bow and arrows from her grasp and tied them to his mount.

"Almost. I'll just be a moment." She hurried off toward the stream, taking the time to see to her needs and to wash her hands and face. Unbinding her hair, she finger-combed the mass and then braided it, tying the ends with the worn leather thong. She brushed the dirt from her own clothing, which was much more worn and faded than theirs.

Satisfied that she was ready, she gazed down at the stream as if memorizing it. But that was silly. She was coming back. Would be back in probably less than a week. Still, as she turned and headed back toward the waiting men, she couldn't shake the feeling that, once again, her life was about to take an unexpected turn.

Swallowing her fear, she hurried toward the men and horses. Whatever came, she would face it like she had faced everything else in her life. With courage and determination. Her father would have expected no less.

Several hours later, all her fears had faded and a kind of fatalistic feeling had taken their place. She could not change what would happen, so she might as well enjoy herself when she could. With that in mind, she began to question Kalis and Malik about the forest surrounding them.

"What animal is that?" She pointed to the furry creature that watched them cautiously as it peered out from behind a large tree.

"That is a marten," Kalis replied, his large hand resting on her belly.

She turned her head and smiled her thanks. She'd been riding in front of Kalis since they'd started their journey. The plan was for her to take turns riding with both men so as not to overtax either horse.

Zarina had expected to be tense and uncomfortable, but both men had done their best to put her at ease, pointing out things of interest and answering all her questions about the flora and fauna. She soaked up all their words, knowing that her future survival might very well depend on her knowledge of her forest home.

They stopped late in the morning and watered the horses at a small stream while they ate some of the leftover bread and berries from breakfast. Zarina was amazed by the variety of flowers growing along the soft banks of the stream. Both men were knowledgeable and told her the names and pointed out several species of leafy plant that were safe to eat.

When it was time to leave, Malik lifted her onto his horse to ride in front of him. Unlike Kalis, she could feel the tension in his body as they started back on their journey. Zarina said nothing, not wanting to do anything that might upset the pleasant tone of the day.

"Our home, the village of Calla, is about five days' ride beyond Ankaris." He said the words casually, but she wasn't fooled.

"I thought you couldn't go home." Her tone was sharp with suspicion. Was he about to tell her that they'd lied about the curse? No, she scolded herself. She trusted both men and knew they would not lie to her. She softened her tone and placed her hand over Malik's where it rested at her waist. "I did not think you would risk it."

"Nay, we would not risk the health and wellbeing of our family and village. We have not been back since the day we left." Sorrow was heavy in his voice. "But we must return for one night if the curse is to be broken."

He covered her mouth with his hand before she could voice her opinion that she was not the woman they sought. Leaning down, he spoke softly. "I know you do not believe that you are the woman we seek. But what can it hurt to try? If the curse is not broken, then you are right." He removed his hand and she could feel him sigh as his chest expanded briefly, pressing against her back.

Kalis pulled his horse alongside them. "We will leave quickly the next day so that no harm will come to anyone." He smiled and his tone was cajoling. "What can it hurt?"

What can it hurt? She wanted to scream the words aloud. It could hurt her. It could prove once and for all that she was right and then what would happen? Then they would leave her. They would have to in order to keep searching for the woman who could break the curse.

She hung her head in shame. She was a coward. That was the real reason she didn't want to go to their home with them. It would be bad enough that the people would stare at her and treat her as if she were some kind of abomination, but Malik and Kalis would witness their people's treatment of her. She was very afraid that once she was proven to be the wrong woman, their opinion of her would change.

But what did it matter? The voice of love spoke from her heart. If it freed them to search for the one who could break the curse, then how could she not do it? She loved them enough to set them free if that was what they needed. It might break her heart, but she could not live with herself if she did not do all that was in her power to help them.

Raising her head, she looked at Kalis, who stared back at her with a hopeful gleam in his eye, and then she turned her head and looked at Malik who sat stoically behind

her. "We will stay only one night?" She didn't think she could bear to be around all those people for much longer than that.

"Only one." Malik's arm tightened around her, bringing her back hard against his chest. She could feel his erection pressing against the small of her back and she sucked in a breath. He rested his chin on the top of her head, rubbing it against her hair. "Thank you." Such simple words, but they were filled with such depths of emotion.

She dared not speak, afraid she would make a fool of herself and begin to sob like a child. It was the beginning of the end and she knew it. Looking out over the trail ahead, she blinked until her vision cleared and she had her wayward emotions under control once again. The end had not come yet. She still had time with them and planned to make the most of it.

Leaning back against Malik, she enjoyed the feel of his large body behind her. With his massive arms around her, she felt cradled in his strength. It had been the same in Kalis' arms this morning. It was a great gift these men had given her. No matter what happened, they had shown her true caring and concern, shown her how it should be between a man and a woman, and she would always love them for that.

Chapter Twelve

The afternoon passed uneventfully, but she was tired by the time they made camp. She hadn't ridden a horse for any length of time in months and some of her unused muscles were protesting by the time she dismounted. She'd stifled her groan, but Kalis had immediately seen it and had offered her his arm until she was steady on her feet.

"The best thing to do is to move around." Malik unloaded the horses and tethered them close by.

"I know." Gritting her teeth, she pried her fingers from around Kalis' arm and hobbled toward the nearest tree. Using the trees for support, she stretched her legs. She didn't look at either man. She felt humiliated enough as it was. She was from a desert tribe of Talkos, a people known for their horsemanship. Yet a day in the saddle had her crippling around like an old woman.

Zarina sighed as the cramps in her muscles gradually eased and she was able to walk more effortlessly. She should have expected this. After all, she certainly hadn't been at her best since she'd met these men.

When she at last felt fairly normal, she went to the baggage and pulled out her blanket roll. Carrying it close to the tiny fire that Malik had built, she laid it close and undertook the slightly uncomfortable process of lowering her body to the ground. Malik, seeing her problem, scooped her into his arms and laid her on top of her blanket.

"Thank you." Stretching out her legs in front of her, she groaned. "I'm not used to riding anymore. It's been months since I sat on a horse for that long." For some reason she felt compelled to explain the situation to them, not wanting either brother to think her unskilled.

Malik's face softened as she spoke. "We would not think otherwise, little warrior."

She could feel the heat creeping up her cheeks and it had nothing to do with the small blaze burning next to her. Malik had started calling her "little warrior" from the beginning, and rather than being a derogatory slur against her skills, it was more of an endearment. She'd be lying to herself if she said it didn't please her.

Malik stood and walked toward the luggage, stopping long enough to grab his own bow and arrows before melting into the surrounding wood. "He will be back soon." Kalis crouched next to her, poking the fire with a stick. "Then we will eat." He glanced up toward the sky. The sun was almost gone, disappearing on the western horizon. "We will sleep then." He grinned as he glanced back at her. "You need your rest. Tomorrow will be another long day in the saddle."

Groaning, she dropped back on top of the blanket and stared up at the sky. "Do not remind me," she groused, but truthfully, she was enjoying riding again. She knew from

experience that her sore muscles would be fine in a day or two. As Kalis busied himself around the campsite, Zarina surreptitiously rubbed her bottom, trying to work the stiffness from her body.

She was sitting up again and feeling much better when Malik returned with fresh game. He quickly skinned the small animals, cut the meat into chunks and skewered them with long sticks. They each took a stick and held it over the fire, waiting for the meat to cook. The delicious aroma made Zarina's stomach grumble and her mouth water.

They were all silent, but it was not an uncomfortable silence. They were in unfamiliar territory and they all kept one ear trained on the sounds of the forest as they ate.

They were clearing away the remains of the meal and Zarina was packing away what was left of the meat for tomorrow when Malik spoke. "I'll take first watch."

Kalis nodded as he extinguished the remains of the fire, mounding dirt over the dying embers to smother them.

"I'll take a watch." Zarina was determined to pull her weight on this journey.

She expected refusal, but Kalis simply nodded. "I'll take second watch," he said.

Satisfied that she would take the last watch of the night, she moved away from the center of the small clearing and spread her blankets beneath a tree. Kalis was right behind her, spreading his own blankets next to hers.

Malik watched them both as they settled down to sleep and then he disappeared into the woods on the other side of the camp. When she could no longer see Malik, she yanked off her boots and laid them aside before she carefully lowered herself to the hard-packed ground. Her body had begun to stiffen up again while she'd sat eating her evening meal and her muscles complained with every movement she made. Sighing with relief when she finally was flat on the ground, she pulled a blanket over her and rolled onto her side. She could feel the heat from Kalis' body as he stretched out behind her with his chest against her back.

"Thank you, Zarina." Kalis slipped his arm around her body, his hand coming to rest between her breasts, making her acutely aware of how little she would have to move in order for him to be touching her. Her nipples puckered against her tunic as she tried to make sense of his words.

"For what?" With every breath she took, the edge of his hand barely touched the curve of her breast. It was arousing. It was maddening.

"For agreeing to come to our home with us." He began to move his fingers, playing with the laces on her tunic.

"If it will give you the answers you seek, it is the least I can do."

Kalis spoke again, but she could no longer hear his words. His clever fingers had undone her laces and were now gliding closer to her breast. Just another inch and his

hand would be where she wanted it. Then he stopped and she realized he was waiting for her to answer him.

"What did you say?"

His breath was warm against her ear as he chuckled. "That may be all the answer I need." His tongue stroked the outer rim of her ear. "Will you give yourself to me?"

His hand was so close to her breast and it ached for his touch, but when she tried to move, her muscles protested. "I'm not sure I can," she muttered.

He stilled and began to withdraw his hand. "No." She clamped her hand over his, keeping it tucked inside her tunic. "Not that I won't." She hesitated. "I'm not sure my poor abused body will allow me to."

"Ahh." Satisfaction dripped from his voice. "You don't need to do a thing or move a muscle. Let me do everything." This time when he tried to withdraw his hand from her tunic, she let it go.

His hand moved lower to the ties of her pants. They were quickly undone, but once again he didn't touch her. Frustration thrummed through her body. She hadn't shared sex often with either of the men, but it had been enough so that her body knew what it wanted. And right now it wanted Kalis buried deep in her core.

Her sex pulsed with need, her cream coating its thick folds as her body prepared itself for him. She barely stifled a curse when he sat up next to her. But the next moment, she almost cried with relief when she felt him tugging her pants down her hips, past her thighs and knees and over her feet.

Cool air rushed in and she welcomed it. She felt hot and needy as she waited for him to continue. The blankets were adjusted so that she was covered again as he lay back down beside her.

"There is no rush, no need for you to do anything but let me pleasure you." His voice was soft, his tone hypnotic. His right hand slipped beneath her tunic as he began to nibble at her neck. Sighing, she arched her neck slightly. "That's it," he praised. "Just let me do everything."

His large hand covered her breast and he moved it in a slow, circular motion. A low moan came from deep in her throat at his unhurried motions. "I love your breasts, Zarina. They are large enough to fill my hand completely." Her nipple tightened, becoming even harder. He was seducing her both with his actions and his words.

She sank back against him, allowing her weight to rest fully against his body. The hard swelling of his erection was prominent, digging into the curve of her behind. Pushing back, she rubbed her ass against his cock, frustrated by the barrier of his leather pants. "Take them off. I want to feel you."

A rumble of laughter rose from his chest as he tweaked her nipple before withdrawing his hand. "As you command."

She could feel him shucking his clothing behind her and suddenly her tunic was too tight and confining. Struggling, she sat up and started to remove it. His hand stilled

hers. "Let me." She raised her hands above her head and Kalis peeled her tunic over her body. "Beautiful," he sighed as he eased her back down until she was lying on the blanket again.

He crouched over her body on his hands and knees, his much larger frame covering her completely. His hands were on either side of her head and his knees on either side of her thighs. Reaching up, she grabbed a handful of his hair and tugged him closer. His hair felt like silk as it flowed through her fingers. As he lowered his face, it brushed the sides of her face.

His lips were warm and firm as they touched hers. She opened her mouth to him, offering herself. His tongue slipped past her lips, barely teasing the inside of her mouth before withdrawing. Her breath was unsteady and her heart was beating faster. "I want you, Kalis." Her hips shifted restlessly on the blankets and she ignored the stiffness of her muscles as she tried to nudge his erection to her opening.

"Soon," he crooned as he left her mouth and kissed his way down to her breasts. Sighing, she tried to relax, knowing he would do things in his own time. Kalis might appear to be the more easygoing of the two brothers, but he did have a stubborn streak and liked to be in control.

He worshiped her breasts. She didn't know how else to describe what he was doing to her. His mouth and lips and tongue tasted and sucked and licked, leaving no part untouched. A low rumbling sound started low in his chest, almost like the purr of the large desert cats that lived in the northern regions of the desert. Like him, they were large, determined predators that lived by their own rules. She'd seen one as a child and would never forget the loud purring sound it made as it lay sunning itself on some rocks.

She gave up trying to smother her cries of pleasure as his teeth tenderly captured her nipple, holding it still as his tongue flicked over the tip. "Kalis," she groaned, her fingers digging into his shoulders, her short nails scoring his skin. She wasn't sure if she was trying to hold him closer to her breasts or push his head lower to where her core was weeping with need for him.

His hands flowed over her stomach, his mouth following closely behind. Her breath was coming in short gasps now as his fingers parted her slick folds and his mouth hovered over her sex.

"I wish I could see you, Zarina. The soft, pink folds of your cunt, all wet with your cream." His fingers traced a path around the outside of her labia. "And it's all for me, isn't it?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"But I can smell you. I can feel the heat of your arousal as your body cries out for mine." He blew gently, the light puff of air making her shiver as her pussy clenched with need. "You want my cock pounding into you, pleasuring you. Don't you?" He plunged a finger inside her and withdrew it slowly, dragging it across the upper wall of her sheath as he did so.

She moaned aloud as his finger touched a particularly sensitive spot. He withdrew his finger and she cried out at the loss. "Don't you, Zarina?" he whispered.

"Kalis!" She cried out his name as she tilted her hips toward him.

"Tell me."

She struggled for breath as the words poured from her mouth. "I want your mouth on my body, licking and sucking. I want your fingers inside me, touching me, pleasuring me." She arched her hips toward his mouth, tempting him, taunting him. "I want your cock pounding into me until I scream and we both come."

The air around them thickened with desire and Kalis' control broke. She sensed the change immediately. The laughing, teasing bedmate was gone, replaced with a man determined to claim what was his.

His hands gripped her hips, holding her still as his mouth descended. He gave no quarter as he devoured her cunt with his mouth. He did all that she'd demanded and more. His lips sucked and nibbled as his tongue licked and savored. Slipping one arm beneath her bottom, he held her easily. With his wide shoulders keeping her thighs spread, he thrust two fingers deep into her.

Zarina cried out as wave after wave of heat surged through her body. She was so close. The night receded from her sight and sound. She could hear nothing, see nothing. All that existed for her was Kalis and what he was doing to her body.

Then he slowly spread his fingers, opening her impossibly wide. She felt stretched to the breaking point. His mouth found the bud of nerves at the top of her sex and he sucked it gently as he plunged a third finger into her depths.

Zarina's body bowed, her head tipping back as she cried out. Her inner muscles convulsed around his fingers and she could feel the gush of liquid flowing from her body as she came. Her legs trembled, her arms shook. There was nothing to grasp onto, nothing to anchor her except Kalis' touch.

Heat and pleasure rushed through her and she gave herself over to it, trusting Kalis to keep her safe. She sank, almost boneless, back onto the blankets, groaning when he removed his fingers and lowered her hips back to the blanket. The muscles in her ass and thighs were tight and sore.

"Zarina?" Sweat had stuck several strands of her hair to her forehead and Kalis leaned over her, brushing them aside.

She tried to answer him, but it took more energy than she had at the moment to speak. She raised her hand and cupped the side of his face before her hand slipped back down to land on the blanket with a thump.

"Your muscles are still sore." Zarina knew he wasn't asking her a question. Rather, he was talking to himself. But still she nodded.

His erection nudged her belly, bringing her back to her senses. "You haven't come," she said. Wrapping her hand around his length, she squeezed tight.

Kalis dropped his head until his forehead was touching hers. "That doesn't matter."

"It matters to me," she murmured as she continued to stroke him. She loved the feel of him. Such strength covered by such soft skin. It gave her great pleasure to touch him in this way.

He dropped a kiss on her forehead, one on her nose, her lips and her chin before sitting back on his heels. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't," she promised him. It would hurt her more to leave him this way. She wanted – no, *needed* – to take him into her body.

He moved from between her sprawled legs and gently rolled her onto her left side. "You just lie there and let me do all the work."

"I thought I did that last time." She looked over her shoulder and smiled at him and he laughed as she'd hoped he would.

"No, you didn't." He stretched out behind her, his left arm sliding under her body. "But this time you will." Before she could protest, he continued. "I don't want to hurt you, Zarina."

His sincerity moved her deeply. Maybe he and Malik did not love her as she loved them, but there was no doubt that they did care for her. "I know, Kalis."

Relaxing, she allowed him to do as he pleased. He lifted her right leg and draped it over his leg. As he did so, he angled her hips back toward him and she could feel the tip of his erection probing at her entrance. Ever so slowly, he pushed himself into her. It was exquisite.

His cock stretched her swollen inner muscles, but he took his time and all she felt was pleasure. He felt bigger taking her this way, but she wanted all of him. "Don't hold back. I want every inch of you."

He groaned and his hips flexed, pushing himself deeper. They lay there, both of them breathing deeply. She could feel his cock throbbing within her and her cunt began to pulse in rhythm with him. Kalis held her with his left arm and used his right one to stroke her belly and lower.

His fingers lightly brushed her clitoris. Just a whisper of a touch. Zarina began to rock back and forth, ever so slightly.

"Zarina," he warned.

"I can't help it. I have to move."

He sighed deeply, his grip tightening on her, but he didn't stop her. Together, they rocked gently, he pushing his cock deep every time she pushed back against him.

His touch never varied on her clitoris. Lightly, he stroked her over and over. Her orgasm took her by surprise. One second she was lost in the beauty of their joining, the next, her body was convulsing. It was not the largest orgasm she'd ever had, but somehow it was more satisfying. It went beyond the physical. The intimacy of the moment touched her heart, making it ache.

She felt Kalis come. His body clenched tight and he held himself still as his cock spewed its hot seed deep within her. He buried his face in her neck, his arms tightening

around her. For the first time it occurred to her that she could bear a child. The thought brought a combination of elation and terror. Her body went hot and then cold.

Whose child would it be? She'd been with both men. Did it even matter? Not to her it didn't. She'd never really thought about having children before. All her energy had been given to her hunting and warrior skills. Could she be a good mother? What would happen if she had to raise a child on her own?

Kalis shifted, sucking on her neck, and driving all thought from her mind. It did no good to borrow trouble. What would be would be, and whatever happened she would handle it. The risk was well worth it.

He withdrew his shrinking erection from her body and carefully lowered her leg. Dragging the blankets over them, he wrapped both arms around her and held her tight. "Thank you, Zarina."

She didn't respond, but snuggled tighter to him, gripping his hand where it nestled between her breasts. The day had been long and she was tired. She blocked all thought from her mind and tried to sleep. She had to be fresh when the time for her watch came around.

Chapter Thirteen

Zarina was still annoyed two mornings later when they rode toward the town of Ankaris. She'd slept the first night through, missing her turn at watch and not waking until the sun shone down into her eyes early the next morning. Neither man made an apology for not waking her.

She'd given them her silence the entire next day and rather than anger them, it seemed to amuse them. The brothers talked quietly on occasion but gave no indication that they thought anything was amiss.

She'd finally broken her silence last evening, questioning why they were not going to push onward to make it to the town that night. Malik had explained that it was safer to camp outside at night and go into the town early in the morning. Since they had more experience than she did about such things, she bowed to their experience. She might be annoyed with them, but she wasn't stupid.

She'd taken the first watch last night, vowing to stay awake all night and not wake either man. But Malik had come to her halfway through the night to relieve her from her watch. She stalked back to their campsite and spread her blanket far away from both men.

At least she was back to normal now, the soreness gone from the muscles in her legs and behind. She rode easily now, enjoying her days in the saddle. Each day had brought an improvement as her body remembered its former skills.

"What do you think?" Malik stopped his horse, bringing her attention back to the present.

From her seat in front of Malik, she had a good view of the place. "It's big." Truly, she had never seen so many buildings, people and animals in one spot. "There must be several thousand people."

"Probably." Malik sounded unconcerned. "We must stay close together. It would be easy to become separated in such a crowd."

Zarina knew that what he really meant was that she could become lost. She had no doubt that both men could take care of themselves. She could easily take care of herself as well, but she would have to be cautious. Men did not like women who did not act like women. She did not want to find herself in the position of having to defend herself against a large group of strangers.

Although he sounded relaxed, she could feel the tension in Malik as they passed the open gates of the town and headed toward the marketplace. His arms tightened almost imperceptibly around her. She glanced over her shoulder, taking in the stiff set of his shoulders and the harsh glare on his face. He was all warrior at this moment. The sheer

size of him, coupled with the scowl on his face and the sword strapped to his side, would make other men walk warily around him. They should have no trouble here. Satisfied, she turned back around and proceeded to gawk at the wonders surrounding her.

Zarina couldn't help herself. She'd never seen such a variety of people before. There were pale-skinned people from the mountain area, darker-skinned men from the southern desert and people of all shades in between. And the clothing they wore! Some wore the leather leggings and tunics that she was most familiar with, but others wore fabrics of such wondrous colors of red, blue, yellow and green. From fancy cloaks and billowing pants on the men to mysterious wraparound dresses on the women, some of whom shielded their faces with gauzy veils, Zarina couldn't take it all in fast enough.

She glanced down at her own worn and dusty clothing and had to fight the urge to swipe her hands over them to try to clean them off. Straightening her shoulders, she sat proudly in front of Malik. She had no reason to be ashamed of how she was dressed. But still, she could not suppress the slight pang of envy as they passed by a group of women clothed in vivid cloth of a fine weave. She hadn't owned a dress since her mother died. Her father had never thought to buy her one.

The women stared pointedly at Malik and Kalis, their eyes filled with interest and desire. Several of them smiled openly and one brazen hussy even leaned forward to better expose the bounty of her breasts to them. Zarina glared at them, fingering the hilt of her dagger.

"Sheath your claws, little warrior." Malik lowered his chin to the top of her head and brushed it back and forth. "They are of no interest to us."

"I have no idea what you are speaking of, warrior." There was no way she'd admit that she was jealous of these women. That just for once in her life, she'd like to wear something beautiful and to feel pretty.

Malik's chuckle grated her and she elbowed him in the ribs. He gave a short grunt and chuckled again. "My mistake." She could still hear the amusement in his voice and shook her head in disgust. She glanced over at Kalis, who was riding by their side, and there was a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

What right did she have to be jealous? She had no real claim on either man at her side. She struggled to bury her own feelings of inadequacy, but alongside these women, she felt lacking. She was not soft-spoken and womanly. She had no finery to wear. Her hands were calloused, her body muscular. The voices of those who had taunted her over her lifetime rose up to swamp her—abomination, unnatural, strange. The words threatened to choke her.

Perhaps seeing her alongside these other women, they were seeing her as she truly was. Perhaps Kalis and Malik even wished to seek the attention of some of these women.

Just the thought of those women running their soft hands over Kalis' hard body or rubbing their lush breasts against Malik's chest made her want to smack them. Her

stomach churned and her blood burned at the mere thought of any of them touching *her* men. Her thought brought her up short and she stared blindly out over the crowded market. But they weren't really hers, were they?

Swallowing her bile, she shrugged, pretending a total lack of concern. "I do not care if you seek them out. It is none of my concern."

Malik stilled behind her and she could actually feel his anger rising within him. What did he have to be angry about? Feeling totally out of sorts and wanting only to be gone from this place, she rushed onward. "Let me off here and I will tend to my business." There was a communal well in the center of the square and she pointed toward it. "I will meet you there when I am done."

"Zarina," Kalis began, but his brother cut him off.

"As you wish." His words were clipped, his tone angry. He lifted her off his horse in one easy motion, setting her on the ground beside him. "We will stable the horses and meet you back here."

"I need my satchel." Zarina stared at the side of the horse, watching Malik's leg as the muscles in his thigh tightened around the animal's side.

He unhooked it from behind him and tossed it down to her. She caught it in her arms, cradling her precious belongings against her chest. Reaching down, he captured her chin in his hand and tilted her face upward. "One hour."

She nodded, not daring to disagree. When he nodded, his lips parted in a cruel smile. She swallowed hard, on the verge of tears and not sure why.

He rode away and never looked back. Kalis rode by his side as they headed toward the stables. She bit her lip hard to keep from yelling at them not to leave her. Even though she had all but driven them away, she felt abandoned and bereft. She swallowed again but could not push down the lump at the back of her throat. This was what it would be like when they finally left her.

What if they did not come back for her? She locked her knees to keep from racing after them, and when she finally lost sight of them, she swayed on her feet. Alone. She was alone in the world once more. The crowd surged around her, jostling her, and she realized she was still standing in the middle of the road, blocking the flow of people and animals.

She made herself move off to the side and stood in the shelter of a building that was fashioned out of some kind of smooth stone. She touched it and it was cool, but rough. She longed to ask Malik and Kalis if they knew what it was made of. A low keening sound came from deep inside her, startling her, and she swallowed again.

The urge to turn and run from the town was so strong that it was all she could do to stand where she was. But she could not run. Drawing on every ounce of strength she possessed, she forced herself to stand her ground and look around the marketplace. Teeming with life, there seemed to be people buying and selling all manner of goods.

She'd come this far, and she needed supplies if she were to survive. The colder season was coming soon and the length of the days would shorten. There would be less

time for hunting and gathering and if she hoped to live through the season without starving, she needed some basic food staples. But first, she needed money.

Taking a deep breath, she left the safety of the wall and forced one foot in front of the other. She scanned the crowd, searching for what she needed. As she meandered amongst the stalls, she traded her seashell for some needles and thread that she would use to repair her own clothing and to fashion her furs into some kind of covering. Her shell, while of great value to her, held not as much worth here in this trading town.

Finally, she approached an older woman who was selling fruit from a small cart. She bowed respectfully and when she raised her head the older woman was smiling at her. Encouraged, Zarina made her request. "Please pardon my intrusion, but could you tell me where I might find an honest merchant who might purchase jewelry?"

The older lady cackled with glee, showing a mouth that was short a few teeth. Still, her eyes were kindly but shrewd. "You are a smart one, yes? And optimistic too. You seek not just a merchant, but an honest one."

She sized up Zarina, starting at the bottom of her dusty boots and moving upward over her worn pants and her sweat-stained tunic until she reached her face. Zarina struggled not to squirm under the woman's gaze, meeting her eyes squarely. Whatever she sought, she apparently found because she nodded abruptly. "You are a proud one, all right." Before Zarina could take offense, the older lady was giving her directions. "Go and see Akmid." Her gnarled and wrinkled hand pointed toward some stalls in the distance. "Over where the gold and silver merchants sell. He will deal fairly with you. Tell him Dagmar sent you."

Zarina nodded and bowed again. "Thank you, Dagmar. I appreciate your kindness." The older woman just smiled her gaping smile and shooed her off.

Clutching her sack in her arms, she fought the flow of the crowds as she made her way toward the jewelry merchants. Several people bumped her and many stared, but she kept her eyes focused on where she was going. It took her several inquiries before she finally found the stall she sought.

"You are Akmid?"

The short, wiry man nodded, his dark brown eyes assessing her and easily dismissing her as a buyer. "You have something to sell? Your dagger, perhaps."

Zarina fingered the hilt of her dagger where it sat against her thigh and watched the merchant eye the blade and sheath with interest. There was no mistaking the quality and markings, even though it was an older blade. Daggers made by the desert tribes were always in demand. Even she knew that.

For a moment, she toyed with selling it instead. But common sense prevailed. "I need my blade to survive," she muttered. She did not need what was inside her sack.

She eyed the rich fabric of his robe and nodded. This man had money that she desperately needed. "Dagmar sent me to your stall."

He laughed and his dark face took on a more kindly guise. "What has that old woman done now? Quickly now, I do not have all day."

Zarina wanted to turn and run, but that was not an option. Her hands shook as she opened her pack. Reaching inside, her fingers closed around the familiar, warm links of silver. Tightening her hand around it, she withdrew it from the bag. Not able to look at it, she thrust it forward. "How much will you give me for this?"

Akmid tried to take it from her, but her fingers would not release their grip on the chain. He tugged once and then stopped. "Are you sure you wish to sell?" The pity in his voice almost brought her to her knees.

The word "no" lingered on her tongue. Maybe it would be better to starve to death than to sell the one remaining link to her family. Her father's face popped into her head, admonishing her, and she heard his words as clearly as if he was standing next to her. *A warrior does what needs to be done and a warrior never gives up until his last breath is drawn.*

Releasing the death grip she had on the necklace, she allowed Akmid to pull it from her hand. "Yes." She turned her head away, unable to watch as he examined it.

Malik was still furious when he stalked out of the stables with Kalis close behind him. The horses would be fed and well cared for until they returned. Now if he could only calm himself. Zarina's words were still ringing in his ears. *I do not care if you seek them out. It is none of my concern.* How could she say such a thing? Did she truly not care if they sought out other women to slake their lust? Malik found the mere thought utterly revolting.

He stopped short and Kalis almost ran into him. "Malik, slow down and take a deep breath. It does no good for you to lose your temper."

His brother's words gave him pause and he dragged his hands through his hair, his agitation plain. He shook his head. "I know you are right. Only Zarina can make me lose my temper in this way."

"That is because you love her – because you care so deeply."

Malik faced his brother, scowling at the calm look on Kalis' face. "And how would you know?" Even as he spoke, he knew how foolish his question was, but still Kalis answered.

"Because I love her too." He smiled wryly. "And because I am not as calm as I appear either. I wanted to turn her over my knee and beat her until she'd never even think such a thing again."

Malik snorted. "You would not harm a hair on her head."

"Aye, you are right." Kalis' smile changed and then his face filled with lust. "But I wouldn't mind swatting that sweet ass a few times."

Malik tried to push that image out of his head as his cock stirred, pressing against the front of his leather pants. Fisting his hands on his hips, he glared at his brother. "Do not put such thoughts in my head at this time. Business first. Then we will see to our prickly little warrior."

Heads turned as the two men walked down the road. Both were big, imposing men who would draw attention on their own, but together they seemed to fascinate people. They were well used to the stares and easily ignored them. The legend and curse of their people was well known and wherever they traveled, someone would invariably ask if they were the cursed twins. Many men did not wish to fight them, fearful that if they killed either of the twins that the sorceress's curse might pass to them and their family. Still, just as many wished to challenge them, wanting to slay them, hopeful of gaining a reward from the sorceress. It wasn't something either man thought about much anymore. It was just the way their life was. Still, they were always instinctively on their guard.

"I do not think she meant the words she said." Malik did not need to explain what he meant to his brother. As usual, they were thinking alike, almost sharing the same thoughts.

"Nor do I." Kalis' smile deepened at the memory. "You did not see the expression on her face when that group of pretty ladies was staring at us. I think she meant to do them violence if they touched us."

"I thought she was jealous until she said she did not care if we sought them out." Malik's frustration began to rise again. "How could she think such a thing?"

Kalis grabbed Malik's arm, stopping him. "Because she is unsure of herself and of us. She does not trust that our affection goes beyond the need for her to break the curse."

Malik reached up and rubbed his chest. Even though his shirt covered the marking, he could still feel it burning against his flesh. "I do not know what to do to convince her."

"She needs time, Malik. At least she agreed to go to our home with us. Perhaps the curse will soon be broken."

"Perhaps." They started walking again and Malik changed the subject, not wanting to dwell on what might happen if the curse was not broken. "We need to get some food stocks and some presents to take home to our family. We have not seen them in all these long years and I will not return to face our parents empty-handed."

Kalis agreed easily. "I will go and buy what we need and take it back to the horses. You go and purchase something for our parents." Slapping his brother on the back, he strode toward the food sellers.

Malik watched him go, wishing he could at least appear to be as unconcerned as Kalis. He knew his brother was as worried as he was, but just hid it beneath a smile and his easygoing manner.

Striding into the heart of the market, he sought out the jewelry merchants first, hoping to find something pretty to buy for his mother. He quickly found the stalls filled with gold and silver chains, rings, bracelets and other items of adornment. He wanted something special and took his time, examining all the goods available for sale.

A flash of silver caught his eye. Wandering closer, his eyes widened. "Where did you get that?" he whispered hoarsely to the merchant. Surely there could not be two alike.

The thin, wiry man rubbed his hands together as he strode forward. "It is beautiful, is it not? The stones are only semiprecious, but the craftsmanship is very fine."

"Where did you get it?" Malik repeated, pinning the merchant with his stare, his eyes cold and merciless as he picked up the familiar necklace.

The man swiftly backed away, holding out his hands. "I purchased it from a poorly dressed woman earlier today. I should have known it was stolen, but I am softhearted and bought it from her."

"What woman?"

The merchant swallowed as Malik stalked toward him, matching him step for step. "Tall and strong. More manly than womanly."

Malik halted, closed his eyes and swallowed. His fingers closed around the silver chain so tightly, the stones dug into his palm. In his anger, he'd sent Zarina off on her own, not even stopping to think that she did not have any money. That she had bartered her one belonging of value, the necklace that her father had given her mother, almost broke his heart.

"What did she tell you about the necklace?"

The older man shrugged, still watching Malik carefully. "Truly, she did not say much, but I sensed she was reluctant to sell."

"I want it."

The merchant stepped forward, back on familiar ground. Rubbing his hands together. "I will give you a fair price."

Malik pierced the man with his icy blue gaze. "Yes, you will."

The haggling began and within minutes, Malik had purchased the necklace in his hands and the merchant was busy putting his newly acquired coins into the small purse attached to his belt. "I offered to buy her dagger, but she refused, muttering something about needing it but not needing a necklace." The old man was chatty now that he'd made his sale. His words were like salt in an open wound to Malik. Carefully tucking the necklace inside his shirt, he turned and walked away, desperate to find Zarina.

He could only begin to imagine how much she was hurting right now. Somewhere she was alone among the throngs of people. He was totally disgusted with himself. A few words spoken in anger and he'd sent her off on her own, unprotected and with no money to see to her needs. Of course she did not know how much he valued her. He'd done little to show it.

Checking to make sure the necklace was safe, he then strode through the streets, toward the communal well in search of her. His legs ate up the distance quickly as he began to scan the crowds for her. He pushed down the panic that began to well up

within him. What if she'd left? There was nothing to keep her here after she purchased her supplies.

After the way he and Kalis had just left her in the town square, she might even abandon her blankets if she just wanted to be rid of them. He suddenly became aware of the thin and vulnerable connection that he and his brother shared with Zarina. They'd only been together for weeks, not months. And their actions earlier this day had certainly not shown any consideration or care for her. Perhaps she would think herself better off without them.

People scurried out of his way as he quickened his pace. No one wanted to step in front of the grim-faced warrior who was intent on his destination.

Chapter Fourteen

Zarina stood in the shadows of a building, leaning against the cool stone while she waited. It was good to be out of the merciless sun, which beat down on the marketplace. She'd quickly discovered that she didn't really like the atmosphere of the large town and would be glad to leave it behind. So many people crowded into one spot, all talking at once and staring at any stranger who walked by. Staring at her.

Sighing, she tucked herself and her goods as close to the wall as she could get, all the while keeping one eye on the communal well. She wasn't sure how much time had passed, but she hoped that either Kalis or Malik would be along soon. She was more than ready to leave this place. She longed for the open air and the quiet of her forest home.

But she wouldn't be going home. Not yet. Not until she fulfilled her promise to the men to visit their village with them. She dreaded that even more than she had the visit to this town. All the villagers would know Malik and Kalis. Being surrounded by people who would expect her to miraculously break a seven-generation curse was more than a little intimidating.

Shifting her weight from one foot to the other, Zarina ignored the heat while the sweat rolled down her temple. She desperately tried not to think about the empty spot in her sack, which felt so much lighter slung over her shoulder. She knew that the necklace's weight had been negligible, but still she felt the lack of it.

Her satchel might be lighter, but her heart was heavy. Sighing, she pushed those thoughts aside and focused on the larger sacks of food at her feet. The dried fruits and grains would help her survive the coming months and give her time to accumulate some animal pelts for trading.

Where were they? Certainly they would come for her no matter how angry she'd made them earlier. If nothing else, they wanted her to try to break the curse. She bit her lip and stared blindly out over the throngs of people who were buying and selling in the market.

Perhaps they'd taken her at her word and were even now buried between a sleek pair of thighs and kissing some sweet-smelling stranger with sultry eyes and soft skin. Her breathing grew shallow and her stomach felt hollow. She knew her jealousy and anger were unreasonable, but they were there all the same. Malik and Kalis belonged to *her*.

Her head began to throb in a combination of anger, sorrow, heat and hunger, and she rubbed her hand across her forehead, trying to ease the ache. After a moment, she sighed and dropped her hand back to her side. It was doing no good. The only cure for her headache was to get far away from this place.

She caught a blur of motion out of the corner of her eye and turned her head, berating herself for not paying better attention to her surroundings. It did not pay to be inattentive in a strange place. Sure enough, several young men seemed to be watching her. They were pointing and talking amongst themselves, and Zarina's instincts were warning her to get away quickly. They were definitely trouble.

Hefting her two large sacks of goods, she left the cool overhang of the building and strode purposefully toward the well. It was better to be out in the open if they approached her. It seemed to take forever for her to reach her destination, but in truth it was only a matter of minutes. The crowd jostled her and she had to stop and wait while a man moved his small herd of goats down a small alleyway. The well was in sight when she glanced over her shoulder. Sure enough, they were following her.

Swearing under her breath, she picked up her pace. She prayed she was wrong and these men just happened to be heading in the same direction as she was. But she knew it was a false hope. Her instincts had always been good, but the past months had sharpened them to a razor's edge. These men were out for trouble and, unfortunately, she was their target.

A heavy hand descended on her shoulder just as she dropped her sacks by the edge of the well. She whirled around, smacking the hand from her shoulder. The stranger's eyes widened and he frowned as he stared at her.

"You dare to strike me, woman?" He was a tall man, probably in his early twenties, with olive skin and dark hair and eyes. He might have been handsome if not for the scowl of displeasure on his face. Tilting his chin upward, he furrowed his eyebrows as anger grew in his eyes.

"You dared to lay hands on me." She could not back down. Like any predator, if they sensed any weakness at all, they would pounce on her. His two friends flanked him, both of them scowling at her.

"Where is your man?" He arrogantly placed his hands on his hips and cocked his eyebrow at her. "Why are you running around the market dressed like a man? You are a woman and should behave like one."

"I have no man. And why I dress as I do is no business of yours." Anger displaced her unease, straightening her spine.

His hand shot out, slapping her across the face. "By the gods, you shall learn your place, woman."

Zarina's head snapped back from the blow, but she did not cry out. Instead, she turned her face back to him, narrowing her eyes and bringing her hand to the hilt of her sword. "I know my place and it is no concern of yours."

She could sense a crowd forming around them as people stopped to stare. The people watched the scene uneasily, some wanting to see a fight and others getting ready to flee if one should break out.

The stranger stared at her as if he could not understand the sheer audacity of a woman to put him in his place. He looked so confused that she almost laughed. His

friends shuffled next to him, muttering under their breath. *Was he going to let a woman get away with that?*

She widened her stance, knowing she was going to have to fight. There was no way the man could back down now and save face in front of his friends—not if he wished their respect. Not for the first time, Zarina wished that men were not so foolish about their sense of pride.

The man motioned to her two sacks of goods. “If you have no man, how did you pay for your goods?” A cunning gleam entered his eyes. “Perhaps you stole them?”

“I am no thief.” She stood taller and straighter. A child cried in the distance as the waves of heat seemed to dance across the air. Zarina narrowed her eyes to see better in the glare from the sun’s fierce rays. Time stood still and the atmosphere grew even more oppressive as the men realized that she had nothing else to say. She would not justify herself or her actions to these strangers.

The stranger raked her body with an insolent glare. “Perhaps you are a whore then.” He stared at her breasts, anger and lust now mixing in his gaze. “Not a very beautiful one, but I imagine that certain men might find you useful.” His mocking laughter echoed in her ears as he reached out to touch her.

The sound of steel being withdrawn from a sheath broke the silence of the market square. The edge of her blade rested on the man’s hand where it hovered in the air. “Touch me and lose it.”

“You are as spirited as you are foolish.” He slowly lowered his hand back to his side. “And I will enjoy breaking you and teaching you your place, woman.” Drawing his own blade, he held it in front of him. “Can you use it?” he mocked. “Or is it just for show?”

Zarina ignored his taunts, knowing they were designed to anger and unsettle her. He had no way of knowing that the insult to her as a woman hurt her more than any slurs against her fighting skills could. After all, she was secure in her abilities with her sword. Her womanhood was another matter altogether.

When he lunged, she countered easily, knocking his blade aside. His scowl grew as he flipped off his cloak and began to fight in earnest. She was forced to move away from her belongings, and it was hard to keep one eye on them and on her opponent as well. She could not lose them—not after bartering her beloved necklace for them. That food represented all she had. It was her future, her hope.

She countered blow after blow, hoping he would stop but knowing she would eventually have to fight back. Zarina was beginning to wonder if she would make it out of this town alive if she were forced to kill the man. Patiently she waited as his anger made him sloppy. And when she saw her chance, she attacked, knocking his blade from his hand and into the dust at his feet.

“Enough.” She stepped back to stand beside her belongings, which were thankfully untouched. It seemed as if the entire market was fixed on their fight.

The stranger lurched forward, grabbing his blade from the dirt. His lust and anger had turned to unreasonable fury now that a woman had bested him in front of all these people. "I have only just begun, woman. You will beg me for death before I am done."

A calm swept through Zarina. She'd already lost her entire world. Death held no fear for her. She stepped forward to give herself room to fight. "So be it."

The man let loose a battle cry and swung his sword toward her. A blade came out of nowhere, slicing through the air to counter the deadly stroke.

"You have dared to touch my woman." Malik's low, even tone belied the fury he felt. His gaze promised death to the man as he stumbled backward, tripping on his own feet and tumbling to the ground.

"She said she belonged to no man." The stranger scooted backward, still clinging to his sword as he rolled to his feet.

"She is mine."

"And mine." Kalis stepped into the fray, his own sword drawn as he walked to Zarina's side. "He did not hurt you?"

Zarina snorted. "I am fine."

Kalis reached out with his left hand and stroked the side of her face. "That is good. For if he had touched you, I would have to kill him."

The stranger's face went from Kalis to Malik and back again. His gaze flew to the opening of Kalis' shirt, where the edge of the tattoo was just visible. "You are the cursed ones." The crowd began to murmur as the man took another step back. He looked positively ill now and a bead of sweat trickled off the edge of his chin. "I meant no offense."

"But I am offended, nonetheless." Malik was in no mood to give quarter to this man. He felt Zarina coming up behind him, could feel her presence right to the very marrow of his bones. When her hand touched his back, he could feel it burning through the fabric of his shirt.

"Malik," she began, but the stranger wasn't finished.

"Your warrior prowess is well known, my lords." The man bowed at the waist, keeping his eyes on Malik all the while. "I have heard the tales in the taverns."

"And what have you heard?" Kalis' tone was almost conversational, but neither Malik nor Zarina were fooled.

The stranger relaxed and began to chat. "That you have traveled all over Amanas, from the mountains to the seas, covering the forest and desert in between." He gave Malik a man-to-man smile. "It is said that your prowess with the ladies equals that of your swordplay on the battlefield." He laughed at his own joke. "I know a lovely tavern where there are many soft, fine ladies who would love to welcome you to our town."

Malik could hardly believe the stupidity of the man. "If you are not gone from my sight within the next five seconds, I will cleave you in two and leave you to rot in the dust."

The stranger's eyes widened as if unsure he'd heard properly, and he began to back away. "One," Malik counted. "Two." The man turned and fled with his friends close behind him. Sheathing his sword, Malik whirled around to confront Zarina. "You can not stay out of trouble for an hour."

Her smile of welcome faded and her entire body stiffened. "I did not start this trouble, but I would have finished it." Turning her back on him, she sheathed her sword and stalked back to the well. Grabbing her small sack, she slung it over her shoulder and hefted her two bags into her arms. "Are we leaving now?"

Kalis sheathed his own blade, went to Zarina's side and wrestled the two bags from her arms. "We are leaving." He led the way toward the stables with Zarina hot on his heels.

Malik swore and headed after them, knowing he'd have to do something to make amends to Zarina. He patted his shirt to make sure the necklace was safe. He'd apologize to her later, once they were safely out of this town.

They were all silent as they sat around the fire that night. By unspoken consensus they'd ridden hard all afternoon to put as much distance between themselves and the town as possible. There was always the outside chance that the stranger they'd had the altercation with would come searching for them, seeking revenge. It was unlikely, but none of them wanted to take that chance.

Zarina stared blindly into the flames, even though she knew she shouldn't, overwhelmed by all she had lost. Her father, her home, her beloved necklace and now, it seemed, even Malik and Kalis. Both men had been quiet since leaving the town. She'd ridden all afternoon with Kalis, but she could still sense Malik's anger.

She closed her eyes but could still see the flames dancing behind her eyelids. Suddenly, she was so very tired. The sheer effort just to stay alive almost overwhelmed her sometimes. She knew she had to deal with Malik sooner or later. Better now, when she could pick the time and place. She wanted this confrontation over with before they reached the men's home village.

Gathering her strength, she opened her eyes. Malik was seated across from her, watching her every move. "The fight was not my fault." She kept her tone firm but even.

"I know."

"They accosted me as I stood waiting. I had no choice but to fight them." Zarina was marshalling her argument, her voice growing stronger as she continued. "They were looking for trouble and I just happened to be a handy target."

"Zarina, I know it was not your fault."

She was so wound up that Malik's words didn't penetrate her awareness as the memories of the day swamped her. The fear of being surrounded by all those strangers, wondering if she would make it out of the town alive, was almost too much to bear. "There were so many people there. All of them watching and hoping for a fight."

Malik was by her side instantly, tugging her into his arms. She wanted to resist, but even more than that, she wanted his comfort, wanted to feel safe for just a few minutes in the dark of the night. Turning her face into his chest, she allowed him to hold her in his arms. She laid her head against his chest and could hear the sound of his heart as it thudded wildly.

He tilted her head back against his arm and stroked the side of her face with his hand. "It was my fault, little warrior, not yours." His smile was sad as he ran his fingers lightly over her hair. "I allowed my anger to overcome my common sense. I did not see to your safety and for that I beg your forgiveness."

Zarina stared at Malik in wonder and then quickly turned to Kalis, who had moved closer to them. He nodded as he sat down by her side and took her hand in his. "I am sorry as well, Zarina. We are not taking very good care of you."

"I don't understand." She could hear the confusion in her voice.

Malik sighed. "When you told us you did not care if we sought out other women, it angered us both. I want you to care." His eyes were solemn and she could see herself mirrored in their depths. His fingers stroked the curve of her jaw. "I wanted you to be jealous, to demand that we keep away from any other women."

"There is no other woman for us, Zarina." Kalis brought her hand to his lips and kissed each knuckle in turn.

Her heart was pounding so hard it was almost impossible for her to breathe. They'd been angry because they thought she didn't care. Zarina rolled that thought around in her mind. The more time she spent with these two men, the more she came to understand just how different they were from other men she'd known. They treated her as a woman of worth and she owed them nothing less than her total honesty.

"I was jealous." She could barely hear her whispered words, so she cleared her throat and began again. Both men had stilled the moment she'd spoken and she had their full attention. "I saw all those gorgeous women looking at you, devouring you with their eyes, and I knew what they wanted. And I hated it." She looked at both men in turn. "And I wanted to draw my sword and drive them away from you, but I don't have that right."

"Yes you do." Malik's reply was swift.

She shook her head. "We do not know that. Until the curse is broken, you cannot commit to me. If I am not the right woman, you will need to leave and go in search of her." Her chest ached as she spoke the words that had to be said.

"You are the right woman for us." Kalis' hand tightened around hers.

"We shall see." Tired, she closed her eyes again, content just to be here with them. As she snuggled closer to Malik, she could feel something digging into her side. A

thought belatedly occurred to her and her eyes flew open. "Did you get what you needed in the town before we left? I had my sacks of supplies, but you weren't carrying anything." It upset her to think that they would do without because of the trouble she'd had with the locals. "Whatever food I have is yours as well."

A sound of distress came from deep in Malik's throat as he buried his face in her neck. His grip became so tight she could barely breathe. At her side, Kalis lowered his head until his forehead was touching her hand. What had she said to upset them so?

"Malik?" He shook his head and held her tighter. "Kalis?" He just tightened his grip on her hand. Tugging her hand until Kalis finally released it, she wrapped it around his head, pulling him toward her. He came easily, resting his head against her stomach.

Eventually, Malik raised his head. His eyes appeared luminous, almost wet, and he turned his head away from her and blinked several times. When he looked back at her, his eyes seemed normal again and she told herself that it was just a trick of the firelight.

"You would share all you have with us."

"Yes," she replied slowly, not quite sure what the problem was. "You have given freely of your own supplies and skills—I can do no less."

"No, you could not do anything less, could you?" His comment sounded mocking, but she sensed he was mocking himself and not her. It made no sense to her. She could sense Malik's rising anger again. Enough was enough.

"Why are you so angry at me?" Like any wound, if left untreated it would fester. Zarina was not about to allow this to happen.

"I am not angry at you." His voice rose, making a lie of his words.

"Then why are you yelling?" She tugged at his hair until she had his full attention. "Why are you angry?" She spaced her words apart, saying each slowly, wanting to get to the bottom of this.

"I am angry at myself," he roared. He caught himself and took a deep breath and then another, slowly releasing it. "I am angry at myself."

"But why?" Zarina was totally confused.

"Because I left you alone in that town with no protection and no money to buy what you needed."

"But it is not your place to give me money to buy what I need. That is my responsibility."

"No." Malik's voice was firm. "You are my woman."

"Our woman," Kalis corrected.

Malik nodded in agreement. "Our woman. And it is our right and duty to provide for you." He paused. "How did you buy your supplies? I did not think you had any money."

The sickness came back to her belly. She did not want to think about what she had given up to buy what she'd needed. She shrugged, trying to act unconcerned. She wanted this behind her and forgotten about. "I bartered something I had. That's all."

"That's all." Malik shook his head. "You traded your mother's necklace for money. I saw it in the one of the jewelers' stalls, Zarina."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I had to eat. I do not need pretty baubles." A lone tear rolled down her cheek and she swiped it away. "I have my memories. That is enough."

Both men stared at her. She could not decipher the look in their eyes, but they were making her uncomfortable. "It is enough," she reiterated, wanting the subject dropped. It had never occurred to her that either man might discover what she had done. She wasn't even sure why it mattered so much to them. It was just a piece of jewelry. And if she told herself that same thing for the next fifty years, she would still never truly believe it. Another tear escaped and trickled down her face.

Malik shifted her, reached inside his shirt and pulled out something. Zarina realized it was the mysterious something that had been digging into her side. He opened his fist in front of her. Her head spun and she bit her lip to keep from crying out. Her whole body shook and she wrapped her arms around herself to try to still the trembling. "You bought it." Perhaps it was a present to his mother or one of his sisters. Although it hurt to see it, it heartened her to think of someone in his family wearing it and cherishing it as much as she had.

"Yes. Of course I bought it."

She could hear the confusion in his voice, see it in his face when she finally got the courage to look at him. What more did he want from her? She wanted to draw her knees to her chest, curl up into a ball and cry until she had no more tears left. "Thank you." She pushed herself out of Malik's lap and began to walk away.

"Zarina?"

The hurt in his voice stopped her and she knew he needed something more from her. She'd bit her lip so hard to keep from crying out her pain that it was bleeding. She could taste her own blood in her mouth. "I hope that whoever you give it to cherishes it as much as I did. Thank you for not allowing it to fall into the hands of a stranger." Her voice broke. She had to get away. She stumbled blindly toward the woods.

Strong arms captured her from behind, halting her headlong flight into the dark. "I bought it for you, Zarina." He said the words over and over as he picked her up and carried her back to the fire.

She was so distraught that it took her awhile to comprehend his words. Her chest hurt, her eyes burned and her stomach roiled. But finally, his voice and the comfort of his body stilled some of the pain and she began to truly hear what he said. She sniffed and stared at him and at Kalis who was once again by her side. "Truly?" She could not comprehend such a thing. Only her parents had ever given her anything in her entire life.

"Truly." His smile was sad. "I'm just sorry you had to sell it and I beg forgiveness from you."

"There is nothing to forgive." She was at a loss for words at what he had done for her. For what they both had done. They'd fought for her, not once, but twice now. And more than that, they treated her with respect and care unlike anything she'd ever imagined.

She longed to tell them how much she loved them and how she wanted to spend the rest of her life with them both, but she held back. The words threatened to tumble from her lips, so she bit them again, letting the pain wash over her.

She could not say these words to them. Not until she knew for sure if she was the right woman to break the curse. She knew that they both cared deeply for her and if she told them that she loved them, they might feel honor bound to stay with her. They would not seek out the woman to break the curse and she could not live with herself if that were to happen.

Her love for them would remain a secret until the curse was broken. If it was broken.

"There is much to forgive, Zarina." Kalis stroked her bottom lip gently, soothing the sting of the cut.

"Then you are forgiven. Both of you." Malik and Kalis both relaxed and it was only then that she realized just how tense they'd been.

Kalis picked up the necklace where it lay by the fire and placed it around her neck. His fingertips stroked her nape as he fastened it. When he sat back, he was smiling. "It is back where it belongs."

She reached up and touched the familiar metal around her neck, her fingers tracing the stones, which were warm against her skin. Closing her eyes, she gathered her love for these two amazing men close to her heart. The heat from the two men and the fire warmed her body, but her love for them warmed her soul. Lulled by the warmth and comfort, she drifted off to sleep.

Kalis was watching Zarina and knew the moment that sleep claimed her. He stared at her for the longest time, trying to marshal his own thoughts and emotions into some semblance of order. The tattoo on his chest burned slightly and he opened his shirt and stared down at the familiar design. The dark red heart was pieced by three swords that all crossed in the center, the bloody tips protruded from the bottom, dripping down his skin. He traced the image with his fingertips. "I no longer care if she is the woman to break the curse." He turned, meeting his brother's fierce gaze.

Malik nodded decisively. "She is ours."

"I will not let her go, regardless of the outcome." Speaking the words that had haunted his mind and his heart these past weeks solidified his resolve. The curse no longer mattered. Only Zarina mattered and Kalis would do whatever it took to keep her

with him. If that meant he had to wander the world forever and remain cursed, so be it. The tattoo might be on his chest, but Zarina owned his heart.

Malik was rubbing the mark on his chest as well as he gazed down at Zarina. "She is ours."

Kalis knew they were in agreement. He knew his brother's thoughts as if they were his own. Malik would no sooner give her up than he would. Good! With the two of them united, nothing could separate them from the woman they loved.

Not even a sorceress's curse.

Chapter Fifteen

It was early afternoon five days later when Zarina caught her first glimpse of the village of Calla where Malik and Kalis had been born. It was very similar to the village she'd called home for almost all her life, but it was very different too.

Her people were nomadic, never settling anywhere for too long, living in harmony with their harsh surroundings. Always traveling, they moved with the seasons, settling in certain areas depending on the time of year and taking advantage of the oases and what little vegetation grew in the region. The desert spanned thousands of square miles and was inhospitable to those who did not know its ways or respect it. There were seven major desert tribes, as well as a smattering of smaller groups, that called the vast Talkos Desert home. Zarina had been born into the Danari tribe and her people had lived primarily along the vast eastern border of the desert.

Zarina's people lived in large tents, which could be dismantled and packed easily. Four times a year, they pulled up stakes and migrated to a different area of the desert and in less than a day the tents would be up, the animals penned and the entire settlement would look exactly the same. She would never be part of that cycle of life again. She blinked back her tears, determined to move forward and stop looking backward.

Still, people went about their daily business with children and animals running underfoot. Women called out to one another, chatting as they hung out their laundry to dry in the sun. Men honed their weapons and talked about battles or hunting. Life was similar no matter where one went.

But here, people built sturdy homes crafted out of wood and stone and settled, naming their communities. Some of the homes seemed to be partly made of some sort of clay or brick, different from the buildings in the town they'd just come from—sturdier somehow.

She found the idea of living in one place and never moving fascinating. In a way, that was what she was doing now that she'd settled into her cave. Would she stay there? And if she did, would she eventually build something more enduring?

That was the major difference. There was a feeling of permanence that surrounded the village, almost as if the forest around it had embraced it. How hard it must have been on Malik and Kalis to have to leave this all behind and to travel the land alone. It had been hard on her and she was very used to a nomadic style of life.

The past few days had passed in a peaceful haze. Upon awakening the morning after they'd left Ankaris, neither man had mentioned what had happened in the town. It was as if they were determined to put it behind them and enjoy the journey ahead. And in many ways, they had been the sweetest days of Zarina's life.

Strangely enough, although she slept between the two men each night, neither of them made any sexual advances toward her. She knew that they wanted her and were waiting for her to make the first move, but she was afraid to do so, afraid to reach out and take what she wanted for fear of becoming even more attached to them than she already was. The fear that she was about to lose them would not leave her. Now, as they got closer to the village deep in the western Jallak forest, she wondered if she hadn't been a fool. Perhaps she would have been better off taking as much as she could get, sharing herself with them, for whatever time remained to them.

But still, she couldn't bring herself to regret the past few days. Both men had been very attentive, sharing stories with her and pointing out all things of interest as they traveled. She'd spent equal time with each man, riding easily in front of them as if she'd been doing it her entire life. It was amazing how quickly she'd become accustomed to riding again.

She'd seen a side to the men that she hadn't seen before—a playfulness that came out when they stopped by a lake that first afternoon. Both men had swiftly dismounted and began to strip off their clothing. The sheer power and beauty of their bodies had struck Zarina anew as they dove into the cool water.

Kalis had surfaced first, raised his eyebrow at her and teasingly admonished, "What are you waiting for?"

As Malik had risen up from the watery depths, Zarina was sure that her first impression of them had been true. Perhaps they really were gods, toying with her for their amusement. Then Malik had dunked his brother's head below the water and yelled at her to join them.

She'd laughed at their antics as she'd hauled off her boots and stripped off her tunic and pants, discarding them on the grassy shore. She felt no awkwardness or self-consciousness being naked around them. She enjoyed looking at their bodies and hoped that they enjoyed hers as well. It felt natural and right to join them.

Taking her time, she'd carefully stepped into the water, but Kalis had had other ideas. When the water was finally to her waist, he'd snuck up behind her, picked her up by the waist and tossed her into the lake. She didn't panic until she began to sink and her feet could not find the bottom.

Zarina could not swim.

A strong arm had quickly yanked her to the surface. As she'd sputtered and gasped for breath, Malik had been berating his brother. Zarina had laughed and pushed Malik's head below the water. When he'd surfaced he was laughing once again.

They'd frolicked away an hour in the cool, inviting lake with both men taking pains to teach her how to swim. They'd been appalled that she didn't know how until she reminded them that she'd grown up in a desert. Water had been in short supply, lakes nonexistent.

The nights by the small fire they allowed themselves had been filled with relaxed conversation as both men continued to share stories from their travels. Hesitantly at

first, and then with greater ease, she had shared stories of her life among her own people. They were affectionate with her, but they did not pressure her sexually. Although many times she'd catch one or the other of them staring at her with lust blazing in his eyes, and there was no denying the large erections that neither man tried to hide from her.

As the horses carried them lower into the valley, Zarina began to sweat. What would these people think of her? How would they treat her? She shrugged off her concerns. No matter what they thought, she was here only for Malik and Kalis.

Kalis tightened his arms around her as he lowered his head and kissed her temple. "Do not worry so, Zarina. All will be well."

"Will I be expected to sleep away from you and Malik?" Although the village elders knew that people slept together outside the bonds of a formal joining, many frowned on them doing so in an open manner. Zarina hated the thought of being in a strange village with people she did not know. This could be her last night with her men and she wanted to spend it in their arms. She'd been a fool not to take advantage of her time on the journey here, but she would be a fool no longer.

Kalis laid his chin on top of her head, and as he shook his head, his chin brushed her hair. "No, Zarina. Your place is with us."

Satisfied now that no matter what happened, she would have her time with them, she straightened her shoulders and pasted a serene expression on her face. She was a warrior and she was ready.

As they broke through the line of trees that surrounded the village, a shout went up. Someone had seen the strangers approaching and the men were coming to investigate. Neither Malik nor Kalis slowed their mounts, but kept an even pace, moving steadily forward.

"Halt, strangers. What business have you here?" An older man stepped out in front of the others. His long dark brown hair was streaked with gray, but his stance was straight and his body muscular.

Malik reined in his horse. "Your eyes are not what they used to be, old man." A smile broke across his face. "You do not recognize your own nephews, Uncle."

The man looked from Malik to Kalis and back again and then fell to his knees in the dirt. "Praise the gods you are home."

Malik swiftly dismounted and strode toward the man, lifting him to his feet and enveloping him in a huge bear hug. Kalis helped her down from the horse and then slid off after her. Handing her the reins, he walked forward, more hesitant than Malik had been.

The crowd was growing larger as word spread like wildfire through the village. The lost sons were home. Zarina leaned against the horse, rubbing her hand against its flanks, drawing comfort from its presence. Once again, she felt as if she were the odd man out, not really belonging. But then, she had never truly belonged anywhere.

A woman's cry pierced the air and the crowd parted as she stumbled forward. Kalis caught her before she fell, his strong arms pulling the smaller woman close to his heart as he buried his face against her shoulder. The woman was laughing and crying as she ran her hands over his head and shoulders as if trying to reassure herself that he was real. "My babies," she cried over and over again.

This was their mother, Zarina realized as Malik released his uncle and reached out toward the woman. "Mother." His voice was hoarse with unshed tears as she gasped and wrapped her arm around him, hugging both sons at once.

"You're home. Praise the gods, my prayers have been answered!" She pulled back as Kalis lowered her feet back to the ground. "Or have they?" Her gaze flew toward Zarina, who huddled closer to the horse. "Is she the one?"

"She is the one." Kalis and Malik spoke as one, their voices melding easily.

"Where are they?" A loud voice boomed over the din of the crowd. Everyone grew silent as a large man strode forward. Zarina's eyes widened. There was no doubt who this man was. Malik and Kalis both resembled their father greatly. It was like looking at them some twenty years from now, except even now the sons were harder and tougher than the father because of the curse they bore. Still, from the lines etched deep around his eyes, there was no doubt that he too had suffered.

The woman stepped back, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. The man's eyes widened with disbelief and his steps faltered. He swallowed hard as tears flowed unashamedly down his cheeks. "My sons." Opening his arms wide, he welcomed them home.

Kalis and Malik stepped forward and allowed themselves to be swallowed by their father's embrace. Zarina swiped at the tears in her own eyes. It was good that she'd come with them. Whether they knew it or not, both men needed their family.

Zarina watched the happy reunion as two young women and a young man raced forward to greet the brothers. From all they'd told her, she assumed that these were their younger siblings. They kept touching Malik and Kalis as if afraid that they weren't really there. She noted that their mother couldn't seem to stop crying and it broke Zarina's heart to think of how this woman had suffered over the years. No matter the outcome, she was glad she'd brought her men back to their home.

"Where is she?" Zarina already recognized the large, booming voice of their father. He turned toward the horses and pinned her with an icy stare. She stepped away from the horse, widened her stance and unconsciously placed her hand on her sword hilt. The older man's expression didn't change as he stalked toward her. "Are you the one who can break the curse?"

Zarina would not lie. "I do not think so, but your sons think differently."

His eyes widened and he challenged her. "Then why are you here?"

Her own eyes narrowed as she glared at the man. "Because your sons will not leave me to search for the right woman until it is proven otherwise."

"Stubborn whelps," the man muttered.

"They are," she responded easily. Malik and Kalis flanked her, facing their father, aligning themselves with her. She could see the older woman glancing uneasily at her sons and husband, the happiness fading from her face, and Zarina wanted to smack them all for upsetting the woman.

"Why do you believe you are not the right woman?" His tone had softened slightly, but there was still a hard edge to it. Zarina did not blame the man. He was only trying to protect his sons. Her own father would have done the same for her. It made her respect the man more than if he'd accepted her unconditionally.

Zarina held out her arms at her sides. "Look at me." She knew that her clothes were worn and dirty after days on the trail. She was dressed in pants and a tunic with her sword at her waist and her dagger strapped to her thigh. Tall and muscular, her skin was tanned a golden brown and her long hair was drawn back in a braid. Her face was strong but not beautiful, and fine lines radiated from the corners of her brown eyes, a testament to her years of squinting against the hot desert sun. "Would you have chosen me for your sons?"

He seemed taken aback by her words and studied her carefully. Zarina struggled not to squirm beneath his perusal as she waited for his denouncement of her.

"I believe I would," he replied softly as a smile broke across his face. "Especially since they have obviously chosen you for themselves." It made him look younger, less stern and so much like her men that he made her heart ache. Reaching out, he touched her cheek with his hand. "Thank you for bringing my sons home to me."

Zarina gave a perfunctory nod. She could not allow herself to be drawn in by the kindness of these people. She knew it would change the moment they discovered that she was not the right woman.

Malik broke the silence, wrapping his arm around her shoulders and tucking her beneath his arm. "This is Zarina, from the Danari tribe of the Talkos desert." He looked down at her and she could see the happiness in his eyes. "May I present our family? As you probably already guessed, this is our father Talon." Zarina nodded to acknowledge the introduction.

The older woman stepped forward and held out her hand. "I am their mother Rebatta, my dear. I cannot thank you enough for what you have done."

"I have done nothing." She realized how sharp her reply had been and added, "But I am pleased to meet you."

The three younger people crowded around them and Rebatta continued the introductions. "And these are my other children. My son Vernan and my daughters Alita and Yasamine."

Kalis reached out and touched his sisters' faces, stroking their cheeks lovingly. "You are both so beautiful." They threw themselves into his arms and he hugged them tight. Looking over their heads, he eyed his younger brother. "You must have your hands full keeping them out of trouble." Vernan laughed and allowed himself to be hauled into his brother's embrace.

Zarina could feel Malik's hesitation. "Go to them," she whispered. She sensed his indecision as he weighed his desire to protect her against his need to reunite with his siblings. She stepped away from him and gave him a small shove toward them. "Go."

The introductions came so quickly after the initial reunion between the family that Zarina did not even bother trying to remember names. Everyone in the village wanted to meet her. It was uncomfortable to be the center of attention, especially since she knew that she was bound to disappoint them when the curse still existed in the morning, but she bore it as best she could for Malik's and Kalis' sake.

Quickly, the day became a celebration. Women began to cook food as children played beside them, excited by the arrival of the strangers. Men gathered in a large open area, roughly near the center of the village. They sat around a fire, talking and drinking, toasting the return of the lost sons of Talon.

Zarina felt utterly alone in the midst of the crowd. She fit neither with the women nor the men, so she sat on the fringes of the group, watching and listening. Sitting cross-legged, she propped her elbows on her knees and rested her chin on her hands and just enjoyed watching Malik and Kalis as they reunited with their family and friends. She smiled when they laughed, nodding whenever they glanced her way.

"You care greatly for them."

Zarina had known that this was coming, but she'd hoped to avoid it if possible. Sighing, she sat up straight and turned to the woman settling next to her. "Yes, I do."

She was surprised when Rebatta offered her a smile and a cup full of sweet-smelling cider. Settling down beside Zarina, she sipped from her own cup. "Both my sons care for you as well. You are never far from their sight."

"They care for me, but they also believe I am the woman to break the curse." Zarina sipped her drink as she picked at a hole near the ankle of her pants with her other hand. This woman made her more nervous than any of the men.

Rebatta shook her head. "It is more than that, child." She cocked her head and stared at Zarina, who shook her head in denial. "Why do you deny it?"

This woman deserved her truth and her respect and she gave her both. "Because I am a warrior and know little about being a woman. I am outcast from my own tribe because of it. I have nothing. I am nobody." It hurt Zarina to lay herself bare like this, but she did not flinch from the other woman's thoughtful gaze.

"You are not nobody, Zarina. You are the woman whom my sons love." Rebatta's voice was brisk now. "You are the woman who brought my sons home to me. And you are the woman who is willing to try to break the curse. I can ask for no better woman for my sons than that."

Zarina gritted her teeth, locking her jaw to hold back the emotions churning inside her. This woman was offering her an acceptance the likes of which she'd never experienced, but she could not bring herself to embrace it. If the curse was not broken, Zarina would be an outcast again, and to accept the older woman's kindness now would make it all the harder when she turned against her.

"I will be leaving in the morning." Zarina didn't mean to be cruel, but Rebatta flinched.

Sighing, the older woman gained her feet and then cast Zarina a look filled with pity and understanding. "Whether you leave or not, I still thank you for your care of my sons and for bringing them home to me. Even if they must leave again, I have seen them with my two eyes and held them in my arms. They would not have returned home if not for you. I will always be in your debt."

As Rebatta walked away, Zarina wanted to call her back and bask in the other woman's kindness. She wanted to ask her a hundred questions about her sons and what they were like as children. But she did not. Instead, she curled her legs up to her chest, wrapped her arms around her legs and prayed for this day to end.

By the time the sun had sunk behind the horizon and the stars and moon were bright in the sky, the mood was less jovial and growing tenser as each moment passed. They had feasted and danced the afternoon and early evening away.

Zarina had even taken the opportunity to have a bath. Rebatta had returned just before sunset and had taken her to a small building that was little more than a sleeping area. A large enclosed bed sat along one wall and a fireplace sat on the wall opposite it. A table had been shoved to one side and in the center of the room had been a large tub filled with steaming hot water.

It looked heavenly and Zarina had taken the opportunity to wash the trail dust from her hair and body before redressing in her one set of clean clothing from her pack. Rebatta had even put some kind of herb in the water and now Zarina's skin and hair smelled fresh and inviting, almost like the flowers in an early morning dew. She had to stop herself from sniffing her skin.

When she'd returned to the gathering, she could tell that both men had bathed as well. But unlike her, they were dressed in brand new clothing, obviously provided by their family. The pants and shirts they wore were made of heavy woven fabric that had been dyed a dark brown.

Zarina wanted to examine the cloth more carefully. Her own people wore leathers and clothing sewn from fabric that was woven from the fibers of plants that grew on the Great Plains of Yamantu, beyond the southernmost tip of the desert. It made lightweight, comfortable clothing that protected a body from the summer sun, but was cool. Many a days, Zarina had missed her clothing made from the light, airy cloth. This fabric, however, looked tougher and more durable.

The men strolled over to her side, but she encouraged them to spend time with their family and friends. She was very much afraid that they would have to leave again in the morning before the curse began to affect the people of the village.

Zarina wasn't sure what she or the villagers had been expecting, but nothing out of the ordinary had happened and the tattoo was still prominently displayed on both men's chests. Nothing had changed. The curse was still there.

The night was growing late and already many of the villagers had said their good nights and headed to their own homes to tuck their children in bed. Their welcoming smiles now turned to unease as they wondered what the morning would bring.

Zarina sighed as she watched Talon and Rebatta wish their sons a good night. She could see the longing in both their eyes, along with the worry. Zarina wished she had the power to break the curse. Looking up at the stars, she wondered about the sorceress who cast it. How unfair to curse future generations for what one man had done. Better she'd have smote the one man where he'd stood and been done with it.

The hair on the back of her neck raised and Zarina sprang to her feet, ready to fight. But there was no one there. The night grew silent and she could swear she heard the mocking sound of a woman's laughter. But surely that was a trick of the wind. Sweat broke out on her brow in spite of the coolness of the night air.

"Where are you?" Zarina muttered as she scanned the darkness beyond the buildings. "Who are you?"

"Zarina." She spun around at the sound of her name being spoken, already knowing that this person was no threat. Kalis watched her with a solemn, concerned gaze. "Will you sleep with us tonight?"

There was no thought of denial. This could be her last night with them and she wanted them both. A fire began to burn low in her belly as she held out her hand to him. "Yes."

His eyes widened and a slow, sensual smile crossed his face as he understood exactly what she meant. She stepped closer to him, running her free hand up his chest, feeling the muscles jump beneath her palm. "I want you and I want Malik. Then I want you both." She wanted no doubt in his mind.

His smile widened and his worry seemed to slip away from him. Good. She could give them this gift, if only for one night. It gave her great pleasure to know that she could take their concerns from their broad shoulders and that they could find comfort in her body.

"Come." He scooped her up into his arms and walked away from the fire and the remaining people. "Malik is waiting for us."

Zarina rested her head against his shoulder, absorbing his heat and his care as he carried her toward her destiny.

Chapter Sixteen

Kalis carried her back to the familiar building where she'd had her bath earlier in the evening. He easily elbowed his way through the door and kicked it shut with his booted foot. The large tub was gone, giving more space to the small area. A cheerful blaze crackled merrily in the fireplace, lending both light and warmth to the room.

He stopped in front of the fireplace and slowly lowered her legs to the floor. The firelight danced across his face, illuminating the harsh planes of his cheeks and jaw. Lust filled his pale blue eyes, but she saw tenderness there as well. His large, rough hands cupped her face as he bent toward her.

She stood on her toes, meeting him halfway. Their lips met, barely touching, but it struck Zarina like a lightning bolt. *Last time.* The words echoed in her mind, lending her a sense of urgency, but she fought it back. They had all night and she planned to make the most of it.

Stepping back, she pulled off her boots and laid them aside. Kalis never took his eyes from her, but she could see the rapid rise and fall of his chest and knew he was very aroused. She grabbed the end of her braid and untied the leather thong, dropping it on top of her boots. Then she began to slowly unwind her hair until it was left free and flowing down her shoulder all the way to her waist.

"Zarina," he whispered.

"Shh. I'm not done yet." Gripping the bottom of her tunic, she tugged it upward, hauling it up over her head and discarding it carelessly behind her. Her breasts felt heavy and her nipples tight. Kalis' gaze was drawn to them, so she cupped them in her hands, moaning as she stroked her thumbs across the hardened tips.

A rustling noise from the confines of the bed caught her attention. Malik emerged from its darkened depths, totally naked. His cock was hard and thick and she licked her lips in anticipation. She held out her hand. "Come."

His eyes blazed as he sauntered toward her. He wrapped his hand around his erection and stroked it as he came to stand next to his brother.

Zarina shivered with delight. These two magnificent men were hers. At least for tonight. As she watched them, Kalis ripped off his shirt and threw it aside. His pants and boots followed quickly and then they were both naked. Their hard bodies gleamed, their bronzed-colored flesh glowing in the firelight. They both stood with their hands clenched by their sides, carbon copies of one another, yet to her, so very different.

They both wore their hair free and the dark brown locks brushed their shoulders. Their necks and shoulders were thick, corded with muscles. Their biceps were huge,

their chests impossibly wide and their stomachs rippled. With their stance wide, it emphasized the strength of their thighs and calves.

Simply put, they were perfect. And they were waiting.

Her fingers shook with need as she untied the front closure of her pants. But finally the ties parted and she pushed the fabric down her hips and thighs. She stepped out of them and kicked them aside with her foot. Naked and proud, she stood before them.

Slowly, she turned in a circle, holding her arms out by her sides, hiding nothing from them. "Tonight, I am yours and you are mine." Kalis started to speak, but she held up her hand to stop him. "No, the morning will come quick enough and we shall deal with it then. But for tonight there is nothing else in the world but us."

Taking the two steps to bring her in front of the brothers, she leaned forward and kissed the tattoo on Malik's chest and then the one on Kalis'. The marking felt warm against her lips and she could feel the beating of their hearts beneath the one tattooed on their flesh. She examined the markings closely when she raised her head, searching for any changes. But they were the same.

Swallowing her disappointment, she placed a hand over each marking. Part of her had hoped that she was the right woman. How she longed to break the curse and free them! But if that was not meant to be, she would offer them the comfort of her body, showering them freely in her love.

Sliding her hands over their abdomens, she could feel their muscles jump as she continued downward. Her fingers grazed the hardness of their erections as she moved even lower, cupping the soft sacs between their thighs. Both men moaned as she carefully massaged them, weighing the heaviness in her palms.

Fingers tangled in her hair, tipping her head upward. She caught a glimpse of fierce need on Kalis' face before his lips claimed hers. This was no gentle kiss, but a mating of tongues as he thrust his inside her mouth. Her fingers tightened around their scrotums and both men gasped. Kalis released her lips and tipped his head back. She watched, fascinated as he regained control of himself.

"Zarina," Malik growled, bringing her attention back to him.

She gave them both one final squeeze before going to her knees in front of Malik. The floor was hard and rough against her knees, but she didn't mind. Leaning forward, she nuzzled her nose against the crisp hair at the base of his erection. She could smell the scent of a spicy soap, but underlying it was the warm, rich scent that was uniquely his.

She kissed her way up his hard length, allowing her tongue to follow the blue vein that pulsed within. Her tongue swirled around the head, tasting his salty essence that leaked from the tip. She withdrew her tongue, enjoying his flavor.

Leaving Malik, she shifted toward Kalis. The head of his cock was darker and she slipped it into her mouth, sucking hard. His fingers gripped her hair as his hips pushed forward. Zarina took him deeper, grazing his sensitive flesh with her teeth.

Reaching out blindly, she captured Malik's erection in her hand and began to stroke him as she continued to pleasure Kalis with her mouth. A log dropped in the grate behind her and she could hear the hiss of the fire as it surged higher. Both men were sucking in air, their breathing labored.

Dropping her hand from Malik, she concentrated totally on Kalis. Her fingers caressed his scrotum and stroked his length. He held her head tight and began to thrust himself harder and deeper. She could feel the tension growing within him and knew he was close. She sucked harder on the tip, and his sac drew up tight to his body. He gave a shout as his hips bucked wildly. Hot cum spewed into her mouth as she continued to lick and stroke him until he was spent.

Sitting back, she swallowed. Then she turned her attention to Malik. He growled with pleasure as she slipped her mouth over the straining head of his cock. Her fingers stroked him and she knew he was almost ready to explode. Pushing her fingers behind his sac, she found the sensitive piece of flesh between it and his anus. She stroked it as she licked at the tip of his erection.

Malik's fingers tangled in her hair. She could feel Kalis kneeling behind her, his body crowding close to her. He placed his hands on the side of her head and helped guide her mouth over his brother's cock. "Suck his cock hard, Zarina. Just as you sucked mine."

Her cunt felt empty and needy as she arched her hips. Pleasuring her men was driving the heat down to her own core. She'd been so focused on both men, she'd all but ignored her own body. But Kalis' words had broken that spell. She breathed deep through her nose, trying to suck in enough breath. Her chest was rising and falling rapidly as Malik tightened his grip and began to fuck her mouth faster.

Zarina reveled in the feel of Kalis' hard body behind her and Malik's in front of her. She allowed the men to guide her head, taking Malik as deep into her throat as she could. She felt suspended, almost weightless as her head rocked back and forth between them.

She sucked strongly, stroking his length with every thrust. Malik came hard and fast, emptying himself down her throat. She choked and coughed but continued to swallow, wanting to take his essence into her as she had with Kalis. His yell of completion thrilled her and her inner muscles clenched in response.

When he finally withdrew his semi-erect cock from her mouth, Zarina laid her hands on the floor for support and took several deep breaths. Kalis pulled her back against him, wrapping his arms around her and cupping her breasts in his hands. "I love your sweet mouth, Zarina." He whispered the words into her ear. "But I still want your hot cunt and your tight ass. They belong to us, as you belong to us."

Malik knelt in front of her. "You do belong to us." He echoed his brother's words as he lowered his head toward her breast. As Kalis cupped her breast in his hand, Malik stroked the tip with his tongue. Zarina was sweating now. The heat surrounding her

and burning inside her was incredible. She moaned as Malik bit down gently on her nipple.

He placed his knees inside of hers and pushed them open, spreading her legs wide. He took his mouth from her breast and she cried out at the loss. But Kalis captured her nipples between his fingers and tugged gently on them. Malik stroked his hand down her belly until he was cupping her mound. His fingers threaded through her pubic hair and he drove two fingers straight into her core. She was so wet, she knew his fingers were soaked. Her pussy clenched. Thought was beyond her.

"Your cunt is ours to pleasure and enjoy." Malik's words were hard as he pulled his fingers out and pushed them farther back, massaging the tight, puckered muscles of her anus. "This belongs to us as well. Will you let us have you, Zarina?"

Her gaze was unfocused as she stared at Malik. In spite of all his claims of possession, he was still waiting for her consent. She wanted them as badly as they wanted her. Still, she was concerned. Both men were so large.

Her hesitation must have shown in her eyes, for Malik's expression changed, softening as he withdrew his fingers from between her legs. He cupped her face in his hands. "We would never hurt you, Zarina. We will take the utmost care with you." He leaned forward until his forehead was touching hers. "Your pleasure is our pleasure. You can say no at any time."

Kalis' touch on her breasts had become lighter and softer until he was simply holding her with his hands. It was such a simple thing—Malik's words and Kalis' touch—but they opened the floodgates within her and all the love that she'd tried so hard to contain flooded her at once.

These men cared deeply for her, perhaps even loved her a little. She knew for sure that she loved them both in a way that she would never love another. Better to have had it all and lost it than never experienced and tasted their lovemaking to the fullest.

She loved them and trusted them. "Yes." She'd spoken before she'd really thought to do so. Her instincts were telling her that this was right and she would trust herself as she trusted them.

"You will not regret this." Malik came to his feet and offered her his hand.

She took it and allowed him to pull her to her feet. "I know," she offered softly. With Kalis leading the way, she walked toward the bed.

Kalis hardly dared to breathe as he helped Zarina onto the large platform bed. Enclosed on three sides, the only opening was covered with a heavy curtain that had been pushed back to allow the heat and the light from the fire to penetrate its depths. As she knelt up onto the thick mattress, he caught a whiff of her arousal. His cock, already partly erect again, sprang to life, lengthening and thickening.

He climbed onto the bed behind her, turning her so that she was facing him, her back to Malik. The firelight cast shadows across her face, but he could still make out her features. He clasped her face in his hands, brushing his thumbs across her cheekbones.

Her golden-brown eyes were solemn as he traced the length of her straight nose, the lush fullness of her lips and the curve of her stubborn jaw. Every inch of her face was precious to him. A lock of her long, dark brown hair fell over her shoulder, landing in her lap. He adored her long hair. It was such a feminine contrast to her otherwise tough exterior.

Her body was pure pleasure. Her torso was long and lean, her arms and legs strong and well-muscled. Her waist dipped inward and her hips flared, inviting a man to grasp them as he thrust into her waiting heat. Her ass and her breasts were full and, as he and Malik had both learned, very sensitive to touch. "You will belong to us now and forever."

She shook her head. "For tonight. Who knows what the morning will bring?"

Malik reached around her, tipping her head back onto his shoulder. Zarina's gaze flew upward just as Malik's head swooped downward. "Now and forever," he growled as he claimed her lips.

Kalis could understand his brother's frustration, but it would do no good to frighten Zarina before they had claimed her. He reached out and gently touched his brother's shoulder. Malik continued to kiss Zarina, his lips and tongue reclaiming familiar territory, but his eyes snapped open, blazing with lust and possession.

Kalis did not remove his hand but glanced at Zarina and back at his brother, shaking his head in warning. He could see Malik fighting with himself, his need to lay claim warring with his need to be gentle. His brother's body shuddered and he slowly pulled away from Zarina. Kalis nodded and sat back.

They had to give Zarina so much pleasure that she would never want to leave them. Right now, she was still staring up at Malik with a dazed look on her face. "Let us pleasure you." Malik didn't wait for her to answer but leaned back against the pillows at the head of the bed and drew her with him. He settled her back against his chest with her head resting against his shoulder. His hands slid up her flat stomach and covered her breasts. Hooking her long legs over top of his, he then spread his own legs wide, parting her thighs for Kalis.

Kalis moved between their spread legs and ran his hands up the tops of her thighs. He could feel the goose bumps on her flesh. She shifted slightly and tilted her hips upward in invitation. He wished there were more light so he could see the succulent, pink lips of her labia better. Once again, her sweet scent assaulted his nostrils and his entire body tightened in response. This was *his* woman.

Her moan of pleasure was loud in the quiet room. Kalis' head snapped up in time to see Malik claim her mouth once again, smothering her cries of pleasure with his lips. For the first time in his life, he felt a twinge of jealousy. His brother's hands were wrapped around her breasts as his fingers pulled gently on her puckered nipples.

As if sensing Kalis' unstable emotions, Malik opened his eyes and looked straight at him. His fingers stilled and he removed one of them, plumping her breast in his palm,

inviting Kalis to taste. Kalis felt his emotions settle once again. This was right. Malik was more than his brother, more than just his twin. Malik was the other half of himself.

Supporting his weight on his hands, Kalis leaned forward and captured one of her turgid nipples with his lips, stroking it with his tongue. Zarina tipped her head back and cried out.

Malik leaned down and whispered in her ear. "Look at us, Zarina. I am holding your breast while Kalis is touching it, tasting it. This is the way it can be for always. The way it should be."

Kalis didn't want to give her a chance to voice her denial again. He wanted more than just tonight with her. He didn't bother to look up to see if she was watching as Malik had commanded. Instead, he bit down carefully on her nipple, pleased when he felt her fingers tangle in his hair, holding him close.

Balancing his weight on one hand, he moved the other between her thighs. He stroked his fingers over her wet folds, reveling in her gasp that trailed off into another moan. Liquid flowed from her core, coating his hands and running down between the cheeks of her ass. He stroked her clit with his thumb while he flicked her nipple with his tongue. He could feel her trying to move, but Malik held her tight in his arms.

Kalis sat back and licked his lips. Malik immediately covered her wet nipple with his fingers, once again toying with both her breasts. Moving down between her thighs, Kalis spread her wide with his fingers. He blew softly on her skin and then licked up one side and down the other, enjoying her whimpers of pleasure.

"Please," she moaned, jerking her hips upward, trying to bring his mouth where she wanted it most.

Kalis stroked his tongue over her swollen clitoris. Zarina cried out, pumping her hips frantically. Holding her open with one hand, he shoved two long fingers into her cunt and spread them wide. Her inner muscles spasmed. As he slowly pulled them out, he rubbed the top of her sheath.

"Kalis," she pleaded, grabbing his hair with one of her hands and yanking him close. He laughed, enjoying the slight sting on his scalp. He turned his gaze upward and laughed even more when he saw that she'd grabbed his brother by the hair as well and was kissing him frantically. By the gods, she was hot, lost in the heat of the moment.

He wanted her to come now. His cock was throbbing nonstop and his balls ached for release. Pushing three fingers into her core, he sucked hard on her clit. Her muffled cries got louder and her inner muscles clamped down hard as she came. Her legs shook as she arched against him and liquid gushed from her. Malik groaned and Kalis realized that every time she arched her hips toward him, her back was pressed against Malik's erection.

The sound of harsh breathing and low moans permeated the air. Zarina sucked in a deep breath as he removed his fingers and mouth from her body. He leaned forward until his cock was pressed against her wet folds and he rubbed his length over her,

coating himself in her cream. Kalis finally sat back and swiped a hand over his mouth, wiping the wetness from his face. At the same time, he licked his lips, savoring her taste.

A light sheen of sweat covered her body as she lay sprawled in his brother's arms. Long strands of her hair were stuck to her body. Kalis leaned down and licked her stomach, stopping to nip at her hipbones.

Zarina laughed. "Tickles."

Kalis smiled, loving the sound of her laughter. She looked sleepy and sated, but they weren't anywhere near done yet. Gripping her hands in his, he pulled her up into a seated position and then into his arms. She slumped against his chest and he could feel her heart beating against him.

Malik settled himself flat on his back and waited while Kalis pushed her hair out of Zarina's face, placing a soft kiss on her damp lips. "We're not done yet."

Her eyes flew open and she seemed surprised. He took her hand and wrapped it around his erection. It was his turn to bite back a groan when her fingers tightened around his girth. "It's time for us to claim you," he managed to get out between his clenched teeth.

He removed her hand and turned her easily so that she was facing away from him, her legs spread and her knees resting on the mattress on either side of Malik. His brother gripped Zarina's hips, maneuvering her until his cock was poised at her moist opening. As Kalis watched, Zarina lowered herself onto Malik, taking his length into her body.

"Lean forward," Malik encouraged, using his hands to bring her forward so that she was lying on his chest with him buried deep inside her.

It was his turn now. Knowing he had to take his time, Kalis stroked his finger over the tight, puckered hole of her ass. It was wet, coated with her own juices that had slid between her legs when she'd found her release. Satisfied, he spread the cheeks of her behind wide with his hands, arching her up slightly toward him.

His cock was covered in her cream and he probed her behind, carefully inserting the tip, pushing past the resistance of the muscles. Zarina's entire body tensed, anticipating discomfort. "Relax," he crooned, leaning down and dropping hot, open-mouthed kisses down her spine.

"I'm trying."

"I know you are, little warrior," he soothed her. Taking his time, he began to rock slowly back and forth, almost imperceptibly. With each forward motion, he pushed a little farther into Zarina. Sweat rolled down his back and chest as he forced himself to go slowly. He gritted his teeth at the incredible pleasure that filled him as the muscles of her behind relaxed slightly, admitting more of him on each stroke. It was incredibly erotic and arousing to watch his erection disappear within her inch by inch.

He could hear his brother murmuring to Zarina as he ran his hands up and down her back to relax her. But Kalis couldn't hear the words above the pounding of his own

heart or the roar of his blood pumping through his veins. He could feel her trying to relax, wanting to take him into her, and he thought his heart might burst with joy.

Finally, after what seemed like hours but was probably only minutes, his cock was buried in her ass. Her muscles clenched and unclenched around him. He'd never been squeezed so tight before and knew he'd only last a single stoke or two at most. His balls were drawn tight to his body and his erection was throbbing in rhythm to Zarina's body. Through the thin membrane separating them, he could feel Malik's cock pulsing frantically in Zarina's cunt.

She had taken the two of them.

The marking over his heart burned as he wrapped his hands around her hips and glanced at Malik. His brother nodded back at him. They were both ready. Malik gripped Zarina and eased her forward. Both of their cocks began to slide out of her body. When they were about halfway out, Kalis slowly pulled her back toward him, pushing their erections into her.

Zarina moaned and braced her knees, trying to move with them. Her inner muscles were tight around him, milking his cock, encouraging him to spill his seed within her. He felt Malik urging her forward again and gasped as her body reluctantly let him go. Then he drew her back again, surging carefully back into her ass.

Both men strained for release. A log snapped in the fireplace, sending up a shower of sparks as Kalis filled her ass one final time. He tilted back his head and let out a roar of pleasure as his cock exploded, spewing his hot cum deep within her. His hips jerked as he came and he heard his brother's yell of pleasure, could feel him jerking within Zarina.

Kalis slumped forward, resting his head on Zarina's back, but let out another cry as her body clenched hard and began to spasm. Her cry mingled with his and he knew that she'd found release again. Raw satisfaction filled him that she'd come with both of them fucking her. It made him want to do it all over again.

But common sense and his care for her prevailed. Still panting for breath, he raised himself and slowly began to pull back. His cock was only semi-erect now, and that made it easier to slip from her body. She tensed but did not cry out even though he knew that she had to be sore. He lay down next to them, trying to still the pounding of his heart.

Malik rolled to his side with Zarina still tucked in his arms and then carefully slid himself from within her. She sighed with relief, her eyes closed and her breathing harsh. None of them spoke as Kalis eased himself closer, turned on his side and threw his arm over her hip.

Zarina dared not open her eyes, afraid that she'd burst into tears. Even now, her behind was burning and raw. But the pleasure had far outweighed the pain. It had been hard to take Kalis in that way—he was so big and wide and stretched her unbelievably.

But she'd been determined, wanting to experience what it was like to have them both within her, taking her at the same time.

Yes, it had been painful, but in the end, pain had been forgotten and she'd been overcome with the pleasure of being filled by them both. Their cocks had felt huge as they'd forged their way into her body, filling her cunt and her ass.

A shiver racked her body and two pairs of strong arms tightened around her. She felt a light kiss on her forehead and sighed. Her heart was settling back to its normal rhythm, but still it hurt. She fought the urge to rub it with her hand, to try to ease the ache. She loved both men deeply and completely, but she was realistic enough to know what the morning would bring. The markings were still above each man's heart. Nothing had changed. The curse was still there.

A single tear slipped from her eye, spilling down her face to the pillow below. And although she wanted to turn her head into the pillow and cry and rage at fate for what was going to happen, she did not.

Keeping her breathing even, she snuggled between Kalis and Malik, absorbing every moment of being in their arms. Tomorrow would come soon enough.

Zarina didn't know how long she lay there before she fell asleep. But all too soon, both men were stirring and although she wanted to stop time from moving forward, she knew that the morning had come.

Chapter Seventeen

A small crowd had already gathered at the center of the village by the time the three of them arrived. Yesterday's site of feasting and laughter was now a somber place. Zarina wanted to run back to the small wooden dwelling and climb back into the huge bed where she'd awoken this morning. Last night had been an experience she'd remember for the rest of her days. The feeling of giving and receiving pleasure with the two men that she loved was overwhelming and incredible.

This morning was the end of her time with them. Nothing had changed overnight. The markings on their chests had not disappeared, but were as prominent as ever. The curse had not been broken.

Zarina hung back, fiddling with the sack on her shoulder, checking to make sure her sword was secure and testing the ties of her knife sheath where it was strapped around her thigh as Kalis and Malik strode forward to greet their family. Their father and brother looked grim, their mother appeared as if she were about to burst into tears and both sisters were crying unashamedly. It made her heart hurt to watch them hug one another, not knowing when or if they'd ever see each other again.

"Zarina." Rebatta waved her over and she reluctantly went, all but dragging her feet in the dirt. The older woman took a package from her youngest son and held it outstretched in her hands. "I wanted to thank you for bringing my sons home to me, if only for a visit."

She stared at the package in confusion. Shouldn't the other woman be yelling at her and cursing her for not being able to break the curse? "Take it," Rebatta encouraged.

Zarina laid her sack by her feet and wiped her suddenly moist hands on her pants before reaching out and accepting the package. She tugged off the leather binding holding the bundle together and as she began to unfold the leather, she realized it was a garment. Shaking it out in front of her, she could only stare in shock.

"They should fit you." Rebatta stood next to her, watching her reaction.

Zarina could only stare at the perfect new pair of leather pants that she held in her hands. The leather was dark brown and oh-so soft and supple. She wanted to rub her cheek against the beautiful fabric. But when she'd shaken out the pants, she'd realized that there was more than one garment in the bundle. Tossing the pants over her shoulder, she took a closer look at the other piece—a lovely tunic in the same leather. Beads of various colors had been used to decorate the front of it.

Zarina closed her eyes and swallowed hard to keep herself from embarrassing herself by breaking down and crying like a baby. She'd never owned a piece of clothing so fine before. She blinked as she opened her eyes and met the older woman's gaze.

"Thank you," she offered, her voice husky with emotion. "But why? I don't understand."

Rebatta smiled sadly. "Because you brought my sons home to me and for that I will always be in your debt. Although you believed you were not the woman to break the curse, for love of my sons, you came all this way because they asked it of you."

Zarina squirmed under the woman's knowing stare. She knew that Malik and Kalis and the rest of the family were watching them and wished that Rebatta hadn't used the word *love*. She didn't deny or confirm the words, but simply nodded.

Seeing her discomfort, Rebatta changed the subject. "The girls and I worked all last night to finish it." She motioned to Alita and Yasamine and both young women stepped forward, smiling bravely through their tears. "I got the measurements off your dirty clothing while you were bathing yesterday."

"Thank you for that as well." Zarina had found her own clothing drying on pegs in the room when she'd risen this morning. She hadn't noticed them in the dark last night. But they'd been clean and dry and ready for her to pack away for the trip.

"You're welcome. It's the least we could do for you."

Zarina bit her tongue. No, the least they could do would be to beat her and throw her out of their village. After all, her own people had done it to her and these were but strangers.

As if sensing her discomfort, both Malik and Kalis came to stand beside her. She bent down, picked up her sack and carefully stored her new clothing inside. She would always cherish the kindness of these people.

Talon stepped forward and Zarina found it hard to meet his stern stare. He, more than the rest, would have cause to resent her. These were his eldest sons and she had failed to bring them home to him for good. His large hand came toward her and she steeled herself to keep from flinching. But instead of the back of his hand against her face, as she'd half expected, he cupped her jaw, leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. "Thank you, Zarina," he said as he stepped back, dropping his hand by his side. "You are welcome here always for what you have done."

Zarina felt like a fraud. "But I have done nothing."

His smile was so sad it made her eyes well up yet again. "You have done all that my sons asked of you and more. And that is not nothing."

Malik cleared his voice and stepped forward. "We must leave now before anything happens to the village."

Talon nodded, hauling both his sons into his arms and hugging them tight. "The horses are ready and there is extra food and supplies."

Zarina could see three horses tied to a tree in the distance. *Three*. She looked at Talon as he met her questioning gaze. "It is yours." He nodded toward the dark brown beauty at the end. "She is a little past her prime, but she will carry you for a few years to come."

A horse was a gift of enormous value and one she did not think she deserved. "But," she began, only to be cut off swiftly as Talon held up his hand.

"No. There is no value that can be put on what you have given me." He glanced at Malik and Kalis. "There is nothing I can give you that can repay what you have done."

Zarina was in a daze, unable to believe the incredible kindness of these people. And it wasn't the presents so much as the acceptance and generosity of spirit that they had shown her. "Thank you." She reached down, unstrapped the knife from her thigh and held it out to Talon. "It is not the finest, but it is a good quality knife, made by a master craftsman from the Danari tribe of the Talkos Desert."

Talon hesitated and glanced at his sons, who nodded, before reaching out to take the knife and sheath from her hands. "Thank you, Zarina."

Feeling as if she'd repaid their kindness in some small way, she nodded. Her fingers felt empty and her thigh bare without the familiar blade, but she ignored it and straightened her sword. She'd retrieve the small knife that she'd taken from her assailant out of her pack later. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing.

"It is time to go." Kalis placed his hand on the small of her back, urging her forward.

The wind whipped up and began to blow. Talon and Rebatta looked up at the sky with fear in their eyes. The sky was growing darker by the second. Obviously, they had overstayed their welcome and now the curse was going to make them pay.

"Run!" Kalis yelled, pushing her toward the horses. Zarina stumbled as the wind gusted, blowing dirt and grit into her face. His arm came around her, sheltering her against his chest as he pushed onward.

She heard a cry and tore herself out of Kalis' embrace. Their younger brother was desperately trying to help his sisters to shelter. Alita was on her hands and knees on the ground, trying to regain her footing, while Yasamine clutched her brother's arm. Talon was sheltering Rebatta in his arms. "We have to help them." The shouted words were torn from her lips and lost in the wind.

"The wind will not die down until we leave. That is the best way to help them."

It went against every fiber of her being to leave the others like this, but she knew Kalis was right. Malik had already untied the horses and was fighting to hold onto them.

The closer they got to the horses, the harder the wind blew. The sky flashed with lightning so bright that Zarina was momentarily blinded. The horses whinnied as they pawed at the air, frightened by the storm. They tore away from Malik's tenuous hold and bolted into the woods. He fell back, hitting the ground hard.

Zarina screamed, redoubling her efforts. Was he hurt? Kalis was like a madman now, fighting for every step, needing to get to Malik and then away to protect his family from the curse. Dirt and rock pelted her face and arms, but she ignored the sting and the pain and kept putting one foot in front of the other.

Malik rolled to his side and came up on his hands and knees. Relief filled Zarina. They could always find the horses later or do without them, if it came to that. As long as he was not seriously hurt, nothing else mattered.

As they reached his side, Kalis leaned down, grabbed his brother's arm and yanked him to his feet. Both men wrapped their arms around her as they headed toward the woods.

Suddenly the sky lit up with a huge flash of light. The ground rocked and rumbled as thunder followed. Kalis yanked her to the ground, covering her body with his. "Crawl," he commanded and she did. Her palms stung and breathing was almost impossible.

Damn the curse and the sorceress who had wrought it, punishing innocent men for the deeds of one! Fury whipped through Zarina, more vicious than the wind. Strength flooded her body and she gained her feet, one painful inch at a time. Kalis tried to pull her back down, but she flung herself away from him and stood tall.

Drawing her sword, she raised her hands to the heavens. "Come and fight me if you dare, Sorceress!" Zarina screamed. "Damn you for cursing these men who have done nothing to you!"

The wind died as suddenly as it had come and an unnatural stillness filled the air. Zarina spit dirt from her mouth and wiped the grit from her eyes. "Show yourself, Sorceress!" she commanded.

"Zarina, no!" Kalis' frantic shout came from behind her.

"Come away, Zarina!" She could hear Malik getting closer to her and she spun around.

"No!" She held her sword out in front of her. "You said I was the woman to break the curse, then let me break it."

"No, she will kill you."

"She can try." Zarina was beyond fear at this point. She couldn't fight an enemy she couldn't see.

"Your man is right." They all turned as a powerful female voice filled the air around them. "You should be afraid."

Zarina turned in a circle, trying to find the source of the voice. The sound of metal being drawn from a sheath filled the air as both men drew their weapons and flanked her. She ignored them as she sought the location of the sorceress. "This is between you and me, Sorceress. Or are you too afraid to face me?" Both men cursed, but she was deaf to their entreaties for her to cease. This had to end. Now!

"You have taken mothers' sons for seven generations, Sorceress, harming the innocent as you were harmed. Where is the fairness in that? Where is the justice?"

"What do you know of it?" They all spun around and faced the woman who was standing tall some distance away from them.

As Zarina strode forward to meet her, she noted that Malik and Kalis' family had managed to take cover and was grateful for that small blessing. "I know what it is like to be shunned for what I am. I have been called unnatural and an abomination. I have been beaten and cast from my home, Sorceress. So I know better than you do the loss of all. You still had your home to go back to and your child in your belly, so don't bleat about your losses to me."

"Stop, Zarina," Kalis pleaded with her.

"He is right, woman. Stop now and I will let you leave." The sorceress cast her cold gaze across them all.

A chill went down Zarina's spine, but she would not back down now. No matter the cost to herself, she would free them from this curse. "I am challenging you to break the curse."

Light surrounded the sorceress as she cast Zarina a scornful glare and laughed mockingly. "You think you are the special woman to break the curse?"

Zarina answered honestly. "No, I do not." The other woman frowned, obviously taken aback by her candor. "What I am is a warrior, willing to fight for those I love."

"And do you love them?"

"With all that I have."

The sorceress eyed her calculatingly. "Enough to give them up for good? Enough to give your life for them?"

"Yes," she replied firmly over the yells of denial from both men.

They stepped forward, positioning themselves in front of her. "You shall not have her, Sorceress," Kalis retorted, his voice low and hard. "Not without going through me first."

"Why do you care, warrior?" The woman moved closer now, her long hair whipping out behind her, moved by some unnatural breeze. Power radiated from her as her long legs moved her toward them. She was clad in leather pants and a tunic similar to Zarina's, but the sorceress's clothing was of much finer quality. She drew a large, gleaming sword from a sheath at her waist as she approached.

"I love her more than my life." Kalis' quiet reply stopped Zarina's heart cold and then it began to pound in her chest. How could he say something like that now? Zarina's head spun with the knowledge that he loved her.

"I love her as well." Malik spoke as he took a step toward the sorceress as she stopped mere paces from them. "More than my life," he added.

"Well, well, well." The other woman rested the point of her sword on the ground and tapped a finger against her cheek. "Do you really love her as well as you think you do? I wonder." She dropped her hand back to her side and smiled. It wasn't a very pleasant thing to see, filled with malice.

"We do," Malik replied for them both.

"What if I told you that I would break the curse if you gave up Zarina and never saw her again?"

Both men froze in place.

Zarina had had enough. She stepped from behind them, determined to face the sorceress and end this once and for all. "I say it is done." She pointed her sword at the sorceress. "You remove the curse from this family for good and I will leave them."

"I thought you loved them," she sneered.

Zarina could feel her heart breaking at the thought of never seeing either man again, but her love for them was stronger than her selfish needs. "I do."

"Yet you would walk away from them?" Each word was like a blow to Zarina.

She gripped the hilt of her sword in her hand and ignored the sting of tears in her eyes. "If that meant that they were free of the curse? Then yes, I would walk away."

"No!" Malik and Kalis spoke as one and once again stepped in front of her. Now they were within a sword length of the sorceress.

"No?" she mocked. "There is no other way to break the curse. Would you be exiles forever, never able to settle anywhere, never able to see your family again?"

Both men looked over at their family and the villagers who had gathered nearby to watch the scene unfold. Then they turned their gaze to Zarina. She could see the sadness in their eyes, but beyond that, she could see the love shining through. They were willing to give up everything for her.

She could not allow that to happen.

"No." Zarina tried to step around the men, but they blocked her way. "I will not allow it."

"It is not yours to allow or disallow," the sorceress replied softly. "It is their choice to make."

"The curse does not matter as long as we have Zarina." Kalis turned and reached out to stroke his hand over her hair. She could sense the resolve behind his words.

"Zarina is ours and we will not give her up." Malik shifted to stand beside her, smiling as he stared down at her.

The magnitude of their love for her overwhelmed her. Never in her life had she expected to be loved this much by one man, let alone two. They were the finest men that she'd ever known and she would love them always.

"I love you both more than you will ever know." Reaching up, she pulled Malik's face toward her, kissing him softly on the lips. Then she did the same with Kalis. Stepping forward, she faced the sorceress. "I will set them free, Sorceress. This is between you and me."

The sorceress's laughter echoed throughout the entire valley and the wind began to whip up again. Power surged all around them and she seemed to grow larger as she stood before them. Malik and Kalis tried to reach out and grab Zarina, but there was an invisible barrier between them. Both men shouted in anger and disbelief, cursing and

yelling as they beat on the impenetrable barrier. Zarina spun around, shocked to see tears in both men's eyes as they beat their hands bloody trying to get past the unseen obstacle between them.

She leaned forward and placed her free hand against theirs, wishing she could feel their flesh against hers one final time. She whispered, "I love you," and then turned her back on their shouts and pleas.

"Are you ready to give your life for them, woman?" the sorceress demanded.

Straightening her shoulders, she faced the older, powerful woman, unafraid. Her heart was heavy, but her soul was light, knowing that she was freeing the men she loved to live normal lives. She prayed they'd find happiness. "I am."

The sorceress raised her arms and Zarina faced her death calmly and with love. Lightning flashed in the sky and thunder crashed around her, but she did not flinch from her destiny.

The older woman's voice rang out as she faced Zarina. "Blessed are thee with the swords of three, never more to roam. No more are you cut off from all that you know, for your three swords have been freely joined. A heart has been given, most willing and full, to break the curse of the past. For you have found a love more rare, and forever a place to call home."

A huge flash of lightning blinded Zarina totally and she turned her head away, stumbling backward. Strong arms caught her, sheltering her as the mighty crash of thunder shook the ground. The barrier was gone and once again Malik and Kalis were next to her.

Absolute silence wrapped around them.

Zarina opened her eyes and stared at the sorceress who was standing in front of them with a gentle smile on her face. "I don't understand." Zarina blinked to try to clear away the spots of light still dancing before her eyes.

Malik cursed and yanked off his shirt and Kalis did the same. Both men stared down at their chests, and as they all watched, the swords faded from the tattoos, leaving behind the wounded red hearts. Zarina reached out and touched a heart, and as she did, she felt a burning on her own chest. She sucked in a breath as she reached for the ties on her tunic, opening it enough to see her chest. Above her heart there were three swords joined as one, but this time they pointed upward not downward.

Kalis shoved aside the fabric of her tunic and traced his fingers over the swords. "Does it hurt?"

Zarina shook her head and faced the sorceress, who was waiting patiently. "Why?"

The corners of the older woman's eyes crinkled as she smiled. "I had to test your love for one another to see if it was real. The fact that you were all willing to die or give up your relationship to protect the other proved beyond a doubt that you'd given your heart freely." She glanced at the swords that the three of them still gripped in their hands. "And there is no doubt that your swords have been joined."

She stepped closer and both men crowded protectively around Zarina. The older woman laughed. "You have nothing to fear from me, warriors." She reached out and touched the tattoo over Zarina's heart. "This is to always remind you that you are all joined as one, stronger together than apart. It is a testament to the sacrifice you were all willing to make."

She placed a palm over each man's chest, covering the heart that was all that remained of the tattoo. "This will always be there to remind you of the love you all share, which will grow stronger over time and be blessed with many children." Both men gasped, and when the sorceress removed her hand, the holes that had been pierced through the hearts by the blades were gone and the hearts were now whole. The droplets of blood that had dripped from the hearts were also gone.

The sorceress stepped back and raised her hands once more. "This union is blessed by the love they all share and the sacrifices freely given for that love. The curse is broken and is no more."

"Thank you, Hesabeth," Zarina whispered. It was the first time any of them had called her by name.

The older woman just smiled, turned and walked toward the woods, her form getting lighter and lighter until she faded from sight. She was gone.

Zarina fell to her knees, overwhelmed by the magnitude of what had just occurred. Malik and Kalis went to their knees beside her, wrapping her in their embrace. She could feel the pounding of their hearts when she placed her palms on their chests – they beat in time with hers. Three hearts had become one.

They held on tight to one another, and she felt both of their lips brush the top of her head. Gradually, noise intruded and Zarina raised her head. The villagers who were all laughing and crying at once surrounded them. Zarina found herself swept up into the crushing embrace of Talon. "Thank you, my daughter, for what you have done."

Emotion threatened to overwhelm her, but she swallowed it back. With his words, he had more than repaid her.

Chapter Eighteen

It was strange to be among so many people after being alone for so long, but after a week, Zarina was beginning to adjust. Her new family was a tremendous help as she tried to find her place among them. She hunted and trained with the men but was also learning some more traditional female jobs from Rebatta. Zarina was surprised at how much she was enjoying learning how to sew.

Her own mother had begun to teach her the basics before she died, but after that there had been no one to continue her training. Zarina could do a passable, if not great, job of mending a hole in her clothing, but that was the extent of her knowledge. She had always wanted to know how to sew better and create her own clothing.

Rebatta was a patient teacher, always encouraging and smiling as she corrected Zarina's large and sometimes clumsy stitches. And Alita and Yasamine were both filled with mischief and laughter, brightening Zarina's day.

Vernan kept his distance, somewhat unsure of her, but even he was kind and courteous. Personally Zarina thought he was in awe of his older brothers and didn't quite know what to make of a woman who challenged them daily with her sword.

A small smile played at the corners of Zarina's lips. She would never be a conventional female, but she was finding that didn't matter here. These people were more than willing to accept her for what she was. The village elders and the children seemed fascinated by her life in the desert and constantly barraged her with endless questions and pleas for stories. The men were won over the instant they discovered that she had a great store of knowledge on how to raise and train horses in the desert tradition, and that she was more than willing to share it. The women followed Rebatta's example, answering her questions and sharing their knowledge with her. All the women kept gardens, growing root vegetables during the long summer season, and they were teaching her how to plant and tend a garden. After growing up in the arid desert, she found the idea of growing her own food fascinating.

Her days were filled with work and laughter and her nights...well, her nights were filled with love. The three of them were still sharing the small dwelling on the edge of the village while Malik and Kalis constructed a new home for the three of them. She'd been slightly stunned by the size of the home they were building, but Kalis had just smiled as he informed her that he intended to see it filled with children.

Zarina laid her hand across her belly. She'd never contemplated having children before, but now she thought about it all the time. Both men had insatiable sexual appetites, and if they kept it up then it probably wouldn't be too long before a child was on the way.

"Are you all right?" A muscled forearm wrapped around her waist as she was drawn back against a massive chest. Closing her eyes, she breathed in the tangy scent of woods and male sweat.

"I'm fine, Malik."

He laughed as he rested his chin on the top of her head. "You are the only one who can distinguish between the two of us without even looking. How do you do it?"

She turned to face him, hooking her arms around his neck. "I don't know. To me you are both different men." She shrugged as she tugged his head down for a quick kiss before releasing him.

"Are you up to another short journey?" He leaned down and nuzzled her neck, causing goose bumps to rise on her arms.

"Where?" As much as she loved her new home, a few days away sounded very good to her.

"Since we are settling here, we need supplies. We have money from our trading ventures—more than enough to purchase the tools and things we need. Kalis and I would like to take a quick trip back to Ankaris." His voice got lower as he nipped at the lobe of her ear. "We could take our time and maybe spend an extra night or two away from everyone. I know this has not been an easy adjustment for you, Zarina, and I would make it easier."

Was it any wonder she loved this man? His concern for her was a balm to her beleaguered soul, but she did have concerns. "What about the trouble we had last time?" She didn't think those three young men would be a problem, but one could never be certain of these things.

"Another small group of men will be traveling a day or so behind us and we will wait just beyond the town until they arrive. I do not think there will be any problems, but there is safety in numbers." Malik grinned, the action softening his harsh features and making him appear younger. "Besides, they all understand why we would want a few days alone. But be warned, my mother is planning our joining ceremony for as soon as we return."

"What?" Zarina was stunned by that piece of news.

"You did not think we would live together without a formal joining ceremony, did you, little warrior?" Malik stroked his hand lovingly over her hair. "Kalis and I want the world to know that you belong to us and that we belong to you. All our children shall have the full protection of our family and of the village."

She stared down at her feet, scuffing the toe of her boot in the dry dirt. "I wasn't sure. I figured we'd go on as we had been."

Malik hooked his finger under her chin, raising it. "What we've had up until now has been good, but now it will be even better." He drew her into his arms, tucking her close to his heart. "Trust me, Zarina."

"I do." She laid her hand over his heart and felt the heat radiating from the tattoo. The mark on her chest began to throb.

"Come." He tucked her under his arm and led her toward their temporary home. "We will get Kalis and be gone within the hour. The others will follow on the morrow."

Five days later, Malik rode toward Ankaris. Although he was well rested, he was on edge. He admitted to himself that he was uneasy about bringing Zarina back here. He knew that she was committed to their relationship, but he would not rest until the joining ceremony was complete. His honor demanded it.

He snorted under his breath. It was more than honor. It was a possessive need he had to proclaim Zarina as his own. And he knew that Kalis felt just as he did.

The town was bustling, as always, and everything appeared normal, but Malik could not shake the sense of impending doom. His instincts had always served him well, and now they were screaming at him that something was going to happen. He longed to grab Zarina and carry her back to his village, but he knew that he could not. He had to trust that whatever happened, he and Kalis could keep her safe.

He slowed his horse until he was alongside his brother. Kalis glanced over at him. "You feel it too."

Malik relaxed slightly as Kalis confirmed his own suspicions. His brother would be on his guard as well. "If I thought we could convince Zarina to wait in the woods beyond, I would."

Kalis snorted with laughter. "Good luck with that." They both gazed toward Zarina, who was riding alongside their father, sharing an easy conversation with him. She and Talon were an unlikely pair, but they were becoming fast friends.

"She is stubborn." It was said with more pride than rancor.

"That she is, my brother," Kalis retorted with a quick grin.

"We will have to keep a close watch on her. I don't know if anything will happen, but I feel it in my gut." His hand went to the hilt of his sword.

"I will not lose her now that we finally have a chance at a normal life together." Kalis spurred his horse forward until he joined Zarina and their father. Malik trailed behind them, scanning the crowds carefully as they entered the town and began to pick their way through the teeming streets.

His unease had quieted somewhat by the time they'd stabled the horses, but Malik was still watchful. He would not be happy until they were well on their way home. He was beginning to regret ever suggesting this journey to Zarina.

Their father and the three men who had made the journey with him had already headed out into the marketplace to haggle over the goods they needed. His father was looking to purchase a horse if an acceptable one could be had. They would meet back here at the public stables later in the afternoon and ride out together.

Malik sensed Zarina behind him and turned, hiding his concerns. She was dressed in her new clothing that his mother and sisters had sewn for her and her eyes were shining as she looked around. It suddenly occurred to him that this visit was very different from her first one. Unlike the last time, she would not have to sell her one and only prized possession, and this time she would not be left on her own. Malik still regretted his actions from that trip.

As if sensing the path of his thoughts, Zarina tucked her hand in his and squeezed it. "The past is behind us. Now is what matters."

Kalis came up beside them and took Zarina's other hand. "Are we ready?"

"I want to see everything!" Both men groaned, but her enthusiasm was contagious and soon the three of them were wandering up and down the crowded streets, perusing all the myriad goods available for sale.

Zarina was as excited as a child as they wandered the thriving marketplace. Unlike her first visit, which had been filled with sadness, unease and fear, this time she felt none of those things. Both men flanked her as they made their way through the crowded streets. Fine fabrics in a rainbow of colors, rugs, pottery, jewelry and weapons all shared spaces side by side. The air was redolent with spices and tasty treats that tempted the shopper as they strolled by. The place was alive with the sounds of voices as people laughed and shouted and haggled.

Even though it was still early morning, the air was thick and the sun already a blaze of fire in the sky. It was a hot day for early fall. Dust kicked up with every step they made. But Zarina didn't mind. As a child of the desert, she was used to the heat. Besides which, she planned to be seated in the shade enjoying some of these wonderful exotic foods by the time the sun reached its height at noon.

Malik tugged on her hand, stopping her in her tracks. "I have an errand to run, but I will only be gone a short while."

Zarina could sense his unease as his brow furrowed. Several people glanced at Malik's scowl and gave them a wide berth. "Kalis and I will be fine while you are gone. There is no need to worry."

Malik sighed and offered her a smile that did not reach his eyes. He squinted against the brightness of the sun as he scanned the area. Zarina sighed. She loved her protective warrior, but this was taking it too far. "Malik, I'm in the middle of a busy marketplace with Kalis right beside me. Your father and his men are just up the road." She pointed to the area at the far end where there were animals penned for sale. "Do not worry. All will be well."

He heaved a sigh but still did not look convinced. "If you are sure?"

She released his hand and gave him a push, but it was like trying to push a large bolder uphill. He did not move. "The quicker you go, the quicker you'll return."

He raked his hand through his hair. "I will return quickly." He reached into a small sack attached to his belt and drew out a smaller bag, handing it to her. "Here."

Zarina felt the weight of the bag in her palm and immediately offered it back to Malik. "I do not need your money." She had no money of her own but did not feel right taking his.

Malik's frown turned ferocious as he glared at her. "It is mine to give."

"But it is not right," she protested.

"Why is it not right? You are the woman of my heart and will soon be my wife. Did not your father provide for your mother?"

His words brought her up short, stilling her protest. He was right, but she still felt strange about accepting his money.

Malik smiled. "You do not have to spend it, little warrior. But if you see something you like, I want you to be able to purchase it for yourself." When she still hesitated, he added, "Would you not share with me if I was without coins and you had some?"

Zarina's hand closed around the rough cloth bag as her mind wandered to a fine piece of fabric in the palest shade of blue that matched Malik's and Kalis' eyes. Maybe she'd buy that and have Rebatta help her make a robe out of it. The fabric was semi-sheer and would accentuate the curves of her body. A smile played at the corners of her mouth as she imagined their expressions when they saw her covered in such a garment.

She laughed at herself, knowing she probably wouldn't buy it. Her practical nature would not allow her to waste money on something so frivolous, but it was fun to dream and know that she could buy it if she truly wanted to. "I probably will not spend it." She went up on her toes and kissed his cheek. "But thank you."

Kalis laughed and slapped his brother on the back. "Are we not the most fortunate of men, my brother? A woman who does not want to shop and spend our money." His blue eyes were shining as he smiled, the corners of each eye crinkling.

Zarina sent them a mock scowl, pretending to be angry. "Just for that, I may spend it all."

"If you spend it all, ask Kalis for some of his," Malik suggested as he took his leave. Zarina was relieved that he seemed more relaxed now and less worried.

As she watched him disappear, Kalis draped his arm over her shoulders and turned her toward another set of stalls. "Are you hungry?" He pointed toward a vendor who was selling some kind of bread. The rich smell of cinnamon wafted from his table.

Her stomach growled even though she'd eaten her morning meal. She placed her hand over her belly, but it grumbled again, this time loud enough for him to hear. She grinned and shrugged. "I guess I am."

Kalis laughed. "Wait here and I will get us some."

Zarina tucked the money safely inside the pocket of her tunic as she watched him stride toward the busy vendor. He was head and shoulders over most of the other customers, but he did not push them aside to get served first. An elderly woman was having a hard time getting service, and Kalis cleared a path for her with his large body. He was such a good man. Both her men were.

"You little whore." Fingers dug deep into her arm, yanking her backward toward an alleyway.

Zarina whirled, but instead of trying to pull her arm away from her attacker, she turned toward him, fist flying. He jerked out of her reach as he tugged her just beyond the crowded street. She reached for her dagger and touched nothing but the cloth of her pants. It was an instinctive movement. She'd forgotten that she'd given her dagger to Talon. The smaller one was tucked away in her pack with the horses, as she didn't have a proper sheath for it yet. Kicking out, she struck her assailant in the shin. With a yelp, he released her.

Free of his hold, she drew her sword and faced her attacker. "Illian," she spat.

The tall, bronzed warrior's face was suffused with anger and sweat as he glared at her. His clothing was dusty and stained, and he had the look of someone who had traveled hard and fast. "You are too good for me, and yet you have no problem spreading your thighs for those forest-dwellers." He drew his own sword and pointed it accusingly.

"Unlike you, they are worthy men." Zarina held her sword easily in front of her. She would not underestimate her opponent. Illian was like a snake, striking when you least expected it. She edged to the side so that her back was against a wall. She was confident she could handle him on her own, but Kalis would miss her quickly and start searching for her.

"You have cursed me." There was true venom in his words as he spit them at her. His eyes were wild and bloodshot. "You said that your father's spirit would not give me peace and it has not. There has been nothing but unrest in the tribe since his death."

"I think that has more to do with you than my father, Illian. You were always a bully and never a leader." She never took her gaze off his face as she taunted him. He always made mistakes when he got angry and that is how she would defeat him.

"My men and I will quell all rebellion. It is only a matter of time until they accept me." Spittle dripped from the corner of his mouth as he clenched his sword tighter.

"I wish you luck then." She shrugged, feigning total unconcern.

Her attitude seemed to take him off guard and he paused. Then his eyes narrowed with malice. "Do not pretend that you will not accept the leadership if they offer it to you."

This time she did not have to feign her emotions. She knew that pure surprise and disbelief were written all over her face. Illian laughed. "I see that they have not found you yet. They packed up your horses and swords and jewelry and snuck away in the dead of night, hoping to find you." He thumped his chest with his fist. "Those goods belonged to me. To me!" he shouted.

"Actually, they belonged to my father," she countered softly. "They were never yours to take." She wasn't quite sure if she was referring to her father's belongings or his people, or both. Either way, her words enflamed Illian as he lunged at her.

Zarina jumped aside, countering his blow with one of her own. "I am not a grieving daughter, two days without food and water now, Illian. How will you defeat me without a band of warriors behind you to hold me captive while you strike?"

A wild shriek erupted from deep within him as he lunged again. Fury boiled up within Zarina. This was the man who had not allowed her to see her father properly cremated and his ashes scattered. This was the man who had taken her home from her.

He struck hard, but she ducked in time to keep her head attached to her body. Gripping her sword with both hands, she blocked his desperate swings.

"I have been tracking you for weeks," he roared. "You shall not escape me now." He licked his lips and reached down between his legs and cupped the bulge in his pants. "I will not kill you right away. If you would play the whore for other men, then you shall be my whore as well. The whole tribe will see you for what you truly are and you shall beg me for death by the time I am through with you."

Zarina knew then and there that this time only one of them would survive. And she planned on it being her. Illian was obviously beyond rational thought, eaten up by his own greed and ambition.

"Did you call my daughter a whore?" The words were softly spoken and all the more deadly for it. Talon stood at the far end of the alleyway with his sword drawn.

Fear gripped Zarina's belly as he advanced toward them. He'd obviously heard everything. She could not allow him to be drawn into her fight with Illian. She'd never forgive herself if anything happened to him because of her. "Stay out of this, Talon." She kept her tone hard and unyielding. "This is my fight."

He jerked back as if she'd struck him. She would apologize later, but right now, she had to deal with Illian and quickly. "You want me and I am here. Or are you all talk and no action? That is what the women of the tribe always whispered." She sent a scornful glance toward his erection, goading him into attacking her.

Even though she was expecting it, he sprang so suddenly that she barely had time to deflect his killing blow. Sparks flew from their swords as they struck with incredible force. Zarina felt the shock run all the way up her arm and knew she had to end this swiftly. It wouldn't be long until Kalis and Malik came looking for her. She wanted this over and done with once and for all.

"You will pay and pay dearly, whore." Illian rained blow after blow down on her.

Zarina ducked and turned away, wishing she had more room to maneuver. "You've been saying that for years." Illian's sword glanced off the adobe building, chopping a large piece of the stone that crashed to the ground. Sweat covered both their faces as they circled each other. Grit filled her mouth as the dust flew around them.

In a daring move, she dropped her sword arm slightly. As he came in for the kill, she heard a roar from behind her. Kalis had come, but it was too late for her to stop now. As Illian's sword flashed down toward her, she fell to her knees and rolled. Coming up under his swing, she drove her sword deep into his belly. Yanking it out, she continued to roll, gaining her feet quickly.

Illian stared down at his chest and the rapidly expanding stain covering his shirt. He looked up at her dumbfounded. "This was not supposed to happen." He fell to his knees, his eyes glazing over. They widened with sudden fear. "Jerome," he whispered, his voice tortured as he fell facedown in the dirt. He twitched once and then ceased to move.

Zarina wiped off her sword on the back of his shirt and then sheathed it. Swiping the back of her hand across her forehead, she turned to face the two men who were watching her. Ignoring Kalis, she faced Talon. "I meant no disrespect, but I could not allow him to harm you. I would never forgive myself if something happened to you, and I fear that your sons would never forgive me either."

Talon shook his head. She'd expected anger, not the pity and sadness she saw in his gaze. "You are wrong, Zarina. My sons would not forgive me if I allowed harm to come to you." He rubbed a hand tiredly over his face. "You are truly a warrior woman." Sheathing his sword, he turned and walked away without looking back.

Zarina swallowed hard. What had she done? Once again, the fact that she was different could cause her to lose her home. A sinking feeling filled her heart and she blinked her eyes hard, telling herself it was only the dust making them water.

Steeling herself, she finally turned to face Kalis. Malik was now standing next to him, his face set like stone. In spite of the heat, she shivered. She'd never seen such anger on their faces. They met her gaze then glanced away as if unable to look at her.

Loud voices were coming closer and Malik stalked over to her and gripped her arm tight. Her arm was already bruised from Illian's earlier manhandling and she flinched. Malik swore and dropped her arm. "Do not say one word, Zarina. We will handle the authorities."

Oh gods, she'd all but forgotten that they were in a town that would have its own laws and ways of dealing with these things. "Illian is a chieftain," she whispered, horrified as an official-looking man and several armed warriors came marching down the alley from the opposite end. They glanced down at Illian's still form and back at them.

"Say nothing," Malik ordered under his breath as he stepped forward and offered his hand.

The official in charge stepped forward and clasped it. "What has happened here?"

What if the authorities held Malik or Kalis responsible? Zarina wanted to speak out but held her tongue as Malik had asked. If it became necessary, she would speak. Her mind drifted away from the alleyway and the talking behind her faded into the background. She'd ruined everything by her actions. She should have known better than to think that she could fit in anywhere. Talon was as disgusted with her as Malik and Kalis were. Her short time of feeling as if she finally belonged somewhere was gone.

Grief, deep and debilitating, struck her and she felt herself begin to sway. She heard her name being called as if from a great distance. She blinked, but the world was a blur.

Kalis shouted and grabbed Zarina as she swayed precariously. He quickly lowered her to the ground, crouching beside her as the authorities gathered around in concern.

"Is she hurt?" the leader of the guards inquired. "One of the vendors said he saw the man drag her away by the arm. Who knows what else he did before you came along to save her." That was the story that Malik had given the authorities. The fact that several reputable vendors, including Dagmar, who had been selling fruit from her cart, had come forward to tell what they'd seen was in their favor.

Kalis ran his hands over her body, searching for wounds, finally breathing a sigh of relief when he found none. "There are no wounds." He glanced up and caught Malik's eye. "I think perhaps the heat and the stress..." He trailed off, letting them draw their own conclusions.

"Of course," the officious man continued. "One can only expect a woman to be emotional after such an ordeal. You can bring her to my home if you wish until she recovers."

Kalis pushed his arms under her shoulders and knees, lifting her easily. "Thank you, but I think it will be best if we return to our camp."

The official nodded and hesitated. Malik drew the man's attention by holding out several coins. "Please take this for your trouble." He continued smoothly, "I thank you and your men for disposing of the body for us."

The official took the coins and tucked them safely into the pouch at his waist. "Of course we will take care of the body for you. It is our duty, after all." He motioned to his men. They came forward and lifted Illian's body. "He's probably got a horse stabled somewhere in town. Ah well, we shall find it." The official rubbed his hands together. "It belongs to the local government now, of course."

Kalis turned in the other direction, leaving Malik to finish with the town official.

"I can walk." Zarina's voice was low but steady as she tried to shove away from his embrace.

"No." She struggled and he tightened his hold on her. "Stop it," he hissed. "They are still watching. It is better if they think you overcome by the assault." She reluctantly subsided and he strode through the town with Zarina cradled in his arms. They'd almost lost her. How could she have been so foolish as to not allow their father to help her?

He stopped in his tracks. Of course she had not allowed their father to help her. As a warrior, she would consider it her duty to protect him. He'd always known in his mind that she was a fighter, capable of defending herself, but this was the first time he'd truly understood that she had the honor and heart of a warrior as well.

It would take some getting used to. Kalis was sure that some of his hair had turned gray from what he'd witnessed this afternoon. He'd come far too late to save her. He'd had but a split second to see the sword descending toward her and his heart had ceased to beat.

He buried his face in her hair, gripped her tighter and took a calming breath before continuing down the crowded streets. He could see the stables in the distance and picked up his pace. Her skin was damp and pale as death, but her breathing was steady. But beyond that, she did not seem to be hurt. Kalis would not relax until he'd stripped her bare and examined every inch of her body himself.

Malik joined them just as he entered the stables, worry etched on his face. "How is she?"

"I am fine." She pushed away until Kalis lowered her to the ground. She kept her face averted as she strode to her horse, refusing to look at either of them.

His brother looked as if he wanted to say more, but Kalis shook his head. Now was not the time. "Not yet." He kept his voice low so that she could not hear them. "Saddle the horses."

Within minutes, Malik had the horses ready and Kalis mounted. He wished Zarina was still in his arms, but she'd already mounted her own horse.

"Kalis?" Her knuckles were tight where they clutched the reins.

"Shh." He reached out and stroked her face. "There is time to talk later. Right now, we are best off leaving here as quickly as possible."

Taking him at his word, she nodded and urged her horse forward.

Chapter Nineteen

The fire crackled merrily, casting its warmth and glow around the group, but the mood was somber. Zarina sat on her blanket with her legs curled tight to her chest. The time had come to face them all. She still couldn't believe that she'd almost fainted. Kalis blamed it on the heat, but Zarina knew better. She was a daughter of the desert and the heat did not bother her as much as it did others. She knew it was grief and worry that had made her lightheaded. Malik hadn't said much of anything to her beyond inquiring if she was feeling better. His calm concern cut her like a knife. She'd rather he yelled at her than face her with such detachment.

She opened her mouth to speak, but it was dry. Reaching out, she gripped her mug of sweetened tea in her hand and sipped. The liquid eased her parched lips and tongue. Clearing her throat, she tried again. "About what happened this morning," she began, only to be cut off as another voice cut through the night.

"Greetings. We come in peace."

The men rose as one, drawing their swords. Zarina laid her wooden mug aside and stood slowly, reaching for her sword, which was within easy reach. Kalis growled beneath his breath. "You are not recovered yet. Let us take care of you this time." Although she nodded at him, she still gripped her weapon in her hand. It went against all her training and instincts to go unarmed.

A group of about eight men came toward them from the direction of the town. Some of them were still mounted, while others were leading their horses. She immediately recognized the man riding in the front. "Pyatt?" She lowered her sword and began to walk toward him. Malik immediately stepped in front of her, blocking her way. She placed her hand on his back. "I know these men."

His muscles stiffened, but he did not turn toward her. "But we do not."

Her hand dropped away. He was right. These were the men who'd stood by while her tribe had cast her out. Well, all but Pyatt that is. She really had no idea what they sought. "As you wish," she acceded, taking a step back.

"What do you want?" The harsh growl in Malik's voice left no doubt that these men were not welcome here.

Several of the men shuffled and stared down at their feet, but Pyatt calmly dismounted and strode forward. "We've come to see Zarina." He ignored the men and their swords as he made his way toward her. He opened his arms to her. "Let me look at you, child."

Zarina stumbled forward into Pyatt's arms before Malik could stop her. His thin but still surprisingly strong arms surrounded her. As she buried her face in his

shoulder, she smelled sandalwood and horseflesh. It was such a familiar smell, and it reminded her so much of her father that she clutched him tighter.

"You are well?"

His cloak muffled Zarina's bark of laughter. It seemed that was the question everyone was asking her today. She raised her head from Pyatt's shoulder and nodded. "I am fine."

Malik's arm was like steel as it wrapped around her, drawing her away from the other man. He held his sword easily in front of her, pointing it toward Pyatt. "What do you want?"

Pyatt sighed, his eyes sad as he turned and motioned to the other men. "I think our trip has been in vain," he muttered, but did not explain further.

Zarina gasped as a horse the color of the desert sands was led forward. "Talkin," she gasped. She gripped Malik's arm, but he would not free her. "Malik, that is my horse. The one my father gave me." His arm loosened until he finally dropped it.

The horse was agitated, stamping her feet and trying to pull away from the man trying to hold her. Zarina hurried forward, giving a light whistle, much like the sound of a bird. The horse stilled immediately, her head coming up and her ears perking. The man released his hold and the horse trotted forward, butting its head against Zarina's chest.

Her laughter filled the clearing, drawing every man's gaze. Gripping the reins in her hand, she led the horse off to the side as she rubbed her glossy coat. She was so glad to have her back. As Zarina tied her mare to a tree, she whispered a promise that she'd be back soon into the horse's furry ear.

"I will not ask again," Malik's voice boomed. Zarina gave Talkin one last pat on the nose and hurried back to stand between Malik and Kalis, who now flanked his brother.

Pyatt held out his hand, palm up. "We come in peace and we come to ask the daughter of our former chieftain to return to her tribe and claim her rightful place."

"And what place would that be, old man?" Malik growled.

"The people want her to return to help lead them." Pyatt nodded toward her.

Zarina was stunned by the offer. She hadn't really believed Illian's mad ramblings. "I don't understand."

Pyatt's gaze softened. "Not all supported Illian, my child. And many think that it is your rightful place to rule with a warrior husband of your choosing."

"Over my dead body," Malik gritted out.

"You threw her away." Kalis spat at their feet, his insult blatant. "We found her and she belongs to us now."

Zarina's head was spinning. Her own people wanted her back. Illian hadn't been spouting nonsense. After this morning's incident in the town, she hadn't been sure how Malik and Kalis would feel about her. Suddenly the tattoo on her chest began to burn, its pain a reminder of what they'd been through. She realized then that she'd allowed

her past to taint her expectations. She'd momentarily lost her trust in them and their feelings for her.

Her hand went to her heart and she rubbed it absently. They had joined swords together. She'd been wrong today to not allow Talon to help her fight. It was wrong not to expect Malik and Kalis to protect her. She wanted to do the same for them, so how could she expect any less from them?

"Zarina?" She could hear the worry in Kalis' voice as he sidled closer. "Are you all right?"

She tossed her sword down onto her blanket and placed her hand on the side of his face. "I'm fine. Truly."

"Zarina," Pyatt interrupted. "All these men have come to offer themselves as husband to you." They all stepped forward and she noted that the man whose bed she'd once shared was there. She shot him a scornful glance. He wanted her now when she was acceptable to the tribe, but he had stood by and allowed her to be beaten and cast out of the village. All these men had stood silently and watched it happen.

"You cannot have my daughter." Talon stepped forward, shooting a glare at Zarina as he did so, daring her to object. She smiled at him, wrapping her arms around her waist and hugging herself tight. She wanted to laugh and cry, she felt so overwhelmed. After all that had happened, Talon was not only willing to protect her but to claim her as his own. A warmth descended upon her, encircling her. He was truly treating her as a daughter of his heart.

Pyatt cocked his eyebrow at Talon. "She is the daughter of Jerome of Talkos, chieftain of the Danari tribe."

"No," Talon intoned. "She was the daughter of Jerome of Talkos, but he is dead and her village cast her out. She is going to join with my sons as their wife." He thumped his hand on his chest. "She is my daughter. She is the daughter of Talon of Jallak, warrior of the village of Calla."

The two groups stood there glaring at one another for the longest time.

"What say you, Zarina?" It was Kalis who finally broke the silence.

They all turned to her. The air was filled with anticipation. Expectation. She shook her head as she faced her former tribesmen. "I will not return with you. I am Zarina of Talkos no longer." She took a deep breath before continuing. "Illian is gone. He will not trouble you again. Find another to lead you."

The men began to protest, but Pyatt silenced them quickly. "We know about Illian," he sighed. "We tracked him to Ankaris and heard what happened. It will be as you wish, my child. But know that you are always welcome in this old man's home."

Zarina reached out and hugged Pyatt tight, and when she let go of him, she knew the final remnants of her old life were gone forever. Pyatt nodded to Malik, Kalis and Talon in turn before making his way back to his horse. He mounted and turned to leave, but at the last second, he whirled back around. "Good luck and good health to

you, Zarina of Jallak." He pinned the men with a sharp gaze. "I hope you realize the treasure you have."

"We do," Malik and Kalis replied as one.

Malik hesitated briefly, gathering his thoughts. "Thank you, old man, for what you did for Zarina. We are always in your debt. If you ever have a need, do not hesitate to contact us."

Pyatt nodded solemnly. "There will be no repercussions over Illian's death. I will see to that." He turned away and this time he did not look back as he disappeared into the night.

Several of the men with him brought forth several packs and laid them on the ground in front of Zarina. "These are your father's belongings."

She met her former lover's eyes and nodded. Another man tied two horses next to Talkin and she recognized them easily as two of her father's best.

The rest of the men quickly mounted and followed Pyatt, leaving behind an uneasy silence. Zarina knew she still had to deal with what had happened today. Gathering herself, she faced them all. "I do not know if I can return to the village with you either."

Malik's frown was enough to scare off the bravest of men, but Zarina did not back down. She knew that he would never hurt her.

"It does not matter where we go, so long as you know that you will not be going alone." He stood so close in front of her that his toes touched hers.

Kalis came to stand behind her until his toes were touching her heels. "You belong to us, Zarina. We belong together."

Relief flooded through her veins, making her weak in the knees. The depth of their love for her still continued to amaze her. She knew that if she lived for another fifty years, she'd never take a moment of it for granted.

They were waiting for her to speak. She could feel the tension of their muscles as they crowded closer to her, all but smothering her with their bodies. "We belong together," she whispered. "Three swords, one heart."

Talon had reached the end of his patience. "Of course you'll come back to the village, girl. Where else would you go? We've got a house to finish building and a joining ceremony to perform." His gruff voice was filled with emotion.

Zarina pushed against Malik's chest until he stepped back. She could not be responsible for Talon losing his sons again. "Then you forgive me for what happened this morning?"

His eyes widened. "There is nothing to forgive. But," he continued sternly, "if anything like that ever happens again, I won't stay out of it. You are my daughter, and as such, you are under my protection."

"And you are under mine," she countered.

Talon gave a gruff laugh and dragged her into his arms for a rough hug before releasing her. "So be it."

"It is time for you to rest." Kalis made his pronouncement from behind her as he took her arm and led her toward the shadows of a large tree where their blankets were spread.

"What about my belongings?" She motioned to the small pile of packs lying on the ground.

"They will still be there in the morning," Malik muttered as he stalked toward the blankets.

"I am a woman of means now." She smiled. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out the money Malik had given her earlier and held it out to him.

He scowled at her. "Keep it." He flung himself down on the blankets, stretching his hands over his head. "Next time we go to town, you can buy something for me."

"If we ever take her to town again," Kalis muttered under his breath.

Zarina laughed. Love and life filled her as she smiled at her two men. They completed her. Kalis scooped her up and tossed her onto the blankets. Malik cradled her fall, cuddling her close. She could feel his erection poking her in the stomach and felt the answering call deep within her. Her core went liquid with need.

Kalis lay behind her, cuddling close. It was no surprise to her that he was aroused as well. "I love you both so much." Her heart was overflowing and she could not contain her emotions any longer.

"We love you too," Malik whispered just before he claimed her lips.

"Three swords, one heart." Kalis echoed her earlier words, forever branding them on her heart.

Epilogue

Laughter spilled from Zarina's lips as she stood with her hands braced on the table facing Kalis, who stood at the opposite side.

"There is still plenty of time before the ceremony is to begin," he cajoled. With his hair falling free around his face and his blue eyes twinkling merrily, he looked like a mischievous young boy. But as her eye was drawn over his hard, fit body, she was reminded that he was all man.

"I am not going to risk damaging this beautiful dress your mother and sisters made." She edged around the end of the table as Kalis stalked her, making sure to keep well out of his reach. Rebatta and the girls had presented her with a beautiful dress made especially for her. It was crafted out of buttery, soft leather in a light beige. The bodice was fitted with laces going up the front and intricate beadwork scattered across it, but the skirt was fuller and swirled around her ankles when she walked.

Rebatta had confided that she'd never made a dress for a joining ceremony out of leather before, even leather as fine as this, but she felt that Zarina would be more comfortable in the familiar fabric. Zarina had been deeply touched by the other woman's thoughtfulness and understanding.

"I'll be careful of the dress. In fact, if you took it off, you wouldn't have to worry about wrinkles at all." Like a predator on the prowl, he kept moving steadily forward.

She chewed on her bottom lip as indecision filled her. Common sense prevailed and she shook her head. "We can't."

"What can't we do?" Malik stepped in through the front door, closing it behind him. He had something hidden behind his back that she couldn't see.

Kalis crept closer and Zarina shuffled a few steps farther around the table. "Nothing. Nothing at all."

Kalis grinned at his brother. "I'm thinking there is time for a quick tumble before the ceremony. A joining before the joining, as it were."

Malik shot the bar across the door, locking it from the inside. "I think you are right, my brother." He moved in on her right side.

Zarina tried not to laugh, tried to project a stern visage, but it was impossible with the two of them looking so smug and pleased with themselves. She was doubled over with laughter, gripping her stomach when they pounced. Kalis grabbed her from behind in a giant hug that lifted her right off her feet.

"My dress," she managed to squeak out.

"Have no fears about your dress." He grabbed her hands and placed them on the table. "Bend over, Zarina."

Heat and liquid pooled low in her belly. His fingers were already on her laces, swiftly tugging them open. He pushed the edges wide and slipped his hand inside, cupping her breast. It seemed to swell in his palm, her nipple puckering and pushing against it. She needed this, wanted this. The last few days had been filled with such hectic preparations that she'd fallen into bed and had been asleep long before either man had joined her. It had been days since she'd shared her body with them and she missed the special closeness that they shared.

She pushed her breasts deeper into his palms as he leaned over her, rubbing his erection against the curve of her behind. She pushed her hips backward, pressing against it and he made a sound that was half groan, half laugh. "You are a sorceress, Zarina. I am bewitched by you and I never want the spell to be broken." Kalis stroked his hand over the mark of the swords above her heart.

Cool air wafted across her body as he pulled his hands away. She cried out at the loss, but he quickly flipped up the ends of her dress, exposing her legs and behind. "Beautiful," he intoned as he stroked his hand over the globes of her ass. "Bend lower and open your legs," he murmured. "Let me in, Zarina."

Unable to deny either his or her own need, she spread her legs and leaned lower, bracing her forearms on the table. She glanced to the side as Malik sat down on the bench next to the table, his eyes glittering with unslakened lust.

She could feel Kalis fumbling with the opening of his pants and then his hard cock stroked over her damp folds. Her breathing was coming faster now as he slipped his hands back inside the front opening of her dress. His fingers lightly rolled her nipples and she cried out.

"I can't wait, Zarina."

"Then don't," she cried, pushing her hips backward, encouraging him to enter her.

He kept his hands wrapped around her breasts as he inserted the tip of his cock into her. Her inner muscles contracted, trying to draw him in deeper. Needing him, wanting him inside her. "Kalis," she cried. "Now. Do it now."

"Look at me," Malik commanded. She turned her head, staring almost blindly at him. "I want you to watch me as Kalis takes you."

On Malik's final word, Kalis thrust hard, driving his cock deep within her. She cried out but kept her eyes on Malik. His face was hard as a savage, possessive grin crossed his face.

Kalis continued to pound into her, his hips thrusting harder and faster with each stroke. His fingers tugged lightly on her nipples as he fucked her from behind. Her temples were pounding, her breathing harsh as she reached for completion. Her body was primed and ready after days of abstinence. Just being around these men on a daily basis, touching them, seeing them but not having them, was like a long, torturous but pleasurable foreplay.

His thrusts got wilder. Her feet left the ground at one point, as he pushed them both harder. Her inner muscles began to spasm and she cried out as her orgasm washed

over her. She closed her eyes, unable to keep them open and lost herself in the sensation. Kalis drove deep several more times before he gave a yell. His hips jerked against her bottom as he emptied himself in her. The feel of his hot cum inside her sent off another round of spasms.

She collapsed against the table, gasping for breath. Kalis' fingers tightened around her breasts before he removed his hands. He gripped her hips briefly before pulling out of her. Her sheath contracted, not quite ready to let him go. They both groaned at the separation. Leaning down, he kissed the back of her neck, resting against her for a moment.

"Now it is my turn." Her eyes opened at Malik's pronouncement. He stood up and unlaced the front of his pants. His cock jutted forward and the prominent blue vein running its length pulsed with need. Zarina sucked in another breath, wondering if she had energy enough to take him.

Kalis moved from behind her, and she expected Malik to take his place. Instead, he pulled her away from the table, turned her around and laid her back against the hard wood surface with her legs dangling over the side. "My dress," she managed to croak.

The corners of Malik's eyes crinkled as he lifted her legs over his forearms. "I will take care of your dress." He leaned forward, fitting his hard length into her. Her swollen inner muscles protested slightly, but he kept pressing forward until he was seated to the hilt, his balls resting against her. "And I will take care of you." Spreading her legs wide with his arms, he began to thrust, slow and easy at first but quickly picking up speed.

Kalis leaned over the table and spread her bodice wide as he bent down and captured one of her turgid nipples with his mouth. He sucked hard, making her back arch off the table just as Malik thrust deep. She cried out as her body began to climb again toward its peak.

She forgot all about her dress, the joining ceremony and the people gathering in the center of the village. Nothing mattered but these men and the love and pleasure they all shared. One hand clung to the edge of the table, digging into the wood for purchase. The other gripped Kalis' head tight, holding him to her breast.

Malik shifted his hold, pulling her closer to him as he fucked her, hard and fast now, his need and urgency translating itself to her. "Harder," she cried and both men obeyed. Kalis drew on her nipple as Malik shoved himself deep.

Her body exploded with pleasure and words spilled from her lips. "I love you. I love you. I love you," she chanted over and over. Spasms rocked through her body and her inner muscles contracted. She felt another gush of liquid between her thighs and she tipped her head back and moaned.

Malik continued to thrust heavily, and then with a roar, he came. She shivered as she felt his cum flood her core, heating it, coating it with his essence. His fingers dug into her thighs, holding her legs wide open as he ground himself against her.

Her heart was pounding as she sucked air into her lungs. A bead of sweat rolled down her forehead and she groaned. She reached up to swipe at the perspiration with her hand. "I'm a mess," she muttered.

Malik chuckled as he stepped back, pulling his still semi-hard erection from her and lowering her legs until they hung back over the side of the table. She raised her head and scowled at him as he laced the front of his pants. "It's all right for you two."

She pushed Kalis' head away from her tender breast. He sat back and grinned at her. "I'm a mess," she wailed. "And the ceremony is only minutes away." She could feel tears pricking at her eyes. She didn't know why she was feeling so emotional today, but she was. For once, she wanted to feel normal.

"Zarina," Kalis stroked her forehead, his concern obvious as she swiped at an errant tear.

Malik strode over to a basin in the corner and dipped a cloth in the cool water that was left there from earlier when she'd washed. Wringing it out, he returned and bathed her swollen flesh, wiping away the remnants of their sexual intercourse. His gentle and methodical care of her spiked tears once again.

"I don't know what's wrong with me." She struggled to sit up. Malik tossed the cloth aside and lifted her off the table. Her legs were weak and she swayed. He scooped her off her feet and sat down at the bench with her in his arms.

"It is only natural to be emotional on such a special day."

"I don't see you two crying." She glared at them both as she tried to smooth out the skirt of her dress.

Kalis pulled the front plackets of her dress together and quickly laced it closed. "That does not mean that we do not feel it all the same, Zarina."

"I know." She offered him a gentle smile as she stroked her hand over his beloved face.

Malik reached down to the floor behind the table, grabbed something and plopped it down onto her lap. "These are for you. Gifts from us to mark this special day." He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her temple. "We do feel it deep in our hearts, little warrior."

She heaved a huge sigh as she collected herself. Her emotions were running high today. One minute she was happy, the next weeping. Ignoring the presents in her lap, she wrapped one arm around Malik's waist and reached out to Kalis with the other, drawing both men close to her. "I love you both so much. I never thought to marry, let alone marry two men." She offered them both a smile.

"Take a look." Malik pointed to her lap and she did, excitement growing within her as she looked at her presents.

Zarina's fingers trembled as she touched the rough piece of leather that was wrapped around the presents. As soon as she peeled back a corner of it, a piece of fabric all but fell out. She held her breath as she touched the length of cloth that was now

draped across her legs. It was the beautiful sheer blue fabric from the marketplace. The piece that she hadn't been able to go back and purchase. "How?" She was dumbfounded.

Kalis' smile was tender as he covered her hands with his. They were huge and strong as they touched the delicate fabric, but Zarina had no fear that he would damage it. "I saw you staring at it with such yearning in your eyes, yet you did not buy it." His fingers traced the sheer blue cloth as it tumbled over her thighs. "I hope to see you wearing it sometime soon." He paused and raised his eyes to hers. "And only it."

"It matches your eyes." Zarina brushed the fabric with her fingers. "And I had dreams of making it into a bed robe."

"There is more." She could sense Malik's impatience and shifted the cloth from her lap, laying it carefully on the table. A leather sheath sat in her lap and she gasped as she picked it up and drew the dagger from it. The blade was straight, strong and sharp, and the ties from the sheath would strap easily around her thigh. "It's beautiful, Malik."

He brushed back a lock of her hair with his fingers, rubbing it between them as he did. "Both presents are part of you, Zarina. You are a warrior in need of good weapons." The back of his hand traced the curve of her cheek. "But you are also a woman, with a woman's softness, a kindness of heart and a spirit that is beyond price."

Her heart swelled with joy. No one had ever said anything quite so beautiful before. She was finally beginning to see herself as these two men saw her and for once she didn't feel like an outcast or a freak. She felt like a woman—a desirable woman.

"Thank you both." She set the dagger and the leather wrapping on the table next to the beautiful blue fabric. Leaning forward, she brushed a soft kiss across Malik's mouth. Their lips clung for the briefest of seconds before releasing. Sighing, she pulled back and leaned toward Kalis. He met her halfway, brushing his lips across hers.

"Open up!" A hard fist thumped on the door, making them all jump. Zarina's foot caught Kalis in the leg and he stumbled backward, landing on his bottom on the floor. The look of disbelief on his face made her giggle. Malik sighed and stood, setting Zarina on her feet.

"I know you're in there and you better not be doing what I think you're doing." They could hear the humor in the male voice.

Zarina gasped as she struggled to swallow her laughter. "That's your father." She felt like a child caught doing something that she shouldn't have been doing.

Kalis heaved himself up off the floor and straightened his clothing. Zarina glanced down at her dress, smoothing down the skirts. "I told you I'd be careful." Kalis checked her laces one final time and smoothed her hair over her shoulder. She knew that he was referring to more than just her dress—knew it was a promise for all times.

"I know." She patted his chest.

He grinned at her. "But I didn't say anything about your hair."

She shook her head as he walked to the door with a huge smile on his face. Malik came toward her with a brush in his hands. She reached out to take it from him, but he shook his head. Turning her back to his chest, he quickly undid her braid.

Kalis unbolted the door and pulled it open, sticking his head out through the opening. "We'll be along in just a minute."

"You'd better be or your mother will be down here next to drag you all to the ceremony." Talon's voice was filled with laughter as Kalis closed the door on him.

Malik drew the brush through her hair, smoothing it all down. He tossed the brush aside and quickly braided her hair, tying the end with a leather thong. "There." He stepped back. "All ready."

Zarina checked her hair with her hand as both men came to stand in front of her. She saw the love she bore them both reflected back at her from their eyes. She offered her hands to them and they claimed them, wrapping their larger ones carefully around hers. "Now I'm ready."

They walked across the room and out of the dwelling. Hand in hand, the three of them strolled toward the center of the village and toward their waiting future.

About the Author

N.J. Walters worked at a bookstore for several years and one day had the idea that she would like to quit her job, sell everything she owned, leave her hometown and write romance novels in a place where no one knew her. And she did. Two years later, she went back to the same bookstore and settled in for another seven years.

Although she was still fairly young, that was when the mid-life crisis set in. Happily married to the love of her life, with his encouragement (more like, "For God's sake, quit the job and just write!") she gave notice at her job on a Friday morning. On Sunday afternoon, she received a tentative acceptance for her first erotic romance novel, *Annabelle Lee*, and life would never be the same.

N.J. has always been a voracious reader of romance novels, and now she spends her days writing novels of her own. Vampires, dragons, time-travelers, seductive handymen and next-door neighbors with smoldering good looks all vie for her attention. And she doesn't mind a bit. It's a tough life, but someone's got to live it.

N.J. welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by N.J. Walters

Anastasia's Style

Annabelle Lee

Awakening Desires: Capturing Carly

Awakening Desires: Craving Candy

Awakening Desires: Erin's Fancy

Awakening Desires: Katie's Art of Seduction

Dalakis Passion 1: Harker's Journey

Dalakis Passion 2: Lucian's Delight

Dalakis Passion 3: Stefan's Salvation

Drakon's Treasure

Ellora's Cavemen: Dreams of the Oasis IV *anthology*

Ellora's Cavemen: Legendary Tails IV *anthology*

Heat Wave

Jessamyn's Christmas Gift

Tapestries: Bakra Bride

Tapestries: Christina's Tapestry

Unmasking Kelly



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com