

XIV

Opposites Attract



Brenna
Lyons

Temperance

**OPPOSITES ATTRACT:
A LESSON IN
TEMPERANCE**

BY BRENNAN LYONS

**A Short Story from the Night Warriors
Series**

"So, are you going to let me protect you?" Bryant asked.

"You? You are danger personified. I don't want you anywhere near me." Shana almost grimaced at the lie. She wanted Bryant close, closer than was prudent.

"You don't want the beasts near you either. Right?" he reasoned.

"Well... No. Not really," she admitted.

"Then the only safe thing for you to do is accept this amulet." He held the necklace between them.

"And," she hesitated, feeling her cheeks darken in a deep blush, "you have to kiss me to do this, right?"

His smile made her heart skip a beat. "Would one kiss be so dangerous?" His voice was dark and seductive.

Oh yes. One kiss from Bryant is likely to be fatal.

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Temperance—Opposites Attract

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ABOUT THE CARD...

Shana could be said to exemplify the heart of the word temperance. She avoids excess, takes the safe route, and believes in avoiding extremes. Though she doesn't realize it, in her quest to live to this ideal, she is extreme in her own way.

That is where the deeper meaning of the card comes in. Because Shana and Bryant are polar opposites on most subjects, they have to achieve a middle ground, recognize their strengths and use them as needed, work together, and finally – find a way to be safe and secure with each other.

Other possible meanings of this card are renewing your energy stores, healing – which Bryant does a bit of in this story, and joining forces.

DEDICATED TO...

*Curt, for convincing me that his
brothers needed their stories told,
darn the man!*

*Sean, for always asking, but what
happened next, darn that man too!*

Glossary of Warrior Terms:

Beast	A beast is what humans erroneously refer to as vampires. The stories humans tell are obviously not correct, but you can't expect a human to get everything right.
Blutjagd	The "blood hunt." Warriors crave battle with the beasts, as the beasts crave blood. Warriors are tied to beasts in that they sense many of the beasts' special powers. A Warrior can feel the use of coercion, feeding, and other controls of humans. They also feel other Warriors engaged in Blutjagd, the death of beasts and Warriors in their range, and the presence of nearby beasts who are not ghosted.
Elder	One of the original beasts, the stone stealers who were damned for their crimes against the stone and the Warriors. The elders are gifted with powers other beasts are not, including the ability to reproduce with a <i>Blutjagdfrau</i> , the ability to turn other beasts, and the inability to be killed by anyone but a Warrior.
Ende Spiel	The point in printing when a Warrior must either seal printing or go insane. A Warrior who feels printing may not progress should break printing long before this point.
Ghosting	A talent that both beasts and Cursed Warriors learn to harness. Ghosting

can hide the physical form of Cursed Warriors or beasts and all they hold or carry from each other and humans. In a lesser strength, it can “blur” the image of the user so that humans do not note the passage but still see a person there, which avoids accidental collisions. Even a ghosted beast cannot hide uses of power that a Warrior can track.

Printing

Like imprinting, a Warrior becomes tied to his mate for life. He cannot choose another if she is lost, cannot be unfaithful while she lives, and cannot ever divorce or otherwise dissolve the union. A printed Warrior is the most stable of men unless his mate or children are endangered or lost. Then, he will suffer the printing madness and may have to be killed by his house. Likewise, a Warrior who breaks printing, even early printing, will suffer for it. A Warrior who breaks printing too close to Ende Spiel will face the madness.

Warriors

Also called Cursed Warriors or Sons of the Stone. The Warriors were an ancient race of protectors who spawned the beasts and now are driven to hunt their former brothers to extinction.

CHAPTER ONE

April 20th, 2030

Somewhere in the foothills of Arkansas

The child came from nowhere. Shana would have sworn under oath that the road was deserted. Then she yawned, and the little boy appeared in her path, barefoot and wearing a muddy pair of pajamas.

“Oh, no,” she breathed, dragging the wheel to the left and slamming on the brakes.

Shana realized her mistake immediately. The road was a mess of heavy clay-based mud, and the move sent her into a sidelong skid. Shana fought the wheel, releasing the brakes and trying to steer her way out of the skid, but all four wheels were hydroplaning over the slick surface, and there was no hope of controlling the motion.

The car tipped as the right two wheels slid into the drainage ditch. Shana squeezed her eyes shut, every muscle tensing in anticipation of the crash to come.

It wasn't so much a crash as a jarring stop. There was a sickening sucking sound, as the car sank into the thick layer of mud at the bottom of the ditch. She cursed aloud, as the side airbags deployed then burst.

She sat in the aftermath for a moment, her breathing labored. "Some help you are," she grumbled at the deflated airbag that brushed her hip. Well, there was no sense in sitting here all night. At the very least, she needed to make sure the child in the road was all right.

Shana planted her feet on the slight hump between the front seats and fumbled for the seatbelt release. The road was dark, without streetlights or house lights to aid her in her escape. She cursed her luck. She'd followed the directions the gas station attendant gave her precisely, but this deserted stretch of road couldn't possibly be the right way to the conference in Little Rock. Either Shana misheard him or he'd been playing some prank, a prank that had her trapped in a ditch on a muddy road.

She pushed up at the car door, but it was too heavy to heft straight up from her precarious perch. Shana gave up and started unrolling the window. It would be a tight fit with the extra thirty pounds of padding she carried on her five-foot-nine frame, but she couldn't sit in the car, waiting for help that might never come.

The handle was wrenched from her hand as the door moved. Shana lost her footing. She grasped at the seatbelt, using the locking mechanism in her favor to stop her sudden drop and pulling her foot from the cold mud with a grimace of disgust.

Hands circled her arms and dragged Shana up through the now-open door, depositing her on her feet. She slipped, gripping her car to keep from landing in a mud puddle.

"You okay?" a man asked.

Shana nodded, scanning her eyes around for the child. Had she missed him? How far did the car slide? "Is the little boy all right?" she asked urgently.

The man chuckled. "Jes fine, Miss. Jes fine."

She looked to him in the deeper darkness outside the limited globe of light from her headlights, trying to gauge his humor. What was so funny in her nearly running down a child? And what was a child that young doing in the road at this time of night? He couldn't have been more than six.

Her questions stuck in her throat. Two eyes glowed a flickering red in the darkness. Shana shook her head. "I'm unconscious," she reasoned. "I hit my head when I crashed. Or, I fell asleep at the wheel and this is all a dream." *Yes. Those are the only plausible explanations.*

"Tha's right, Miss. This is all a dream."

But the grip he had on her arm was no dream. Shana couldn't recall ever feeling touch in a dream. The mud in her shoe and the firm but not painful grip on her arm couldn't be a dream, could they?

The smell of unwashed body assaulted her. She definitely didn't smell in dreams. Shana recoiled, pulling at his hold.

It didn't loosen. She looked to those eyes in rising panic. *This isn't real*, she pleaded. *Things like this don't happen in real life.*

"Jes settle." The man's voice was soothing – if he was a man.

For a moment, Shana calmed. Then common-sense kicked in, and her situation became very clear to her.

He could kill her. He probably would kill her. "Let me go." Shana wrenched her arm back then rebounded against him when he didn't move.

"Calm down, Miss." His voice was impatient, seemingly annoyed with her refusal to follow his orders.

She punched him across the face, her breath catching on a cry of alarm at the pains shooting up her arm. True, Shana rarely had cause to hit anyone in her life, but she remembered that they didn't typically feel like a hot brick wall when she did.

"No," another male voice barked.

Shana spun in the first man's grip, her heart racing at the sight of another pair of glowing eyes. She shook her head, shocked beyond coherent speech. Why had she come here? She'd been safe at home, and Shana had always preferred to be safe. Had she really thought this out-of-state con would be an adventure? This was more adventure than she wanted.

The second man closed his hands over her shoulders, and the first man released her and moved a pace back. Shana stiffened then relaxed in his arms, her entire body warm and comfortable. Even her foot didn't seem cold anymore.

"Like this," the second man crooned. "Remember that the kinder emotions are harder come by. Make them love you not fear you. Master Jörg taught me that."

Shana nodded, though his speech hadn't been intended for her. She licked her lip in a fierce hunger. The fact that she was intended as an object lesson in teaching the younger man about physical love was

arousing. Even more arousing, the older would touch her as a means of teaching. Shana knew he would. She wanted him to touch her.

Her nipples tightened against the cotton bra cups, and her panties were abruptly damp against her aching core. She shifted against him, seeking pressure to ease that ache.

"That's right," he urged her. "Come to me."

Shana needed no more encouragement than that. She tipped her head back, moaning as his lips closed over hers. The kiss was hot and hard, whispering of all the experiences he intended to grant her. His mouth left hers, exploring her face then her throat. Shana arched her spine and laid her head back, offering herself to him.

"Touch her," he instructed his young charge. "Slowly. Draw out the moment."

The smaller male body nestled behind her, and Shana gasped at the erect lengths pressing into her front and back. One pair of hands kneaded her breasts, teasing at the already-hard nipples. The other pushed her skirt up her thighs, an unhurried glide that told her it was the man in front of her whose hand sought out the damp strip of panties between her thighs. Shana spread her legs for him, and he rewarded her with another kiss.

"Now," the younger man demanded. His breath teased at her throat. His tongue darted out, licking along the sensitive skin.

Shana shuddered at that then groaned in acceptance. It felt incredibly erotic, and she couldn't imagine why she had considered stopping him a

moment before.

"Better," the man in front of her complimented his student. "But no. I will taste her first, at the height of her pleasure. Then we will both have her."

Her body rioted in pleasure, demanding that. The thought of both of their bodies piercing hers at once nearly sent her over without any help from the men gifting her this experience. A whisper in her mind swayed her from that, promising greater pleasures if she held off for them.

"You want to touch me, woman." He didn't question that she did.

She nodded, her fingers trailing over smooth skin. Had he been nude when he came to her? There was a faint memory of clothing, but it hardly seemed important. Not when her hand had just circled his cock and elicited a growl of male satisfaction from him. Pleasing him was a much more intriguing concept than unimportant things like a naked man walking around in the middle of the night, just waiting for her to come along.

"Yes, you," he breathed.

Shana stroked him, and the fingers caressing her found the nub of flesh, making her legs shake in near climax. His mouth returned to her throat, nipping at her skin, stroking at her flesh in a way that made her head spin.

* * * *

Bryant scowled at the lewd scene laid out before him. He'd been investigating this band of beasts for almost

a month, and this was the perfect chance to cripple them. Without their high-level master, the low levels would have much more difficulty taking prey and would be easier to pick off. Without whatever elder turned them to instruct them, the learning was slow and painful. For that, Bryant would be eternally grateful to gods he thanked for little else.

But this form of “teaching” turned his stomach. The high level was using coercion to force the woman to serve them. Presumably, the flashes of coercion from the low level meant the beast was learning how to control humans by sharing in this experience.

The high level had used some sort of illusion to drive the victim’s car off the road – an animal or maybe a child. Those were the most popular ruses employed. The illusion had alerted Bryant, and the coercion had served as a beacon to bring him the rest of the way. Luckily, he had been close to their ambush spot, this time.

He moved toward them, as the high level pulled back, his fangs descending fully for a feed. The low level pulled at his foul, tattered jeans, freeing his cock for the violation to come. Bryant sneered at that. It must have been some time since they’d taken prey of a size to clothe the younger beast.

Bryant took the high level’s heart first, swinging around the mass of entwined bodies to take the low level’s before the shock of his slain master could spur him to motion. The stomach-wrenching sense of a beast feeding made Bryant turn back in dismay. He dragged the creature off of his prey and slit his throat in a spike of pure fury, as much at himself as at the

beast.

Never turn your back on a dying beast, even one with a mortal wound. How many times had Kord and Adam all but beaten that into him? He had to take out both beasts, but he lingered too long. He should have been faster.

It had been a half-baked attempt and weakly executed, but the high level had marked her for his brethren. Now they could all track her. *Damn them!*

The woman weaved on her feet, one hand going to the track of blood running down her throat and the other dragging her skirt down her thighs. She sobbed. He grimaced at that. The coercion had broken with the death of the high level. The woman was left in confusion, pain, most likely horror at what had happened to her.

Bryant cleaned his blade and sheathed it, offering his hand. "You're safe now. Come with me, and I'll protect you." He had to offer his protection. She'd been fed on. He'd failed her.

She backed away, tripping over the body of the low level and righting herself by a grip on her car. She shook, looking from one body to the other then to Bryant.

It wasn't unexpected. She didn't know whether or not to trust a man who appeared out of nowhere and killed two other beings. It was what he'd expected her to do. His duty required that Bryant not traumatize her any further if he could help it, but there were more beasts closing on them, and he had to do everything he could for her unless she told him rationally that she didn't want his protection, even if

that meant forcing her to accompany him.

But, first he'd try to convince her. "Please, trust me. There are more nearby. We have to leave here." All low levels that he knew of, but there might be another high level. Even in these lean times, a high level rarely took on more than seven or eight low levels for his own. It was too time and energy consuming to be worth the protective layer they offered. The number of low levels closing seemed to indicate at least one more high level somewhere nearby.

"Who are you?" Her voice was tremulous and weak.

"My name is Bryant Maher, and I only want to help." He turned his head, grinding his teeth at the unmistakable sound of ripping metal.

The woman was abruptly at his back, where he would have ordered her in battle anyway. "What is that?"

Bryant grumbled a curse. "My car. The damn beasts have destroyed my car." Repairing the Stingray would be expensive. Worse, Bryant would have to convince Adam to let him spend the money – and after this screw-up, that wouldn't be easy.

This isn't the right time to think about that, he chided himself. The band of beasts had just pinned Bryant in the middle of nowhere with a traumatized victim and were closing in on them in overwhelming numbers. As much as Bryant hated to admit it, the Stingray wasn't nearly his biggest problem.

He grasped the woman's hand and started leading her away from the road to the woods beneath. She pulled away, turning to run from him. Bryant hefted

her over his shoulder, ignoring her blows and stilling her legs so she couldn't kick. He didn't give her a chance to complain. The beasts were nearly on top of them, and she was obviously not in the mood to follow his commands in battle.

"Let me down," she demanded, but her voice hitched.

"Look Miss —"

"Parsons. Shana Parsons. Now let —" She grunted, as Bryant jumped over a stone then slid, wrenching himself upright.

"Do you want to face more of the beasts?" Bryant grimaced at the fact that she was acting like a searchlight, leading them in. The beasts had turned cross-country after them, but they were too close to stop and protect her now. Even if he tried, Shana wouldn't be likely to accept his protection yet.

"What are those — beast things?"

"This really isn't the time —"

Shana laid a punch on his spine.

Bryant jumped in response. "That hurt, you know."

"Good. Now let me down or answer me."

"Beasts are roughly what you'd call vampires," he answered, half-sliding down a muddy incline.

She hit him again.

A wild urge to drop Shana and leave her to her fate gripped him, but his duty wouldn't permit that. Bryant tightened his hold on her. "Knock it off," he growled. Why couldn't they simply accept his help and be grateful for it for once?

"Vampires don't exist," she informed him.

"You're right. Vampires don't exist, but beasts do," he countered as patiently as he could.

"And what are you? Abraham Van Helsing? You look good for your age," she offered sarcastically.

Bryant chuckled at that. Shana was down but not out. "A whole lot better, baby."

She started to protest but stopped with a squawk, as Bryant skidded to a halt. He cursed fluently at the group of beasts surrounding them. Usually, low levels wouldn't attack a trained Warrior without being ordered to do so by an elder, but they were obviously counting on their numbers to save most of them, and they were most likely right about that. Bryant's sacred weapon was drawn again and the first beast dead before the ring was complete.

A beast stepped forward, clapping, a measured sound that conveyed his disregard for who and what Bryant was. Bryant grumbled a curse at that. It was a second high level, just as he feared. No wonder the low levels were so willing to take this chance.

"Most impressive," the beast stated in a bored voice. "Your brother would be pleased."

"Hardly," Bryant snapped at him. No. Adam would not be amused by his current situation in the least. In fact, if this got back to the new Lord Maher, chances were that Bryant would be the proud owner of a few new scars in Trial for this one. How the hell did he let himself get trapped this way?

The beasts had stopped him only twenty yards from the river. While it wasn't true that beasts couldn't cross water, only the high level would be able to keep track of them once the strong current

dragged them a few miles downstream, and by the time they did catch up, Shana would be protected. They would have no reason to come then. There was always easier prey than a protected human.

"Name yourself," Bryant commanded him. *Might as well observe the formalities on the way. Might be the last time I get the chance to ask the question. Think! How do I get out of this one?*

The high level smiled a fang-heavy smile. "Kirrel. At your service, Warrior."

Hardly. "Let's get this over with." Bryant scanned his eyes over the area, evaluating the possible moves he could make and their probable outcomes. The nearest riverbank was a small cliff away, but it was likely that Bryant would break his ankle in the jump. Even Warriors took a week or so to recover from a broken bone, and in the meantime, they would never reach safety.

"Bryant," Shana began, no doubt about to suggest he put her down again.

"Quiet," he grumbled. *I need to think. There has to be a better choice.*

"This is simple," Kirrel reasoned. "Even you can't fight fifteen beasts at once. You're not a König, after all."

Nice try, but I am not jealous of Curt for that. "You're not suggesting I give up?" Bryant asked in mock disbelief.

"I'm suggesting a simple trade."

His stomach tightened at that. Warriors didn't make deals with beasts. "I'm listening."

"Give us the woman, and you may walk away to

fight another day.”

Shana tightened her grip on his jacket, shifting against Bryant’s shoulder, as if counting the beasts around them.

“She is a bit of a pain,” Bryant admitted, stalling for time.

The bridge was too far, and it would be too easy to chase them down that way. Warrior genetics or not, Bryant would eventually get tired of carrying Shana. Worse, fighting out that direction would leave the high level at his back, the last place Bryant wanted him.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Shana gasped.

No, Bryant wouldn’t, but he had to come up with a better plan than taking on fifteen beasts at once with a woman slung over his shoulder. “You haven’t exactly asked for my protection, have you?”

“I’m asking,” she pleaded.

Bryant charged the high level. With any luck, the move would cause the low levels to scatter in confusion. If he wasn’t quite that lucky – *this doesn’t seem to be the night for it* – he might at least take out his most dangerous adversary and cause the weakest left to scatter. That would even the odds up some.

Kirrel obviously expected the move. His claws slashed out, and Bryant was slowed in response by Shana’s added weight. He took the beast’s heart but felt the tearing of claws as he streaked past the parting line of startled beasts.

He slid and tumbled down the slope to the bank of the river. Bryant dropped Shana in the water and dragged off his jacket. He’d had practice swimming in

his boots, but the long, leather jacket would only drag him down. Besides that, it was torn and stained in beast blood, so it would have to be discarded at some point. He retrieved his phone from his belt with the thought of keeping the delicate device above water then dropped it atop the jacket in disgust. It was broken, pierced by one of the claws that wounded Bryant.

“That’s it. We’re stuck here.” Bryant dove into the river after Shana.

CHAPTER TWO

“We can’t sleep here,” Shana complained. She surveyed the ramshackle barn in the gray light of the rising sun.

“There is nowhere else to sleep,” Bryant pointed out to her. “The house collapsed more than ten years ago. Be glad there is any shelter at all. The next farm is five miles away.”

“But — But there are probably rats in there.”

“No. Field mice but not rats.” He strode into the barn, his still-wet black hair swinging around his shoulders.

Shana pressed a hand to the squirming in her stomach. She shook her head. Bryant was admittedly gorgeous, despite that mop he called hair, but she’d never felt this sexually attracted to a man before.

Except those beast things. Her stomach rolled at that, the butterflies morphing into angry snakes. How could she? It had to be some sort of trick. After all, Bryant said the stories about vampires were loosely based on these beasts. Maybe they had the legendary mental powers.

“Are you coming or not?” Bryant called out.

"Yes." Shana followed him into the dim interior, hoping the structure wasn't going to collapse around them.

Bryant took her arm, guiding Shana to a work table that looked to be only slightly more sturdy than the barn itself. "Sit here."

She pulled herself up gingerly, half-expecting it to crumble under her weight. Bryant pulled a plastic bag from his sodden jeans and opened it. The smell of isopropyl alcohol was powerful.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He pulled out a gauze pad. "Cleaning the bite. It's not as deep as it might have been. Good thing. I am not equipped to put stitches in you. All of the heavy first aid gear was in my car." He cleaned his hands first, taking the last of the foul black stuff that she assumed was beast blood off of skin that was irritated beneath. Bryant set the pad aside and pulled out another. "He only got one fang in, and he missed the artery entirely, so you didn't bleed severely."

Shana winced, as he stroked the alcohol-soaked pad over the cut gently. His hands on her skin were disconcerting, making the low burn of arousal for him all the worse. "Is this really necessary?"

His mouth quirked up in a half-smile. "You said you like safe. You dunked it in the river, and you have no idea where else that beast had his mouth."

She shuddered, her arousal abruptly forgotten.

His smile disappeared. "Sorry."

"Have you ever been bitten?" she asked quietly.

"Gods, no!"

"Then why do you do this? Did they kill someone

you cared about?"

Bryant didn't answer. He cleaned the cut thoroughly then collected up the other gauze pads and tossed them all aside.

"That's littering," she reminded him.

He waved his arm at the rotted walls surrounding them. "In this junk heap?"

"It's still littering."

Bryant scooped the pads up and tucked them into his back pocket. "Happy?" he asked, looking more than a little annoyed at her concern.

"It's a step in the right direction." *Better would be getting me home.*

He rolled his deep brown eyes.

"Shouldn't you clean out your own injury?" she asked, trying not to wince at the deep gashes in his side.

Bryant fingered the ugly-looking one at his waist and shrugged. "My body takes care of itself. In three or four days, it will be fine."

"That? You're dreaming. It needs stitches and—" Shana swallowed the rest of her argument, as Bryant shot her a look of warning.

She nodded. "Okay. You don't need to clean it," she conceded carefully. "Why do you do this? You never answered. Did they kill someone you care about?"

"Sure. Lots of people, but that's not why I do this." Bryant didn't meet her eyes, and he played with the red-stoned ring on the pinky of his left hand. If that stone was a ruby, it was worth a fortune.

"Why do you?" she asked for the third time.

He cracked a smile. "It's the family business. I was born to it, trained for it from the day I turned fifteen."

Well, that was a scary thought. "Who did these – beasts kill?"

"My father. My grandfather. Every dead man in my family as far back as anyone remembers. They'll kill me too – someday, when I get sloppy or old and slow." He twisted the ring on his finger idly, rolling it beneath the pad of his thumb.

Shana found forming a response difficult. "Are you at war with them or something?"

Bryant sighed. "Yes. I'm afraid we are."

* * * *

Shana's green eyes widened in surprise, and she hooked a lock of the honey brown hair that escaped the bun behind her head over her ear. "What do I have to do with this?"

Bryant rocked the ring back and forth on his finger, trying to ignore her question. Kord had been a fan of leather pants and silk shirts. Adam liked exotic weapons. Every Warrior deserved an expensive passion for what they risked. His car could be destroyed, but a beast would have to kill him to take Bryant's ring.

It was worth as much as the car, without a doubt. The heavy brushed titanium band housed a nine karat blood-red ruby acid etched with the Maher seal: balance scales surrounded by a garland of laurel. Half the cost of the ring was the fact that two stones had been damaged before the etching was perfected.

"Bryant?" Shana called nervously. "Why me?"

He shrugged. "You're food and entertainment. It's a lot easier to kill you than to kill me." It was the harsh, unvarnished truth, but maybe that would make her more likely to accept his protection.

She choked at that. "How do I get out of here?"

"We walk. Two days to the closest phone."

"Two days?" Her voice went shrill in near panic. "But the convention center has to be closer than that."

He met her earnest expression dead-on, his ring momentarily forgotten. She was off by more than sixty miles. A niggling of unease settled in his stomach. Bryant had wondered how the band kept getting people into this hellhole, but this was the first chance he'd had to ask. The high-levels always erased that memory first.

"Who told you that?" he asked, praying that there hadn't been time to erase Shana's memories of how she got here.

"The attendant at the gas station on state road sixty-two. I stopped there for directions. He directed me this way, but—" A pained expression clouded her face. "He set me up. Didn't he?"

Bryant nodded stiffly. *But, he won't set anyone else up. A bought human who facilitates deaths is fair prey, and he's my prey.* "What did he look like? The greasy blonde?" He'd refueled there several times. There were only three attendants that worked the afternoon and evening.

She scrunched up her nose in a look of distaste that announced she avoided that particular attendant. Bryant reminded himself that the man probably

looked rather threatening to Shana.

"No. The clean-cut redhead."

Of course. His looks would inspire trust, especially from women traveling alone, and he was probably well-paid with the valuables of victims. He could afford the look he carried off.

"What are you going to do to him?"

Bryant smiled at that, his bloodlust already burning, but just an edge. "Don't worry. It won't be very painful." *He won't live long enough for it to be painful.*

"But that's - that's -"

He shook his head. "He set you up to be raped, fed on, and probably murdered. He's done it before, and he'll do it again, unless I stop him."

"So that makes it all right?" she asked in seeming exasperation.

"Let me guess. You don't believe in capital punishment, even in the most extreme cases."

"Two wrongs don't make a right," she replied stubbornly.

"What do you suggest? I let him get more people raped and killed?"

She faltered. "Well... No, of course not. Prison -"

"Excuse me, officer? This clean cut, all-American boy next door is in league with the vampires hunting these hills, and I just wondered if you would be so kind -"

"Very funny," she snapped.

"No. It's not funny. That's what you have to get through your head. This is a war, and Mr. Clean Cut is killing people. It's not an accident. He's setting

them up in cold blood. The police will think we're insane. I am the only thing standing between you and a lot of other innocents and death. That's not funny."

"Well, you saved me. Thank you very much. Now, get me out of here and you can go back to your little war, while I get out of Oz."

Bryant grimaced. "It's a little more complex than that."

Her face darkened, most probably in rising frustration. "Why?"

"You've been fed on."

Shana pressed a hand to her neck, swallowing hard. Too late, Bryant remembered that she had no idea what that really meant. It had been months since he'd had to explain this to someone; and subtly, as Erin was so fond of pointing out, had never been Bryant's strong suit.

"You're not becoming one of them," he assured her. Damn the movies *Blade* and *The Forsaken* for making that part of the mythos! At least Brahm Stoker's *Dracula* had that part right.

"Then why does it matter?"

"They can track you now. That's how they followed us last night. That's how they will follow you again tonight, if I'm not protecting you."

"Anywhere?"

"Anywhere you go, they can and will follow unless you're under my protection."

"And what am I supposed to do about that? There has to be a way to end it."

"Accept my protection. A beast very rarely preys on someone who's protected. It's too much of a risk

for too little return."

"You hanging over my shoulder for the rest of my life?" she replied hotly. "I don't think so."

"Afraid I'd embarrass you with your prim and proper friends?" he countered. *And why would I care if she was?* "Well, don't concern yourself, princess. I give you an amulet and a little kiss, and then you're free to go - as soon as we get to a phone." *The sooner, the better.*

"A—a— You are seriously deranged. You know that, don't you?"

"Oh, am I? I suppose you don't believe the beasts really exist, now? You just ran yourself off the road and decided to have sex with a couple of rednecks?"

"Of course not," she grumbled. "They tricked me somehow." Shana rubbed a hand over her forehead, looking weary. "Somehow," she repeated.

Bryant's anger faded somewhat. "Yes. They did. I guarantee that I won't disrupt your life, unless a beast is stupid enough to try and attack the amulet."

Shana laughed weakly. "You? I find it hard to believe that you can do anything that isn't completely flamboyant."

He sighed. She'd pegged him with that statement. "I can be unobtrusive when I need to." *Invisible, if I want to.* "I can blend anywhere I have to."

She scanned her eyes over him with a scowl, her gaze settling at his shoulders.

Bryant shifted uncomfortably under her inspection then forced himself to relax, pushing his hair back over his shoulder. "What?" he demanded in a sudden flash of understanding. "Lots of men wear a ponytail

with a tux these days." He even owned a tux. Not that he'd ever used it, but he owned one.

"Sure. Mr. – what are you? Six foot two?"

"Three," he grumbled.

"Figures. Mr. Six foot three and looks like an escapee from a horror film hall of fame. Even trading in your current attire for a tux – Bet you'd still wear that ring, wouldn't you?"

He bristled at that. Damn right, he'd wear his ring. What was wrong with that? "So?"

"That's a real ruby, isn't it?"

"Yeah. So? I have a little money. People excuse eccentricity when they think you're rich."

Shana rolled her eyes at that pronouncement. "What do you drive, Mr. Unobtrusive? Let me guess. A Beamer 2030 LM with the two-thirteen remake overbored for performance."

He searched her face. He'd studied that car, considered buying it until the Stingray caught his eye. Adam had been relieved that he'd chosen the Stingray. By all accounts, the Beamer had barely passed minimum safety testing, but safety wasn't his concern. "Nah. Highly overrated. The handling for the horsepower isn't up to spec for me. I prefer the 2020 Retro Stingray. But, cars can be changed. You can rent staid cars, you know. I don't have to drive the Stingray." *I prefer it, but I don't have to.*

"You made my point," she grumbled.

"Which is?"

"You don't know how to blend."

"You don't think I could drive a safe little Mazda like you?"

"By the traffic laws?" she hinted.

Bryant didn't answer that. Again, she'd pegged him, but with his response time and ghosting abilities, who cared about that? It wasn't like his life was a safe one, no matter how he drove, and sometimes people's lives depended on how fast he got to the scene of an attack.

"Thought so."

"I never said I led a safe life. I just said I could blend if I needed to – for as long as I have to."

"Sure you can," she replied sarcastically.

"So, now I'm being condemned for the car I drive?" he asked.

Shana shrugged.

"Fine. Let's take a look at you, Ms. Stuck-Up."

She opened her mouth as if to protest.

"Gorgeous hair pulled into a bun so tight you look like a 1950s spinster. Sensible shoes with a knee-length skirt. The safest mid-priced car on the market. Reading glasses, because you don't want to risk sticking something in your eyes. Sensible cotton panties and bra. A safe condo in a safe neighborhood and a non-threatening job in early childhood education. You even drive rather than fly."

"How could you –" she gasped.

"You just proved my point," he taunted, repeating her words back to her with great satisfaction.

"Which is?" Her voice was gaining strength again.

"For all your lip service at playing it safe, you have absolutely no survival instincts." Bryant plowed on, determined to prove her inattentiveness to her. "I got a good look at your bra and panties last night,

between the wet blouse and –” He waved his hand at that, unwilling to delve too deeply into the beast playing at her body.

She paled at the reminder.

“You’re headed to the convention center. A decent Warrior knows all the major events that draw people into his area.”

Shana groaned. “Early childhood,” she grumbled. “You saw my car, shoes and hair.”

“And, you complained about leaving *your* car behind while we were walking last night. So, you drove here rather than fly.”

“What about the reading glasses?”

Bryant smiled. “You squinted when you were trying to make out the design on my ring. If you don’t wear glasses, you should.”

“And the condo?”

His smile felt more strained. “Fifty-fifty shot. Women like you either live in an old family home or an apartment. You struck me as the minimalist type, and the neighbors are closer – in case you scream.”

Her eyes flashed in anger.

“So, are you going to accept my protection or not?”

Shana blushed deeply and glanced to his lips then away. Bryant raised an eyebrow at that. So, she wanted a kiss, did she? This could get very interesting.

* * * *

“So, are you going to let me protect you?” Bryant asked.

"You? You are danger personified. I don't want you anywhere near me." Shana almost grimaced at the lie. She wanted Bryant close, closer than was prudent.

"You don't want the beasts near you either. Right?" he reasoned.

"Well... No. Not really," she admitted.

"Then the only safe thing for you to do is accept this amulet." He held the necklace between them.

"And," she hesitated, feeling her cheeks darken in a deep blush, "you have to kiss me to do this, right?"

His smile made her heart skip a beat. "Would one kiss be so dangerous?" His voice was dark and seductive.

Oh yes. One kiss from Bryant is likely to be fatal. But what a way to go!

Bryant closed on her position as if she'd agreed, and Shana felt her heart rate accelerate. He was going to do it. That rogue was going to kiss her.

The amulet settled over her shoulders, the disc coming to rest over her breasts. Shana didn't look at it. The intent set to Bryant's eyes held her full attention.

His fingers worked at the bun in her hair, and the damp strands curled around her face. He smiled his approval at that, making her feel pretty and wanted. His hands settled on her cheeks.

"Do you want my protection?" he whispered.

Shana nodded, unwilling to trust her voice wouldn't squeak.

He lowered his face until the foreign words he murmured teased her lips with heat. Her nipples

hardened in response, and her whole body sensitized in anticipation of his touch. She closed her eyes as he fell silent and –

Bryant kissed her forehead and moved away abruptly.

Shana opened her eyes, hurt and confusion warring in her breast. “What... Why?” she managed.

He raised an eyebrow, a mocking smile turning up one edge of his mouth. “What did you think? That I’d be – flamboyant?” Bryant closed on her again, raking a hot look over her body. “Do you want me to be flamboyant?” he offered. His body pressed to hers, his hands gripping the table on either side of her hips. “I can be as outrageous as you want me to be.”

Shana ground her teeth in frustration. He was taunting her. “Certainly not,” she snapped, pushing back at his shoulder.

Bryant shrugged and ambled away, seemingly unaffected by her refusal. “Your choice,” he called back, “but you don’t know what you’re missing.”

She didn’t answer that. In truth, Shana couldn’t concoct an answer that wouldn’t make her appear the child in a midst of a tantrum she was hiding inside.

“Just one thought, Shana.”

“Yes?” she managed evenly.

“Safe isn’t much fun. My life may not top sixty-four years, but it won’t be boring while I am alive to enjoy it.” Then he was gone, disappearing into the darkness past the tack room.

* * * * *

Bryant stretched out on the musty hay, his cock aching. He grumbled a curse at that.

Stopping had been stupid. Making fun of her had been worse. She had been willing to let him take release, though she had wanted to play it off on the fantasy of being swept off her feet by a rake. Bryant had played his share of sex games, and he'd bedded his share of blade chasers. So, why the hell hadn't he just finished what he started back there?

"You're losing your touch, Bryant," he berated himself, pulling the alcohol swipes from his back pocket. "Not littering. Not taking women. Next thing you know, you'll be driving a Mazda by the traffic laws and giving up your ring."

He shook away a vision of a baby seat in that Mazda. "Not me. Not ever," he vowed.

Despite his lineage, Bryant had never flirted with printing. Not even Ms. Straight-Laced was going to change his mind about that. If he took release with her, it would be hot, mindless, and over the minute they reached a phone.

CHAPTER THREE

Shana stared at Bryant, memorizing every line of his body as he walked. The man was sin incarnate, a body created for carnal adventure and the attitude to revel in those pursuits. She licked her lips, watching the way his jeans caressed his butt, wishing that she could run her hands over it just to see if his body was as hard as it looked.

She had given up trying to decipher this arousal not long after his aborted kiss. It wasn't just that Bryant was gorgeous. His words taunted her, replaying in her mind until the damned things actually made some sick sort of sense to her.

So, Bryant isn't Prince Charming. Big deal! Most women don't wait until the wedding night to have sex with a man, and this is definitely not a chance that's likely to come twice in life. Didn't Grandmother always tell me that a woman should have one secret that she held close to her heart?

Shana glanced at Bryant's sculpted backside again. What a glorious secret a night with him would be!

"You all right back there?" he asked.

"Just fine," she lied. Shana was getting blisters

from the leather shoes drying on her feet, but admitting it would be akin to admitting her inability to meet this challenge.

"Up for a climb?"

She stumbled in surprise, taking the opportunity to grasp at his shoulder for balance. In a lightening fast move, Bryant was facing her, catching Shana against his chest as his motion threw her further off balance.

For a moment, she didn't speak. She didn't feel capable of coherent speech, of saying anything that wouldn't make her sound like an idiot. "Uh... Thanks." She managed what she hoped passed for a nonchalant tone. "Wasn't watching my feet, I guess."

Bryant nodded, setting her back on her feet but not removing his hands. "No problem. It's part of my job description." He released her, tracing his hands slowly along her hips as if testing her balance before he turned and strolled away.

Her knees were rubbery, her stomach fluttering in response to his touch. Oh, yes. A night with Bryant could easily be the highlight of her life.

He stopped a few yards from her, cursing wildly.

Shana forced herself forward. "What is it?" she asked.

"The rains have decimated the trail."

"And this means..."

"Going around means another day, at least."

Shana considered that. Another day of staring at Bryant's body was enticing, but they hadn't found much in the way of food. Her complaining stomach made the decision for her. She stepped out onto the steep incline.

Bryant grasped her by the arms. "What are you doing?" he asked.

She smiled. "Weren't you the one who said safe wasn't fun?"

"You really want to chance this?" His voice sounded of disbelief.

"Chicken?" she challenged, pushing away the memory of how many times she'd turned away from that taunt over the years.

Bryant snorted in laughter. "You're on."

* * * *

She's actually going to do it. Bryant forced himself to watch the hazardous trail instead of the woman preceding him down the slope. He had been certain that she would choose the extra day of travel. It was safe, sure, exactly what he would expect her to do.

Bryant grimaced at her slight limp. She no doubt had blisters thanks to her dunk in the river.

Saying Shana had been displeased when he dragged her out of the water would be like calling his sacred weapon a butter knife. He smiled at the memory of her sputtering, slapping him around the head and face, and calling him a jerk for even pretending to hand her over to the beasts.

He glanced at her white cotton shirt, a rumble of hunger unrelated to appetite bringing his errant cock up fast. Bryant breathed a curse at that, arguing that he was stronger than his curse.

He wasn't the typical Maher Warrior. Bryant was thirty-two years old and had never had a brush with

printing. He took his release often, not because he lost control if he didn't, but because he *liked* sex. There was nothing wrong with liking sex. He wasn't his brothers, his father or his grandfather. Bryant was as normal as a Warrior could be.

If Shana had sex with him— *Shit!* That thought made him harder. *If* she had sex with him, he'd make it the best sex she ever had. Bryant prided himself in making sure both he and his partner had a great time in bed. But, they wouldn't have sex because he couldn't control himself. It wouldn't be because he had no choice.

Curt couldn't say for certain how much of his lack of control with Erin had been the Maher genes and how much had been the interfering stone. He couldn't even rule out that both of them being Warriors hadn't worked against them.

Bryant was lucky; he didn't share the Maher weakness.

His eyes strayed to Shana, and his cock pulsed, as if arguing that point.

He pushed away the rebuttal. It had simply been too long since he'd taken release, but there were any number of blade chasers who would gladly give him another go, once he got Shana back to civilization and kissed— He ground his teeth. And said his goodbyes.

He forced his mind back to the subject at hand. He *didn't* share the family weakness for release and printing, and there wasn't an interfering stone taunting him. Erin held the stone's power, now. Even if she hated Bryant enough to use the stone's power against him, Erin had too much honor to force anyone

to print.

Bryant tensed, his mind numbly noting Shana's abrupt disappearance. Her scream shook him, propelling him forward. He crashed through the bushes, grasping the stalks as his feet slid from under him on the same mud slick that she'd discovered.

A hand grasped his ankle, and Bryant reached for her blindly with his free hand, dragging Shana toward him. The sound of tearing fabric was loud even in comparison to his ragged breathing and pounding heart in his ears. He sent up a fervent prayer that he hadn't torn skin with her clothing. She was human, and her healing wasn't even a quarter as fast as his was.

Her hands fisted in his shirt, and Bryant wrapped his arm around her, trying to calm his thundering heart and rapid breathing. He noted his trembling hands in a wry sort of amusement. He was scared, and he wasn't really sure why he was.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded, looking at the inhospitable drop below them with a sigh of relief. Shana laid her cheek to his chest, closing her eyes.

A smile pulled up at his lips. "Enough excitement for you?" he teased.

She growled what sounded like an unladylike curse. "Just get me off this hillside, please."

"As the lady wishes."

CHAPTER FOUR

Shana stared at Bryant across the small fire he'd built outside yet another abandoned farm. "There are a lot of them, aren't there?" she noted.

His forehead creased in confusion. "A lot of what?"
"Abandoned farms."

"Ah. Yeah. In my grandfather's day, they were all running. Then the river shifted, and there were periodic floods. It was too poor a region for the government to care. The farmers changed crops to try and counter the increased ground water, but it was new and they played out the soil pretty quickly." He waved a hand around them. "Half of this is swamp for four months a year now."

"That's sad. All of those families forced off like that."

Bryant played with his ring, nodding silently.

Shana adjusted his shirt on her shoulders. His had a small tear, but after he pulled her from the bushes, hers had been no cover at all. She shivered in the memory of his eyes traveling the length of her body. He'd swallowed hard and looked away, pulling off his shirt and turning his back to give her privacy to

change into it. He still had the skin-tight black t-shirt beneath, so she hadn't argued taking the button-down shirt that reached to her mid-thighs.

She bit her lip as Bryant stripped off his t-shirt and laid back, using it as a pillow while he stared at the stars. Her eyes wandered over his half-naked form, settling over the cut at his hip. She moved toward him, hardly able to believe her eyes, but getting closer didn't change what she saw.

"You're almost healed," she exclaimed.

Bryant touched the spot. "Yeah. It'll scar, but a few more days will make it look like an old scar."

She touched the deep pink line of knitting tissue gingerly. "This was what you meant. You said you didn't need to clean the wound."

He sighed. "I have accelerated healing. It's - a family trait."

"You're connected to those vampires somehow, aren't you?"

His fingers brushed over hers then retreated. "The original beasts who spawned the rest were related to my kind several millennia ago. These beasts are just infected. They aren't like me at all."

"You don't drink blood or anything, do you?"

He snorted in laughter. "If I did, I wouldn't be starving right now." He pulled his lips back, baring his teeth as if to assure her that he didn't have fangs.

Shana moved her hand to another scar. "You've been hurt a lot in your life."

"No more than any other Warrior," he dismissed her.

"You've never wanted anything else?"

Bryant met her eyes. "Like what?"

"A different life... Or something?"

"We call it a curse. Even if we want something different, we couldn't be happy not hunting. I don't think we could function that way. We'd go nuts."

"But, have you ever wanted anything different?"

He shrugged. "I suppose all Warriors do - at some point, before they give up dreams of the impossible."

"What did you want to be?"

Bryant smiled. "A cop."

She rolled her eyes. "Always something dangerous."

"Always someone who protects others," he countered.

"Protecting people is important to you, isn't it?"

His smile faltered. "Yes. It is."

"What is it?"

"It is our most sacred trust. We always protect the innocent." Something in his manner was guarded.

"You didn't once," Shana guessed, uncertain what gave her that idea.

He looked toward the fire. "Yeah. I forgot how important it was once."

"What happened?"

A stiff smile returned to his lips. He traced a scar above his left nipple. "See this?" He moved his hand to another scar at his right shoulder without waiting for her answer, lingered only a moment and moved on to another closer to his neck. "And these?"

"Yes? What are they?"

"Reminders. The first was a gift from my grandfather. The other two were gifts from my father."

They didn't let Curt take a blade to me, and they left me standing for him, beaten to a pulp already... He broke three of my ribs and knocked me unconscious. That was my lesson never to shirk my duty to protect an innocent again." He shook his head. "I learned it well."

Shana shuddered at the barbarism inherent in their justice system. She wanted to soothe away his hurt. "Curt is your brother?" she asked, hoping to lead him to safer, happier ground.

"The younger one. Adam is the oldest."

She stroked her hands over his chest, and Bryant closed his eyes.

"It was Curt and Erin I should have been protecting," he murmured.

Shana laid a kiss to a scar a hand-width above the one the beast gave him, and he groaned.

"Erin gave me that one."

A stab of jealousy lit in her breast. Shana was touching him, and all Bryant could think about was this - Erin person. "Your girlfriend?" she asked acidly, cursing the fact that she cared - or maybe cursing him just in case he did have a girlfriend. Yes, that was it.

Bryant barked in laughter. "No. I tried, though. I tried to get her to marry me. That's why she scarred me."

Her heart ached at that. "You must have loved her very much."

His eyes opened, and Bryant searched her face, abruptly serious. "No," he admitted. "I didn't love her. I just wanted her. A lot of men *wanted* Erin."

"What happened to her?"

"She married Curt. He does love her."

Shana stared at him in disbelief. Bryant had a way of surprising her. She never knew what to expect next where he was concerned.

He stood, kicking dirt over the fire. "We should get some sleep. It's still another five hours or so to the cabin in the morning." He walked away without looking back.

She sighed. Again, he'd thrown her a curve ball. Just when she thought he was opening up to her, he shut her out again.

* * * *

Shana bit her lip, staring at Bryant in the pale, morning light. They would reach the cabin and a phone today. If she intended to seduce him, now was the time.

She turned toward him, stroking her fingers along the ridge in his jeans. Bryant groaned in his sleep, bucking his hips against her as if asking for more. Encouraged, she traced the lengthening rod as it stiffened. She pressed her lips to his chin, cupping his sac in her hand.

The soft stubble on his chin scraped her lips. Then his mouth covered hers, his tongue seeking access and sparring with hers when she granted it.

Bryant broke off the kiss, his entire body taut and his breathing as ragged as hers was. "Be sure you want this," he warned.

Shana nodded, barely able to catch her breath let

alone talk. She'd been kissed before, but never by someone who seemed to put his entire body and soul into the act. She nodded again. She wanted this more than she'd wanted just about anything in her life.

He hummed a low note that made the ache between her thighs throb in time with her heart. His eyes locked on hers, pinning Shana in his gaze. Her body responded fiercely, her nipples coming to points that brushed his chest when she breathed and her core hot and wet.

"You're sure," he whispered, as if it surprised him. "You're never going to forget this." It was a solemn vow full of dark sensuality.

"No, I won't," she agreed.

Bryant's hands traced the tips of her breasts. "I won't be stopping."

She shook her head. Shana didn't want him to stop. It felt too good to stop now.

His hands traced down her ribs and around her waist to cup her buttocks. Bryant pulled her hard to his erect length, smiling at her moan of surrender.

"No one will ever fuck you like I will, baby." His mouth closed on hers again, capturing her answer.

Yes. This was what she wanted. This would be her personal secret, and no safe man would ever fuck her like this. Women dreamed of a mad encounter with a man like Bryant for their first time. Shana would have that dream in the flesh.

* * * *

Bryant pushed her skirt up her legs, smiling as she

tipped her hips to facilitate the move. Her hands cupped his face, and her mouth returned to his. Their kisses were hot and hard. Bryant knew there was a wild side to Shana somewhere; he was just glad it was her sexual side.

Shana wiggled her bottom out of the plain, beige cotton panties she wore then pulled at his jeans frantically. When Bryant took over, her hands returned to his face, slipping back to wind in his hair. He shuddered at that; for all that she complained about the length of his hair, he noted that her eyes focused there often – almost as often as they focused on his ass or his cock, when she thought he wasn't watching. He'd dreamed of her burying her hands in his hair as he buried himself in her.

He slipped the head of his cock between her thighs, teasing Shana with thrusts that drew the fluids dripping from her swollen slit to her clit. Her kiss became more fevered, and she moved with him. He groaned at her increased wetness. He was working her into a froth, and he wouldn't take her until Shana begged for him.

She tried to guide Bryant over her, but he held back. If he took her now, it would be over all too quickly. Shana would never forget this encounter. If he was lucky, she might let him take her again.

"Bryant," she pleaded.

Maybe if he brought her to climax more than once... He didn't hesitate. He pulled back then rolled her beneath him, using the rigid base of his cock to stimulate the sensitive spot at her pelvic bone.

Shana wriggled against him, her plea for more lost

in another heated kiss. Bryant thrust two fingers into her, stilling in surprise.

It wasn't her climax that stopped him, though the force of it might well have done so anyway. Her cry was pure and heartfelt, and he didn't doubt that her reaction was completely honest. Virgins rarely played games with faking a response, and the tough scrap of skin at his fingertips attested to the very big mistake he'd almost made with her.

He looked around at the rundown barn, guilt eating at him. This was wrong. He couldn't do this.

Bryant ground his teeth at his insistent arousal. He'd never worried about the women he'd bedded before, even the virgins, but he'd never bedded a woman in such rough circumstances before. He pushed away memories of sex on hiking trails. *It wasn't the same. I've never taken a woman like this before – and I won't start now.* He eased his hand from her slowly, laying a kiss on her cheek.

Shana bit her lower lip, her expressive green eyes announcing her confusion. "I offered," she choked. "Why didn't you –"

"Shh. Not like this." Bryant shook his head, trying to find the words to explain himself. "It's your first time."

Her face darkened to a pale crimson blush. "I offered myself to you, and you're turning me away? You?" Anger and hurt warred in her voice.

He fought back irritation at that, reminding himself that she had laid herself open to hurt with him, and he had fumbled it again. She probably didn't believe that he had no honor, only that he had done

something unexpected and tactless, from her point of view.

"I'm not a complete rogue, Shana. Do you want to remember your first time this way? In a bed of moldy hay and dust? Do you?" He touched her cheek. "Please, let me make it better than this." *Anywhere but here.*

For a moment, she seemed incapable of answering. She pushed at his shoulder, and Bryant rolled away to his back. He dragged his jeans up, watching Shana out of the corner of his eye as he fastened the buttons over his still rock-hard length.

She didn't look at him. She smoothed her skirt over her thighs and grasped her underwear in shaking fingers. Shana pushed to her feet and all but bolted into the morning light.

"Don't go far," Bryant instructed her. He rubbed a hand over his face. He hadn't meant to hurt her, but he had. "I am not Curt," he grumbled. "I won't take Shana the way Curt took Erin."

He groaned at that. If only Shana was really his to touch. If only she wanted him like Erin had wanted his brother.

Bryant shook away the thought impatiently. "No. I don't want that. I just want sex. I am not the typical Maher."

* * * *

Shana bit back a sob. Of all the brainless moves she'd made in her life, that one had to be the worst of the lot! What had she been thinking? Had she been

thinking at all? Just a meaningless fling with the vampire hunter?

She couldn't even do that right. Just when she thought she had Bryant pegged as a self-serving ladies' man who'd screw her and walk away, leaving her with nothing but hot memories of one truly wild moment in her dull life, the man had to go off half-cocked... She groaned at the unintentional pun. He had to go and get noble on her.

"Face it, Shana. You can't even lose your virginity in an interesting fashion." She did sob at that. Well, there was nothing to do but go on from here. She started working the panties back up her legs. "Yeah. You'll end up marrying an accountant or a college history professor." She grimaced at that. Every college history professor she'd ever had was capable of putting dust motes to sleep. She sighed. "And, you'll be a virgin on your wedding night," she grumbled.

Shana peeked around the edge of the barn, watching Bryant stroll out of the cover. He'd donned his weapons belt and boots, but his t-shirt was dangling from his back pocket, leaving his chest deliciously bare. He relieved himself against an overgrown wood pile, seemingly oblivious to any propriety at all.

She backed away, pressing her back to the rough wooden walls, her hand fisted over her womb. Just the sight of his cock made her ache for him again. Memories of his teasing her with the tip made her wet and hot all over again.

"Not good," she decided. It would be better to go

to her wedding night as a virgin than to torture herself with memories of Bryant for the rest of her life. Wouldn't it?

CHAPTER FIVE

Shana looked around the cabin in surprise. It was comfortable and well kept with only a light dust settled on the surfaces. It was also much larger than she would have expected for a cabin – at least two...possibly three bedrooms and spacious common areas. He'd stopped on the way in and started a generator that looked as if it were meticulously maintained and was obviously stocked with enough gas for an extended stay.

"This way."

Bryant led her deeper into the structure, past the kitchen and two closed doors, into what appeared to be a master bedroom. She stared at the bed, her body staging a revolt that demanded she pull him down on it. He took her hand and drew her past it and toward a small alcove.

"Not yet," he answered her unspoken plea.

Her head spun at that. Despite hours of arguing that this was a bad idea, she couldn't deny that she wanted this, that she'd let him take her to that bed and have sex with her when he asked. She shivered at the thought that Bryant wouldn't be asking. When he

was ready, he would simply flip her libido on like a switch and take her to ecstasy on the rush of it.

Bryant opened a front-loading washer and flipped open a lidded garbage can next to it. He pulled off his t-shirt and tossed it in the garbage. His eyes traveled down her body, and Shana nodded in understanding.

She kicked her shoes away and unbuttoned her skirt, pushing it over her hips. Her underwear followed. Shana let them fall to her ankles, raising her eyes to Bryant at last.

He wasn't watching her, as she hoped – or maybe feared. He'd removed his armored boots and belt, setting them atop the dryer, and moved on to his jeans. She watched, transfixed, as he yanked the muddy fabric off of his feet, taking his socks with them. He pitched his clothes into the washing machine and looked to Shana.

His half-erect cock hardened. He stepped toward her and fisted his hands in the hem of the shirt she wore – his shirt. Bryant stripped it off and pitched it over his shoulder into the garbage can. He worked at the catch on her bra, and the fabric slid away in his hands then landed, unheeded by either of them, in the washer.

Shana shivered, her gaze locked with his, not daring to glance down his body again, knowing he was as hard as a man could get and intent on her. Bryant sank to his knees, urging her back a pace. He scooped up her clothes, his face so close that his breathing teased at her stomach. He stood slowly, depositing the rank clothing in the washer and starting the cycle with a shake of detergent.

He took her hand again and guided her through the bedroom and into a bathroom. It was surprisingly large, even for the size of the cabin, and clean. Bryant didn't speak. He started the shower, a multi-head setup with a wide bench in the center.

There was no need for words between them. He stepped into the spray, and Shana followed. He motioned to the bench, and she sat, closing her eyes and sighing as the hot water washed away the days of mud and grime.

She gasped, meeting Bryant's eyes as he started bathing her. Shana didn't watch the mud washing away. She could barely keep her eyes open and focused as Bryant soaped his hands again and again. His fingers traced every inch of her body, circling her nipples, following her ribs, cupping her calves and thighs, and finally playing at her throbbing core.

He rose up on his knees, leaning into her; but just when she felt certain he would push her thighs further apart and take her, he massaged a fragrant shampoo into her hair then leaned her head back and rinsed it, his fingers combing through and tugging gently as they worked knots out.

Shana moaned in longing. He eased her head forward and she opened her eyes, abruptly dizzy and disoriented. Her vision sharpened, locking on the individual water droplets that fell from his long dark hair, that ran down his cheeks and beaded on his eyelashes and lips.

Bryant nodded and turned off the water, collecting a stack of towels. The torture began again. He dried her body and hair slowly, leaving her breathless.

She grasped one of the towels, drying his hair. He settled the towel in his hand across her lap and leaned forward, giving her a better vantage point to dry it – while he took one of her breasts in his mouth. She stroked the towel over him, unconsciously matching his ministrations, drying all of him that she could reach.

He explored her body with his mouth, up to her shoulders then throat, ducking away when she would have kissed him. She fisted the towel as he returned to her breasts, one then the other before trailing down her body to press a kiss in her curls, his whiskers combing them as his fingers had the hair on her head.

Bryant pulled the towel from her lap, letting it fall to the floor, then lifted her knees over his shoulders and eased her to the edge of the bench. His breath teased at her body. Shana threw her head back, as his tongue flicked over her clit. He stroked his tongue lower, sensitizing every inch of her before delving inside.

Shana dropped the towel, winding her hands in his hair and pulling him closer. Her breathing came in strangled gasps, and her whole body trembled. His tongue continued its plunder. He sucked at her, licked at her, even nipped at her tender flesh. It was exquisite. Shana reveled in the pleasure he gave her even as she begged him to end it.

He didn't push her over this time. Bryant knelt up abruptly, catching her knees and lowering her feet to the floor as his mouth closed over hers. The sweet taste in his mouth incited the ache in her to a riot.

Bryant broke of the kiss. "Here or the bed?" he

asked, his voice gruff.

She wrapped her legs around his hips and urged him closer. She needed him – now.

“Be sure. I can give you a bed.” His eyes called him a liar. The stark hunger in them announced that he would pay a dear price for that, if he could bring himself to wait that long at all.

She shook her head. This was supposed to be a crazy chance. It wasn’t supposed to be sane and predictable – or respectable.

Bryant grasped her hips and slid deep in a single thrust. Shana arched back over the bench, crying out as much in pleasure as in pain. Bryant’s groan rumbled through her body. He guided her face back to his, his kiss at once urgent and reverent. Just when it felt that kiss might get out of control, he executed a single slide out and back in, as if testing her readiness.

“Now,” he rasped.

She expected him to take her on a frantic ride, but his thrusts were slow and solemn. His mouth mated with hers again and again, soothing words surrounding her as the pain receded and pleasure washed over her body in warm waves that seemed to intensify with every stroke.

“You’re close,” he whispered.

Close didn’t begin to describe her state. Shana rode the crest of pleasure, closing her eyes as the waves finally swamped her. She was all but numb to his continuing thrusts, whimpering as her entire body came alive with starbursts of sensation firing every nerve seemingly at random.

His heat swirled through her, a maelstrom within

the storm still raging in her. His harsh cry sounded of surprise mixed with the expected enjoyment. Bryant muttered a curse, going still inside her as his erupting cock buffeted her with pulse after pulse of his heat. That final sensation forced her past endurance and ripped a scream of surrender and longing from her, longing for this moment never to end and surrender to whatever Bryant wanted from her to have it.

Shana came to realization slowly, her cheek pressed to his chest, her hands still grasping handfuls of his hair, his hands tracing her back, as if memorizing every line of her body, and his cock still buried deep inside her. He dipped his head, nuzzling his lips to hers, his whiskers making hot spots on her chin and cheeks.

He's marking me. Her body made urgent demands at that. Yes. She wanted to be marked as his, but that wasn't something that was likely to happen.

At last, he eased out of her body. Bryant lifted her into his arms and turned toward the hall, his stride purposeful.

"Where are we going?" she asked, confused by his silence.

He didn't smile. Bryant didn't even meet her eyes, though his voice was gentle and sounded somewhat of bemusement. "To the bed, Shana. Once could never be enough with you."

CHAPTER SIX

Bryant stroked his fingertip along her lower lip, watching Shana sleep much as he had watched her sleep for the last few nights. She sighed and turned to him, seemingly seeking him in her most unguarded moments.

He shook his head, confused by the ache within him. Bryant had never slept with a woman he'd had sex with before, never stayed past a few moments after he screwed her into a deep slumber. Curt and Adam had spent whole nights with women they took release with before they printed, but Bryant never had. He'd never felt the urge to, yet more proof that he wasn't the typical Warrior of Maher.

It wasn't just that Shana was under his protection. Bryant felt certain that he would have stayed with her, even if he'd picked her up in a bar for the night, though he couldn't have said definitively why he would do something so out of character. Release was release. This was something else.

"Why are you so different?" he whispered, halfway wishing she would answer his question in that sexy voice that manifested only when he was

buried to the hilt in her.

Bryant had deflowered virgins before. He'd slept with scores of women – hundreds in the seventeen years he'd been cursed. Never before had he felt the need to take one so tenderly.

"Release is release." He repeated the words he'd said so often when Curt and Adam tried to tell him how life-altering the sex that sealed printing was. This time, he said it with much less conviction.

Release had always been rough and fast for Bryant. Even with virgins, he had worked them to a frenzy and given them a wild night of memories to treasure.

But, not with Shana. He'd worked her up gently, feeding her arousal to a more potent edge than he'd ever bothered to build before. Then he'd taken her slowly, reverently. The sex was akin to a prayer, a communion – a promise.

"A promise of what?" he questioned, his heart pounding. Bryant shook his head. "Not printing," he pleaded. "Please, not that."

When a Warrior of Maher fell, he fell hard and fast. For all that he taunted the other men in his family for their weakness in matters of love, he always knew he wasn't immune somewhere deep in his heart. That's why Bryant never stayed the night. It was his attempt at escaping, his quest to prove he was stronger than the urge to tie himself to a woman and produce his two-point-five young Warriors.

"I *am* stronger," he decided.

Bryant pushed from the bed, his stride purposeful. He pulled the spare cell phone from the charger and opened the line, knowing it was at full power with a

four-hour charge.

It was simple. He'd call Adam and have a car delivered – as soon as possible. Shana would go back to her safe life without him. There was little chance that he'd ever see her again. The beasts were dwindling, and there was much easier prey around than a protected woman. Why would they attack her?

"Simple," he assured himself, breathing a sigh of relief.

He opened the connection, but he didn't press the buttons. Bryant closed his eyes, unable to still the shaking in his hands as his fingertip wavered over the one button to start dialing. The dial tone sounded much too loud, and a cold sweat coated his brow. He hadn't even left her... He hadn't even called for the car to leave her, and he wanted to scream in frustration – in the torture of losing a lost love.

It wouldn't be simple. Bryant would face printing madness. He'd be a veritable madman for days or weeks, until he conquered his nature. Then he'd be free to go on with his life.

Or would he? He ambled back to the bedroom doorway, shutting the connection on the phone to avoid waking her. He stood, staring at Shana, his heart struggling to hold a steady rhythm. Could even the madness erase this need to have her in his bed? No, not just in his bed! In his life! Did he want it to take that away from him?

"No."

He jumped. Bryant hadn't meant to say it aloud. He hadn't wanted to admit it at all.

"It's true."

He conceded defeat gracefully. If Shana turned from him, he'd face the madness and give her the freedom she wanted. He wouldn't leave her while there was any chance that she'd accept him. He couldn't.

Bryant turned the power off on the phone and dropped it on top of the robe thrown over the dresser. He returned to the bed, taking Shana in his arms and burying his face in her fragrant curls.

"Please, choose me," he begged.

* * * *

Shana burrowed her face in the warmth beside her, stilling as arms circled her. She bit her lip, her mind supplying the truth.

What had I expected? That Bryant would leave me in the night?

She squeezed her eyes shut. She had expect it on some level. It would have been easier if he had left. Facing him after what they'd shared, knowing it was just another night of sex to him, would be pure torture.

His hands stroked her buttocks, and his knee urged her thighs apart. His breathing was ragged, as if he was restraining himself, and his erect cock brushed over her seam.

Shana realized she was already wet, already throbbing - a slow, steady beat not unlike his thrusts in the shower. She pushed down on him with a sigh of relief. He met her movement, filling her with his body, completing her even as he made her long for

more.

Bryant threaded his fingers through hers, drawing her hands above her head as he turned her beneath him. His kisses were deep and drugging. She wrapped her legs around him, levering herself further onto him; and Bryant moaned in delight.

She opened her eyes and found herself pinned in his gaze. His expression shifted continuously: fierce, tender, driven, uncertain. It was as if she were being gifted with a rare glimpse inside his soul.

Her orgasm rolled over her without warning, and Bryant joined her, their cries mingling much as their bodies did. They panted in the aftermath, his sweat-slicked body teasing at hers. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Shana looked away from the intensity in his eyes, her mind rioting. She couldn't keep doing this. She wanted more than this, and taking more would only make her want it more acutely.

"What is it?" Bryant asked.

"I don't—" She couldn't say it. As catastrophic as his leaving would be, Shana couldn't ask him to stay with her. Not now. If he refused her, she'd never live down the hurt.

"Usually do this?" he finished for her, just a touch of humor in his tone.

Shana nodded. It was as good an excuse as any, she supposed.

Bryant chuckled. "Virgins rarely do have practical experience."

She darkened at that.

"Do you regret that it was me?" he asked, abruptly

serious.

"Never." She shook herself mentally. "I just—" She faltered.

He released her hands, tracing a finger along her lips, his eyes soft and dreamy. "Just what?"

"I never thought I'd do this."

"Make love with a man?" he asked, no trace of a smile curving his lips. Bryant looked hungry and distracted.

"Of course not. I mean... I knew I would someday, but..."

"But?" he prompted her, laying a kiss on her chin and inhaling deeply.

"I guess I thought I was the type to wait until the wedding night," she stammered, feeling her face go a shade darker at offering the admission while he lay buried in her, still hard and occasionally pulsing.

He seemed to consider that carefully. Bryant brushed his lips over hers, and she gasped at the feeling of a final eruption within her, her mind numbly supplying that he had to feel really good to have aftershocks that notable. His tongue teased at her upper lip, stroking just inside her parted lips and flicking across the surface as he retreated.

"As far as I'm concerned, you have." His voice caressed her face.

Her heart stuttered at that. Did she dare hope that she'd heard him right? "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I'm asking you to marry me." He grimaced. "Oh, gods. I'm doing this all wrong. I don't have a ring. I should be on my knees. I should—"

She kissed him, unable to bear his self-recrimination any further. Bryant was fevered, a hair off of desperate.

"You're doing it just right," she assured him.

Bryant smiled, his hand cupping her cheek. "Only if you say 'yes'."

Shana took his hand in hers, removing his pinky ring and placing it on the middle finger of her left hand. Even at that, it was a bit loose on her. She touched the metal disc over her chest. "I'm wearing your amulet and your ring."

He nodded, his eyes locked on that ring in longing that she prayed was for her and not the piece of jewelry. "Is that a 'yes'?" he asked.

"I don't suppose you'll ever drive the speed limit," she mused.

He sighed. "Probably not, but I'll switch cars if you like."

"Only with me."

He nodded urgently. "Yes?" It was obvious that he was having trouble controlling his nerves.

"Can I keep the ring?" she teased, winding her hands in his hair, fully expecting him to balk - or to offer to get her a ring of her own.

"Yes. Anything - except my hair. I am not cutting my hair."

Shana smiled, pulling his mouth down to hers. "Yes, and I don't want you to cut your hair."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Adam fisted his hand on the steering wheel of the rental, his eyes scanning the dark, dirt track ahead. When he found Bryant, he'd kill the thoughtless pup himself, unless he was at Death's door.

Being out of contact wasn't unusual in itself. The fact that Adam had felt a feeding then several kills in his range was typical enough, though he cringed that some poor soul had been fed on. Bryant wasn't a first night in the habit of reporting every kill. Adam had assumed all was well.

Then the call came in. Adam shuddered in the memory. A state trooper had contacted him in his search for Bryant. That was when Adam had known something was wrong.

His younger brother doted on his car. The 2020 Retro Stingray was Bryant's life. Even if beasts had torn it apart, piece by piece, he would have had the pieces collected, replaced, and reconstructed into his high-gloss black baby with leather interior. He absolutely would not have willingly abandoned the car, no matter the circumstances.

Adam had flown out immediately. It hadn't taken him long to find where the car had lain. It had taken only hours longer for him to find the shattered phone and torn jacket covered in dried blood – human and beast. He'd lost the trail there, at the bottom of a muddy slide into the river.

Bryant had been running but struggling. The tracks were clear on that fact. That bothered Adam. He would have felt it if his brother died. He wouldn't have felt even a serious injury, if Bryant ghosted to hide himself from tracking beasts. Visions of his brother, running injured and maintaining ghosting to save himself, taunted Adam. Was he unable to reach a safe haven?

This was his last hope. He was on his way to the closest cabin. There were no protected in this area. It was the only plausible place for Bryant to head in an emergency if he was on foot. If he wasn't there, Adam would backtrack toward the river. There were several abandoned farms between the cabin and the river that Bryant might have sought cover in. It would mean criss-crossing back roads, but Adam had a half-ton truck and all the time in the world, if it meant his brother's life.

He stared at the cell phone miserably, forcing himself not to try calling again. Every time the other phone rang without answer until the voice mail picked up, a part of him died. He was Lord Maher, and the family was his responsibility. If Bryant died... He forced that thought away, peering through the windshield.

He stared at the cabin, praying he wasn't

hallucinating. Adam let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. There were lights on at the cabin.

His mind sorted through the possibilities. Maybe Bryant wasn't badly hurt but was recovering, hoping not to worry Adam – or anger him with his carelessness. Maybe the phone was damaged; he couldn't remember how long it had been since the last time it had been checked. Maybe...

Adam ground his teeth in frustration. There was no way to know until he saw Bryant.

"If the pup isn't dying, I will kill him," he promised again.

He parked the truck and let himself into the cabin with his key. He passed through the first few rooms, stopping in the bedroom doorway in surprise.

By the amulet laid between the woman's breasts and the jagged cut healing on her throat, Adam deduced the reason for his brother's staggering gait in the mud. He'd obviously been carrying the woman.

He looked to the cell phone, forcing back his *Blutjagd*. Bryant had never shown self-control sexually, but turning off the phone and leaving Adam to worry went past even his usual disregard for others' feelings. Adam considered the beating he'd give Bryant – as soon as he woke him to administer it.

The woman moved her hand, and the light glinted off the ring on her middle finger. Adam went still, his mind putting together the other small clues. It was Bryant's signet ring she wore, the Maher seal etched into a blood-red ruby. If there was one possession more precious to Bryant than the Stingray, it was his

ring; and now this woman was wearing it.

Adam bit back a laugh. So, Bryant wasn't immune to the Maher urge to take a mate, after all. He leaned against the doorframe, watching them sleep. Adam considered walking away and leaving them in peace, but he did owe his brother some repayment for all this worry, for making him leave his wife and children for no good reason. He cleared his throat as loud as he could.

The woman sat up abruptly, dragging the quilt up to her chest, her eyes wide in terror.

Bryant came up with his sacred weapon, his *Blutjagd* like a bonfire surrounding him, his body placed to protect his mate. He stared at Adam in disbelief for a moment then lowered his blade with a series of curses, rubbing a hand over the new beard on his chin then over his neck.

"Bryant," the woman called, her voice shaking. "Who is that?"

"It's all right," he soothed her. "This is my brother's idea of a joke."

"It's not very funny," she complained, tucking the quilt under her arms, her face and chest flushed crimson in embarrassment.

"I agree. Adam, do you mind?" he hinted.

Adam smiled. "You think this is my revenge? Not in the least. Wait until Curt and Erin hear about you—"

"Adam! And, Erin probably damn well knows everything," he grumbled. "Now, will you kindly—"

"I think I'll stick around for a few minutes. After all, I want to meet my sister-in-law." He scooped up

the phone. "At least, I hope she's my sister-in-law. If you pulled a stunt like this and she's not, I may have to kill you myself for it."

The woman grasped at Bryant's shoulder, paling at that. "I am," she offered quickly.

Adam watched her reactions in confusion. Did she really believe he'd kill his own brother?

Bryant scowled at him, running a hand over hers in comfort. "Quit scaring my wife," he growled, his *Blutjagd* warning Adam off.

Adam cleared his throat, looking to the woman pointedly.

He nodded, calming somewhat, accepting that Adam's teasing was through. "Adam, this is my wife, Shana. Shana, this tactless oaf is my older brother, Adam. We call him Conan. You can guess why."

A smile pulled up at the edges of her lips. "Ah. I see. It's a family trait."

Adam laughed heartily at that. "Yes. I'm afraid it is."

Shana sighed. "It's going to be a long, hard road." She scowled at Adam. "Let me guess... You don't drive the speed limit either."

Before Adam could question what she meant, Bryant was howling in laughter.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brenna Lyons lives in Haverhill, MA with her husband, three children, and a zoo of pets. She was born and raised in the Hazelwood/Glenwood area of Pittsburgh, PA and toured the east coast as a Navy wife for thirteen years.

She enjoys the Society for Creative Anachronism and is a member of such groups as Broad Universe, EPIC, WRW and ERA.

Brenna holds a BS in Accounting and a Certificate of Computer Programming. Why? An auditing teacher commented that she would either “make the perfect auditor or the perfect thief,” and she had been writing for eleven years with little professional training—In effect, a thief of attention by misdirection.

Never one to pass up a challenge, Brenna has worked as an auditor, tracking down fraud suspects, finding the backdoors into exchange computer systems, creating accounting programs for government and small businesses, and as a writer. Overall, it's the best of both worlds.

Brenna enjoys talking to readers and can be reached via her site at <http://www.brennalyons.com>