



Loose Id

THE
WARRIOR'S
Gift

BONNIE DEE

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Dedication

To all my loyal readers, thank you for your time and attention. I hope I've given you some satisfying journeys to other times and places.

Chapter One

“Just because it’s tradition doesn’t make it right, Mother.” Katya dared to say what she had been thinking for a long time. There was no reason to hold back now since she might not live to see another day. “Not for us and not for them.” She gestured out the window toward the high wall of the compound looming on the hill a league away. The sun rose from the other side of the hill, clearing the peaks of the buildings before it shone into her room. She’d looked at those foreboding gray walls and wondered about the men who lived inside it almost every morning of her life.

“It’s unnatural breeding men for nothing except fighting and killing.” Katya turned from her bedroom window and faced her mother, Pellina. “And it’s wrong for us to depend on them.”

“It is the way. The Warriors are all that has kept the people of Geveldon safe and living without fear of invasion for almost a hundred years.” Pellina flitted around Katya, straightening her daughter’s simple white linen shift, fussing with her long, loose, flowing hair, and arranging artful ringlets down the sides of her pale face. “It’s a terrible price we pay, but also a great honor to be chosen as a bride.”

Katya slapped her mother's hands away and tucked the auburn curls behind her ears. "Yes, it's a terrible price, but 'we' don't pay it. The young women do. And we aren't brides but chattel, used and discarded by the Warriors like rag dolls." Tears pricked her eyes as she grabbed her mother's hand and looked into her face. "This is me, Mama, your own daughter! Do I mean nothing to you? How can you permit this to happen? How can you let them take me?"

Her mother's bottom lip trembled, and tears welled in her eyes. "Of course I care. I'll miss you terribly, but there is no choice. You must look on what you are about to do as a sacrifice for your people, for their protection and well-being. The Guardians of the Warriors are respected holy men. They know what is best for all of us."

"But this is *my* life, my future. No one should have a right to decide it for me." Katya's control broke and she dissolved into tears.

Her mother enveloped her in a warm embrace, stroking her back and crooning comforting words, while Katya sobbed out her fear of the unknown future awaiting her. In a few short hours, she would be given to the Warrior who had most distinguished himself in the last battle against the invading forces of the Revocs. The fierce mountain-dwellers occasionally swooped down on the valley lands below, although no village had actually been attacked by Revocs in years. The invaders were always intercepted by the Warriors before they could reach their destination.

Katya would become a sexual plaything for the Warrior, a man whose sole purpose in life was to destroy. Maidens were periodically chosen from the villages as tribute to their protectors, and once they disappeared into the mysterious compound, they were never seen again.

It was said the Warriors were little more than beasts with no knowledge of the world and little capacity for speech. The Guardians took them from their parents as children, another "honor" for those families chosen. They were raised in an almost monastic life in the gloomy settlement on the hill, but their religion was killing. They were taught a warrior's

skills and nothing else. Isolated not only from the outside world, but also from each other, the Warriors were kept in cells. Their only socialization or outlet was through combative play. Although well-fed and housed, they were not offered any diversion. Sexual release was rarely provided. Instead they were taught to sublimate all their desires into bloodlust. At least those were the rumors.

Various villagers claimed to know someone who had spoken with one of the Guardians, the elite enclave who raised and trained the Warriors. But despite the stories, no one really knew the truth of what went on inside the fortress.

Katya pushed away from her mother, dashing her hand angrily over her eyes. "Say what you will, Mama. This is not right. We tithe a quarter of our crops and goods to the Guardians and give our sons and daughters when required. Yes, the Warriors protect our lands from invaders, but the price is too high. Our freedom is sacrificed for our safety."

She whirled away from her mother and strode toward the window, staring once more at the ominous, dark walls on the hill. "I will comply; I'll give myself to this beast for the sake of our family's honor and our people's protection, but I'll never believe it is right."

Inside she added, *And I won't submit to him without a fight.*

* * * * *

As the sun waned toward late afternoon, the villagers turned out for the bridal procession, smiling and calling out congratulations as if it were an actual celebration. The false cheer in their voices and the fake smiles on their faces disgusted Katya. She knew that a few of them had lost their own children to the Guardians.

Katya followed the flower-strewn path leading away from the village. The closer she drew to the forbidding stone wall of the fortress, the more her heart raced. The procession of villagers stopped following Katya and her parents when they came within a hundred yards of the massive oak doors. The congratulatory cries died away, and the people watched in reverent silence as the door in the wall swung slowly open.

A Guardian in scarlet ceremonial robes walked out. He was tall and clean-shaven, including his scalp. He approached Katya, who stood trembling between her mother and father. Looking down at her with expressionless, pale blue eyes, he said, "Young woman, you have the honor of being chosen to serve your people as a Warrior's bride." He raised his voice and gazed at the crowd behind her. "Tell all assembled here that you enter this union of your own free will."

Katya's jaw clenched. Words of denial trembled on her tongue, but one glance at her mother and father's anguished faces stopped them. Their life would be unbearable if they had to live with the shame of their daughter resisting -- and it would do no good anyway. The young women chosen always disappeared into the compound one way or another.

Despite her heart clamoring against her breastbone like a bird trapped in a cage, Katya answered as required. "I do." There was nothing else to reply. She knew the penalty for refusal. When she was a little girl, she'd seen what had happened to the family of a maiden who'd tried to run away. The family was not simply ostracized. In the dead of night they were driven from the community with pitchforks and flaming brands, their lands and possessions seized.

Katya hugged her parents fiercely and kissed them goodbye. Then, clenching her jaw even tighter to keep from weeping, she stepped forward.

The Guardian took her by the arm and led her through the opening in the dark wall she had looked at every morning of her life. The heavy doors closed behind her with a resounding thud, sealing her into her future.

Chapter Two

Katya walked silently beside the Guardian, who offered no words of encouragement. Her legs were trembling so fiercely, she could scarcely keep on her feet, and her heart pounded in her ears. She gazed at the slate-gray buildings on either side of her that she assumed were barracks to house the Warriors. There were small, high windows at intervals along the walls. The path went between two tall buildings like a corridor, giving the feeling of being indoors, even though a slice of blue sky arched overhead.

The sounds of clashing swords and shouting men came from up ahead. As Katya and her escort rounded the corner of the building, a wide open courtyard central to all the buildings came into view. Pairs of men were engaged in mock combat. Huge, hulking brutes with arms and legs the size of tree trunks thrust, parried, and hacked away at each other, wearing only light leather padding to protect them from the blows.

Katya wasn't certain they were simply practicing until one man sliced another's arm open and blood gushed onto the iron-stained paving stones of the exercise yard. A whistle blew, and the fighting stopped instantly. Weapons descended and sword points rested on the ground as the Warriors waited meekly with their heads bowed while a red-robed Guardian

came and bound the injured man's arm before ushering him off the field. When the whistle blew again, the fighting continued as though it had never been interrupted.

"In here," her escort snapped.

Katya reluctantly turned away from watching the combatants and stared at the door to the barracks, which she must enter. Her already rapid heart rate ratcheted to the speed of a rabbit running from a wolf, pounding so fast her head was light and she thought she might faint. This was really happening, and there was nothing she could do to save herself from her fate. She vowed that once she was inside the Warrior's chamber she would fight him tooth and nail, making his effort to take her as difficult as she possibly could. She imagined kneeling his groin and gouging her thumbs into his eye sockets, and the pictures in her mind gave her the strength to keep walking.

"Go on." The Guardian's pale eyes narrowed. He grabbed her arm and thrust her through the doorway.

Her bare feet were cold on the stone floor, and blood raced hot inside her body. The hallway was dimly lit with rows of doors leading off from either side of it. Katya wondered how many were occupied right now and how many Warriors were out in the practice yards. She wondered if they would even hear her if she screamed. She certainly knew no one would come to save her.

The corridor seemed to stretch out before them forever and then the Guardian stopped before a door.

Katya's terror intensified. She curled her fingers and squeezed her hands so tightly her nails bit into her palms. Letting out a shaky breath, she renewed her promise to herself not to submit without leaving lasting scars on the man. Her nails were sharp, and her will was strong.

The Guardian's grip on her elbow abruptly tightened. Swinging her to face him, he pressed her up against the wall beside the door. "Before I throw you to the beast, it will do

no harm to take a little taste for myself.” His translucent eyes were no longer expressionless, but dilated dark with lust as he leaned down to cover her mouth with his.

She clamped her lips tight against the unexpected assault and fought his grip on her wrists. Pressing a hand against his chest, Katya pushed with all her might.

He clutched her breast through the loose fabric of her shift and squeezed. When Katya gasped, he slid his tongue into her mouth. One of his legs thrust between hers, and he pressed his erection into her crotch, grinding it against her.

Katya squirmed and twisted in his embrace, too shocked to even be frightened, and when she couldn't break free, she bit down on his tongue ... hard.

The Guardian pulled away, howling in pain. He let go of her, clapping his hands to his lips, then spitting a mouthful of blood on the floor. He glared at Katya and slapped her across the jaw, knocking her head against the wall.

The blow vibrated through her skull. Sharp pain radiated from her cheek and from the side of her head where it had struck the stone. She curled her arms up, covering as much of her body and face as she could in anticipation of another blow.

But the Guardian simply seized her shoulder and pulled her roughly away from the wall. “Never mind. I'll have my use of you later.” He laughed harshly. “If you're still alive by the time he's finished with you.”

Katya trembled with rage, fear, and shock as he slid back a sturdy deadbolt on the doorjamb and opened the latch. He took her arm again and thrust her through the open door, calling out, “Here is your gift. Try not to break her.”

The door slammed shut behind her, and she heard the deadbolt slide into place. She hadn't thought it possible for her pulse to race any faster, but now feared she might pass out as blood roared in her ears and black spots blurred her vision. Katya swayed on her feet, blinking, trying to focus in the dim light. She peered around for the hulking brute she knew waited within the shadows somewhere.

The room was tiny and spare, but clean. There was an iron cot, neatly made up, a washstand, a few clothes hung on hooks along one wall, and a chair placed in a corner. Filling the chair with his massive frame was the Warrior, her intended “groom.” He’d been filing the edge of a long knife, but his hands stilled and his gaze lifted to regard Katya as the door shut. The man stared at her with intense, unfathomable eyes, so dark they appeared black. They glittered in the light of the oil lamp on the wall. His black eyebrows drew together in a frown, shadowing his deep-set eyes further.

The hair flowing past his shoulders was also black, but with coppery highlights where the light struck it. He had prominent cheekbones, an angular jaw and chin, and a sharp blade of a nose. His full-lipped mouth softened and balanced the hard masculinity of his face. His lips parted slightly as he continued to watch her with his deep, searching eyes.

The Warrior rose from the chair, the knife dangling at his side. He was a giant, and his overwhelming presence filled the room.

It was like being caged with a wild beast. Could he even understand her if she spoke? She offered a weak smile and said slowly and clearly, “My name is Katya.”

He stared at her so blankly her doubts about his ability to comprehend increased. The sleeveless tunic he wore stretched across broad shoulders, revealing massive biceps. His chest strained against the gray cotton. Below the loose-fitting shirt, a pair of black pants encased his long legs, and beneath them his feet were bare.

“I am to be your bride.” At the word “bride,” a memory of her friend’s wedding the previous fall flashed in Katya’s mind. She remembered the joy and music and flowers that had marked Greta’s wedding day and contrasted it with this horrible, twisted marriage. “What is your name?”

He gazed at her for long, hushed moments before speaking, his voice hoarse and halting as though rarely used. “I am Turan.” He fell silent again, studying her from head to toe.

Countless seconds passed. Katya thought she would go mad from suspense. If he was going to assault her, then let it begin. She was ready to fight him. Her blood raced, and her fists clenched by her sides. "What do you want me to do?" she finally burst out in exasperation. She couldn't stand her fear of the unknown another moment.

He shook his head, his brows knit in a frown.

"Should I stand here or sit on the bed? What?" Katya's fear was overshadowed by anger. She had been afraid all day and was tired of it.

He took a step toward her, then stopped. "I don't know."

"You don't know?" she snapped, raising her eyebrows. The hard-muscled, rock of a man approaching her made her want to break, run for the door, and pound on it until her fists bled, but she held her chin up and faced him. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know what I am to do with you. They didn't tell me." His voice was quiet, but vibrated in the stillness of the room, as rumbling and warm as a cat's purr -- a very, very large cat.

Katya stared into his obsidian eyes under anxiously knit brows and realized he wasn't about to attack her and throw her down. "You don't know what a man and woman do together?"

Turan shook his head.

Katya looked down at his crotch. She saw from the bulge beneath his pants that his body knew what to do even if he didn't. She bit her lip and thought quickly. It was possible to buy some time and maybe even escape the situation if she was lucky. "Men and women ... talk," she told him. "You sit in the chair. I'll sit over here on the bed, and we can talk for awhile."

The frown smoothed from his forehead. Turan sat down and watched her expectantly. With his eyes wide and curious, he looked much younger and less frightening, an innocent giant.

Katya perched on the edge of his bed, her hands twisting nervously in the skirt of her gown. "So ... what do you do here all day?"

"Fight."

Katya pictured the engagements she'd seen in the exercise yard. "All day?"

"I eat." He paused, then added, "And exercise."

"When you're alone in your room how do you fill your time?"

He lifted the knife he'd been sharpening when she arrived.

"You care for your weapons. That's all? Do you have no other chores? No entertainments like storytelling, music, or card games to pass the time?"

He shook his head, and from his slight frown, she guessed he wasn't even sure what all those words meant.

She smoothed a wrinkle out of the bedcover with her hand. "Do you talk with the other warriors?"

"No, we fight," he repeated patiently, as though explaining something obvious to a child.

The rumor was true, then. The men had no stimulation for their minds, only exercises and mock battles. They were perfect killing machines, brought up to understand nothing except orders and to channel all their energies into fighting. Katya's heart clenched at the thought of their sad, empty lives. She wondered how they kept from killing themselves from loneliness or boredom. "Do you remember your parents or the village you came from?"

He shook his head.

"You must have been very young when they took you." She didn't know what else to say. It was clear he had nothing to contribute to a conversation. Katya was staggered by the implications of a whole life lived without family or interaction with other people, a life with no display of love or affection. It was a wonder he was sane. Perhaps he wasn't.

"My parents live in the nearest village," she said. "My father is the miller. That means he grinds wheat into flour. I have no brothers or sisters, but my best friend is like a sister to me. Her name is Greta. We used to swim in the river or play in the woods when our chores were finished, but now she's married, so we don't play as we did when we were girls. I like to sew. Well, not sew, perhaps, but I do like embroidery. And I like to sing. I have a dog named Cee. He's brown and white and stands about this tall." She demonstrated, leaning over to hold her hand a couple of feet off the floor. "His tail curls up over his back, and it's very feathery. I've taught him some tricks, but he won't do them most of the time."

Turan watched her intently, but offered no comment on her nervous babble.

Katya looked around the room, searching for anything to spark conversation. She glimpsed a pale mark scratched into the darker gray of the wall, far down and almost hidden by the head of the bed. She leaned toward it, pushing the flat pillow aside to reveal markings, a primitive picture etched into the stone. "You did this?" She looked at Turan.

He rose from his chair, looking alarmed at her discovery.

"It's very nice." She traced her finger over the circle and wavy shapes, trying to decipher their meaning. "What is it a picture of?"

"The sky." The husky rasp of his voice sent a pleasant shiver through her, like fingers dancing up her spine.

Immediately, Katya saw that the round disc was the sun and the wavy shapes, flying birds. "Beautiful. Did you use your knife to make it?"

He walked over and replaced the pillow against the wall, hiding the etching. Before he did, Katya saw that the picture extended below the level of the bed. He must pull the bed away from the wall to work on his drawing.

Her stomach tightened at the heart-wrenching image of a lonely man trying to create beauty in his dark life. She craned her neck to look up at Turan, towering over her, and felt a

different kind of leap in her stomach. He was so big and overwhelming. Heat radiated off his body, sending waves of warmth through her.

Katya's cheeks burned from his heat as she patted the bed beside her. "Sit down." She couldn't believe she was making the offer; she should be trying to distance him, not encourage closeness. Turan might become aroused, let his body take over, and follow the primal impulse to tumble her back on the bed and have his way with her. Surely he must gratify himself with his own hand in the long, lonely hours in this chamber. He must have *some* idea of what to do with the thing between his legs.

Turan smoothed his hand over the pillow and sat down beside her on the bed. His weight settling on the mattress shifted Katya toward him. There was no man in her village so large, and she would have found his presence intimidating if he were not so endearingly innocent.

"You've never been touched before? Never kissed anyone or been held in someone's arms?" She marveled at her audacity in asking, but couldn't believe that lacking female companionship, the Warriors didn't make do with pleasuring one another. The brickmaker's son, Bray had told her some men did such things.

Turan didn't respond. Maybe he didn't know what a kiss was.

Katya was a virgin and somewhat ignorant of sex herself, but she'd seen animals mate and couples grope in the dark behind the barn during harvest dances. She'd also had a special friendship with Bray and done her share of kissing and touching. She knew what people did together, and how they gave one another comfort. She pitied Turan and wanted to offer him some respite from his bleak existence. Reaching out her hand, she stroked the side of his face; it was rough with stubble and scratched her palm. The scratching sent another of those exciting shivers down her back. Her nipples beaded tightly beneath her loose shift.

Katya traced a puckered, white ridge of scar tissue that ran from his temple down to his jaw with her finger. His skin was warm and his bones hard beneath it.

Turan exhaled audibly. His eyes drifted closed at her touch, and his jaw tightened. He swallowed hard, the corded tendons of his neck moving in fascinating ways.

She smoothed her hand over his jaw to the muscles of his neck and shoulder, powerful as a horse's haunch. His pulse beat beneath her hand, and when she finally brought it to rest on his chest, his heart pounded so hard it felt like it might explode through his rib cage. Her own heart raced to match it, and her chest grew tight. An unfocused yearning bloomed inside her.

The Warrior made a low, choked sound in his throat, and the desperation in it made the hair rise on the nape of her neck.

Katya took his hand and pressed it against her cheek. His fingers were rough and callused on her skin, but gently explored the contours of her face, wandering over her forehead, eyes, nose, cheeks, and lips like a blind man's.

Her eyes closed partway as she enjoyed his touch. "Feel me?"

Turan nodded. He opened his eyes and gazed at her with a mixture of awe and a powerful, frightening hunger. "So soft!"

Again, she felt a stab of yearning at the sound of his voice. Touched by his sweetness and drawn in by his need, she ignored the inner voice screaming at her to stop. Katya leaned in and placed her mouth over his, kissing him with a gentle pressure. The contrast between the full, cushiony softness of his lips and the rest of Turan's hard angles was a marvel. At first his mouth remained still beneath hers, but as she kissed him again, he responded, his lips opening slightly and moving against hers.

Katya had spent much of last summer with Bray, kissing and cuddling in haystacks, meadows, and beneath the forest trees -- anyplace they could be alone together. She knew what felt good to her and what a boy liked. Sorrow stabbed her at the memory of Bray. If she hadn't caught him doing much more than kissing another girl, she probably would have married him by now and been safe in the village instead of here.

Her attention turned back to Turan, and suddenly, “here” didn’t seem such a bad place to be. She traced his lips with her tongue, then slipped it inside his mouth, so wet and hot. An aroused quiver ran through her at the sensation. She woke his sleeping tongue by stroking it with hers, enticing it to play. Her hands threaded through his thick, long hair, as glossy and smooth as a raven’s wing.

Turan groaned quietly. His arms encircled her body. His hands splayed against her back and moved up and down its length, feeling the weight and shape of her. He might be untutored about sex, but he had the primal moves of lovemaking embedded in his very cells. He kissed Katya without hesitation now, possessing her mouth with searching tongue and stroking lips. The power in his arms and the starving passion of his kiss were alarming.

Another vibration of lust swept through her at the feeling of his strength surrounding her, holding her fast. Turan’s hard chest beneath her hand, his soft mouth on hers, raised feelings in her akin to dark clouds piling up on the horizon that would soon sweep across the land and break in a violent storm. Arousing him had been dangerous. He wouldn’t stop at just a kiss or two -- and maybe she wouldn’t be able to, either.

When the Warrior pulled her half onto his lap and she felt the hard bulge of his erection thrusting up from his groin pressing into her hip, Katya grew nervous. She pulled away, gasping, and pressed him back with her hand on his chest. “Wait! Wait.” She licked her tingling lips and touched them with her fingertips, wondering what she’d been thinking to awaken this sleeping giant. What had happened to her vow to fight him off with all her strength?

Turan’s dark eyes glowed like two banked coals ready to ignite into flame. “Please. More,” he begged hoarsely. “Please.”

She suddenly realized that, despite the fact he could snap her in two if he wished, she was the one with the power. He didn’t intend to hurt or force her. All the control was in her hands. It was like feeling the pull of a strong horse on the reins of a cart. The animal had the strength to run away with the cart, but was obedient to its master’s will.

Katya's sex tightened and grew wet. Her nipples peaked at the raw desire in Turan's voice. Her body had reacted like this when Bray kissed and held her, but not nearly so strongly. Like Turan, she wanted more. Much more. She wanted something a woman shouldn't share with anyone except her husband. But then, this Warrior was her husband, according to the dictates of the Guardians. It was inevitable he would possess her. Why not now when her pulse was pounding and her body begging for more?

Katya smiled and took pity on him. She inhaled deeply, then hooked her hands around the back of his neck and pulled him down to her for another kiss.

Turan groaned into her mouth and hugged her tight against him. His hands gripped her body through the thin, homespun fabric of her garment. She combed her fingers through his long hair. They tangled in it, and he mirrored her move, letting her long, smooth tresses sift between his fingers before cupping the back of her head. Then he grew adventurous, leaving the terrain of her mouth and letting his lips travel down her neck, their soft touch tickling and sending a tremor through her.

Katya made a soft sound and tilted her head back to allow him access to her throat.

He licked down the long column before settling his mouth over the pulse point in the hollow and sucking gently.

Closing her eyes, she gave into the pleasure of his nuzzling kisses for several delicious moments, then pressed her hands against his chest and pushed him away again.

Turan reluctantly pulled his mouth from her throat and looked at her through unfocused, half-lidded eyes.

"Wait just a second." She reached for the laces fastening the front of her shift, not allowing herself to think about what she was doing as she slowly bared her chest.

He watched, eyes growing slowly wider, as she untied the laces and slipped the fabric down her shoulders. His gaze riveted on her round breasts and the rose-pink buds in the center of each.

Katya's nipples pebbled like stone in the cool air and at the hot caress of Turan's eyes. He blinked and stared some more, completely mesmerized by her feminine assets.

She laughed at his reaction, which infused her with a sense of power, making her feel utterly desirable. A primal awareness of herself as "woman" jolted her. Until this moment, she hadn't really thought of herself as more than a girl -- Katya, the miller's daughter. In an instant she'd grown to the fullness of her womanhood.

Turan's gaze shot to her mouth, and he frowned as if he didn't recognize the sound of laughter.

"Go ahead." She took his hand and placed it over a breast. "You can feel them."

Turan encompassed the full mound in his huge hand and lightly squeezed, before brushing his thumb over the taut nub in the center. A bolt of fire shot straight from his stroking thumb down to her crotch. Katya had never felt anything like this heat when Bray grabbed at her chest. In fact, she used to find his rough grasping somewhat annoying. But Turan's gentle, almost reverent exploration sent powerful waves of longing surging through her. The tough pads of his fingers scraped her tender flesh, leaving a burning trail in their wake.

He reached to stroke and knead her other breast. His coal black eyes studied her chest like it held all the secrets of the universe, and his tongue darted out to lick his lips. He inclined his head slightly as though he would take her breast in his mouth.

Katya imagined what that might feel like, heat and wetness covering her nipple, the pull of his mouth as he suckled there. Her jaw clenched and her body shuddered -- from the cool air in the room brushing her skin, she told herself. She didn't just want, but *needed* him to put his lips to her breast. The wantonly sexual urge overcame her and she completely ignored the warning voice in her head telling her to stop. "Yes, you can taste them, too." She sucked in a breath and held it, anticipating the feeling of his mouth. It was something she'd never let Bray do. Squeezing her breast through her dress was the closest he'd ever been

allowed. But this man, this Warrior, was supposed to be her husband, wasn't he? She excused her weakness again. So it was right to let him to do such things, to encourage him to do anything and everything he wanted with her body. *Anything!* A thrill ran through her at the idea of it.

Turan didn't need another invitation to lean down and draw one nipple into the depths of his hot mouth. His tongue rolled over the hard nub and when he sucked, the tugging sent a renewed lick of fire down to her sex.

Katya exhaled her pent-up breath, and her eyes drifted closed as she thrust her chest toward his mouth and stroked the back of his head encouragingly. Turan licked and sucked one breast while fondling the other, then switched to give equal attention to her right breast.

She stroked his long hair. "Mm, that feels so good."

Encouraged by her praise, he sucked a little harder and rolled her nipple between his fingers with a little pinch that drew a gasp from her. His tentative exploration grew more controlled and demanding, and her excitement increased.

Her inner thighs were wet with the juices leaking from her clenching pussy. The steady glow between her legs pulsed hotter and hotter. Too hot to be covered. She wanted her dress the rest of the way off, but hesitated. There would be no turning back once she'd uncovered her sex, which would be making a clear offer of her body to him. But what had she imagined all the kisses and touches were leading to? Giving all of herself was inevitable now.

Katya interrupted Turan from his lavish attention to her breasts. He groaned in protest as she pushed him away.

Rising, she pushed her dress the rest of the way down her hips, letting it drop to the floor. She stepped out of the circle of white fabric and stood naked before him.

Turan's gaze traveled up and down her nude body, feasting on the sight. Her flesh felt like his fingers were touching every inch of her, so intense was his focus. He looked like a

starving man being presented with a full meal. She'd never felt more desirable or beautiful than at that moment.

"Now you." She reached toward him.

Turan lifted his arms so she could draw his shirt over his head and cast it away. His shoulders, chest, and abdomen were packed with muscle, more than Katya had ever seen on the village boys working in the fields. His skin was a map of battle scars. Ridges where the flesh had torn and healed crookedly and areas of pink skin that marked severe burns told the story of his brutal life. Between the patchwork of pain, his skin was tan and smooth, but for a light sprinkling of black hair on his chest. On his flat stomach, below the navel, the dusting of hair continued in a trail that led to the waistband of his pants. And behind the pants, a large bulge marked his erection.

Katya swallowed, and her stomach tightened as she imagined what his member might look like free of the confining material. She dragged her attention back up his body to his powerful shoulders. She reached out hesitantly to run her hands over his shoulders and biceps, across the expanse of his sculpted chest and down toward his belly. Beneath her palms, his skin felt like the soft swan's-down cloak she'd had as a child, only marred by the harsh scars of battle. His skin twitched at her light touch, rousing an answering twitch in her loins. She smiled, amused at his reaction to her stroking hands. He was so enormous and broad across the chest and shoulders, he would have been frightening if his eyes weren't so wide and gentle. Katya could see he wouldn't use his strength to hurt her. Still, touching him felt a little like teasing the Gunderson's big, black bull as it stood somnolent in the pasture. He might suddenly turn wild and trample her.

But Turan gazed at her with an expression of adoration as she continued to stroke his torso, moving lower, over the flat expanse of his stomach and to the fastening of his pants. His stomach jumped violently as her hands brushed against the soft trail of hair leading down from his navel.

Katya bit her bottom lip, and struggled to untie the string on his pants, eager -- and afraid -- to see what lay inside. Yes, this was definitely like waking the Gunderson's bull, and she was just as curious and determined to test the limits as she'd been as a child playing with the dangerous beast. She pulled the front open, and his cock sprang out, thick and erect, from its dark thatch of pubic hair. It pointed arrogantly at her, as though demanding her attention and stating, *Here I am! Tremble before me.*

She was intimidated by its length and girth and not quite sure what she was supposed to do next. For a moment, she simply stared at the swollen, dusky-red head protruding from the foreskin and the long, veined shaft quivering with life.

Turan reached out, took her hand, and molded her fingers around him. His member felt hot and stiff in her fist, velvet skin over a pulsing, living organ. He sucked in his breath sharply as he moved her hand up and down the silken skin of his cock. After several strokes, he let go so she could continue on her own. His eyes closed a moment, and he swallowed hard before opening them again to watch her work him.

Katya grasped him firmly and slowly glided her hand along the hard length. The tiny slit at the top of the smooth, round head oozed pearly drops. She wondered what that liquid might taste like. Her married friend, Greta once confided to her that men loved to be taken into a woman's mouth. At the time, Katya had been horrified at the disgusting thought, but now she was curious to find out how Turan would react to such a thing. There was no one to say it was right or wrong, so she followed her impulse as she'd been doing from the moment she'd entered the cell.

Dropping down to her knees on the floor before him, she tugged on his pants. Turan lifted his hips so she could pull them down his legs. Katya looked up at him as she lifted his penis in her hand and slowly kissed the tip. She rolled her tongue over the head, tasting the salty musk experimentally, then slowly closed her mouth over it and drew it deeply inside. Turan gasped loudly. He mumbled something under his breath, a word she didn't know. His

chest rose and fell rapidly with his panting breaths and he gazed at her in shock as she bent to her task.

The sight of his intense arousal thrilled her. She felt a sense of power in controlling his pleasure. She sucked in as much as she could of his thick member and stroked the rest of the big shaft with her hand. The taste was salty, and the texture smooth and solid. Beneath the silken covering was hard steel that pulsed with the coursing of his blood. Reaching down between his legs, she fondled his heavy sac, cupping and weighing the egg-shaped balls inside. Holding and sucking his shaft was like nothing she'd ever imagined. This part was what made him male, and her now-intimate knowledge of its taste and texture made her feel more female. Every part of her body seemed to swell and yearn toward him like a flower opening at the touch of the morning sun.

Turan groaned loudly. He rested his hands lightly on her head at first, then pushed them into her hair and held her head steady as he thrust into her mouth. His hips jerked faster as he grew even more aroused and began to lose control.

Katya knew what came from a man's penis. She'd seen farm animals coupling, and she understood Turan was near his release. Uncertain about having him do that in her mouth, she let go of his erection and stopped fondling his balls. The slick, engorged organ was mottled red and deep purple at the head. It had miraculously swelled even larger. The idea of accepting that huge instrument into her body was both frightening and exhilarating. She looked at Turan's half-closed eyes and gasping mouth. "Don't let go yet. There's more."

Her heart hammered in her chest as she asked herself again what she was doing. She could bring him to release with her hand and keep her virginity for a bit longer. But it was long past the time to consider that. Her need was close to matching his. Her sex clenched and released rhythmically, and her thighs were wet with her juices. Her body desired him, craved the feel of him inside her. It might hurt; he was so very large and her passage narrow, but she was as ready as she'd ever be, throbbing with desire. The moment was here. The bull was about to be unleashed.

Rising from her knees, she climbed onto the bed to lie beside him. He still sat there, dark-eyed with arousal, his face flushed and his breath rasping in and out, watching her, waiting for her cue. He grabbed for her hand and held it. Katya held his gaze and tugged on his hand. "You lie on top of me now," she explained. "That's what comes next."

Turan obeyed before the words were even out of her mouth. His heavy body pinned her to the bed, although he supported most of his weight on his arms, muscles bulging with the effort. He loomed over her like a big, powerful animal and it was both intimidating and exhilarating. A frown of concentration knit his dark brows as he positioned his cock at the opening to her wet slit.

Katya reached down between them and guided the head into place. The lips of her pussy tensed as she separated her folds and placed him at her entrance. She drew a deep breath, afraid, now that the moment had come. Would it hurt? He was so big; it didn't seem possible he would fit inside her.

Turan pushed into her, slowly, inexorably, stretching and filling her. It was different than what she'd expected from what Greta had said about her wedding night. The lips of her entrance stretched to accommodate him, which felt odd, but didn't hurt exactly. And the feeling of being filled was so satisfying. Then his cock hit resistance inside her and tried to push through the barrier.

Katya cried out at the sharp, tearing sensation. Her body tensed, rejecting the intrusion. Her thighs trembled and her muscles clenched around his girth, trying to stop his slow slide into her depths. *This* was what Greta had been talking about.

At her cry, Turan stopped. He'd been gazing down at the juncture where their bodies joined, watching his cock disappear into her. At her yelp of pain, he looked up. "Does it hurt? I don't want to hurt you."

His concern reassured her. He hadn't meant to hurt her, and really, now that her body had adjusted, the pain was already receding. Her desire to have him inside her hadn't

diminished. Her body still craved his. She gave him a small smile. "It's good. Keep on, but go slowly."

He nodded and carefully pushed the rest of the way inside her tight channel until he was completely engulfed by her body, seated deep within her.

The stab of pain subsided to a milder ache. All Katya was aware of now was how full she felt. It was an amazing sensation. She murmured, "Good."

Turan slowly drew out the glistening length of his shaft, leaving her body bereft and empty, yawning and yearning for him. Then he eased back in, filling her once more.

Katya clenched her inner muscles around him and cupped her hands around his buttocks, pulling him deeper. She moaned in satisfaction as she arched her pelvis to meet his thrust.

Gaining confidence, Turan began to pump rhythmically in and out. Deep groans of contentment reverberated in his chest. Faster and faster, he thrust into her. Her tight, virgin canal was rubbed raw by the friction. She bit her lip, holding back a moan of discomfort. And then she looked up at his face, contorted into an expression halfway between ecstasy and pain. His eyebrows were drawn together in a frown. His eyes were tightly shut and his mouth open and panting. Slick with sweat, his chest and shoulders gleamed in the faint, yellow light from the candle. The sight of his mounting bliss touched her deeply, abruptly changing her pain to pleasure. The soreness inside her seemed like nothing and she was able to focus again on the marvelous sense of being completely filled.

Running her hands up his back, she clutched his shoulders and wrapped her ankles around his legs, grappling him to her. Her body shook under his hard thrusts. It was heady holding that much power in her arms, and she loved that she could move him to ecstasy.

Closing her eyes, she concentrated fully on the friction of their bodies and the sensations percolating through her. Her body tingled all over as it rubbed against his. Sweat rose on her forehead, and her hips strained upward as she moaned. Her pussy throbbed, and

something inexplicable began to happen deep inside her. There was a glittering sensation, like the pulse of stars in the night sky or the sun glinting on the river on a sunny day. It grew stronger, the little lights joining together into a brighter glow. Her whole body stretched and reached for something ... what? She didn't know. It was something older than time, something primal and deep, something she'd never known she was lacking, but which she wanted, needed now with every fiber of her being.

Desire coiled up from her core, stronger and stronger and exploded in a sparkling fountain of light. She was flying, like when she'd launch herself from the rope swing into the river near her home, a brief, weightless flight through the air, then a plunge into the water.

Katya cried out, arching her neck and throwing her head back against the pillow. She clutched Turan's shoulders so hard her nails dug into his flesh.

Suddenly, he let out a loud howl of release, as primitive as a wolf baying, and his cock pulsed inside her as he spent his seed. His thrusts slowly subsided until he was cradled between her legs, replete and unmoving. He groaned and relaxed, letting his full body weight collapse on her. There was a sobbing catch in his breathing, and Katya felt the hot wetness of tears on her shoulder. She was moved by the depth of his emotion and shaken by her own. She'd never expected such an enormous tumult of feeling to be part of the sex act. No one had told her that would happen. Tears pricked her eyes, too, and she wrapped her arms around Turan, holding him tight and crooning comforting words. She whispered, "That's what men and women do together."

He remained quiet, lying with his head burrowed into the crook of her neck and shoulder, as his breathing slowed and evened. His hand stroked her hair away from her face and across the pillow. He kissed and nuzzled her neck. "It's good," he murmured at last.

She continued to hold him until he fell asleep on top of her, his great weight almost too much to bear. It crushed her and compressed her chest so she could scarcely breathe, but she enjoyed the intimacy of their embrace and didn't want to wake him from his deep slumber.

Katya had no idea what was going to happen to her next in this strange place. She was still afraid, but not of Turan. Now she was full of righteous anger on his behalf as well as her own. The way the Guardians used the Warriors to protect the land from invaders was wrong. No man should be conditioned to fight and be cut off from all the other aspects of life. Katya imagined inciting rebellion among the slavish Warriors, making them see there was another way to live. Almost an impossible task, considering she was a slave herself with no idea how much longer she might be allowed to live.

She rubbed a hand up and down the smooth, hot back of her ... husband -- how strange the thought was -- and drifted into a dream in which she led an army into battle.

Chapter Three

Turan woke knowing something was different, not the room or the light coming in the window, but something. His world had changed, spun off into a completely new direction that made his head whirl. He struggled to remember why his mind seemed suddenly bigger, more open -- like a window with the breeze blowing through, airing out his thoughts.

It only took him a moment to remember what was new.

The woman stirred beneath him, warm and soft as nothing he'd ever experienced, softer than his thin mattress, warmer than his rough blanket. She was beyond comprehension -- small, delicate, so breakable, and yet wiry strong. He couldn't have imagined such an astounding being existed.

One time, when Turan was with a small band of Warriors scouting the Northern Mountains, they were set upon by the Abrogesians, fierce mountain tribesmen, attacking from the cliffs above. Surrounded on all sides, it had required all their skill to fight free of the ambush and quell the enemy. When the battle was finally won, the land littered with dead and dying men, the Chief Trainer had commended them. He said they'd faced impossible odds and accomplished a miracle fighting their way free of the enemy.

At the time, standing blood-stained, gasping for breath, and clutching a wound in his side, Turan hadn't understood the concept of a "miracle." Fighting and defeating enemies was what he did; it was his reason for being, but it wasn't special. Now, for the first time, he comprehended what a miracle meant. It was something seemingly impossible that happened anyway.

Katya was a miracle.

He rolled off of her, aware he must be crushing her tiny body, and he lay watching her sleep. She was beautiful beyond belief, lying in the small square of pale moonlight shining through the window. He could gaze forever at her perfectly-formed features. Her wild mane of red-brown hair framed an oval face. Slender eyebrows arched over two crescents of black eyelashes, which rested against her pale cheeks. Her nose was slightly upturned at the tip. Her lips were full and pink and soft ... so very soft.

He reached out to brush his fingertip over them. They were like flower petals, one of his secret pleasures. Whenever the Warriors were on a long march, Turan seized every opportunity to covertly touch, smell, and even taste the natural world around him. Sharp-scented pine needles, rough bark, and sweet, soft flower petals were irresistible. When he was returned to his cell after a campaign, he would etch pictures of the things he'd seen and spend the long, mindless hours recalling every detail he could about the bigger world.

Katya's lips were like wild roses, soft and pink. He stroked them lightly, and his cock stirred as he remembered what her mouth had looked like stretched around it. His member stiffened even more as he recalled her body's heat surrounding him. He wanted to fill her again. The sensation of releasing inside her had made him feel like a hawk soaring high in the sky, banking and turning on windy updrafts. He craved that sensation of freedom.

Suddenly, Katya's eyes flew open, and she stared wide-eyed at the ceiling for a moment. Her fringe of eyelashes was lush, and he wanted to touch them with his fingertip to find out if they were as soft as they looked. Then, she turned her blue gaze on Turan, and his heart stopped beating for a moment. His breath caught in his throat as their eyes met. A rush

of something strong and fierce poured through him, like the excitement of going into battle, but different. He felt both violently possessive and ripped open and vulnerable. His gut had a pain in it as sharp as a sword wound. The idea that the Guardians would take Katya away from him was inconceivable. He wanted to keep her forever.

She smiled, and the powerful feelings she incited in him increased a hundredfold.

Turan smiled back, unable to find words to express all the emotions pouring through him. He had been taught few words that expressed concepts beyond his basic needs. It was frustrating to have so much passion boiling inside him and to be unable to even give it a name.

Katya's pink tongue darted out and ran over her lips. She swallowed.

"Are you thirsty? I'll get water." Turan scrambled off the bed and brought her a dipper full of tepid water from the bucket in the corner.

Katya sat up, drank thirstily, then handed the dipper back. "Thank you." She'd gathered the blanket around her body, covering it. He wanted to pull the blanket away so he could feast on the sight of her pale skin and supple curves once more.

Turan drank deeply from the almost empty pail before replacing the dipper. He came back to bed and lay down beside her again, wishing there was something else he could offer her. But he had no food in his cell, and that didn't seem sufficient, anyway. He wanted to give her so much more -- colorful flowers, fall leaves, a bright bird, a patch of blue from the sky. He wanted to give her everything beautiful he'd ever seen.

He tugged gently on the blanket covering her breasts, and Katya let him pull it away.

The round, white globes rose and fell with her breathing. He stroked his hand down her chest, molding first one then the other, toying with the erect buds in the center of each. He could happily lie there touching and petting her amazing body forever. "Tell me about your life ... out there. What was it like?"

Katya inhaled, and her breast rose into his caressing hand. "Well, I lived with my parents in a house by the river. Like I told you, my father is the miller. He grinds grains the farmers bring him into flour or cornmeal. The river turns the great stone wheels that crush the grains. In my house, I can hear the mill wheels grinding and the water splashing all the time. It never stops. My bed was in the loft, and from my window, I could see the walls of this fortress. It's strange. Every day of my life, I woke up and looked out my window toward the hill and the walls of this compound, never imagining one day I'd be inside them. Or that you were here -- growing up, too -- and some day we would meet."

Turan nodded, wishing he could tell her that he had looked out across the land and seen the place where she lived, too. He would have liked to say he'd imagined someone like her living there. He wanted to pretend they had a connection long before this day. But he hadn't seen her house or the splashing water of the river. He'd rarely caught glimpses of the village as the Warriors marched away from it toward the hills, to their next battle. Day to day, he never saw anything except the gray walls of the compound. The only experience he had of houses was when the Warriors were unleashed on a village and fought the inhabitants into submission.

Katya shrugged, her soft skin sliding against his hand. "I don't know what else to tell you. I'm an only child. I had a sister, but she died as an infant. I grew up playing with the neighbor children, swimming in the mill pond or river, building forts in the woods, going to the village school, and helping my mother tend the house and geese. My life was very normal until the Guardians notified my parents I was to become a Warrior's bride. A messenger came one afternoon last week to tell us, and yesterday, they brought me here and gave me to you." She made a small sound in her throat and shook her head, as if unable to comprehend the abrupt change in her life.

Turan didn't know all of the words she spoke, but he understood her tone. Katya had lived a happy life, and she'd been stolen from it and forced to come here. She was unhappy.

She hadn't asked for him, didn't want him. His euphoric mood evaporated. He released her breast, returning his hand to his side and clenching his fist against his thigh. "I'm sorry."

Katya turned her head on the pillow to look at him. She caressed the side of his face. "No! I'm not blaming you. This isn't your fault. It's the Guardians. They control everything, even what people think. They keep all of you like slaves and force the villagers to do whatever they're told." She sat up abruptly. "They pretend to be holy men who know what's best for everyone, but I think they're evil. The one who brought me here yesterday attacked me in the hallway."

Turan sat up quickly and faced her. He didn't understand the concepts of *evil* or *holy* but he knew *attacked*. "What did Slavack do to you?" He touched the bruise forming on Katya's jaw and on her opposite temple. He hadn't noticed them before and wouldn't have commented if he had. Bruises and wounds were a daily occurrence for him.

"He grabbed my breast and tried to kiss me, but stopped when I bit his tongue."

The unfamiliar feeling of laughter burst from his throat. He was shocked by her admission. "You *bit* him?" He'd never raised a hand to a Guardian in his life. Seeing what happened to those who did had taught him that it was best to keep quiet and comply. He didn't need a burn from the lightning stick to train him to silence.

Katya nodded. "Then he hit me and knocked my head into the wall. He said he'd have his use of me after you were finished." She frowned, taking Turan's hand in hers and curling her fingers around it. "You must tell me what happens to the women after the Warriors are through with them. No one in the village knows. When girls are taken away, they never come back. People don't talk about it, but there are rumors that women are raped by the Warriors until they can stand no more, and afterward they're killed." Her voice was bitter. "Sacrificed to keep the local villages safe."

Turan frowned and gestured at the small window above them. "Sometimes I hear screams, but I don't know what happens," he admitted. "I've rarely seen a woman. They're

kept in another place, a building farther up the hill. Some cook our meals and clean our cells, but they aren't brought near us. I don't know what happens to them."

"You never talk to the other Warriors? Even when you're outside of the compound on a campaign? There must be some times when you speak to one another." She grasped his hands and squeezed them.

Turan looked down at their joined hands. He didn't know what she wanted from him. He couldn't give her answers he didn't have. "Once in a while, I've heard men talking about the women they've had. Only a few words whispered now and again. The Guardians are always watching."

Katya leaned forward, looking into his eyes. "What hold do they have over you? How can men so physically weak control powerful Warriors?"

He looked away. How could he explain so she would understand? It was more than the lightning sticks. He'd been trained since childhood never to question the authority of the Guardians. The idea of defying them was as impossible as the sun failing to rise in the sky. "They have long poles that shoot lightning," he offered.

"What?" She frowned.

"If someone causes trouble, the pole sends blue lightning into his body, and he falls down unconscious."

"Lightning? That's impossible."

Turan shrugged. "It's what I have seen."

"But you've never experienced it yourself?"

"I never argue. I do what I'm told." Turan was suddenly ashamed to say it. He'd never questioned the way things were before, but now, with Katya facing him and expecting more of him, he felt exposed. She must think him weak and pathetic to be so obedient.

Once, when he was a boy; Turan had been in solitary confinement, wearing the black hood over his head for a long stretch of time, for a minor infraction of the rules. When they

finally took him out into the sun and pulled off the hood, he'd been blinded by the bright sunlight. That was what Katya's eyes on him felt like. They were burning and searching, demanding.

"I don't know how the lightning stick works or what it feels like to be stung by it. Men burned by the blue fire recover in a brief time, but they don't disobey again."

Katya lay back on the bed, resting on her elbows. Her breasts thrust pertly forward, and Turan longed to end all this tiring, confusing talk and suck one into his mouth again.

"I wonder how much time we have?" she said.

The thought of one of the Guardians taking her from him and maybe hurting her, or filling her as he had done, sent a wave of frustrated anger through him. "I won't let them take you," he vowed fiercely. "I'll protect you and keep you safe with me."

"How?" Katya's sky blue eyes were sad. "What can you do? How can you stop them?"

Turan's gaze went to the knife he'd been sharpening when she arrived. It still rested on the chair. An image of himself stabbing Slavack through the heart formed in his mind, but he didn't answer her question.

She cleared her throat. "I need ... I have to ..." She raised her eyebrows at him.

He stared back blankly, trying to figure out what she wanted.

"Relieve myself."

Turan hadn't thought about her needing to do that. It seemed unlikely that a being so perfect and beautiful would have the same base needs he did. He glanced at the blanket pooled on her lap and wondered how she managed without a cock.

He led her to the cubicle on one side of the room, extremely aware of her small, naked body beside him. His cock stirred and stood erect, begging for another chance to delve inside her. In a small alcove in the wall was a tap for water about the height of Turan's head and a drain in the floor. "You can clean and relieve yourself at the same time." He turned on the faucet.

Katya nodded and stepped inside the small space under the weak trickle of water.

For a moment, Turan watched the water wet her hair and run down her body in enticing rivulets. He wanted to lick it off her skin. Instead, he walked to the window, turning his back to give her privacy.

But though he didn't watch her, he pictured her beautiful body, wet and glistening, her hands rubbing up and down the slick flesh, the smooth curves. He'd never in his whole life seen anything as fascinating as her soft, rounded body. He glanced down at his erection, thrust out before him and quivering with need. He craved her with every fiber of his being, and for the first time in a very long time, he considered trying to escape from the compound ... with Katya.

She emerged, dripping, from the water a few moments later. Her red hair was darkened and moisture beaded on her skin. She shivered in the cool chamber.

Turan gave her a rough square of flannel to dry off with, watching with interest as she buffed her nude body a rosy pink. He took the towel from her and patted at her hair for a moment, then threw the material aside and plunged his hands into the damp locks. Cradling her fragile skull in his palms, he leaned down to hungrily kiss her. Her lips were moist and pliant, and when he slipped his tongue inside her mouth, it was wet and hot.

Katya's mouth opened to his, and she assaulted him with equal passion. Her tongue collided with his, then coiled around it. She clutched his shoulders and thrust her body against his, her cool, damp flesh supple and yielding.

Turan took his hands from her hair and ran them down her back, feeling the bumps of her vertebrae beneath his fingertips. He cupped her buttocks, lifting her up and pressing her warm belly against his straining cock. The desire to embed himself in her depths was a desperate, hot fire raging through him, an inescapable basic need like eating or relieving himself or fighting another man into submission.

She wrapped her legs around his hips and her arms around his neck and held on as he carried her to the bed and lay her down across it.

For a long moment, he simply looked down at her beautiful, pale form against his coarse, brown blanket. Then he climbed onto the bed and crawled on top of her, his weight supported on his arms and legs, but his groin pressed into hers.

He kissed her, rubbing his cock slowly over the bright ginger hair at the apex of her thighs, so different from his dark, tangled thatch -- and, of course, without a cock sprouting from it. How strange and special her body was compared to his. He thought of what she'd done for him earlier, taking his cock in her mouth and sucking it so hard he thought she would draw the very life from him. He wondered if women liked being touched down there, too.

Surrendering her lips, Turan kissed her jaw and licked a trail down her throat to her chest. He drew the sweet, rosy point of her left breast into his mouth and rolled his tongue over it, then nibbled very lightly with his teeth.

Katya gave one of those soft moans that made him grow even harder and arched her chest toward his mouth as though presenting an offering.

Turan suckled the raspberry nipple, making her moan even louder, then moved to the other nipple to give it the same treatment. After a bit, he let it go with a wet, popping sound that pleased him and proceeded to kiss all over the white globe of one breast while tenderly kneading the other.

She wiggled beneath him, arching her hips so her sex stroked against his belly and again thrusting her chest toward his mouth and hand, clearly enjoying his attention to her breasts.

Turan was aroused by her reaction and pleased that he could make her want him as desperately as he wanted her. He finished kissing over and around her other breast, then moved down her ribcage, toward her belly.

“Oh!” Katya pushed up on her elbows to watch him descend lower and lower. Her stomach twitched and leaped beneath his stroking hands and licking tongue.

When he reached her pubic mound, he drew back and examined it. He fluffed his fingers through the wiry hair and carefully spread the pink petals to reveal what lay within. Between her legs lay the dark, mysterious shadow of her opening. He cautiously put his finger inside and found it slippery wet and hot as a summer’s day.

Katya gasped, and her muscles contracted around his finger.

Turan spread her juices up toward the top of her folds where a tiny red bud protruded from a little pink hood like the bud on a maple tree in spring. Curiously, he touched it, flicking it with the tip of his finger.

She whined and her hips arched up to meet his touch.

Turan circled his finger lightly on the little nub, drawing moan after moan from Katya. He smiled, feeling as triumphant as the day he’d finally taken Lorcias in combat. He felt he’d discovered something magical. Leaning down, he lapped his tongue where his finger had been and again was rewarded with soft cries. He sampled the taste of her juices, musky and tangy, like nothing he’d ever tasted.

Turan sucked on the red bud, before licking it again, first with the broad flat of his tongue then with the tickling point. He tried varying the pressure and using different strokes, then abandoned her pussy completely and watched as Katya whimpered and raised her hips high off the bed, trying to regain contact with his mouth. Her open desire for his touch was extremely exciting.

Turan relented and began licking her steadily, delving his tongue deep into her slit, then up and over the button that pleased her so much.

She grabbed fistfuls of his hair and wouldn’t let him move away from her again. A scant minute later, she cried out wildly and bucked up against his mouth.

Turan grabbed her hips and pressed her down, holding her still while he ravaged the sensitive spot until she cried out and arched her back off the bed. Her strong reaction made him want to fill her so hard and deep that she'd yell again. He crawled up her body, ready to straddle her and plunge inside, but she surprised him.

Katya pushed against his chest with all her strength until he rolled to his side. Then, she pressed him all the way back onto the bed and climbed on top of him, sitting astride him as though riding a horse. Her damp hair was a tangled mass around her face, and she shook it back. Pressing her hands against his chest and lifting her body up, she positioned the entrance of her sex over his cock and slowly, carefully seated herself on him.

Turan watched, entranced, as his shaft disappeared into her depths. He let out a low groan of satisfaction at the heat and the tightness of her channel surrounding him. He looked up into Katya's glorious face, her eyes closed, mouth open, and tongue darting out to lick her lips. She threw her head back, exposing the smooth, pale column of her throat and making her breasts jut out before her like two round pieces of fruit.

Turan wanted to nibble on her neck and suck on her tits. He reached up to fondle them, covering each mound completely with his big hands and squeezing lightly, then pulling, rolling, and pinching her nipples.

Katya moaned her delight and squirmed on top of him.

His cock was deep inside her, and he could feel her movements as she twisted around.

She rose up on her knees, releasing him bit by bit. It was almost impossible to believe she could hold all of his length inside her, but Turan watched it emerge, inch by inch. The cool air touched his wet shaft, sending a shiver through him.

Katya looked down at his glistening shaft, then reached down and stroked it. She scratched it lightly with her fingernails.

Turan shuddered and groaned at the stimulation.

She smiled at him and slowly eased back down, engulfing him in her hot depths once more. She repeated this move several times, freeing him from her body, leaving him cold and naked before sheathing him in her delicious heat again.

Turan couldn't take the slow, excruciating pace any longer. He grabbed her hips and moved her up and down on top of him as he thrust into her with steadily increasing speed.

Her breasts bounced as she rose and fell on his cock. The sight of them bobbing and swaying and the sound of Katya's little grunts as he pressed into her each time were so arousing he could take no more. His balls clenched and drew up, and his cock swelled as though it would burst. He clenched her hips, digging his fingers in so hard she yelped. He thrust up once more, moaning in ecstasy as spasms shook him. Then he released deep inside her. Turan shuddered as the convulsive waves of his orgasm burst through him then lay twitching and breathing heavily as he came back to himself. It was so different from the pleasure he brought himself with his own fist, as different as the bright sun was from pale starlight.

When he was completely still, Katya fell forward onto his chest, covering it with her long hair. She kissed his heaving, sweaty chest then lifted her face to look at him. "Was it good?" she asked with a smile, as though the answer was not obvious.

Turan smiled back at her. It was a strange, new feeling. He rarely lifted the corners of his mouth, but understood instinctively that when a person smiled, you were supposed to return the expression. After a moment, it felt natural and good. A glow like sunshine spread through him, warming him inside and out. Turan's smile widened. He had found the thing that described Katya -- she was like sunlight. "Yes, it was good."

"Good."

Turan understood the smug tone. Katya was feeling pleased at the passion she had roused in him, at her control over him. He responded naturally and without thought, giving her a little pinch on her ass.

She laughed -- the amazing, fluid sound filling the room -- and kissed his lips once before laying her head back down on his chest. The woman was so light, she felt no heavier than a leaf resting on top of him. At the same time, it was like the whole world was encompassed in her being. The weight inside him, pressing against his heart, was crushing.

Turan imagined going back to his bleak existence before this day and knew it would be impossible. Katya had shown him what men and women could be to one another, and now he knew he couldn't live without it.

When Slavack or another guard came to take her, he wouldn't give her up without a fight. He would use his knife and slice the throat of anyone who dared take Katya away.

"I will keep you safe," Turan whispered, stroking her hair. "I will not let them take you from me."

Chapter Four

They made love several more times that night as the square of moonlight moved slowly across the stone wall of the cell and a cricket in the corner chirped its repetitive notes.

Katya was ravenous from expending so much energy and would have welcomed food, but food meant Slavack would return. She was certain when that happened, her time with Turan would be over. So she ignored her growling stomach and loved Turan again and again. The chill air seemed even colder as the night wore on, but curled against his fiery-hot body, she was warm and comfortable.

After the last time they coupled, they lay entwined. Katya was almost asleep, lulled by her lover's heartbeat thudding beneath her ear, when he spoke.

"Tell me more about your family and your life."

"What do you want to know?"

"What is a normal day for you?"

Katya yawned and stretched against him. "Well, first thing in the morning, I would draw water from the well for cooking and washing up, then help my mother prepare breakfast." She related the mundane details of her daily life, droning against Turan's chest and practically putting herself to sleep with the dullness of her tale.

But he seemed enthralled. He interrupted with questions and observations that revealed how exotic he considered her normal life. "What is the purpose of the dog? Is it to eat?"

"No. People keep them as companions and to protect their homes. They don't have to have a purpose. They're just pets."

"You said you sing while you sew. What is that?"

"What? Singing? It's something you do with your voice. Music." Katya had never stopped to think what singing actually was. Rather than try to explain to him, she hummed a bar of a traditional tune, then broke into the lyrics. *"If I thee wed then you must be, faithful to me, faithful to me. But my lover turned his back on me, never to be, never to be. I cast myself into the sea, dark and deep, dark and deep."*

The haunting melody sounded eerie in the dark chamber. Katya's voice trailed off. She already felt upset and worried about what the next day might bring, and the depressing song made it worse.

"Music is sad." Turan's voice rumbled in his chest.

Katya rubbed her hand over the hard muscle and bone covering his tender heart. "Not always." To soothe away the melancholy, she broke into a child's counting rhyme, with a cheerful, fast-paced tune. When she was finished, she said, "See? Music can be happy, too."

"It's beautiful ... like you." Turan pulled her even tighter to him, holding her so close, she imagined her skin would meld with his, and they would become one creature.

Wrapped in his embrace, Katya fell asleep again. She didn't wake until early morning, when the wooden door of the cell banged against the wall as it was suddenly thrown open. Her eyes flew open and she sat up.

Slavack stood in the doorway. In his hand was a long, metal pole. "Off the bed," he ordered Katya. "Stand up." He turned his attention to Turan, who had also sat up. "And, you -- go to the corner."

Turan rose from the bed. His eyes cut sideways to the knife sitting on the chair where he'd left it.

The Guardian held up the long, metal pole and pointed it threateningly at Turan. "Don't think about it." He gestured toward the corner of the room with the pole. "Move!"

Katya held her breath, waiting to see if Turan would take a chance, launch himself across the few feet separating him from his weapon, and grab the knife. The moment seemed to spin out forever, poised and breathless. Her heart raced, and she glanced around the room, trying to see if there was anything she could use as a weapon to back up Turan in the fight. Surely, between the two of them, they could subdue Slavack.

"Eyes down. In the corner. Now!" the Guardian yelled.

The moment, pregnant with possibility, broke. Turan lowered his gaze to the floor. His head bowed as he crossed the room to stand where he'd been ordered.

Katya's hopes plummeted like a bird falling from the sky. Turan was not going to fight for her as he'd promised, and he was probably right. Resistance was futile. Her stomach felt as if it were filled with a lead weight as she rose from the bed, picked up her shift, and slipped it over her head. While she dressed, she looked at Turan, trying to meet his eyes, but he wouldn't raise his gaze from the floor. She wanted to reassure him that she understood now was not the time to make a move.

"Quit dawdling." Slavack jabbed her hard with the end of the metal pole. "Hurry."

Katya registered movement from the corner of her eyes as Turan took a step in her direction.

Fast as a striking snake, Slavack spun toward him, pointing the lightning stick and triggering it by pressing something on the handle. A streak of blue-white light shot from the end and hit Turan in the center of his chest. He jerked and twitched as the voltage entered him, then dropped to the floor and moved no more. The stick truly contained lightning.

Katya stood frozen in shock, staring at his body, sprawled unmoving on the floor.

Slavack swung the weapon back toward her.

She braced herself for the pain of fire shooting through her.

"Move out," he ordered, gesturing toward the door.

Katya obeyed. There was nothing else to do. Before she left the room, she glanced back at Turan's unconscious body one last time, wondering if she would ever see him again.

He couldn't be her protector or savior. It was up to her to rescue them both. Somehow she must find a way.

Slavack locked the cell door behind them and nudged Katya to walk down the empty corridor by jamming the pole between her shoulder blades. They'd reached the end of the hall when he gave her another poke. "Stop here."

Her mouth was dry and heart pounding as Slavack passed close by her. She felt his body's heat and smelled his sour sweat mixed with too-sweet cologne. As he concentrated on unlocking the door of a cell, she examined his sharp-featured profile and the light stubble on his shaven head. Katya wondered if she dared simply run away while he was fumbling with the lock. But before she could work up her courage, he pushed her inside the small room.

This cell was exactly the same as Turan's, but empty. Slavack left the door slightly open, and light from the hallway dimly lit the room.

Katya backed away from him until her back hit the far wall. She could guess what he wanted to do with her.

The Guardian approached, step by step, until he loomed over her. "There will be no biting this time unless you want the blue fire. Understood?" His breath blew hot against her face. "Kneel down."

Shaking with cold and fear, Katya complied. She had the sense of being caught in a nightmare from which she couldn't awaken. Her breathing grew ragged and loud, gasping in and out as her heart pounded.

Slavack petted the top of her head. "I know you want it, but please don't pant like a dog."

Katya bit her bottom lip and forced herself under control. This was one thing she could do, hide her terror and maintain her dignity. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of enjoying her fear.

Slavack unfastened his robe at the waist and reached inside. He pulled out his rigid cock and held it out to her on his palm as though offering a delicacy. "Suck it."

Trembling with fury more than fear, Katya leaned forward, opened her mouth and gingerly took the red, swollen head of his cock into her mouth. It was slightly salty, thick and hard, not so very different from Turan's, but the sensation was a world away from what she'd felt with Turan. The same act was completely repulsive when forced instead of shared as a loving gift. She gagged and pulled her head back. She looked up at his face and even in the dim, gray light, could see his eyes glittering with lust.

Slavack seized her head, twisting her hair savagely around his hands so she couldn't move her head away. "More. Take it all in," he hissed, thrusting toward her face.

From outside in the hall, there was the loud clang of a door opening and a voice called, "Slavack?"

The Guardian cursed and released his grip on Katya's hair. "Fucking Drogon," he muttered, pushing her away from his crotch with a hand to her forehead. "What?" He stuffed his prick into the front of his loose robe and walked to the door of the room.

Katya stared at his back, silhouetted in the doorway and thought how she would like to attack it, beating with her fists and reaching around his head to claw at his eyes.

"What are you doing?" an unseen man's voice asked. "Have you got the new woman in there? You know you can't interrupt a breeding cycle."

"I'm not," Slavack snarled. "Just giving her a little taste. No harm there. Not that it's any of your business."

“Well, my shift has started, so I guess it is my business. Take the girl to the women’s quarters, and don’t interfere with her again.”

There was a second or two of silence. Katya couldn’t see either man’s face, but imagined them facing off like two bristling barn cats. Then Slavack turned and snapped at her, “Get up. Come on,” as if she’d kept him waiting.

Still trembling from the rush of emotions coursing through her, Katya got shakily to her feet and walked out of the cell, rescued from Slavack for the time being.

The Guardian standing in the hallway was short, stocky, and thick-necked. He was clean-shaven, but blue-black stubble shadowed his head and jaw. The sleeves of his robe were pushed back to reveal hairy forearms. His build reminded Katya of the blacksmith in her village.

Their eyes met for just a moment before Slavack grabbed her arm and urged her forward. Drogan’s were brown as her dog, Cee’s, and they seemed kind. Or maybe Katya’s gratitude at being saved made it seem that they were.

“Take her straight over,” Drogan warned Slavack again before the door closed behind them.

“Come on.” Slavack squeezed her arm hard enough to bruise it, then pushed her in front of him out the door, prodding her with the lightning pole as before.

Katya gritted her teeth, holding back the tears that burned in her eyes. She desperately wanted to cry, to release all the emotion pent-up inside, but was determined not to break down in front of Slavack. She stumbled on the rough cobbles of the open courtyard, regained her balance, and walked on.

In the gray, pre-dawn light, they crossed the quiet, empty exercise yard, passing more barracks exactly like the first two buildings as they climbed the hill toward the heart of the compound.

“Here.” Slavack stopped in front of a long, gray building with small slits of windows set high up on the wall. He unlocked the door, then grabbed Katya’s shoulder and squeezed it. Leaning near her ear, he whispered, “I’m not finished with you. I’ll see you again, little bitch,” before pushing her through the open door.

Katya heard it lock behind her. Exactly like yesterday, she was thrust into a strange place with no idea of what would happen next. But the previous day had ended in the delight of Turan’s arms. Maybe things wouldn’t be so bad here, either.

“Hello?” a soft, feminine voice called from down the hallway.

“Hello,” Katya responded tentatively.

A moment later, the glow of a lantern illuminated the corridor. The shape of a woman, silhouetted against the light, moved down the hall toward her. The beam shining in Katya’s eyes was too bright for her to make out the woman’s features.

“A new one. Where will we put you? We’re full to bursting right now.” As the woman approached, she lowered the lantern. She looked young, not much older than Katya. She had dark hair and eyes and a pretty, heart-shaped face. Her swollen belly preceded her. She extended a hand as she reached Katya. “I’m Leah.”

Katya took her hand. “Katya.” Her glance rose from the woman’s distended stomach to her face.

“Are you all right? Not hurt at all?” Leah’s grip was firm and reassuring.

“I’m fine, just ... overwhelmed.” Katya didn’t want to release the woman’s comforting, warm hand.

“Where are you from?”

“Geveldon,” Katya replied. “You?”

“Parveine, across the river and to the south.”

Katya nodded. “I know it. I traveled there with my father once when I was little.” She shook her head, amazed they could talk about such mundane things as birthplaces in this

strange situation. She unleashed a barrage of questions. "What is this place? Why are we here? How long do they keep us here? What happens next?"

Leah beckoned her to follow. "Come to the common room. It's still very early. I don't want to wake anyone, especially the babies."

Babies? Katya followed the bobbing lantern down the corridor then left along another short hallway.

Leah opened a door and ushered her into a large room furnished with tables and benches in rows. A fireplace was at one end. Coals glowed orange on the hearth, and Leah gestured for Katya to sit on the floor near the warmth of the dying fire.

She held her icy hands out to the glow and began to tremble, her teeth chattering beyond her control. The events of the past afternoon and night swirled in her mind; the separation from her parents, her first sexual experience, the unexpected connection with Turan, and her abuse at Slavack's hands. The storm of mixed emotions was too much to bear. Tears trickled down her cheeks.

"Let me get you a blanket." Leah squeezed her shoulder and petted her hair like the older sister Katya had never had, then hurried from the room.

Closing her eyes, she concentrated on breathing in and out, trying to still her racing thoughts. The warmth of the heated coals sunk into her face and hands. After a moment, a coarse blanket settled around her shoulders.

Leah lowered her bulky body to the floor beside Katya and awkwardly folded her legs to one side. She smiled at her. "I know what it's like, that first day when they bring you here. The worst part is not knowing what's going to happen to you or why it's happening. Ignorance is frightening and frustrating, so I'll tell you right away why we're here. We are breeding stock. The Guardians are creating a perfect army and need healthy young women to breed with the best, hand-picked Warriors. The Guardians are aware of children born to

villagers and keep track of young women reaching breeding age. Only the best are chosen to be matched to a Warrior. It's as simple as that."

Katya frowned. "What about the boys taken from the villages? I thought that was how the Warrior army was built."

Leah shook her head. "Originally, but it wasn't enough. They want control over the quality of the Warriors before they're even born." She patted her belly and looked at Katya with desolate brown eyes. "Strong, healthy, and raised completely under Guardian control. They want no influence from parents during the boys' formative years, and take our little ones from us to begin training as soon as possible."

"But why?" Katya frowned. The plan was not only obscene, but senseless. "There are enough Warriors already. They've kept our lands safe and peaceful for so long, no one dares attack our land. There has been no fighting within our borders for several generations. Why would the Guardians need to breed even more fighters?"

Leah rose slowly to her feet, took a poker, and knocked the banked embers, making a shower of sparks fly up the chimney. "One of the women, Andrina, has a Guardian named Drogan who is completely enamored of her. He confides things when they lie together. The Warriors aren't created just to maintain our borders. The Guardians have built an invading army. They want more lands, more goods, more power ... more everything."

"Impossible," Katya murmured under her breath. "What about ... What if the babies are girls?" The words stuck in her throat. She feared the answer would be death.

Leah replaced the poker in the stand and turned to face her. "Slavery. The same for women who can't bear children or who have given birth once or twice. When they're no longer fresh, they are passed on to a slave trader. A caravan stops here occasionally and the trader pays cash for all the unwanted women and children, making yet more profit for the Guardians."

"This is unbelievable!" The bizarre plan and callous cruelty were beyond comprehension. "I have lived within sight of these walls all of my life. How could I not have seen a caravan coming through?"

"They arrive at night and leave by morning a couple of times a year." Leah sat down by Katya again. "How often have you seen the Warriors march out to battle? When they move, it's always at night, an invisible, mysterious force. They are like a mighty wind that blows across the land and flattens everything in its path. Perhaps someday there will be no more lands to conquer, and they'll unleash the Warriors on the villages."

Katya's stomach hurt. She clenched her hands on her lap. "But we're already the Guardians' slaves, aren't we? The villagers perform like obedient worker bees, providing all that's needed to keep the hive running."

Leah nodded. "It's been going on a long time."

Katya drew a shaky breath. She inclined her head at Leah's stomach. "So what happens after it's born? Will you be allowed to care for your baby?"

Leah looked down and rubbed the swollen mound. "For the first few months, then all the babies are taken to a communal nursery. The women care for them in shifts, which is intended to keep us from forming any attachments with the children, I suppose. But it's ridiculous." She shook her head. "All the women are mothers. All the babies are like their own. The Guardians want to keep the boys isolated and start training them at the earliest possible age, but they can't stop them from feeling love for the mothers."

Katya touched her hand to her now warm cheek and realized it was wet. She'd begun crying again as she listened to Leah's heartbreaking words. She was suddenly exhausted. All of this was too much to comprehend, and she was physically worn out from her night of passion with Turan. She'd only slept a couple of hours at most and needed to slip into oblivion now, blocking out everything that had happened and all she'd learned.

As if reading her thoughts, Leah said, “As I told you, there is little room here right now, but you can take my bed for the rest of the night. Tomorrow I’ll find you a permanent space.”

Katya nodded. “Thank you.”

Later, as she curled in yet another strange bed, listening to the deep breathing and light snores of strangers lying in cots nearby, she struggled to fall asleep. As tired as she was, she couldn’t stop thinking about the bizarre turns her life had taken in the past twenty-four hours.

She thought about Turan and how she’d faced him with terror, which had quickly turned to pity and then desire. Sex was nothing like she’d imagined. It was basic and earthy, but sparked pure, powerful emotions that transcended the animal act. Katya had spoken very little with Turan, understood little about the inner workings of his mind, but already felt a connection with him beyond anything she’d experienced with Bray after years of mindless chatter.

She relived the moment Slavack had arrived to take her away and the rush of disappointment when Turan didn’t try to stop him. *He promised*, a childish voice inside her whined. Although she knew there was nothing he could have done except delay her removal and his electrocution for a minute or two, the fact that he hadn’t even tried to fight for her stung.

Turan was too indoctrinated to stand up to the Guardians. Too many years of training kept him in line. Katya realized these things, yet she felt a deep-seated twist of anger that he hadn’t protected her from Slavack. She knew it wasn’t fair to blame him, but he’d promised to keep her safe and an hour later she’d been down on her knees with Slavack’s cock in her mouth. It was completely unreasonable, but she couldn’t deny her disappointment in Turan.

Katya rolled to the side, trying to banish her emotions and get to sleep. Leah’s voice played over and over in her mind, revealing the secret of what happened to the maidens

taken to the compound on the hill. Surrendered by their families for the greater good of the community, the girls became breeding stock then chattel sold on the auction block.

This insane system of repression by the Guardians and meek compliance by the villagers must end. Katya imagined herself leading an uprising against the Guardians. As she hovered on the edge of sleep, she fell into another half-dreamed fantasy in which she inspired the women to rebel and led a legion of Warriors against their persecutors.

* * * *

"Katya, is that you? This is amazing!"

Katya jerked awake and looked up into the brown eyes of Matthilde, the older sister of her best friend, Greta. "Mattie? You're here."

"Still here. It's been two years for me. So far I've somehow avoided being sold." Mattie laughed harshly and tossed her head, making her bright, copper curls bounce. "I don't know if that's a good thing or not anymore. Perhaps being a slave in someone's home in a foreign land would be better than living here."

Katya sat up, rubbing sleep from her eyes. She didn't know how long she'd slept, but it felt like a few hours at least.

Matthilde sat down on the edge of the bed, facing her.

It was wonderful to see someone from home. Katya glanced around the room and noticed the three other girls who had occupied the room were already up and gone. She turned her attention back to Mattie. "How have you been?"

"Fine. How is my family?" Mattie took Katya's hands in hers. "Is everyone well?"

Mattie's mother had been distraught when she was taken away. She'd sobbed and screamed, and her husband had had to restrain her, while the Guardian led Mattie through the gates of the compound. Greta had said, "How could Mama behave so badly? It's humiliating for our entire family. Of course, I'll miss Mattie, but being chosen is an honor!"

Even then, ignorant of her own future, Katya had found her friend's thinking twisted and the mother's grief wrenching.

"Everyone is doing very well," she answered Mattie. "Your mother is still heartbroken over losing you; your father, sister, and brothers, too, of course. Several months ago, Greta married Curtis Keon. Remember him? I was in their wedding party."

Mattie gave another bitter laugh. "Who would have guessed you'd be the next 'bride.'" Her voice lowered in concern, and she squeezed Katya's hands. "Are you all right? Did the Warrior hurt you badly? We have a midwife who takes care of all of the girls as well as birthing the babies. If you're torn or damaged down there, she can help you."

"Oh, no. It wasn't like that. He was very ..." Katya trailed off. It was clear Mattie's experience had been quite different from her own. How could she admit that sex had been wonderful for her and that she'd been pleasantly surprised by her Warrior? "I'm fine. Turan was very gentle." Her mouth thinned to a grim line as she thought of what Slavack had forced her to endure afterward.

"What else? I can see by your face there's more," Mattie prodded.

Katya bit her lower lip, ashamed at the easy tears Mattie's sympathy provoked. She brushed her hand across her eyes, irritated at herself for being so emotional. "Nothing. It was the Guardian who escorted me, Slavack. He started to force me to ... do something. If another Guardian, Drogon, hadn't come along in time, it would have been much worse."

"Ah." Mattie nodded. "Slavack is always looking for a fresh mouth to fill. You're lucky you're in your breeding phase. None of the Guardians can take you right now. Your body is off limits to everyone except the Warrior you were chosen for -- which is bad enough in itself. The filthy beasts." She scowled.

Katya understood a little of breeding. Although her father was a miller, they lived among farmers. She understood if a farmer was breeding for particular traits, only certain

bulls would be allowed with certain cows. The knowledge that she was considered of no more consequence than a farm animal was humiliating.

"What about you?" she asked. "How have you survived here so long?"

"I wasn't able to become pregnant, no matter how many times Baraff took me." Mattie's mouth twisted as she spoke the Warrior's name. "I think it was his problem. He may be the strongest, most violent Warrior, but it doesn't mean he can make babies." Her eyes narrowed and her ruddy cheeks turned pale. "That was a bad time. Those first six months, forced to endure that again and again. I thought I would die from the shame even more than the pain of it. The things he did to me and the things he made me do -- it wasn't normal coupling. After half a year, when I still wasn't with child, the Guardians put me to work with Glaria, the midwife. I took care of the babies in the nursery, making myself as useful as I could, and they haven't gotten rid of me yet."

Katya's stomach growled loudly, punctuating the end of Matthilde's story.

Mattie smiled, a pale reflection of the infectious grin Katya remembered from their girlhood. "It sounds like you're starving. Come. I'll find you something to eat and show you around and introduce you to everyone."

"Thank you." She rose, but hesitated before following her friend from the room. "Mattie, have you ever considered ... I mean, do any of the women ever talk about an escape?"

Mattie was already shaking her head before Katya finished speaking. "No. Whatever you're thinking, forget it. There is no escape, and there is no resistance. It's impossible. Do us all a favor and put it out of your mind right now. Rebellion would only bring down disaster on everyone." She turned on her heel and led the way from the room.

Katya followed silently, dropping the subject, but not the thought. Her mind was at work, inventing scenarios and schemes for rising up against their captors. Resisting might be

futile, but not even trying was criminal and made them no better than the cowed Warriors and weak-willed villagers. It was each woman's duty to at least make an attempt to escape.

And Katya was going to make sure they understood that.

Chapter Five

Turan swam up through layers of consciousness like a fish rising from deep water to shallow. He opened his eyes and focused blearily on a cockroach scuttling across the floor. It paused and poked at something with its long antenna, then scurried on its way.

He tried to work up saliva in his dry mouth and licked his tongue over cracked lips. Slowly, he sat up and looked around. Nothing was different. His cell looked as it had every day of his life -- dark and empty. The sunshine Katya had brought to it, which seemed to illuminate every corner of the room, was gone.

Turan rubbed his hand over the scorched flesh of his chest. All these years, he had obeyed the Guardians because he was conditioned to do so and because he was afraid of the lightning stick. He'd been submissive and careful never to experience its flash. Now that he knew the worst the weapon could do, his fear was lessened. His chest hurt more from the breaking heart inside it than from a mere flesh wound.

He had betrayed Katya, promising to keep her safe then retreating to the corner like a whipped dog when Slavack ordered him to. He hadn't fought the Guardian, hadn't even tried, and the worst thing was, he hardly knew why. It wasn't that he was afraid of being

beaten down or burned by Slavack's weapon. It was something deeper, something far beyond that.

A lifetime of doing exactly as he was told had destroyed his will until it was almost physically impossible for him to stand against his masters. When Slavack barked an order, Turan's feet moved to obey. The impulse to dive for the knife and attack the Guardian was still there, but Turan had been physically unable to act on it. He was merely another weapon in the Guardian's hand with no more mind than the lightning stick.

Turan sat on the stone floor, legs pulled up to his chest and his arms wrapped around them. He rested his forehead against his knees and thought about Katya. Did she hate him now for breaking his promise? Would he ever see her again? Was she thinking of him as he was of her?

Katya. She was the most beautiful, perfect being he had ever seen. Having her presented to him yesterday had been a miracle. She'd opened up the world to him and a whole new way of thinking. He sat there, reliving every moment of their lovemaking, the perfect way their bodies moved together. He tried to recall every word she'd spoken and the beautiful song she'd sung. If they never let him see her and hold her again, he didn't know if he could survive. Now that he knew what it was to have her, the lack of her felt like a knife in his chest.

Turan slowly rose to his feet and looked around for his knife. It had been removed from the room while he was unconscious. As he dressed, he considered different ways he could get close enough to Slavack to kill him. The killing was simple, a twist of the neck, a blow driving his nose up into his brain, two fingers pushed straight through the hollow of his throat to crush his windpipe. But escaping the compound with Katya when he didn't even know where they'd taken her was not going to be as easy.

And then there was the question he didn't want to examine too closely -- could he even bring himself to do it? Could he rebel against a lifetime of training and turn on his masters?

For Katya, yes, he could.

The deadbolt was drawn on the other side of the door. Turan drew a deep breath and cast his eyes to the ground, steeling himself to show no emotion. The Guardians must believe he was as compliant as always. Although his muscles quivered with the desire to attack and fight, he must use his brain, not his muscle. He must watch, listen, and reason as he never had before. His captors couldn't know it, but he was becoming a new man.

Drogan, one of the friendlier Guardians, entered the room. "Up already? Good. I thought your little run-in with Slavack might have put you out for the day." He laughed. "That or all the rutting last night. How was it? Did you enjoy the woman?"

Turan eyes narrowed as he continued to stare at the floor. He didn't like Drogan talking about what he and Katya had done in that way, making it sound like no more than a pair of animals mating. But he suppressed a scowl and nodded.

"Come on, then. Time for food and exercise."

Turan moved silently past him.

Drogan clapped his shoulder and said jovially, "Don't look so sad. You'll have her again tonight."

Turan was elated at the information. He had to admit Drogan was better than most of the Guardians. He gave orders and spoke to the Warriors politely, except in front of his superiors. Then he was as cold and rough as the rest.

Turan's body ached as he trudged to the mess hall. His limbs felt heavy and weak, which he supposed was a side effect of the blue fire. He grabbed his half-loaf and bowl of stew, then squatted to devour it, barely glancing at the other men around him all doing the same thing. His face was as blank as any of theirs, but inside, his mind was buzzing. *Tonight. He would have Katya again tonight.*

He glanced up to see Baraff watching him with a calculating expression.

Baraff was one of the Warriors from up the hill. He'd been raised in the compound since birth and like the others bred within its walls, was a breed apart. No one ever bested Baraff, not on the battlefield or during training sessions. He was known for getting carried away and occasionally killing sparring partners. The resulting punishments didn't seem to bother him, and he would repeat his overzealous action again a few months later. The man was lethally violent and the only reason, Turan supposed, he hadn't been terminated was because he was such an unstoppable force on the battlefield. Turan wondered what had drawn Baraff's attention to him today.

He scraped the stew from the bottom of his bowl with a scrap of bread. A grunt to his left made him look up. The Warrior next to him, a blond-bearded giant named Sidhain, who Turan had once saved on the battlefield, lowered his head in a brief nod, the equivalent of a smile.

As boys, the Warriors had attempted to speak to one another secretly, but the spirit of rebellion had quickly been eradicated. Conditioning through isolation, torture, and food deprivation had molded them into obedient drones. Over the years, they'd found subtle ways to communicate that wouldn't draw the Guardians' attention or anger. As adults, only these brief flashes of expression passed between them.

Turan looked from Sidhain to others around the room. A number of them snuck swift glances at him, and offered vaguely pleasant expressions of goodwill. Their looks told him they were aware of his special night with Katya and wished him well.

Turan inclined his head in acknowledgement and set his empty bowl and spoon aside, awaiting the next order as he had every morning of his life for the past fifteen years.

"Light armor today," the Chief Trainer announced. "Suit up."

The men rose to their feet, turned as one, and marched to the armory to dress in leather breastplates, shin guards, and helmets. When Turan was clothed, he followed the rest out to the training grounds.

Today of all days, when he was feeling weak and groggy, he was pitted against Baraff. The man was huge, square, and blunt, as though roughly hewn from rock. He was only a half a head taller than Turan, but his barrel chest was even more massive than Turan's considerable girth. Baraff's legs looked like two deeply rooted tree trunks and his biceps were knotted with muscle. His meaty fist clenched, loosened, and then clenched again on the sword hilt. More intimidating than his size was the blaze of excitement in his steel-gray eyes. He stared at Turan like he was dinner, and Baraff was deciding which part of him to carve first.

Turan gathered his scattered thoughts and focused them. How could he best the strongest Warrior among them? What was Baraff's weakness, and how could he exploit it?

Baraff shifted back and forth from foot to foot. He gripped his sword more tightly and leaned forward like a dog straining on a leash, waiting for the command to commence fighting. "Today you die," he muttered. "Slavack orders."

Turan felt a jolt of surprise. He didn't think he'd ever heard him speak. His pulse pounded at the knowledge that this was to be a duel to the death. He knew Baraff would stop for nothing, certainly not the Guardian's whistle, and maybe not even the lightning stick. The man was a single-minded killer.

Setting his legs more firmly, Turan shifted his hands on his raised sword. The whistle blew, and he brought his weapon down with a clang against Baraff's blade. Metal flashed in the bright morning sun as the Warriors circled and thrust toward one another.

Baraff slashed at Turan's middle, swinging his sword in a mighty circle.

Turan dodged back and to the left. He attacked from the side, jabbing at Baraff with short thrusts. He struck the side of his opponent's breastplate, which deflected the point away from his ribcage. At the same moment, Baraff brought his weapon around with a whack and knocked Turan's sword from his hands. It arched through the air and landed on

the ground with a clang. Taking the advantage, Baraff ran toward him with a roar, sword upraised and ready to impale him.

Turan scrambled backward, receiving only a light blow on his arm as his enemy charged past. Turan's weapon had fallen several yards away. He dove for it, rolled across the dirt courtyard, and scooped it up. He'd barely regained his feet before Baraff was on him again.

Turan parried a series of hacking blows from his attacker. He knew the other man had superior strength. The only thing that could save him would be outwitting and outmaneuvering Baraff. If the bigger man was rooted like a tree, Turan must be the wind blowing the tree this way and that until it finally toppled over, uprooted by the persistence of the gale.

He worked defensively, dodging and parrying blows and backing up farther and farther, until Baraff had driven him to the wall at the edge of the training ground. Sweat poured down Turan's forehead and drenched his shirt as his muscles flowed and flexed. He intercepted blow after blow.

Baraff's blade sliced his arm.

It stung like a brand of fire, but Turan didn't have time to react to the pain. If his guard went down for a moment, he wouldn't survive. *Katya*, he reminded himself. *Live through this, and you will see her tonight.* He redoubled his efforts, and slowly, the fight turned in his favor. He pushed off the wall and drove Baraff a step backward. Turan glanced into his opponent's eyes and caught a brief glimpse of surprise.

Turan circled to Baraff's left, which he'd perceived was his weakest side, and delivered a series of jabs and thrusts.

Baraff returned the onslaught of blows with a mighty whack that would have decapitated Turan if he hadn't ducked.

Thinking fast, Turan fell to his knees and drove his sword up under Baraff's breastplate, piercing his bowels and driving the sword up into his heart. Blood gushed in a fountain onto Turan's sword and hands and rained down on his face and body. He blinked and shook his head, clearing his eyes.

His opponent's eyebrows were drawn together in a puzzled frown as he dropped his sword, and his hands went to the blade embedded in his torso.

Turan's fingers slipped on the bloody hilt of his sword. He took a firmer grip and jerked the weapon out of his opponent. It cleaved the flesh with a sucking sound as it was withdrawn.

Baraff didn't cry out. He emitted a low, pained grunt and toppled to the ground like a fallen oak.

Turan was dimly aware of the Guardian blowing his whistle over and over. He wondered how long that had been going on. He stayed on his knees, too weak to stand. A moment later, one of the yelling Guardians jabbed his lightning stick between Turan's shoulder blades. For the second time, Turan felt white-hot pain race through him, and then he passed out.

Chapter Six

Katya held the squirming baby and looked down into his tiny, red face. The squalling infant's fists were balled up and shaking with fury. "What's the matter with him? Is he sick?" She offered the bundle back to Mattie.

The other woman smiled. "He's a baby. It's what they do."

Katya had no younger siblings or cousins. The world of the nursery was foreign to her. The other women moved around the wooden bins, comforting this infant, changing a diaper on that one, offering a bottle where it was due. Katya had learned the entire women's complex was a well-run hive with a rotating schedule of duties. The Guardians used the women as domestic servants, cleaning the buildings in the compound, cooking for the mess hall, and repairing torn garments or sewing new ones. The women also cared for the babies and young children.

Every woman took a turn at various duties, but the nursery seemed to be the favorite place. Even those who weren't scheduled made side trips to visit the little ones. There were children ranging from infancy through age five or six. The fact there were no children over that age was alarming. Katya could only imagine how the Guardians treated the young Warriors in training or what horrible fates befell little girls sold into servitude.

Mattie had told Katya how some women had to be subdued by a lightning stick when they fought to save themselves or their child from the slave caravan. In the end, the Guardians always loaded them into the cages and took their payment from the slave trader. There was no escape from fate, except death. Mattie also shared terrible tales of young mothers who fell into deep depression and killed themselves after their children were taken away.

Katya handed the baby boy back to Mattie, and the child calmed instantly in her arms. "The trick is not to become attached to them," she murmured as she laid the baby down and loosened his blanket. "If you become pregnant, you'll have a long reprieve before you have to think about your future, and after that, a few months of nursing. Then, you'll be separated from your baby, maybe sent to work with the older children or on the cleaning or cooking crew. If you breed easily and produce healthy offspring, you might be sent back to one of the Warriors to be impregnated again."

Mattie unfastened the baby's wet diaper. "This little lad will never be taken into training. He was born premature and his breathing is weak. Only strong boys are potential Warriors. He will be sold along with the girls and women." She bent and nuzzled the baby's soft belly. His little hands fisted in her hair. "That's right. You're one of the lucky ones," she crooned.

"So you agree the Warriors are as much victims as any of us, forced into a situation not of their choosing," Katya said.

Mattie eyed her coolly. They'd been having the argument all morning. "Warriors are vicious killers and rapists. How they got that way doesn't concern me. If I had my way, they would all be put down like rabid dogs, and their Guardian handlers, as well." As she spoke, Mattie efficiently diapered the baby. She placed him in one of the wooden bins, then walked briskly through the nursery, beckoning Katya to follow.

"There are plenty of tasks to accomplish to keep everything running. If you prove to be a good cook, you might find your stay here extended indefinitely. If you're a good lay, one of

the Guardians may take you under special protection as a companion. They aren't supposed to keep one particular woman -- relationships are discouraged -- but some of them do." Mattie shrugged. "Your fate is completely changeable at all times, and the only way you can learn to accept that without going crazy is to take every moment as it comes."

They entered the mess hall. The high-pitched babble of voices filled the chamber as women moved around, setting tables and carrying out dishes of food. The scent of the food made Katya's mouth water. It had been a long time since Mattie had given her a bowl of oatmeal for breakfast. Only two meals were served here. Lunch was skipped, and they had an early dinner instead.

Katya already recognized a few faces of women to whom Mattie had introduced her. She smiled and nodded at Leah, pouring a beverage into the mugs on the table. A girl named Sarita waved to Katya from across the room. Sarita was in the early stages of her pregnancy and pale from nausea. Katya waved back. She looked around at the busy, chattering throng of women, at least a third of whom were visibly pregnant. They were hardly the stuff of which armies were formed, but somehow she must pull them together and incite them to rebellion.

"You'd better eat quickly before they take you away for the night," Mattie said, indicating one of the tables on which plates were already filled with food. "I know it's hard to be hungry with *that* hanging over your head, but you need to keep up your strength." She sat down beside Katya on the bench, leaned over, and touched her arm. "As hard as it is to endure without struggling, my best advice to you is not to fight him. Lay as still as you can, and try to think of something else while he's on you. Pray that he finishes quickly."

"Mm." Katya nodded, picked up her spoon, and began to eat the hearty stew and biscuit. She wondered how many of the other women felt the way Mattie did about the Warriors and how many had enjoyed their experience. Maybe most of the Warriors were brutish, rutting beasts. Maybe she'd been lucky in being paired with the best man of them all. Or maybe Katya was an aberration, enjoying something other women didn't.

Whatever the explanation, she was thrilled at the idea of having another night with Turan, even if it meant facing Slavack again. She closed her eyes and pictured Turan's long dark hair, his piercing eyes, strong jaw, and soft lips. The hum of voices died away around her as she remembered every moment of their lovemaking the night before. She thought of how his hands whispered over her skin and his breath blew lightly against her cheek when he kissed her. She could almost feel the tug of his mouth suckling her breast, and the pressure of his heavy cock between her legs. Her crotch clenched in response to the memory, and she swallowed hard, almost choking on the bite of biscuit in her mouth.

Mattie stroked her hair. "Don't cry. Try not to be afraid. It's only one night."

Katya opened her eyes and smiled bleakly at Mattie, wondering what horrors Baraff had visited on the poor woman.

Mattie glanced at the door then back at Katya. "It's time. Here comes Drogan"

Katya looked toward the entrance of the room where several Guardians had entered. They fanned out to gather various women and take them off to their respective "grooms." She noticed one young woman with a bruised face was in tears, begging her captor as she was dragged away. But some of the others looked almost as pleased as Katya felt. It appeared that despite the Guardians' attempts to create a uniform, emotionless army of men, there were as many personalities among the Warriors as among any other men.

Katya rose from the dining table to follow Drogan. She kept her eyes downcast, trying not to look eager as she left the room.

Drogan didn't talk to her or make any reference to the previous evening and the situation with Slavack. As he led her through the compound, Katya studied the buildings around her, trying to get a sense of how the settlement was laid out. Mattie had said the Guardians lived in the stately building on top of the hill. The women's area and nursery were on the north side. The youths lived and trained on the far side of the hill. The rest of the barracks, interspersed with exercise yards, housed the Warriors.

They reached the barracks where Turan was housed. Katya's heart raced with excitement as Droган unlocked Turan's cell door and waited for her to pass through it before closing and locking it behind her.

Turan was not sitting in the chair this time. He laid across the bed, fully clothed, arms and legs sprawled wide, as though someone had tossed him there.

Heart fluttering, Katya quickly crossed to him. She gasped when she saw the bandage wrapped around his arm. It was soaked through with blood. His face was pale and spattered with red. His long, black hair straggled in blood-encrusted hanks on either side of his face. His tunic, too, was dirty and bloody.

When she leaned over him, she smelled blood and sweat. She touched his shoulder and when she got no response, shook him gently. "Turan?"

He groaned, and his long eyelashes fluttered as his eyes opened. He gazed at her blankly for a moment before a smile crept over his face. "Katya." He breathed her name like it was a prayer.

"Are you all right?" she asked, although clearly he wasn't.

He nodded and started to sit up, grimaced, and collapsed back onto the bed.

Katya went to the pail in the corner and brought a dipper full of water for him to sip. She supported his neck as he gulped so hastily that the water ran down his chin. She put the dipper aside, then explored his scalp, looking for a wound. After checking his face and body for cuts, she saw nothing. She unwrapped the filthy bandage on his arm. "Is this your only wound? How did you get so bloody?"

"Baraff's blood," he answered simply. "He was going to kill me. Now he's dead."

Katya sucked in a breath when she saw the blood-encrusted slice across Turan's bicep. The brutality of the fighting horrified her, and this had only been a training session. "I'll get you cleaned up."

Turan struggled to rise, swung his legs around, and sat on the edge of the bed, swaying slightly.

"Please, let me help you." Katya went to his side and pulled his good arm around her shoulders, hefting him to his feet. He leaned against her. He was so heavy, she staggered under his weight. Together they shuffled across the room to the cubicle with the water faucet. She leaned him against the wall just outside the alcove.

Katya undressed him, fingers fumbling with the ties of his tunic. She was glad they'd taken off his armor before dumping him in his cell -- assuming he'd even been wearing armor during mock combat.

Turan lifted his arms so she could pull his tunic over his head. Katya unlaced his boots and drew them off, then unfastened his pants and slipped them down his hips. When he was naked, she examined the damage done to his body since she'd last seen it.

There was a large, red, burn mark in the center of his chest, courtesy of Slavack, and the seeping wound on his arm. But aside from a few bruises and scrapes, most of the blood on his face, arms, and chest appeared to be the other man's.

Turan turned to stumble into the shower, and she saw another burn mark on his back where he'd been struck by a lightning stick again. That explained why he'd been unconscious when she arrived. She shed her own garment and supported his nude body beneath the trickling water. It was barely lukewarm and the stream weak, but it was easier than sponge-bathing him would have been. Katya washed away the blood matting his hair, then examined the neatly stitched gash along his bicep. Using the small square of flannel and sliver of soap, she carefully cleansed it of dried blood.

Turan's eyes were half-closed. He leaned against the wall and let her tend to him. Red water swirled down the drain in the floor at their feet.

As she passed her hands and the slippery cloth over the solid muscles of his shoulders, chest, and abdomen, Katya's body responded to his masculinity with a tightening in her sex.

Her nipples beaded to sharp points when they brushed against his chest while she reached up to wash his shoulders. There was so much of him and every part of it huge. She had him turn so she could scrub his back and buttocks, then turn again so she could continue cleaning his front. Even flaccid, his penis was thick and long. When Katya crouched down to wash his thighs near his genitals, it stirred to life.

She took his cock in her hand, rubbed it with the soapy cloth, and then rinsed it clean. She fondled it more than was strictly necessary, making it swell with desire, and glanced up to find Turan gazing at her through half-closed eyes, more aroused than sleepy now.

Her sex ached as it clenched and released. There was a softening and opening between her legs as her body readied for him. Her nipples were hard, both from desire and from the chill water spilling over them. It was time to move out from under the tap and into the warm bed. She turned off the water.

The piece of toweling wasn't nearly large enough to dry them both. She patted Turan then herself as dry as she could, tied another cloth around the slice in his arm, and together they shambled back across the floor to the bed, tumbling into it, still half-wet.

Turan lay flat on his back and took her in his arms, drawing her up on top of him. He grimaced at the strain on his wounded arm. Holding her close, he cradled her jaw and tilted her face so he could cover her mouth with his. He kissed her deeply, his tongue delicately tickling her lips before exploring inside her mouth.

Katya murmured a contented "Mm," deep in her throat as she cuddled against his damp, warm body. She relaxed in his arms, surrendering to his plundering kisses. Her fears and worries and schemes for escape slipped away from her mind. There was nothing at this moment except the two of them suspended in a bubble of peace where no one could touch them. She nuzzled her face along his jaw and into his neck. The rough stubble abraded her soft skin, sending delicious quivers through her. She licked over the pulse pounding in his throat.

Turan lifted his chin to allow her better access.

Katya sucked on his throat until she'd left a red spot that marked him as hers. She trailed her lips down the broad, expanse of his chest, through the sprinkling of dark hair, until she reached the flat, brown disc of his aureole. She nibbled at the tiny bud in the center, bit it hard enough to draw a gasp from him, then kissed her way across his hard chest to the other nipple, licking then blowing a breath of air over it.

Turan shifted beneath her, making a soft sound of contentment deep in his throat. His cock was completely erect now and poking into her belly.

It would be easy to keep going, to surrender to her senses and simply enjoy their time together, but Katya forced herself to stop. She kissed his chest once more, then crossed her arms on it, resting her chin on them, and regarded him. "Turan, we must talk about how to get free of this place. It's not enough for you and me to escape, even if we could find a way. We need to destroy the Guardians' power. If a whole army of men decides it will no longer be controlled, then it can't be."

Turan was silent a long moment. "Most of the Warriors won't stand against them. We are raised to protect and obey them." He shook his head. "I promised you yesterday I wouldn't let them take you from me, but when Slavack gave an order ..." He trailed off. "I wanted to fight him, but I couldn't. I'm sorry. If I have another chance, I won't hesitate."

Katya would never tell Turan that she'd been disappointed in him. There was no point making him feel worse. She took his hand in hers. "I don't blame you for not attacking Slavack yesterday. It wouldn't have helped. Striking against one Guardian isn't enough. We need everyone to work together, the Warriors and the women, if we are to succeed."

"I don't know if they will do it," he said.

"You're telling me that if we unlocked all the cell doors right now they'd choose to stay inside?" The concept of a prisoner rejecting freedom seemed ludicrous.

“Yes. Many would.” He paused as though searching for words to make her understand. “We are taught so well ... You can’t understand what it’s like. This life is all we know. Many would fight to the death defending the Guardians.”

“But not everyone,” Katya said. “I get the impression that some of the women have good relations with the men. With their influence, I believe many men could be persuaded to rise up. The women can’t do it alone. We need Warrior allies.” She sat, suddenly excited as more of the plan became clear to her. “Some of the women sleep with Guardians and could gain access to the weapons. Without the lightning sticks, they have no real power. They aren’t skilled with swords. The only strength they possess is in those weapons and in controlling minds.”

Turan scanned her eyes with an intent gaze. “Is it possible? How would we spread the word, and when would we try this?”

“First, we need to find out who we can count on. When we decide we’re ready, some women would release the Warriors who are willing to fight from the barracks, while others let the Warriors into the Guardians’ dwelling. Everything would depend on timing.”

Turan was silent, his expression inscrutable.

Katya rubbed his chest, then smoothed her hand over his belly. “We all deserve freedom, but we have to make it happen. Things will continue as they always have if someone doesn’t put a stop to it. Think of the boys still in training. We must do it for them, as well as ourselves.”

He was completely still, staring at her with unblinking, dark eyes. Katya wondered if he was going to disappoint her again.

“It’s possible,” he finally said slowly. “Not easy, but possible. I’ll try to talk to some of the men.”

“And I’ll convince the women.” Katya smiled and lay down on top of him again.

Turan stroked her hair back from her face. "I won't fail you this time." His mouth curved up as he tugged lightly on a handful of her curls and said in a low, husky voice, "Now, come here."

Katya slid up his body until they were face-to-face. Slowly, she leaned down and kissed him, her hair making a curtain around both their faces. Her lips pressed against his, and his mouth yielded. For a man with such a hard body, he had very soft lips.

He wrapped his good arm around her and held her tight, kissing her hungrily. Their mouths fused together until she couldn't tell where she left off and he began. Katya closed her eyes and lost herself in the swirling sensations of passion, oblivious to the stark cell around them. All that mattered was her lover touching her, the rough pads of his fingers gliding over her skin. She pressed her crotch against his straining prick, sliding her wetness up and down his shaft.

He moaned into her mouth and gripped her lower back, drawing her even closer. Ignoring the injury to his arm, he moved his other hand to cup her bottom. His hips thrust, pressing his hard erection into her softness.

Katya reached between them and guided him into her wet channel then bore down, accepting every inch of him inside her body. She shivered at the sensation of being completely stretched and filled. Rising on her knees, Katya lifted off his glistening shaft and then pressed down, watching her body encompass his cock once more.

Turan's hands clenched her hips and guided her up and down faster, the motion creating more exquisite friction at the mouth of her pussy. He groaned his satisfaction.

Excited by his raging need for her, Katya's arousal grew from a general sense of lust swirling in her groin to an intense point of desire deep inside her that Turan's cock kept insistently striking. It felt like he was plumbing her very core. She yelped as he drove a little too deep, but her pain was mingled with pleasure -- a pleasure that grew and blossomed.

Finally, the bud of delight unfurled to explode in a cascade of petals that showered down like sparks behind her closed eyelids.

“Aahh!” she cried out, her head falling back and her body arching into a bow. Her inner muscles clenched around Turan’s cock, stroking it, willing him to join her in ecstasy.

Beneath her, he gripped her hips tightly and thrust one last time. He gave a prolonged groan as his cock pulsed steadily inside her, releasing its burden, giving her his very essence.

Katya’s head fell forward and she collapsed onto his sweat-slicked chest. She pressed her face into the hollow of his throat, breathing in Turan’s male scent and licking the salty perspiration from his skin. “You feel so good inside me. This is ... amazing.”

Turan kissed the top of her head. “For me, too. Every moment with you is wonderful. I was asleep, and you woke me. You’ve brought me to life, Katya. I can never go back to what I was before.”

She kissed his chest and smoothed her hand over it, thinking she’d never tire of the feel of the hard muscles under silky skin. Fingering a ridge of scar tissue along his shoulder, she said, “We will find a way out. For us. For everyone.”

They rested for a while, skirting the edge of sleep, before Katya rose and refreshed herself, and came back to the bed to sit cross-legged on it, facing Turan. The very top edge of the etchings he had done in the stone wall caught her attention. “Can I see your pictures?”

Turan rolled his head on the pillow to look at the faint lines of the sketch that showed above the mattress. “I’ve become careless.”

“You’re not allowed to draw? Not even that little bit of entertainment?”

He shook his head. Rising from the bed, he pulled it a few feet away from the wall. The headboard wasn’t tall and didn’t cover much. Turan’s sketching area was only a few feet wide and tall, but every inch was covered with drawings.

Katya scooted farther up on the bed and peered at the wealth of images etched into the stone. The scratchings were a light gray against the darkness, giving a ghostly effect. She

examined the flowers, trees, houses, animals, and people that jostled for position. They were crude, but detailed. She glanced at him, surprised. "I didn't think you'd seen much of the outside world."

He sat on the edge of the bed beside her. "The houses and people were in villages we conquered. People I killed, animals I slaughtered ... on the Guardians' orders in order to frighten the rest of the villagers into submission." He spoke haltingly. "I didn't think while I did it, never questioned what we did ... until now."

She nodded. As long as her world was protected, she hadn't given much thought to the enemy. They were outside the circle of her life. But looking at Turan's pictures, she could imagine people in other villages in the mountains and beyond, living their lives until one day the Warriors descended on them like howling wolves. What Leah had said made sense now. It didn't take this many Warriors to defend their little corner of the world from invasion. The Warriors were attackers, not merely defenders. They were an invading army.

"Once a little girl ran out of a house and got in the way of the fighting," Turan spoke so quietly, she could barely hear him. "My sword cleaved her in two. I killed her."

Katya pictured it and repressed a shudder of horror. "I'm sorry," she whispered, not knowing whom she was sorry for, the people who suffered bloodshed while she lived a peaceful life, or the man who killed because it was all he knew. There was nothing she could say to make it better.

Trying to lighten the mood and draw Turan's mind away from the dark acts that could never be undone, she leaned and pointed out other aspects of his drawing. "The birds and flowers are very good."

Turan looked into her eyes. "I want to make a picture of you, so I can keep you with me even when you aren't here."

She smiled, already seeing her image reflected in his shining eyes.

He rose from the bed, pulled it farther from the wall, and walked to the slit of window. Feeling along the ledge, he produced a sharp-edged stone, then returned to kneel by the wall. "Lie on your side with your head on your hand," he ordered.

She obeyed, stretching out, thrusting her breasts forward provocatively, and smiling.

"And your hair ... like this." He reached out and pulled a length over her shoulder, draping it across her chest. His fingertips trailed over her breast, and a tingle arched from his touch all the way down to her pussy. He lingered, rolling and rubbing his thumb over her nipple, and she doubted the drawing would ever be started. Then Turan broke loose from his breast-induced trance and picked up the sharpened stone. He began to etch a line in the dirty flagstone of the floor near the wall, where it would be hidden underneath his bed. His eyes were sharp and concentrated under knitted brows. His intense absorption in his work amused her.

She tilted her head so she could see his creation.

"Uh." He made a negative sound and reached up to lift her chin, turning her head to its previous pose, then resumed drawing.

Katya held still for a long while, so comfortable lying across the bed that her eyes began to drift closed. Turan's annoyed grunt snapped her awake.

"It's not right. I wanted it to really look like you, but I can't do it." He pushed himself up off the floor and scuffed his bare foot over the scratches, trying to erase them with dirt.

"Stop. Let me see it." Katya leaped off the bed and crouched to examine the picture. The lines were already dimmed from his scuffing, but she could see the curvy lines he'd drawn to represent her body, the bend of her cheek, the flow of her hair. Her eyes were wide and startled. Katya smiled. It was primitive, but she could see herself in the drawing. She stood up and put her arms around Turan's neck, molding her body to his. "I love it."

"It's not you." He frowned and trailed his hands over her shoulders, the slope of her back, and her round bottom. "Not like this. I wanted to show what you are, to have an image of you in case something happens, and they --"

"Sh! Nothing will come between us. We'll find a way." She stretched up onto her tiptoes and still had to pull on his neck to bring his mouth down to hers. After a deep, searching kiss, she pulled away and looked into his eyes. "Do you believe me?"

"Yes." Turan bent his head to kiss her again.

He pushed the bed back against the wall, and they lay on their sides, facing one another. They made love that way, face-to-face, rocking together slowly, leisurely, as though they had all the time in the world, and nothing would dare tear them apart. Afterward, curled together, they fell deeply asleep.

Katya didn't wake until just before dawn when Drogan came to take her back to the women's quarters. The Guardian stood patiently by while she kissed Turan goodbye, a long, lingering kiss filled with yearning hope that they would be together again soon.

Crossing the compound in the chill, early morning, Katya breathed in a fresh draught of air. Her heart rose with the pink glow of the dawning sun. Sunrise always lifted her spirits, and today it gave her hope.

They were almost at the women's quarters when Drogan spoke. "Tell Andrina I won't be able to see her tonight. It's been noticed that I favor her, and I've been reprimanded. Please, tell her I will find a way to keep her here when the caravan comes."

"All right." Katya was startled by the fact he'd said "please," as well as by his message. He appeared to honestly care for Andrina. "Is it coming soon?" she dared to ask, but he remained silent as he unlocked the door of the women's dormitory.

Katya entered.

"Wait!" His voice stopped her on the threshold. "Tell Andrina ... I love her."

The depth of emotion in his voice took her by surprise. After her experience with Slavack, she'd begun to think the Guardians were incapable of normal human feelings. But when he said Andrina's name, Droган's voice held the same warmth Katya felt for Turan.

Katya nodded. "I will." The door closed behind her, and she listened to Droган's retreating footsteps. Mattie had said he was wrapped around Andrina's finger. Katya wondered if she could use their relationship to aid her uprising. A man so in love should be easy to manipulate. Andrina might be the key to getting them into the Guardians' building.

Chapter Seven

Over the next few days, Turan went through the motions of his regular life. He ate. He fought. He cleaned and sharpened his weapons. He exercised and ate again. But through the dull routine, his heart was light and buoyant with the knowledge that Katya would be with him each night. He mentally sang the counting song she'd taught him, marking off increments of time until they were together again.

He lived for the moments when he could hold her in his arms, kiss her mouth, fill her body with his own. In the evening, as the time drew near for her to arrive, his entire focus was on the door of the cell, every particle of his body tuned to hear her approach. The heavy steps of one of the Guardians accompanied by the light slap of bare feet sent his heart racing.

When the door opened and she entered the room, Katya rushed into Turan's arms. He embraced her, lifting her off her feet and glancing over her shoulder. If the escort was Drogan, there might be a smile on his face as he closed the door.

Sometimes they didn't even make it to the bed before having sex.

Katya would pull up her skirts and wrap her legs around Turan's waist. He'd press her against the door, release his cock from his pants, and with a quick thrust, be inside her once more, surrounded by that delicious, melting warmth. Their joining would be over in a few

minutes, and they'd laugh at their own eagerness. Then they'd remove their clothes and lay down to start all over again.

Other times, Turan tried to show some restraint and hold back. He'd slowly caress her all over, petting her long hair, stroking her face, sliding her clothes off her body, then running his hands up and down it, memorizing each curve with his fingers.

However they made love, fast and hard or slow and gentle, it was good. The memory of it got him through grueling days of mindless fighting.

As they spent more time together his knowledge grew. The ideas he'd held locked inside his mind spilled out as she taught him words to unlock them and give them form. He could now speak about concepts like "escape" and "freedom," and he learned the tumult of feelings Katya awoke in him was called "love."

Turan attempted to speak to several of the Warriors who he'd talked to a little in the past. It wasn't easy with the Guardians constantly watching, but he stole moments of time and spoke to them of rebellion. There was no response from the Warriors, and they began to avoid his eyes.

On the fifth day, the Guardians mustered a regiment in the practice field. The men were ordered to gear up and arm for battle. They were traveling into the mountainous Revoc territory to put down an insurrection in a village.

Turan's stomach dropped. In the past, he'd always been glad to go to battle, to break the daily monotony and get outside the confining walls of the compound. He'd never imagined he'd rather stay in his cell. The thought of being without Katya for several days was unbearable, but there was nothing to do but pack his gear, don his armor, and march off with the company of Warriors.

As the gates of the fortress closed behind them and the men strode over the rocky, uneven ground, Turan wondered if this campaign might be his best opportunity to get some of the others alone and speak to them. On a march it was harder for the Guardians to keep

watch over all of them. He imagined outside the compound there might even be a chance to overpower their masters and free themselves. But if his companions successfully revolted, they'd scatter like fall leaves, and Turan would be left alone to try to rescue Katya from the fortress. Better to plant the seeds of rebellion, but not spur the men too far yet.

Marching up a mountain path single file, Turan moved close to the broad back of the man in front of him. "Crowe, is it? Crowe, do you ever think of rising against the Guardians?"

His comrade continued to march without answering.

Turan nudged his back. "Listen. We are many. They are few and weak. We could fight them and win." He kept his words simple and brief to make sure Crowe understood.

The man still didn't speak, but his head turned slightly to the side so Turan could see his profile. Crowe was listening.

"How?" The word came from behind him. Turan glanced back over his shoulder. A young, blond man, barely more than a boy, frowned at him. "How?"

Turan didn't recognize the young Warrior. "Are you from one of the villages?"

"I'm Jitendra. I was born of a Warrior."

"This is your first time outside the walls? Your first real fight?"

Jitendra nodded.

"When we've subdued the Revocs and you find out what it means to kill, we'll talk again." Turan wanted to see more of the young man before placing any faith in him.

They marched through the long, hot day over rough, stony ground, ever alert for an attack from above. The Revocs' arms were inferior to the Warriors' swords, but they excelled at blending into the surrounding landscape and darting out to strike again and again.

This time there was no ambush or sign of the enemy. At dusk, the Warriors camped. They would sleep a few hours, then descend on the village on the far side of the ridge just before dawn.

As he lay on the hard ground staring up at the starry sky, Turan thought of the last few nights with Katya warming his bed. He would give anything to be there with her now. He wondered if she knew where he was and why she hadn't been brought to him tonight. Then a thought occurred that sucked the breath from him. Suppose Katya had been given to another Warrior for the night. There was no guarantee she was meant only for Turan.

Or worse, suppose Slavack had engineered Turan being sent with the raiding party so he could take her for himself.

Impotent frustration made him tremble with suppressed fury. There was nothing he could do, even if either scenario was true. He was here, trapped as surely as if he were in his cell, unable to reach Katya and protect her. That was the way it would always be if he didn't do something to change it.

Turan slept restlessly and was glad to take his turn at watch. Under the vigilant eye of a Guardian, he walked the perimeter of the camp along the top of the ridge, watching the sky turn from velvet black to pale gray on the eastern horizon. Before sunrise colored the horizon, the Warriors were up and on the move again. They arrayed on the ridge of the hill overlooking the Revoc village in the hollow below.

"Remember, you may kill any who resist, but no destruction today," the head Guardian warned. "We're here to collect revenue only. Your job is to remind them who their masters are, then take the offering." The close-shaven Guardian pulled his red robe tighter against the chill in the morning air. He gazed at the assembled band of Warriors. "Now, attack!"

Unleashed, the Warriors let out a collective cry that resounded off the mountains in the still morning air and raced down the incline toward the sleeping village.

Turan raced with the others, his feet drumming against the ground and lungs pumping. The lust for fighting was deeply engrained in him, and exhilaration rushed through him as he ran, mingled with newly-awakened guilt for the pain they'd cause the innocent villagers.

A band of Revoc warriors intercepted their attack. They came streaming out from a stand of trees and from behind rocks, cutting off the path to the village. Raising their clubs and axes, the Revoc men clashed with the Warriors.

Turan raised his sword arm and did what he was trained to do. He slashed left and right, knocking aside weapons, stabbing opponents. Destroying the opposition, he marched through the carnage of battle and moved closer to the goal. The Revocs were few and severely outmatched. It didn't take long to demolish their forces and then the Warriors continued on toward the town.

Turan was barely winded from the brief encounter, but his breathing quickened as he drew near the village. His tension mounted, remembering the incident with the little girl and everything he'd talked about with Katya. He pictured the women and children cowering in their homes and imagined Katya as one of them. What if this was her village being invaded? Some sweet woman just like her was in one of those houses.

He must stop his comrades from killing. Moving toward the front of the swiftly marching Warriors, he shouted, "Hold! There's no need for force. They'll give whatever we ask for. Don't hurt anyone!" It was more words than he'd ever spoken to his comrades at one time in his entire life. Turan yelled the order as if he were a Guardian and had every right to give a command.

His unexpected shouting stopped them in mid-stride.

Turan sheathed his sword, held up his hands and faced the men, making eye contact with those closest to him. "Don't kill! You don't have to." A sense of power rushed through him as they looked at him as though he was a leader, as though they might actually obey him. His newfound words gave him more power than did his muscles and sword.

A Guardian spurred his horse forward, his lightning stick held loosely in his hand like a lance. "What do you think you're doing? Get back in formation!" He reined up sharply, his red robes swirling around the horse's flanks. "Don't listen to him. He has no authority."

Punctuating his words, he turned his weapon on Turan and released its fury in a white-hot blaze.

Turan had one brief second in which to think, at least I tried. Katya would be proud, then the bolt hit him and he fell to the ground.

* * * * *

When evening came the first night she was not taken to Turan, Katya was beside herself with worry. She fretted as she helped clear the supper table of dishes. Had something happened to him during training? Had Slavack planned a more successful attack on his life? Or was the mating finished? Perhaps she wouldn't be allowed to see Turan again until the Guardians were sure of whether or not she'd become pregnant. Katya had no idea what was keeping her from him.

After helping in the kitchen, Katya spent some time in the sewing circle in the common room. There she learned where Turan might be.

"Another raiding party was sent out today." Andrina spoke as she sat patching leggings. "Drogan says soon the Warriors will journey into the plains of the north. The Revoc villages no longer supply all our needs, and the army must conquer new lands. The campaign should take several months. More than half of the Warriors will go, and some of the women will be taken along to clean, cook, and repair things."

"Will it happen before the caravan comes?" Leah said. "We're overcrowded with women and children and this is the time of year the slave trader usually arrives."

"It's a chance to escape," Matthilde said. "I'd gladly volunteer to cook if it gets me outside these walls."

Katya spoke up. "Escaping to run back home would solve nothing, Mattie. We come from villages, from loving parents, who gave us up because the Guardians said they must. In order to have real, lasting freedom, the Guardians must be overthrown."

"Not again, Katya," Mattie complained. Katya had been pushing her agenda at every opportunity.

"Don't you see it's the only way? It's not enough to save ourselves." She forged ahead, and a couple of women groaned loudly. "There are children and the Warriors themselves held prisoner here. With my plan, we can all be free."

"Your idea is dangerous and foolhardy. If we free the Warriors, how will we control them? After being under Guardian control for so long, how would they behave outside of captivity? Can they do anything besides kill?" Leah shook her head.

Katya's heart sank. She'd been confident Leah at least would support her.

"It's an outlandish plan ... and it's long overdue," Leah finished tartly.

"The Warriors are savages." Mattie scowled. "They'll rape and murder us once they're through with the Guardians!"

"Not all Warriors are like Baraff. Some are good men." Katya laid a hand on Mattie's arm. "We can't fight this battle alone. We need their strength and skill."

Mattie's frown deepened. "I don't trust them."

Katya took a deep breath, trying to control her impatience. "I understand. We won't ask you to help, then. You can take care of the children and barricade the doors until it's over, but this *is* going to happen." She pointed toward the nursery. "Do you want more children to be sold into slavery? Or another generation of boys to be turned into killing machines?"

Andrina's hands had stilled on the sewing in her lap. "You're serious! You really want to try to overthrow the Guardians."

"Yes! And you're in a key position, Andrina. When Drogon takes you to his quarters, does he ever leave you there alone? Do you know the layout of the rest of the building? You could locate the room where they keep the lightning sticks, maybe even secure a key. You can leave an outer door open and --"

“Wait!” Andrina interrupted. “I won’t be a part of this. I don’t want Droган injured or killed. The Warriors will massacre every Guardian in the place once they realize they can.”

“But you have to,” Katya protested. “You have the power to save us all.”

She shook her head. “There are many other women who come and go from the Guardians’ residence. Ask one of them. I won’t do it.”

Fear knotted Katya’s stomach. “You won’t betray us, will you?”

Andrina stared at the floor, her long, blond hair curtaining her face, then looked up. “No. But promise me you won’t let them slaughter the Guardians. They aren’t all evil. Some are trapped just as we are. Talk to your Warrior. Make him understand. You must help keep my Droган safe.”

Katya hated to make a promise that might be impossible to keep when the battle began. “I’ll do everything in my power.”

Several days passed while Turan was out with the raiding party. Although she missed him terribly each night, Katya adjusted to the mundane routine of living in captivity. Her days were spent on the cleaning crew, sweeping and mopping floors, emptying slop jars, scrubbing kitchen counters or cleaning fireplace hearths. She couldn’t have asked for a better assignment because each day she was in a different part of the camp, giving her a clear understanding of the compound’s layout.

She was thrilled when her crew was assigned to the Guardians’ building one day. As she crawled on hands and knees, scrubbing the flagstone corridors, she paid attention to every detail of the dwelling. Their great room was more luxurious than any room she’d ever seen, with upholstered seats, thick carpets, bookcases lining the walls, and paintings hung in gilt frames. The dining hall had cushioned chairs instead of the long, low benches of the women’s mess hall, and the tables were polished to a glossy sheen. The Guardians’ bedrooms were small and simple, but lavish compared to the Warriors cells and the women’s dormitory.

Katya learned that the upper echelon of Guardians had lavish apartments in one wing of the second floor. That was where the real wealth was displayed. Her cleaning duties didn't take her there, but the other women told about the amazing elegance of the rooms filled with riches beyond description.

In that sanctum, Elan, the highest ranked of all the Guardians, and his inner circle of acolytes lived in opulence. Katya had yet to catch a glimpse of Elan, but she'd heard about the venerable Guardian who ran the entire operation from his suite of rooms, like an old spider sitting in the middle of an enormous web. The Guardians' power structure had the villages at the bottom of the food chain, supplying goods, the Warriors as worker bees gathering the honey for the hive, the Guardians directing them, and Elan and his men enjoying the fruits of it all.

Wiping down gilded mirrors and the marble fireplace mantle in the great room, Katya thought the villagers would feel differently about their respected "holy men" if they could see the lifestyle their hard work supported.

A voice from near the door startled her. "I've been looking for you, little bitch."

The polishing rag dropped from her nerveless fingers. She turned to face Slavack.

He wasn't an exceptionally large man, but his frame seemed to fill the doorway and her vision. Katya's heart pounded as he crossed the room toward her.

"I've been busy, but I haven't forgotten you." He caressed her cheek, making her skin crawl. "I don't know what it is about you, but you bother me, like a chigger under my skin I have to keep scratching until I dig out." His eyes narrowed as they gazed into hers. "Maybe it's because you don't fear me enough yet. That bothers me."

Katya was amazed he couldn't see her terror from the way she trembled, but she kept her chin up and her eyes cold, refusing to lower her gaze to the floor like a humbled servant.

His hand dropped to her wrist and grabbed it, fingers pinching hard. "I think it's time for another lesson in respect."

“Slavack,” a voice called and another Guardian appeared in the doorway. “Janeau wants us at the youths’ training grounds. Hurry up.”

Slavack turned back to Katya, eyes narrowed. “Don’t think I will forget you.” His whisper was as menacing as the hiss of a snake. He walked out of the room.

She let out a long, shaky breath after she was alone again. She’d become complacent over the past few days when nothing had happened to disturb her routine, but her encounter with Slavack had reminded her of her helplessness and vulnerability.

Katya looked down at her hands to find two crescent-shaped sets of cuts at the base of her palms where her fingernails had dug into them.

Chapter Eight

Turan woke with an aching head and heavy limbs. The after-effects of being struck by the lightning stick were becoming all too familiar. Someone had moved him, and he lay on his bed in his own cell. He rolled to the side and sat with a groan.

He looked up and his stomach lurched. A man sat in the chair by the bed, watching him sleep. He was dressed elaborately in layers of scarlet silk, instead of the simple red robe most of the Guardians wore. Turan recognized the man's face from the few times he'd addressed the Warriors. It was Elan, the highest authority and most revered of all the Guardians.

Turan breathed out slowly and stared at the incomprehensible sight of the head Guardian sitting in his cell.

Elan held his gaze, an assessing look in his pale blue eyes. His face was lined with age, and his jowls sagged in myriad folds of skin. The faint stubble on his head was pure white. He held no weapon, but kept his hands folded calmly on his lap.

Turan glanced around the room, looking for a guard. Standing a discreet distance away in the shadows by the wall was a Guardian with his lightning stick drawn and ready. Turan

smiled inside. Despite Elan's relaxed appearance, he was apprehensive enough to require a bodyguard. It showed that he respected Turan's strength and feared his unpredictability.

Turan returned his gaze to Elan, meeting his eyes and waiting for him to speak.

"You've been giving us quite a time lately." Elan's voice was weak and airy, an old man's tired wheeze. "Usually three reprimands for bad behavior would be grounds for immediate termination. We can't have a maverick stirring up the other men."

Turan sat still as a rock and stared expressionlessly.

"But I was told there are extenuating circumstances, and perhaps the incident with Baraff was merely an attempt to save your own life." He shrugged. "I usually don't get involved in the daily operation of the camp, but I understand that until recently you've been a model of obedience. It's been suggested to me you're worth saving." His eyes in their nests of wrinkles scanned Turan as though expecting a sign of gratitude.

He remained silent and motionless, not understanding everything Elan said, but knowing it was very strange that the Guardian's leader deigned to talk to a lowly Warrior.

"I'm going to offer you something you desire above all other things. All I require in return is that you stop stirring up the other Warriors." He paused. "More than that. I want you to become a model of obedience once more, to set an example for your brother Warriors."

Turan waited to see what he was being offered.

"Could you do that ... if you were allowed to keep the woman, Katya, beyond the breeding period? She would be yours for as long as you wanted her, *if* you make a show of following orders to the letter and once more become the excellent fighter we know you to be."

Inside, Turan reeled as though from a blow to the head. Outside, he remained steadfast. Could he believe such a promise? Why would they offer him that? Why not kill him? It would be just as effective in keeping the other Warriors in line.

Elan seemed determined to out-wait Turan and sat silently as the seconds ticked past, gazing serenely at him.

To have Katya as his own would be wonderful. He could keep her safe within the confines of his cell. There would be no risk for either of them in trying to fight a powerful enemy. She would be his, and all he had to do was return to the comfortable routine of obedience. But could he do that now, after the new way of thinking Katya had opened for him? Could she be happy in captivity?

"I'm surprised you need time to think about it." Elan broke the long silence. "It is a very generous offer. Perhaps you don't fully understand what I'm offering. Maybe I've used words beyond your comprehension." Elan's eyes narrowed to mere slits. "Or perhaps you're much cleverer than you let on and should be destroyed before you spawn insurrection."

His face cleared, returning to the mild countenance of a wise elder. "I'll let you have your woman tonight to remind you what you'll be missing if you don't comply, and over the next few days your behavior will be monitored." Elan rose to his feet. "I'll know your answer by the way you behave." Without another glance at Turan, he walked slowly from the room. The rustle of his silk robes was the only sound in the quiet cell. His bodyguard followed.

When the door had closed behind them, Turan let out his pent-up breath and relaxed his tense body. He lay back on his bed and stared at the ceiling, overwhelmed by the sudden twist of fate. Elan was right. It was a very generous offer and one Turan would've accepted gladly a few weeks ago, but now he didn't know if he could settle for less than the world of freedom Katya had drawn for him with her words.

Besides, he doubted if a woman as strong as his beloved could ever be content in the confines of captivity.

* * * * *

Turan paced his cell as night fell, and he was still alone. Reaching the wall, he turned and walked back across the room, his heart racing as if he'd been running. His chest was

tight, his breathing too rapid, and he felt more impatient at being imprisoned than he had in years. In his youth, he'd been disciplined by being held, hooded and bound, in smaller spaces than this cell. He'd learned long ago to simply let time flow past, since he had no control over it anyway. But tonight, he was ready to claw his way through the wall to get to Katya. Every moment seemed an eternity as he pondered the life-changing decision and anxiously awaited the arrival of the woman he loved.

He wanted to yell and pound on the door. With a harsh cry, Turan slapped his hand against the stone wall. The stinging pain in his palm felt good, so he did it again. But it wasn't enough. Anger washed through him. He ripped the mattress from his bed and tossed his chair across the room. He pulled the bed frame over beneath the window and stood on it to look out through the narrow, barred window. Gripping the bars, he yelled his frustration at the night sky overhead, roaring like a savage beast.

As if in answer to his wordless plea, the cell door opened.

Turan jumped off the cot and turned to face it.

Katya was framed in the doorway with Drogon right behind her. She rushed toward Turan and into his arms.

He squeezed her body so tight she let out a little squeak. "You're here," he whispered into her hair. Glancing over her shoulder, he saw Drogon surveying the ruined room. The Guardian said nothing, but withdrew and closed the door.

"I'm here," she replied, leaning against him and lifting her face for a kiss.

He inclined his head and covered her mouth, hard, aggressive, possessive. He pulled away, holding her chin in his hand and looking down into her eyes. "I've missed you so much."

"I've missed you, too." She stroked his unshaven jaw.

He stopped talking then, drew her close, and kissed her again. Her mouth was warm, soft, and sweet as he dipped his tongue between her lips and tasted it. His cock responded,

hardening like rock inside his trousers. After a moment, Turan swept her up off her feet, so light and airy in his arms. He turned and realized he had no bed to put her on.

“What happened here?” Katya looked around for the first time, her eyes widening at the destruction in the small space.

He didn't answer but set her back on her feet, twitched the mattress onto the bed, and set the frame flat against the wall. Pulling off his shirt and pants, he reached for her again. Loosening the front of her shift, he tugged it down her arms and let it drop to the floor. Beneath it she was naked, her body a pale statue carved from the very moonlight. His eyes feasted on her slopes and curves, so different from his hard angles. Just looking at her gave him pleasure.

Turan stroked his hands slowly down her front, caressing her shoulders, breasts, and soft stomach before coming to rest on the thatch of pubic hair marking her sex. His fingers rifled through the curls and found the secret spot he now knew lay between the petal folds.

When he rubbed his finger over the little bud, he was rewarded with a gasp and a sigh. Katya arched into his hand and her eyes closed. “Ohhh!”

He smiled and dropped to his knees before her. Placing his hands on her hips, he drew her close, breathing in her feminine scent. His tongue flicked out and tasted her juices. He moved his hands, stroking them slowly up the insides of her thighs, making her shiver. Nudging her legs further apart, he burrowed his face into her sex, angling his head and delving his tongue inside her body. It was hot as fire and slippery wet. He lapped his way from her slit up to her little bud, swirling around it.

Katya moaned and thrust toward his face, staggering a little on her feet.

Turan's knees ground into the hard, cold, stone floor, but her flesh under his hands and mouth was warm and pliant. The taste, scent, and feel of her body and her strong reaction to his touch combined to make his cock ache and pulse in time to his heartbeat. Her pleasure became his pleasure, and he relentlessly stroked her with his tongue until she trembled and

cried out, her hands twining in his hair and pulling him even closer. She swayed as she came, her legs trembling too much to hold her upright.

Turan steadied her with his hands on her hips, then rose and picked her up to carry her to the bed. He couldn't wait another moment to be inside her. He crawled on top of her and entered with one swift push of his cock.

Her wet heat surrounding his straining cock was heavenly. Withdrawing, he thrust again and again, grunting each time with the force of it. She made a small sound, and he hesitated, afraid he was hurting her. He looked down into her eyes, glimmering in the hint of moonlight that struck them.

"It's all right. You don't have to be careful with me. Harder. Deeper," she urged.

Her quiet words unleashed him. All his pent-up frustration at being controlled and contained, told when to fight or kill and when he was allowed to be with his woman came boiling from him. Turan thrust into her hard and deep as she had commanded.

Katya lifted her knees and wrapped her legs around his hips. She arched against him as he plunged into her. She gripped his buttocks and pulled him in, then gave a muffled cry of pain when he strove too deep and hit her very core.

Turan gazed at her beautiful face, contorted with pain or pleasure, he wasn't sure which. Energies swirled around in his groin, building and building, and he knew with primal conviction that she was his. He couldn't get deep enough or have enough of her. He wanted to become one with her, impossible to separate ever again. His balls tightened, and the gathering, swelling sensation in his cock increased until something broke free. His consciousness spun out from his body and he heard himself cry out as though from far away. Pleasure such as he'd never known burst through him, filling him with light that glowed in every particle of his being.

Then he was falling, light as snow, drifting gently back into himself.

Katya's soft body clenched hard around his shaft, holding him inside her like an anchor drawing him back to earth. His eyes opened and he found he had slumped down onto her.

She stroked his back, her hands sliding over the slickness of sweat, and murmured something soft and crooning in a sing-song voice.

He buried his nose in the crook of her neck and shoulder and breathed in her scent, then licked the salt from her skin.

Katya stroked his hair and hummed quietly. When her tune was finished, she was silent a moment. The cricket in the corner filled the silence with its own trilling melody. "Soon," Katya whispered, "we'll be together always."

He should tell her now about what had happened during the raid, how he had spoken against Guardian orders and what Elan had offered. It concerned her future as well as his, and she had the right to know. But Turan didn't speak, and the moment passed.

He decided he'd take a little time to think about the proposal and ignored the quiet voice inside that said he wasn't telling Katya because he already knew what her reaction would be.

In the dark room and the safety of her warm arms, all that mattered was that they were together. Turan wasn't ready to think beyond that moment.

Chapter Nine

Katya's days were filled with work and winning converts to her mission, but every night she lay in the shelter of Turan's arms.

All of the women were scheduled in rotation for various duties to limit complaints of being given an unfair burden of work and to keep domestic disputes at a minimum. But Katya noticed the same cattiness and petty dramas here that she'd always detested in the village girls back home. She ignored the drama and concentrated on doing her work and helping others finish theirs. It was the best way to win the girls' confidence and get them to listen to her plan. One by one, she befriended them and introduced the idea of rebellion. Mattie and Andrina weren't the only ones to have reservations. The main problem Katya encountered was the unwillingness of any who had access to the Guardians' building to steal a key and let the Warriors inside. Securing the enemies' weapons was critical, but the women were afraid to take such an enormous personal risk.

Each afternoon as the light turned golden then the orange of sunset, Katya's impatience grew and by the time a Guardian escorted her to Turan's cell, she vibrated with the need to see her lover again. They came together with intensity and passion, never knowing which night might be their last together. Afterward, Turan would tell her of the slow progress he

was making in his attempts to communicate with the other Warriors. He said there was little chance to talk.

One night, curled up with him wrapped around her back like a heavy blanket, Katya lay restless and wide awake, reviewing her plan again. She feared they were running out of time. The caravan should arrive any day now, according to Leah, and their plan still lacked a woman brave enough to steal a Guardian's keys.

"Katya." Turan's quiet, husky voice came from behind her.

"Yes?"

"After we're free, what will you do? Will you go back to your parents' home?"

She rolled onto her back, his heavy arm sliding across her body, and gazed at him. "I don't know. I suppose."

"Oh." Turan looked down at his hand caressing her forearm.

Katya wondered why he seemed so sad, then a light dawned. "With you," she assured him quickly. "You would go home with me."

He didn't meet her eyes. "And then what? What would I do there? I've never done anything besides fight. What if I can't live outside of this place?"

"You'll learn to do something new. Maybe you can help my father at the mill for a while until you decide if you like that work. Maybe you'll decide you want to farm or raise sheep or be a blacksmith. Or maybe you'll want to travel and see more of the world. You can do anything you want."

"What if ... we stayed right here, but you could be with me? If we didn't have to take any chances, and could still be together, could you live like this?" He nodded at the cell around them.

Katya took his chin in her hand, forcing him to meet her gaze. She stared deep into his worried, dark eyes. "I would love you no matter where we are. Nothing will change what's between us, even after we leave here."

“Are you sure?” He sounded uncertain.

“Yes,” she said firmly. She tried to imagine what it would be like to go from a life where every moment was defined, every choice made for you, to a life full of infinite possibility. “Whatever you decide to do for a living, we’ll be together.” Katya ran her hand over her stomach. “And there may be more than just you and me. My monthly cycle is late. Your child could be growing inside me right now.”

Turan’s eyes widened and shot to her flat stomach as if he would see instant evidence of a baby.

She smiled. “I’m not sure yet, but it could be. It gives us more reason than ever to fight for our freedom, to save our child.”

For a moment Turan continued to stare at her abdomen, then his anxious eyes met hers again. “Katya, I have to tell you something. I should have several days ago, but ...” He shook his head, frowning. “I was wrong, and I’m sorry.”

The hair prickled at the nape of her neck. Something wasn’t right. Turan’s tone sounded like Bray’s had when he’d explained to Katya he really hadn’t been cheating on her and that girl meant nothing. “What is it?”

“When I was in battle, I refused an order to kill and encouraged others to do the same.”

Katya was relieved. “That’s not bad, Turan. I’m proud of you for standing up to the Guardians. But what happened? Did they punish you?”

He nodded. “Knocked me unconscious with a lightning stick. When I woke up, I was back in my cell.” He paused so for long that Katya thought he was finished. Then he spoke in a rush. “The Guardians could have killed me, but instead they made an offer. Elan ... you know who that is? Elan himself came to me. He told me if I made a show of obedience -- in front of the other Warriors, I could ... I could keep you.”

Katya pushed his arm off her and sat up. “Keep me? What does that mean?”

“Keep you here always, as long as I wanted.”

She frowned. "And you told him 'no.'"

"I didn't say anything at all. But Elan said he'd be watching how I behaved."

She crossed her arms over her breasts. "So you've convinced the Guardians you're dutiful, but you've still been talking to the other Warriors like you said, right?"

His silence was her answer.

"You've actually considered it, haven't you -- just giving up." Katya's voice rose with her temper. "After everything we talked about, how could you give in to them?"

"I haven't. I won't." He reached out to touch her leg.

Katya pushed his hand away. "When did you intend to tell me? How long were you going to lie?"

"I didn't lie. I just needed to think for a few days, and I'm telling you now." He sat up to face her, his voice rising, as well. It was the first time Katya had heard him even close to angry. "I'm not stupid. I know it's impossible for you to live like this, and I don't trust Elan to keep his word, anyway. But, for just a few days, I wanted to ... I don't know ... believe we could be safe and content. Here. Just us. Without a battle."

Katya was too angry to speak. She knew the furious accusations that would come out of her mouth if she opened it, so she clenched her jaw tightly and glared just past Turan's ear at the wall behind him.

"I know you've been working so hard to convince the women, and I'm sorry I haven't done my part by talking to the Warriors," he continued. "If it makes you feel better, a man spoke to me today, telling *me* about the revolt. The women have influenced them. Word is spreading."

Katya stood up, still too angry to be so close to him. "I'm trying to understand you. Actually, I think I do understand, but that doesn't make me any less upset. That you would even consider the offer of keeping me like ... some sort of prize for good behavior ..." She

clenched her fists at her sides. "I don't want to talk right now." To get some distance from him, Katya went to the wall alcove to wash the sweat of sex off her body.

The trickle of cool water pouring over her served to bring down the temperature inside her as well as out. She felt her heated anger drain away to be replaced by a melancholy sadness. For the first time, her confidence wavered, and it seemed her grand plan was nothing more than a foolish dream that would never really take place or else would get them killed. Maybe Turan was right to consider Elan's offer. Maybe she was a fool not to.

Katya turned off the water, grabbed the flannel to dry with, and stepped back into the room.

Turan stood staring out the window. His dejection was apparent in the slump of his big shoulders. He looked as miserable as she felt.

With a sigh, she tossed the towel aside and went to stand next to him. When he didn't respond to her presence, she nudged his arm. "Are you angry?"

Turan turned to her, his eyes managing to convey both sorrow and amazement. "No! Why would I be angry? I'm sorry because I've made you hate me."

Katya smiled. "I don't hate you. Sometimes people who love each other disagree. They get angry and fight, but they make up."

"I never really thought I would keep you here." He took her hands and gazed into her eyes as he held them as though making a marriage vow. "I still want to fight for you. No one will keep us caged. I'll slaughter every Guardian in this place, then burn it to the ground. Nothing will be left standing."

Katya shivered at the deadly promise in his voice. She understood Turan's quiet rage, but for his sake, he could no longer be a killing machine. "No. Once the Warriors have gained control, the killing must stop. This can't be a massacre."

He frowned. "Why? The Guardians must die."

"Not all of them are bad men. Think about Drogan, who's always been kind to us. Andrina loves him, as I love you. She has begged me to make sure his life is spared."

"Yes. Drogan." He nodded slowly. "I would spare him."

"If there is one like him, there must be others trapped in this life, just as we are. And even the ones who have done evil things like Slavack should be conquered and contained, but not murdered. There should be no more bloodshed than is necessary to gain freedom."

Turan fell silent. From his frown, Katya knew the idea of letting an enemy live was foreign to him.

"Compassion is what separates men from savage animals. Do you understand?"

He let out a huff of breath indicating his annoyance. "I will do what I can to see that Drogan at least is spared."

Katya didn't say anything more. She would let him think about the novel idea of mercy for a while.

"I guess we're finished arguing," she said, offering him another smile. "We don't have enough time together to spend it being mad at each other." She slid her hands up his chest and around the back of his neck. "Shall we make up now?"

She pulled his mouth down to hers for a kiss. Lightly, gently, their lips brushed, barely caressing. Then with increasing fervor, Katya licked and nipped Turan's full lower lip. She loved how soft and pliant it was between her teeth. She ran one hand over his broad shoulder, smooth but for the ridge of scar tissue cutting across it. Fingering the line of puckered flesh, Katya thought of all the fights his body had been through. She'd not yet seen Turan fight and only knew him as a sweet, passionate lover, but imagined he would be fearsome in battle.

Katya pulled her lips from his and, standing on tiptoe, kissed along the line of the scar, tasting the salt of his sweat and breathing in his male scent.

He nuzzled against the side of her head, then leaned to kiss her shoulder. "To bed now?" he whispered.

She nodded, and he swooped her up in his arms and carried her to the rumpled bed.

At first they lay facing one another, kissing and nuzzling, their bodies barely brushing together. Then Katya turned over and spooned into Turan's embrace. His hard cock nestled snugly in the groove of her buttocks. She loved the feel of him at her back, his breath blowing against her shoulder, one hand toying with her sex as he gently thrust against her rear.

"Mmm." The vibration in his chest pressed against her back shot sparks of hot lust through her. "I love you this way." He guided his erection to nudge her entrance. "I love you every way."

Katya smiled and pushed back against him. "I love you, too."

She gasped as he pushed inside her deeply. One of his hands cupped her breast, and she covered it with her own.

His finger circled the bud of her desire, almost but not quite touching where she wanted it to touch. Katya gently guided his hand where she needed it, then settled back into his embrace with a sigh.

Slowly, he moved in and out of her body with long, leisurely strokes.

Katya moaned and pressed back against him each time he thrust into her. They had all night together to move past their argument, to show each other that angry words couldn't touch how they felt about one another.

For the short, precious hours of darkness they were free to love.

Suddenly, the door of the cell flew open and slammed against the wall.

Katya jerked in Turan's embrace and looked up to see Slavack standing in the doorway. She hadn't encountered him since that day in the Guardians' quarters, as he was apparently assigned to another part of the compound, and although she hadn't forgotten his threat, it

was shocking to be confronted by him now. Her hands moved to cover her breasts and her sex from his view.

"Get up and get dressed." He gestured at Katya with his lightning stick.

She and Turan had never been interrupted during the night before. Katya doubted Slavack was here to simply escort her back to the women's quarters.

Turan's body went rigid behind her and she thought he might launch himself at the Guardian.

"No." Katya pulled away from him and turned to whisper, "Not yet."

Turan's eyes bored a black hole through Slavack. The man should have incinerated on the spot from the fire in his glare. Then, looking into Katya's eyes, he nodded almost imperceptibly and released her.

Slavack's hand remained on the trigger of his weapon, and his eyes never left the Warrior. "Get up!" He backed through the door and waited for Katya in the hall.

She slid out of bed and quickly dressed, turning her back to hide her body from the Guardian's stare. She walked out of the room, pausing in the doorway to look back at Turan as she did every time she left him, memorizing his sharp-angled face and penetrating eyes in case something happened and she never saw him again.

Turan's mouth was a grim line, and his hands clenched against his thighs. His eyes locked with hers for a long moment before the door closed between them.

Slavack seized Katya's arm and dragged her down the hall toward the same empty cell at the end of the row, where he'd assaulted her before. Just then, the outside door opened and Drogon entered, a frown furrowing his brow when he saw them.

"Slavack, what are you doing here?" He walked toward them and stopped in front of them.

Katya breathed a sigh of relief. Once more, like a miracle, the other Guardian had turned up at the right moment. Drogon would save her.

“None of your business.” Slavack gripped Katya’s arm tighter and drew her closer to him. “I’m tired of Warrior leftovers. Just keep your mouth shut. Nobody will find out, and I’ll return her to the women’s quarters by morning.”

Drogan’s stocky body blocked the hallway.

“Are you going to move?” Slavack challenged, pushing Katya a little behind him and moving aggressively forward. “Or do you want me to tell Elan what I know about you and your little slut? I can make sure she’s the first one loaded on the wagons when the caravan comes.”

Drogan’s eyes met and held Katya’s for a moment before he looked away and stepped out of Slavack’s path.

Her hopes came crashing down and the depth of her fear was even greater because of that moment of hope. Katya reached out imploringly to Andrina’s Guardian. “Please! Don’t let him --”

Slavack’s stinging blow across her face snapped her head to the side and silenced her. “Shut up,” he growled, jerking her arm and pushing her through the door into the cell.

He slammed the door shut behind them and turned around. “Strip!” The single word sounded like a dog’s bark.

Katya shivered as her hands moved to the neck of her gown to untie its fastening. A garment that she would shed in seconds for Turan, she now opened with slow, shaking fingers. Her eyes darted around the room, looking for anything she could use to save herself from Slavack.

But he had his superior weapon and strength. Katya had nothing with which to defend herself except her will and the armor of her pride and stubbornness. Once more she vowed no matter what he did to her, he wouldn’t see her cry. As she stepped out of her dress and stood naked, Katya lifted her chin and stared defiantly at her captor, challenging him.

The Guardian's eyes were glazed with lust as he examined her nude body. He leaned his weapon against the wall and stripped his red robe off in one swift movement. His cock was already stiff and eager for her. It thrust straight out at a right angle to his body. "Fuck the breeding program. I've had enough of waiting for Warrior's leftovers. Get on the bed, on your hands and knees." Slavack's voice was low and hoarse and quavered with excitement.

Katya knelt on the sagging mattress of the cot and stared sightlessly at the floor. All of her concentration was behind her, listening to Slavack's feet crossing the floor toward her. His hands caressed her rear and her stomach jumped. Her sex drew tight, as though trying to seal off the entrance to her body.

"Put your knees farther apart," the Guardian commanded, parting her cheeks and holding them wide open.

She felt his eyes burning into her private parts as he examined every detail of her anatomy. Despite her skin-crawling aversion to the Guardian's touch, the cool air of the room caressing her genitals made her crotch grow wet and hot. She was shaken with shame at her body's treacherous response. Then there was no more time for feeling anything as Slavack attacked. With no preparation, he slammed his hard cock into her, sheathing himself to the hilt and rocking her with the force of his thrust.

Katya cried out in surprise more than pain then bit her lip, stifling any more sound.

"Go ahead. Scream." He grabbed her hair and jerked her head back sharply. "I want to hear it."

It was then she realized he *needed* to hear it, and so she withheld what he craved. Steeling herself against the pain in her neck and the tugging on her scalp, she refused to respond.

Slavack pumped in and out of her several more times, digging the nails of one hand into her hip and pulling her hair even tighter. "Scream," he insisted again.

Katya steeled herself against his rough thrusts, holding her body steady under the onslaught. She felt the sudden, insane urge to laugh. He was so pathetic. His cock no longer filled her as he began to lose his erection.

Slavack cursed and withdrew his half-flaccid penis. He slapped her buttocks over and over, sharp, stinging blows that Katya absorbed in silence. She understood intuitively that the only way he could reach climax was by feeding on her fear and pain.

The man howled in rage and humiliation and began beating on her with his fists. When he still earned no response, he grabbed her off the bed and threw her down to the floor.

Katya's knees scraped against hard stone. She kept herself from tumbling onto her face by bracing her hands. She looked up at Slavack standing over her, his cock stiffening again at the sight of her subjugation, then she glanced to where his weapon leaned against the wall.

Impulse became action, and Katya scrambled across the floor toward the lightning stick. She grasped the smooth, metal surface. It was cool in her palms. Her hands slid up the pole to the leather-wrapped grip and she twisted around, bringing the weapon to bear against Slavack.

The Guardian's eyes were wide with surprise, his mouth comically open. He reached down to wrest the stick from her. His hands were open, reaching.

Katya fumbled along the grip, feeling for the switch on the handle that she'd seen Slavack use.

He took hold of the other end of the pole and pulled. His grip was strong, forcing Katya to hold tight to keep control of the weapon. Then she felt a small, sharp bump in the handle and flipped the switch. An eerie, brilliant, blue-white fire crackled from the end of the magic stick, which was pointed right at Slavack's groin.

He screamed as the fire fried his genitals.

Katya braced the weapon against her body and held it aimed there for a long time.

Chapter Ten

Turan paced his cell once more, walking back and forth through the patch of moonlight that shone through his window. He knew deep inside Katya was in trouble, and there was nothing he could do to help her. He shouldn't have listened when she told him to wait. He should have attacked Slavack rather than let the man simply take her.

Footsteps sounded outside his cell. Turan ran to it and pounded on the door.

The window in the door slid open, and Drogan looked in. "What?"

"Help me. He has Katya! He's going to hurt her."

Drogan shook his head. "There's nothing I can do."

"Please. What if it was Andrina?"

There was a long pause, then Drogan swore under his breath. The deadbolt slid back with its familiar metallic click, and he opened the door. "Look. Try to calm down. She'll be all right. I'm sorry. I'd help if I could, but --"

A scream echoed down the hall. Turan's head jerked up.

Drogan, too, looked toward the sound. He held his weapon loosely, forgotten by his side.

Turan jerked the lightning stick out of Droган's hand and tossed it across the room. He lifted his hand, ready to drive the base of his palm into the Guardian's nose, shoving it up into his brain. He hesitated, ready to deliver the lethal blow, but Katya's entreating words echoed in his head, and Turan clenched his fist and punched Droган in the face instead, knocking the man to the ground.

Droган's head struck the floor hard, and he lay unconscious.

Turan pulled Droган into the cell by his heels, plucked the ring of keys from his waist, and seized the lightning stick. He closed and locked the door behind him, sealing the red-robed Guardian inside, then raced down the hall toward the source of the scream.

Throwing open the door of the cell at the end of the hall, Turan saw Katya, naked, standing over Slavack, sprawled on the floor at her feet. She held one of the lightning sticks in her right hand, pointed down at the Guardian. There was no fire shooting from its end, but the smell of burning hair and flesh filled the air.

A glance at the burnt area at the man's groin told Turan what had happened. His balls drew up in sympathy at the damage.

Katya looked at him, her face pale. "I don't think I killed him. We need to tie him up and gag him."

Turan walked into the cell and toed Slavack with his foot, but the Guardian didn't respond. He looked at Katya, nude and trembling, and knew instantly what this man had tried to do to her. Instead of fiery rage boiling through him, his mind grew calm and clear.

"We don't save this one," he informed her coolly. Bracing a foot on Slavack's chest, he leaned down and twisted the man's head until his neck snapped. "Not this one."

Katya stared with round eyes at Slavack's limp, lifeless body.

Turan picked up her shift and held it out to her. "Get dressed now," he said gently.

She continued to gaze at the Guardian a moment longer, then took the dress from Turan and slipped it over her head.

Turan got Slavack's keys from his body, then pulled Katya close and held her against him for a long moment. He kissed the top of her head, tilted her face, and kissed her mouth. "Our moment is here," he whispered. "Are you ready?"

She nodded.

He handed her Slavack's keys. "Unlock the women and release the Warriors they trust. I'll meet you at the armory with the men from this barracks." Naturally assuming the mantle of command, he didn't hesitate as he gave her the orders. He was no longer a slave, but the leader he might have been all along if not for the Guardians. It felt good and right and powerful.

"All right." Katya sounded breathless and dazed.

Turan grabbed her chin and looked into her wide, blank eyes. "Be careful. Don't hesitate to use the lightning stick if you need to."

She nodded again, her face clearing and her eyes looking more focused. "I love you," she said, hugging him fiercely before she ran to the door.

Turan walked down the hall and began to release the other men.

* * * * *

Katya ran across the open ground from the shadow of one barracks to another. Her heart raced with her flying feet. The long pole was awkward to run with and occasionally knocked into the side of a building or the ground when she crouched low. Her eyes scanned the area for patrolling Guardians, but she reached the women's quarters without encountering any. The Guardians had no reason to suspect their prisoners weren't secure in their cages.

Katya fumbled the key in the lock of the women's building and let herself inside. She raced along the corridor. "Everyone wake up! Come to the common room. Hurry!"

The women rose and came quickly at her call. Their sleepy eyes were instantly alert when they realized the rebellion that had been an unlikely fantasy was now upon them.

Leah cradled her full belly as though to protect the child within. "The most important job we have besides freeing the men is protecting the children. We must guard them, maybe put up a barricade."

"You and Mattie can be in charge of that," Katya said. "And anyone else who is pregnant or too afraid to help out. But those who promised support should go now and set the men free."

Mattie shook her head and began her familiar litany. "Those Warriors can't be trusted! Now that you have the keys, let's just let ourselves out of this place and run."

Katya exhaled an impatient breath. They'd argued this before. "The Guardians will chase and recapture us. Escape is not enough. We must change things."

"I know where the Guardians' weapons are," Andrina suddenly said. "I'll lead you to them."

Katya looked at her pale, drawn face and knew what it cost the woman to make the offer. "Good, Andrina. That will save a lot of time when we get inside. Drogon is safe, by the way, Turan locked him in a cell."

"But what about --" another woman began.

"There's no more time to argue. We have to go now!" Katya knew how these women could be, worrying a problem to death instead of taking action.

For a moment they continued to stand around, unable to move without direction. Katya understood their hesitancy. Some had been locked up much longer than she, and some had never made decisions for themselves, even back home. Taking their lives into their own hands was a big step, but there was no time for indecision. "Come on! I'll unlock the armory and pass out weapons. Send the Warriors there after you've released them." She turned to Mattie and hugged her. "Barricade the doors. Everything will be all right."

Mattie nodded. "I hope you have as much control over these men as you think you do."

"No one should control them," Katya answered. "They must choose to control themselves."

She led the way through the door and the other women followed.

Katya and her group wove their way across the compound, keeping out of sight of the few patrolling Guardians. When they reached the armory, Turan had assembled a force there, armed them, and explained his plan of attack on the Guardians' quarters. His angular face was harsh and stern as he directed the men. He was no longer her sweet, sensual lover, but a tough, seasoned Warrior, who showed no hesitancy about directing the men, although he'd never been in command in his life.

Turan stepped over the dead body of the Guardian who'd been guarding the armory, and beckoned Katya to him. "Pass out swords and knives as the men arrive and help them dress for combat. I'll be leading the attack on the Guardians." Turan indicated a massive man with a long, red beard and one eye sealed closed by scar tissue. "Sidhain will back me up with a second wave of fighters."

Sidhain nodded.

"Be careful," Katya said. "And please ... no more killing than necessary." She gestured toward Sidhain. "Does he understand, too?"

"He'll do what he must," Turan said curtly.

Andrina stepped in front of Turan and looked up into his face. "Katya told me you spared Drogan. I will show you the back way into the building and lead you to the weapons room."

Turan stared at the woman for a second before he nodded. "Good."

He looked at Katya once, gave her a nod and a tight smile. "I'll see you soon." He beckoned his cadre of men and set off for the building on top of the hill.

Katya watched them disappear like shadows into the dark night and prayed for their safety.

Chapter Eleven

Turan led his men around the north wing of the Guardians' building, silently skirting the stone wall and approaching the side door Andrina recommended. It was locked, but after trying a number of keys from Droган's ring, Turan found the one that worked. He opened the door cautiously and paused, listening, before beckoning Andrina forward to lead them inside.

"I don't know exactly where the weapons are, but Droган and the others often came from this part of the building with them in hand," she whispered as they walked through the massive kitchen.

Turan looked and listened for Guardians, but the area was empty and silent.

Andrina led them down a short hallway beyond the kitchen and into a great dining hall. As they passed through it, Turan was struck by the splendor of the padded seats, glossy tables, plush carpets, and colorful paintings. He'd never seen anything but the most primitive furnishings in barren rooms. He hadn't known such a place could exist.

Entering another hall leading off the dining room, he was taken by surprise when a Guardian suddenly emerged from a door right in front of them. The dim light gleamed on

the red-robed man's shaved head. His eyes went wide and his mouth opened. He stumbled back a pace, then turned and ran the opposite way down the hall, yelling.

Turan pushed past Andrina and tackled the man to the ground, seizing the back of his neck and banging his forehead sharply against the floor.

The Guardian fell silent.

Turan grabbed the man's head, prepared to snap his neck as he had Slavack's, but Katya's voice in his mind stopped his hand. He growled in annoyance. It was very inconvenient to let an enemy live. Lifting the man by the collar of his robes, he dragged him down the hall.

"What are you doing? Kill him," one of the other Warriors said.

Turan ignored him and hauled the Guardian along beside him like a rag doll.

"There's a storage room nearby," Andrina said. She led them around a corner and opened the door of a small room.

Turan tossed the limp body inside, shut the door, and shoved a heavy trunk in front of it. His gaze locked with the Warrior who'd questioned keeping the Guardian alive.

The man's hand tightened on the hilt of his sword, and he glared at Turan. "I don't understand this."

Turan hoped he wouldn't have to fight him. He couldn't afford dissention and didn't have time to explain what Katya had tried to teach him about the ethics of killing.

Andrina rested her small hand on the Warrior's massive forearm. She tilted her head back to look up at the towering giant. "There was no need to kill him. Don't do it unless you absolutely must. That is the way real men behave."

The man frowned, trying to comprehend her words, but grunted and lowered his sword. Her pretty face and blue eyes had quelled him as Turan's shouting or scowling never could have.

Andrina took her hand from the man's arm and turned to Turan. "I'm sorry I can't take you directly to the weapons, but they should be somewhere near here."

"Fan out and search," he ordered the men. "If you meet a Guardian, knock him out, if possible. Tonight we stop being killers and become men."

* * * * *

Katya shivered with nerves and cold. She half expected the alarm to be raised at any moment, so when a loud, repetitive gonging sounded, she wasn't really surprised. "They know," she murmured to Sidhain.

He grunted. "It's the front gate. The gong announces the arrival of the trader caravan."

Katya's already speeding pulse ratcheted up a notch. "Then we must warn Matthilde and the others. The Guardians will be coming for them."

The grizzled Warrior shook his head. "That is not the plan. I am supposed to follow Turan."

"Well, plans change sometimes. We have to make sure the children are safe." Katya grabbed his arm. "At least give me a couple of your men."

"I don't know." Sidhain was clearly incapable of making a decision on his own. She was surprised he'd had the nerve to follow Turan at all.

"I *do* know." She turned and addressed some of the other men. "Do any of you have a woman you've loved or a child she's given birth to? Come with me and protect your families." She turned without waiting to see if anyone followed and ran toward the women's quarters.

She dodged from shadow to shadow, making her way across the open yard. But when she arrived at the dormitory, it was too late. Whatever barricade the women had erected hadn't been sufficient to keep the Guardians out, and they must have known security had been breached, since the women's building was unlocked.

Guardians herded women and small children from the building toward the caravan rolling into the compound. Mattie stood with several children clutching her skirts and a toddler in her arms, arguing with one of the red-robed men. He hit her and grabbed her arm, pulling her with him toward the wagons.

Leah, her swollen belly protruding before her, brandished a club that looked like a table leg in both hands. She screamed and swung at two Guardians, who were trying to subdue her without using weapons due to her pregnant condition. The little girls Leah was defending crouched behind her with their arms wrapped around each other, crying.

The Guardians not occupied with trying to load the wagons raced toward various barracks.

Katya turned to Sidhain and his men, who had followed her after all. "They're going to release the Warriors who are loyal to them. You'll have to fight them."

Sidhain grunted agreement.

Katya could almost see in his eyes the moment he resolved to take charge of the situation.

He beckoned the small group of men close and gave terse directions. "You, to the front gates. Close them so the caravan can't leave. You three, stop the Guardians from freeing the other men. The rest of you." He pointed to the caravan wagon into which crying women and children were being herded. "Attack!"

* * * * *

The first Guardian they'd encountered had alerted others with his yell before Turan knocked him out. Soon the Warriors were engaged in battle in the corridors and rooms of the building's ground floor.

The Guardians had superior weapons, but their strength was totally dependent on them. Turan and the others learned if they knocked the lightning sticks out of their hands

with a well-placed blow of the sword, their enemies were defenseless. The trick was in accomplishing it before being rendered unconscious by the blue fire.

The Warriors hacked and stabbed their way through their oppressors. Vermillion robes and scarlet blood pooled on the white marble floors of the Guardians' dwelling. There was no time to worry about the ethics of slaughtering their opponents.

Turan leaped on one of the dining tables and swung his sword in a mighty arc that drove back all attackers. He severed one man's head and delivered a blow to another that knocked his lightning stick awry, sending the ray shooting harmlessly toward the ceiling.

The fight turned in the Warriors' favor and their enemies were hewn down like trees. Many of the Guardians turned and fled the building.

Turan yelled a reminder to his men to subdue and tie up the few remaining Guardians, many of whom had lost their weapons and cowered in corners. It wasn't easy to rein in the Warriors, but most obeyed his directive, and soon the building was secure and the captured Guardians locked in a room.

Belatedly, the weapons room was discovered and a cache of lightning sticks commandeered. Turan passed them out to the Warriors.

As they exited the building by the front door, Turan was pleased with the easy overthrow of the Guardians and proud he could report to Katya he'd kept the killing to a minimum. But once he and his men were outside, all hell broke loose.

Some of the Guardians had freed the young Warriors-in-training from their barracks on the north side of the hill. Like savage dogs unleashed, the young men ferociously ambushed the more seasoned Warriors. What the youths lacked in strength and skill, they made up for in numbers and sheer viciousness. They howled a primal battle cry as they attacked their elders, some of them their fathers.

Turan's lightning stick was knocked from his hand, and he was forced to raise his sword in defense against the onslaught of one youth. He parried each blow and retreated step

by step, not wanting to harm the boy, but hard put to keep up with his violent assault. His blade clashed repeatedly against the fury of thrusts, and Turan was backed to the wall.

He felt a slice of fire burn down his arm. The boy had drawn first blood.

* * * * *

Katya raced to defend Leah and Matthilde, using her lightning stick against any Guardian who got in her way, felling them like deadwood with a swift burn to the chest.

But Sidhain ran faster. The huge man roared as he barreled through the red sea of Guardians, swinging his sword from side to side and carving a path to the beleaguered women.

Katya saw a woman named Serisse and a young girl, Shiana, being shoved into one of the wagons. She stopped to help them, jabbing her stick at the Guardians who were manhandling them. The Guardians dropped to the ground as she applied her bolt of lightning and Katya felt a surge of power at the authority the weapon gave her. She lifted Shiana from the wagon and comforted the crying child.

Suddenly, there was a roar as a crowd of Warriors, released from their barracks, swarmed toward the caravan, weapons drawn. They attacked with savage fury, clashing with the band of rebelling Warriors, metal to metal. It was like the daily confrontations in the training yard, only this was not sparring. The two factions of Warriors were fighting to the death.

The red-robed Guardians scattered as their henchmen took the field.

Some of the women fled back to the safety of the dormitory. Katya passed Shiana into Serisse's arms and shoved her in that direction. "Run!"

Katya saw Mattie stoop to take the hand of a small boy at the same moment a Warrior bore down on her with his sword raised. In a lust of killing, he sliced at everything in his path. As his blade cleaved the air in a mighty arc aimed directly at Mattie, Sidhain leaped

between them and took the blow. The sword cut cleanly through Sidhain's arm, severing it from his body and sending a geyser of blood spraying onto Mattie and the child.

The big man toppled to the ground.

"No!" Katya screamed, racing toward him.

Just as the attacking Warrior raised his sword to deliver another blow, Katya reached him and extended her stick. She sent the blue-white fire arcing into his body.

The man jerked and shook, dropping his weapon and falling to his knees.

Katya kept the weapon pressed against his back and let the fire course through him as his shirt singed and the smell of burnt flesh rose through the air. Even after he lay still on the ground, she continued to burn him until there was no doubt he was dead.

* * * * *

Turan's sword blocked the young Warrior's blade as sparks flew from their clashing metal. He let pass repeated opportunities for his blade to slip through the boy's defenses and end the combat.

The youth let out a fierce cry of victory and surged toward him, intent on delivering a killing blow. Suddenly, the young man's eyes widened and he went rigid. His sword arm dropped.

Turan had to pull back his next thrust or he would have stabbed him through.

The boy dropped to the ground and twitched.

Andrina stood behind the young Warrior, holding a lightning stick still sputtering blue sparks. "Now we're even." She tossed the stick at Turan, and he caught it. "Use this, not that." Andrina gestured at his sword. "I'm going to Drogon now."

"Be careful."

She slipped away past the battling groups of Warriors and their offspring.

Turan lifted the lightning stick and began stunning one youth after another, felling them like saplings.

* * * * *

The caravan driver and his crew were attempting to escape the melee. The first wagon in line moved forward passing through -- and sometimes over -- the combatants in an effort to turn around and leave the compound. The other three wagons creaked along behind it.

Katya knew that each of the wagons contained people bound for slavery, if not from here then from other places. She ran to the nearest wagon and jumped up on the backboard, trying to open the heavy bolt that secured the doors. Just as she slid back the bolt and opened the latch, she was grabbed from behind and pulled off of the slow-moving wagon. Strong hands spun her around and she looked up into the fierce face of one of the attacking Warriors.

He tore the lightning stick from her hand and tossed it aside, then grabbed her throat, encircling it in one of his meaty fists, lifting her until her toes barely touched the ground.

As Katya felt the pressure of his hand crushing her windpipe, black edged her vision and a rushing sound in her ears threatened to pull her into unconsciousness. She clutched at the Warrior's arm, trying to break his lethal grip.

* * * * *

Turan surveyed the scattered bodies on the ground, some lying in pools of blood, others merely unconscious. The area was suddenly quiet except for the gasping of tired Warriors or the groans of fallen fighters. Some of the young Warriors were dead, but most had only been incapacitated. Turan directed his men to drag them away and lock them up. He was half tempted to lock them in the same room as the Guardians and see what happened.

The sounds of another battle farther down the hill floated through the air. Turan ran toward the din of raised voices and clashing metal, anxious to find Katya and make sure she was safe.

Chapter Twelve

As Katya's consciousness faded, the clash of the battle around her grew faint, replaced by the insistent roaring in her ears. She heard a strange gulping sound, which her brain identified as her struggle to breathe. Her fingers continued to dig into the Warrior's arm as she fought to free her throat from his choking grip.

Suddenly, the pressure on Katya's throat eased, and she was dropped to her feet. She stumbled backward, wheezing and choking as she sucked in a blessed lungful of air.

The Warrior cursed and turned to Leah, who had cracked her makeshift club down on his arm and broken his grip. With an angry growl, he hit her so hard she flew through the air and crashed to the ground.

Katya took the moment of distraction to attempt to run away, but the Warrior turned his attention immediately back to her. He seized her throat again and raised his knife to plunge it into her.

Everything slowed down and took on the quality of a dream. Katya watched with detached interest as the blade rose in the air and the light glinted off the sharp edge of the metal. She registered the Warrior's grim expression of determination to destroy her, and then, abruptly, his frown turned to a look of surprise as once more he was knocked away

from Katya. The Warrior's grip broke; he was spun around and the knife was wrested from his hand. Turan, dark hair flowing, his face and torso drenched in blood, faced the Warrior like a dark, angry god. His hard eyes and scowling face spoke of death. He drew back his fist and drove it into the other man's jaw, knocking his head to the side.

Katya's attacker recovered quickly, broke away from Turan's grip, fainted to the left, and punched with his right. His blow hit Turan in the gut and drove the air out of him. The Warrior kned him in the groin and chopped with the edge of his palm across the back of Turan's neck.

Turan went down to his knees, but before his assailant could deliver another blow, rolled to the side and scrambled back to his feet. With a harsh cry, he barreled toward the other Warrior, driving his shoulder into the man and pushing him backward.

Katya leaped out of the way as the two men sprawled at her feet. They grappled together, rolling across the ground, punching and grunting. Sometimes Turan was on top, sometimes the other Warrior.

She turned and searched the ground for her lightning stick. By the time she retrieved it and started toward the combatants, Turan was straddling his opponent and pounding the back of his head against the ground. The other man had his hands clenched around Turan's windpipe, but as Katya watched, his fingers loosened their grip and his hands dropped away.

Blood seeped from beneath the fallen man's skull, but still Turan beat his head into the stone of the courtyard. Turan slowed and stopped his punishing blows, leaving his opponent motionless.

Staggering to his feet, Turan turned toward Katya. He stood gasping for breath, hands braced on his thighs, gazing at her across the space that separated them. Then he opened his arms and she rushed into them. He pulled her close.

Katya clung to his heaving body, clutching the back of his shirt and holding on tight. She breathed in his scent and the coppery odor of blood. His chest rose and fell under her ear, and she listened to his ragged breathing, content that he was safe.

“Are you all right?” His voice rumbled.

She nodded mutely then pulled away from him. “Leah!” Katya ran to check on the pregnant woman.

Leah lay sprawled on the ground. She was bleeding at the temple and clutching her burgeoning stomach protectively.

“Are you hurt?” Katya asked, dropping to her knees beside her.

“My back aches, but I think I’m all right, and the baby is kicking, so it’s all right, too.” Leah tried to sit up and groaned.

“Let me get you inside.” Katya helped the other woman to her feet and led her toward the women’s quarters. She looked over her shoulder to see Turan in the thick of the fighting once more.

As Katya closed the door behind them, her last view was of Turan brandishing one of the lightning sticks and rushing toward a band of the attacking Warriors.

* * * * *

In the aftermath of the battle, the courtyard was strewn with wounded or dead Warriors. Some of the Guardians had fallen as well, but many had simply fled the compound when they realized they’d lost control over their creations.

Turan lowered his sword for the last time. He had tossed the lightning stick aside when it stopped working. “Feogul, take over here. Lock up these men before they regain consciousness. I’ll be back soon with someone to help the wounded.”

He ran to the women’s quarters, anxious to see Katya. Although he’d sent several of the strongest, best Warriors to defend the building, Turan was halfway convinced something had

happened to her while he'd been fighting and he would walk into the building to find destruction and bloody corpses.

He hit the door like a battering ram, breaking the latch and pushing back whatever the women had piled in front of it. "Open up. It's Turan," he yelled.

Inside, there was the sound of heavy pieces of furniture being moved and the door opened several inches. With his shoulder, Turan forced it the rest of the way open and tumbled inside. The vision in his head proved false. The women were whole and well, although pale and shadow-eyed from fatigue. "Where is Katya?"

"Helping with a birth." One of the women gestured down the hall.

"Show me." Turan followed her. The woman led him through a room filled with sleeping infants and children in cots.

Turan glanced from right to left at the rows of bins occupied by little creatures with tiny faces. They seemed too perfect, too small and delicate to be real. But a little boy made a snorting, snuffling sound through his nose and rolled over, and a baby stretched its arms out, eyes still closed in sleep, and rosebud mouth suckling at nothing. They were alive and very real. Turan's stomach clenched, seeing the little ones' vulnerability. For the first time, he truly understood the rebellion had not been just so he and Katya could be together. They had done something much more important -- saved these children from a lifetime of bondage and opened up a world of possibilities to them.

They left the nursery and went down another hall.

"This is the infirmary and the birthing room," his guide told him as they entered the next room.

When he saw Katya across the room, Turan felt as if a great weight had lifted from him. She was safe and whole. He didn't think he would ever forget the horror he'd felt when he'd seen her in the Warrior's strangling grip.

Katya's hair caught the glimmers of early morning sunlight coming through the window and shone a vibrant red. He realized he'd never seen her by sunlight, only in his dim, moonlit cell. She was bent over a cot, talking to the woman she'd called Leah, and didn't see Turan enter the room.

He approached her, calling her name quietly.

She straightened and turned. Her grim face lit as though the sun had risen in it. "Turan, you're safe!" She rushed to him.

Once more he held her tight and buried his face in her soft hair. He would have been content to hold her forever, but Katya pulled away. "Leah has had her baby early. She says she's all right, but I don't know." She looked up at him. "Is it really over?"

He nodded. "The compound is secure, but there are many wounded. The Guardians who were healers have all gone, and there is no one to tend the men."

"Leah is our healer. I don't know if anyone else knows what to do." Nevertheless, Katya quickly organized a group of women and gave brief instructions. "Stop the blood flow. Clean the wounds, sew them up and bandage them."

When she would have gone with them, Turan grabbed her wrist and pulled her back. "Wait. Come here first." He pulled her down a side hall, pressed her up against the wall, and kissed her. His need to feel her and fill her was so great, his cock was a huge, throbbing ache between his legs.

"We should --"

He stopped her protest with his mouth, thrusting his tongue between her lips and kissing her deeply. Pulling away, he whispered, "I know. But I want to feel you and know you're safe." Turan was already pulling his cock from the front of his trousers, urgent to be inside her.

Katya clung to his shoulders, and when he lifted her up, she bunched up the skirts of her dress to reveal pale thighs and the thatch of hair at their juncture and wrapped her legs around his hips.

The sight of her exposed pussy was almost enough to put Turan over the edge. With a hungry groan, he placed himself at her entrance and surged inside her, pushing her back against the wall. His hands were braced on either side of her head as he pumped into her

“Oh!” She moaned at his aggressive thrust.

Turan wanted to be gentle, but his body ruled him. He pulled out and pushed into her again, just as hard. Her heat and wetness surrounded him, reassuring him of the life coursing through her. Grunting, he rammed into her again.

“Oh!” This time Katya’s cry was definitely aroused excitement. “Oh, yes.” She dug her fingers into his shoulders and tightened her legs, pushing her body down hard onto his cock. Her inner muscles clenched around him like gripping fingers, massaging his swollen shaft.

Turan battered into her again and again. A wild madness surged through him as he possessed her deeply. Very soon, his balls drew up and his prick swelled and released, spilling his seed into her body. His hips pumped a few more times, then stilled. Breathing heavily, he rested his forehead against her neck, exhausted and relieved.

Katya clutched his heaving shoulders. Her body still moved against him, sliding, rubbing, searching for her own release. After a moment, she stopped and simply clung to him.

Turan was embarrassed at the need that had driven him to come so fast and had not allowed her the same satisfaction. He pulled his face away from her neck. “I’m sorry.

She smiled, stroking the sweaty strands of hair from his face. “It’s all right. Next time.”

“Next time,” he repeated, smiling. The words were the promise of a future he’d never imagined he could have. They sounded like freedom.

* * * * *

The women moved among the wounded Warriors and injured Guardians, treating all who needed aid.

Katya held a man's broken leg and Mattie attempted to set it between two boards, binding them straight and tight with a length of material. "It's always the women who must nurture," Mattie said. "Women who are expected to forgive, heal, and comfort. I have no compassion for these vile, raping brutes or the Guardians who controlled them. Why must I help them now?"

Katya shrugged. "Because, by your mercy, maybe you can teach them to be better."

Mattie grunted. "I don't feel 'merciful.' I feel like I hate them and wish they'd all died."

Despite her friend's harsh words, Katya later noticed Mattie kneeling and offering a drink of water to one of the injured Warriors.

Katya had her hands full staunching blood and wrapping wounds. She was almost finished dressing a Guardian's burn when she glanced up to see Turan striding toward her, coming from another part of the compound.

Stepping over damaged bodies, he approached Katya. When he reached her, he pulled her into his arms. "I have some bad news. Andrina is dead. She didn't make it to Droган. It appears she was cut down by a sword just outside the barracks."

Katya felt his words like a blow to the stomach. All the air was sucked from her lungs. She pictured pretty, gentle Andrina laughing and chatting as she sat in her chair in the common room and sewed. Katya clung to Turan, burying her face against his chest. Tears she hadn't had time to shed until now welled in her eyes. She sobbed and shook, the shock of the night catching up with her all at once. She cried for everything; for the horror she'd endured at Slavack's hands and for the carnage surrounding her. She cried for the fate of her friend, Andrina.

"Poor Droган," she mumbled through her tear-choked throat.

Turan made a sound of assent and squeezed her even tighter.

After holding onto him a long time, Katya finally pulled away.

He bent to kiss her, then rested his forehead against hers, while his hands rubbed slowly up and down her back. "I'm sorry about your friend. She saved my life, you know. But look around you. You made this happen. You freed everyone." He dropped his voice to an even quieter whisper and said, "You freed me."

Katya pressed her lips to his again. For several long, sweet moments, their mouths blended and all sounds around them faded away. Finally she pulled away once more, dropping down off her toes.

"But you aren't free." She relieved her sadness by gently teasing Turan. "You belong to me now. You must come home with me and meet my parents."

Turan smiled down at her, his dark eyes glittering in the bright sunshine. "I will love belonging to you -- forever. And I will love being part of your family."

Katya wiped her tears from her cheeks and managed a little laugh. "You haven't met my mother yet."

Epilogue

Katya lay with her eyes closed, listening to the splashing water, the never-ending creak of the mill wheel, and the trill of a redwing blackbird in the cattails by the riverbank. She was half asleep, soaking in the sun's hot rays with the cool grass cushioning her aching back. Suddenly, she felt a large hand sliding up her inner thigh through the light fabric of her dress. A slow smile spread over her face. Katya's eyes flickered open and squinted against the aureole of sunlight shining behind Turan's head. "Do you never get enough?"

"Never." His hand continued to ascend until it cupped her crotch. His thumb stroked idly over her clitoris through her clothing.

Katya shivered despite the heat and wiggled in her nest of soft grass. "Not out here. Anyone might walk by."

Turan looked toward the river. The mill was out of sight around the bend. "The grass is tall. We are hidden. Even if someone passed by, they wouldn't see." Nevertheless, he abandoned her crotch and let his hand drift up to rest on her round belly. He caressed the large mound, and it jumped beneath his palm. Turan smiled. "This baby wants out."

"Not for three more months." Katya drank in her husband's handsome face. She reached up and fluffed his newly short hair. It ended shaggily at his shoulders. Turan had cut

it with his own knife and stubbornly refused to let her trim it. She caressed the side of his strong jaw and ran her finger over his soft lips. He kissed her fingertip.

Katya sighed and shifted in the grass again, lifting her lower back, which hurt most of the time now.

Turan pulled her carefully to a sitting position. He sat on his heels behind her to massage her back. Starting at her shoulders, he pulled the tension away from her neck and out toward her arms, then massaged her biceps. After several moments, he tilted her head forward and rubbed small circles on the back of her neck from her skull down along her vertebrae.

Katya gasped and then groaned in pleasure at his gentle, insistent pressure. Her muscles loosened and relaxed like butter melting in the sun.

He kneaded out the tension between her shoulder blades that the baby's extra weight caused, then spanned her back with his hands and let his strong fingers work the muscles down either side of her spine. Finally, he worked his way down to the sensitive part, her lower back, just above her waist. He dug in good and hard, applying just the right amount of pressure to ease her pain.

"Ah yes." Katya sighed and closed her eyes. "That is very good."

Turan leaned close to the side of her head, and she could actually feel him smiling. "I know." His voice was smug with his newly-developed confidence. He stroked his big, warm hands all the way up and down her back several more times before ending the massage. Then, he changed his position behind her and pulled her back between his sprawled legs.

She relaxed against his chest, secure in the circle of his arms, and watched the blackbird fly up from the weeds with a last lyrical trill. The sun flashed off its shiny black body and the striking, scarlet stripe on its wing.

Katya thought of the red robes of the Guardians -- burned in a symbolic ceremony in the village square several months ago. Their reign of oppression was over, but the effects of it

would be felt in the land for a long time to come. There were many displaced Warriors still wandering the countryside, creating trouble, and roving bands which stole, assaulted, and raped. Most of the former Guardians had fled the area, but those like Droган who stayed, had a hard time finding acceptance in the villages as did many of the Warriors. The society of Gevelling was in chaos with the addition of so many strangers, most of them unskilled at anything except fighting.

There were rumors that the Revocs, having learned of the disbanding of the Warriors, were gathering forces and preparing to invade the land once more as they had in ages past. Some of the Warriors were asked to create a volunteer army to protect the lands, but this time with pay and the freedom to muster out after a period of service. There were a number of them only too happy to join.

Many villagers wished for the security and order the Guardians had provided. It was a system they understood and which had worked efficiently for most of them. As leaders of the revolt, Katya and Turan were reviled by some and exalted by others. Katya wondered how things would be for their child. Would he or she be set apart from the other children, or would things settle down and their part in the rebellion be forgotten as time passed?

She sighed, tired of the uncertainty of life and very tired of being pregnant.

“Still hurt?” Turan kissed the side of her head. “I can rub it again.”

Katya shook her head, rolling the back of it against his hard chest. “No. I think ... I think I just need a little distraction.” She took his hand and slid it from her belly all the way down to her crotch. “And I think that making love under the open sky on such a beautiful day is exactly what I need to distract me.” She loved the sound of Turan’s deep, reverberating chuckle.

He cupped the side of her face and turned it toward him as he leaned over her shoulder to kiss her mouth.

Katya never tired of his soft lips caressing hers or the seeking exploration of his tongue. She moaned softly and opened her mouth to him. She reached a hand over her shoulder and cupped the back of his head, threading her fingers through his sun-warmed hair. It was as black and glossy as the blackbird's wing, she thought idly.

Turan bunched up the folds of her skirt and reached underneath it to caress her naked thigh. His hand rose slowly, higher and higher, coming near to her sex then skirting around it. He touched her all around her swollen genitals, making Katya squirm in her effort to get him to touch the parts she wanted him to. Finally, he dipped his finger between her puffy labia to tease the slippery lips of her opening.

As always, she was wet and ready for him. Her body was conditioned to respond even to the timbre of his voice. When Turan entered the room, the lips of her pussy would clench, as if seeking his solid girth and begging to wrap around it. Katya's pregnancy had only enhanced her arousal. Her body felt full and lush and always eager to receive him inside it.

"Mm. How do you do this to me?" Katya murmured, writhing in his arms and arching toward his stroking fingers.

"The same way you do *this* to me." Turan whispered near her ear, thrusting his stiff erection against her rear. He slipped his hand inside the front of her gown and caressed one of her swollen breasts.

Katya's nipple felt as hard and pointed as a sharp stone, and her engorged breast seemed ready to burst. Her breasts had never been so full and round. Her mother had assured her this was preparation for nursing the baby, but right now, Katya was glad to nurse Turan.

He abandoned her clit, prompting a small whimper from Katya, and turned her around so he could open the front of her dress and play with her breasts freely. She knelt in front of him, and Turan kissed, licked, and suckled first one breast, then the other.

Katya's distended nipples were so sensitive it almost hurt, but in a very good way. She arched her back, offering them to him.

After he had spent several long, wet minutes cherishing her tits, Turan kissed his way down to her belly. Impatiently, he tugged her dress off and tossed it aside. He kissed all over the taut, strained skin of her stomach, then laid her back so he could feast at her pussy.

If Turan knew how to ease back pain, he was even better at gratifying her sexual needs. He bathed her plump folds thoroughly with his tongue, and then lapped between them until he reached the hard nub of her clit.

Katya closed her eyes and sighed in contentment. She felt the hot sun soaking into her naked skin and watched shadow shapes drift across the red screen of her eyelids as she rode the waves of pleasure Turan's tongue aroused. She lifted her hips, rising to meet his mouth.

Relentlessly, Turan worked her over. He dipped his tongue inside her, lapping up to her clit again. He circled and nipped it, forcing a soft little cry from Katya.

She began to writhe and rock, her bliss swelling from a general feeling of lust to a specific, desperate need. "Turan," she murmured, rising higher and higher against his mouth, digging her heels into the ground, and lifting her hips entirely off the earth.

Inside Katya's womb, the baby twisted and turned and kicked out with hard little feet, excited by all the movement.

A last swirl of his tongue brought her to climax. She cried out loudly, but the rushing river covered the sound. If anyone passed by, they wouldn't have heard. Her body jerked several times before subsiding. Katya moaned in quiet gratitude as she landed on earth again.

Turan kissed her mons and her round belly. He murmured something Katya couldn't hear to the baby inside her before he crawled the rest of the way up her body to stare down into her eyes. "So beautiful," he whispered, bending to kiss her.

Katya tasted her juices on his tongue. She sucked it a moment before letting it go.

Although Turan suspended his weight on his strong arms, his taut stomach still pushed against her distended belly. He rolled onto his side next to Katya and draped an arm over her.

She breathed deeply and evenly, still enjoying the aftershocks of her orgasm as they slowly dissipated. Katya turned to her side with her back to her husband, but reached one hand over her shoulder to idly caress his cheek. "I need you inside me now."

Turan needed no encouragement. In a moment Katya felt his hand nudging her thighs apart and his cock pushing at her slippery entrance. It slipped into her wet depths as sleek and easy as an otter diving into the river. He moved inside her slowly, almost dreamily, sliding in and out. His breath puffed warm against her ear.

As Katya lay in Turan's arms, she thought of how her body had been such a mystery to him when they first met. She replayed every moment of the first time they had made love, when everything about each other was fresh and unexplored. She contrasted it with the easy familiarity with one another's bodies they now enjoyed. Both ways were good.

Katya knew Turan's rhythms and his sounds so well. She smiled as his thrusts increased in speed and his panting breaths turned to soft groans. She always adored the moment that he came, when she could feel him pulsing inside her, and his harsh cry was ecstatic and astounded. Each time they coupled, it was like a miracle had taken place.

Turan held her tightly, but without crushing her belly. He spent himself inside her with a few last pumps and a contented sigh, then kissed her hair and nuzzled into her shoulder.

They drowsed together, Katya naked and Turan half-clothed, lying in their hidden nest in the shelter of tall grass beneath the bright blue sky. The sound of the river rushing past was soothing, and Katya drifted toward sleep as the child inside her somersaulted and pressed against its fleshly cage. "Baby wants to be free already," she said, smiling and patting her stomach.

"It will be," Turan replied, kissing her hair. "Our child will always be free."

 THE END 

Bonnie Dee

Whether you're a fan of contemporary, paranormal or historical romance, you'll find something to enjoy among my books. My style is down to earth and my characters feel like well-known friends by the time you've finished reading. I'm interested in flawed, often damaged, people who find the fulfillment they seek in one another.

I have numerous erotic romance novels published by Liquid Silver Books and Venus Press. My short stories have been included in Best Women's Erotica 2006 and Wicked Words: Sex at the Sports Club. For more information on my back list of books go to <http://bonniedee.com>.