



Heart of a Sorceress

Weiran Masters

Sedonia Guillone

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

Dedication

To Mitch with love from your Bimbolina

Thanks yous

I am indebted to the following for their support in the process of writing this book. Mitch, Allyn, Ansley (my lovely editor who has been so supportive of my writing) and to Vanessa, who gave me a wonderful reason to write this book.]

A Prophecy from the Weiran Scrolls

In the five thousandth cycle of Adamah, the dark mages, blinded by corruption and thirst for power will rise up and bend the forces of nature to their will. Their aim: to enslave Adamah and control the Weiran system, including its three suns.

Only one Being, carrying the mark of the chosen, a sorceress of unique innocence, will vanquish the abusers and restore peace to Adamah, the first planet of the Weiran system. No murderer will kill her, no enslavement will entrap her. She carries within her soul the love of Galen.

Her powers will combine with a Being who has remained invisible to the world since his inception. Together, they cannot be defeated.

The most recent entry in the annals of the Council of Mages:

The 3,547th Year of Galen, Adamah, Weiran Solar System

The prophecy in the Weiran Scrolls is nearing fulfillment. The Being destined to vanquish the Abusers has been born and has nearly reached her nineteenth year. At the age of fourteen, her father, General Karan ben Solen, a Veltish general of the Pierran army, was falsely accused of an attempt on the Queen's life, all contrived by the misuse of magery. He was stripped of his rank, branded a traitor, whipped and banished. His wife was murdered and his daughter, the Chosen one, enslaved in the Palace.

Four years later, another bed-slave in the Palace, also falsely accused of the Queen's assassination, escaped, only to re-enter the Palace by use of disguise by magery and rescue the Chosen one. The three fugitives returned to Karan ben Solen's home in the Veltlands.

Lara bat Karan is the Chosen one. Her fulfillment of the prophecy is about to commence.

Part One

The Sorcerer's Apprentice

Chapter One

The sorcerer's muscles gleamed in the morning sun.

Lara caught herself staring impolitely, a warm flush spreading rapidly across her cheeks and down her neck.

The sorcerer called Sha'ul, in the act of splitting logs, was bare to the waist, his trousers tucked into his boots. His broad shoulders and chest flexed with the movements of his axe. Droplets of perspiration beaded off his muscles and the dark mat of hair that covered his chest. Lara swallowed hard, her body suddenly too warm in her new rose-colored damask gown. She hadn't meant to notice the way his chest hair funneled into a dark trail down his taut stomach and disappeared into the waist of his trousers. Sha'ul's raven hair reached below his shoulders, tied at the nape of his neck with a leather cord.

When her grandfather, Solen, had sent her to Sha'ul to determine whether she had the mark of a sorceress, she had expected a stooped, gray-haired, bespectacled elf. Not such a man as this.

"This is Sha'ul?" she whispered to her cousin, Danni.

"Aye," Danni mumbled. The energy about her companion had darkened suddenly.

She glanced at her friend, recognizing immediately his jealousy. Her stomach fluttered. Danni was a good man and so hopeful of having his affection for her requited. She couldn't help that her heart only accepted him as a brother, not a lover.

"Come," he said, "Solen told me to bring you here, I will finish the task." He started forward, toward Sha'ul, and Lara had no choice but to follow, her hands tightening around the loaf of bread her stepmother had made as an offering.

Sha'ul looked up as they approached. He lifted the axe one last time and let the blade sink into the tree stump. He pulled a small kerchief from his trouser pocket and mopped his brow and neck as they came to a stop in front of them.

Lara fought to catch her breath. Up close, Sha'ul took her breath away. He was even more handsome than her father. A high forehead and arched dark brows drew her gaze to his eyes, brown pools that had the immediate effect of quickening her heart. The irises smoldered under their heavy fringe of equally dark lashes, making her feel at once safe and mystified.

He smiled. "Forgive me," he said, his voice smooth and gentle. "I have no sense of time when I begin a task."

Lara stared at him, her voice suddenly gone. She was helpless even to whisper a response and could only nod.

Sha'ul looked at her more seriously, his smile fading. "Daughter of Karan," he said softly, "It is an honor to meet you."

Danni nudged her discreetly and she held out her hand as Solen had instructed her. Meeting a sorcerer had its own set of formalities.

Sha'ul accepted her hand and Lara felt her knees turn to the consistency of porridge. He bowed and touched his forehead to the curve of her knuckles. She swallowed hard again and stared at the bell shaped sleeve of her gown and the embroidered cuff. Ariana had worked for weeks on this gown, preparing her stepdaughter to meet Sha'ul.

A moment later he looked up and gently released her hand. A smile once again curved his lips and the dark eyes sparkled with a hint of mischief. "I can see I'm not what

you expected, my lady.”

Danni nudged her again, a bit less discreetly this time. Perhaps it was his brotherly treatment toward her that had prevented her from requiting his romantic affection. No, it was more the scars she carried from nearly having been a bed slave in the Pierran palace. Which was why her reaction to Sha’ul, handsome as he was, confused her.

“No, my lord,” she answered, her voice escaping in a whisper.

He chuckled. “Well, I was in the Veltish guards like Danni here, until the Council of Mages found me. But I still love swordplay. It’s probably what has kept me from being the little, bent over elf of a wizard you probably were expecting.”

Lara stared at him. It seemed he could read her mind and her heart quickened to an unsettling pace.

“Excuse me a moment,” he said. He turned and retrieved a tunic that lay draped on the side of a small stone well a few feet away.

Lara watched Sha’ul slip the tunic over his torso, the chiseled brawn of his shoulders and chest disappearing under the rough cloth. At her side, she felt Danni’s irritation worsen and wished he would leave, even though she would then be alone with Sha’ul.

“Why don’t we go inside,” Sha’ul suggested, gesturing toward the small stone cottage. “We have much to discuss.”

She nodded, her stomach fluttering.

“Do you wish me to stay?” Danni asked the sorcerer.

Sha’ul furrowed his brow. “No, Danni. It’s better if I speak with Lara alone.”

Solen had told her that this would happen, that there were certain things Beings of Power could not reveal in the presence of others.

“Very well, Sir.” Danni bowed politely to Sha’ul. He looked at Lara. “I’ll pass by for you in a while,” he told her.

Struck wordless again, she nodded.

Danni turned and stalked off down the path toward the forest. Lara knew he was going to visit the forest witches. His sisters, Renna and Kira told her in breathless giggles how the beautiful forest witches made love to their brother, even though he wasn’t a Being of Power. According to legends about the forest witches, their rare exception in Danni was a testament to his physical beauty and guileless nature.

“Come, daughter of Karan,” Sha’ul said when Danni had left.

Lara followed the sorcerer to the small cottage. Her heart had begun to pound and she hesitated on the doorstep.

The interior of the tiny room was, to her relief, inviting. The wooden planks of the floor were bleached and swept immaculately. A fire smoldered in the large hearth. The only furnishings were a crude wooden table and chairs and a bed of fur skins in the corner. Bunches of dried herbs hung from the rafters and cooking utensils were arranged neatly on hooks in the stone walls. Yet, in spite of the stark simplicity, the room emitted a sense of coziness, dispelling the ghosts of her fears.

Sha’ul stood by the wooden table, eyeing her. His brown gaze conveyed sympathy and Lara felt a comforting wave pass over her. She stepped inside and approached the chair he held out for her. As she sat, she became aware of the sack with Ariana’s bread in her hand. She held it up, still finding speech nearly impossible. “This is for you ... my lord,” she murmured, remembering at the last second to address him respectfully. “My stepmother, Ariana, made it for you.”

“That was very kind of her,” he said, gently taking the offering from her hands and setting on the table.

The table was set with cups and a teapot with steam curling from the spout. Sha’ul picked it up, poured an amber fluid into each cup and sat in the chair opposite her. She thanked him and picked up her cup, taking a small sip. The tea was strong and sweet. She set down the cup and looked around, as if to make sure the walls would not close in on her. She was just beginning to get used to the burrow-like rooms of her father’s longhouse.

“Would you rather go outside, Lara?” Sha’ul’s gentle voice cut into the rising panic. His tone soothed her and his empathy caused hot tears to surface.

She shook her head. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, avoiding his gaze.

“Lara, look at me.”

His voice pulled her attention and she caught her breath at the sympathy radiating from the dark pools of his eyes. “There is no shame in having been a prisoner,” he said. “Just because the feelings are still with you does not make you a coward.”

“I’m not brave like Ariana,” she murmured, her cheeks burning. In her lap, she clenched her fists where he couldn’t see them. Ariana had been a kitchen slave and then bed-slave in the Pierran palace for most of her life. When the queen she served had been murdered, she knew she would be accused and escaped the palace, only to turn around and go back in disguise just to rescue Lara for her exiled father. Lara could never imagine loving a man so much she would risk her life for him, as Ariana had done.

“I feel certain she would disagree with that statement.”

She looked at him. Ariana did disagree with her whenever they spoke of that experience. “She does, actually, my lord.” Looking down, she took a warming sip of tea.

“Then I’m right.”

Lara lifted her gaze to Sha’ul again. He was smiling at her in that tender way that made her insides as soft as mud. “If I were brave, I would have already put those years behind me.” Lara found the words tumbling from her lips like a churning river. “A brave person does not hate her own father.” She bit down on her bottom lip to prevent any more mortifying admissions. Certainly, Sha’ul would march straight to her father and tell him what she’d said. There was no possible way in the creation that she could have the makings of a Being of Power.

“I think I understand.”

Lara let out a small gasp at the quiet statement. How could he?

“There’s a part of you inside that blames him for everything that happened.”

His words, like arrows, hit their mark inside her. To her shame, tears pooled in her eyes. “Yes, my lord.” She sighed, her hands fisted on her lap. “There is no excuse to blame him,” she went on. “What could he have done? The Pierrans would have murdered him if he’d tried to go in there and rescue me.” She fell silent, not knowing why she felt suddenly so free to discuss her enslavement with Sha’ul. There was something about him. Until this moment, the only person in the world she trusted enough to speak freely with was Ariana.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Sha’ul sip his tea, a pensive expression on his chiseled features. “All you say is true, Lara. He could not have saved you. But you were very young when it happened.”

She nodded. “Fourteen.” Although, to her, no age was the proper age to watch your

mother raped and slain, and your father bullwhipped and wrongfully branded a traitor. Anger burned through her veins, fueling every moment of revenge she'd ever vowed to take against the Pierran dogs who stolen her life from her.

"Yes. A child, really." He leaned forward in his seat, his gaze on her gentle, yet burning with a mysterious intensity. "Lara, you cannot fight your feelings. They don't have logic, or wrong or right, only heart. You must let them be. Maybe it sounds strange to you, but part of being a sorceress is compassion. Not only for others, but for yourself."

For the first time, Lara looked him straight in the eye. "Are you saying I have the mark, my lord?"

He looked at her, studying. "Don't worry about that right now. I want to make sure you heard what I just said to you."

Sha'ul sounded patient, yet Lara only wanted him to answer her question. She wasn't interested in having compassion for her own feelings. Defiance flickered through her, only to melt away under his sympathetic gaze. Silently chastened, she looked down. "No, my lord. I did not. Not in my heart anyway."

To her surprise, the sorcerer chuckled softly. "It's all right," he said. "It takes a long time to learn such a lesson." He paused and she felt him studying her again. "And to answer your question, I believe it's quite possible. I have to look deeper though."

She whipped her face up, her eyes widening. Renna and Kira had told her about the sorcerer's kiss, about how Beings of Power delve into a person's soul by joining their lips to the other's. Her heart began to gallop and she grabbed fistfuls of her gown. The only person she could bear to have kiss her at all was Ariana. The mere thought of a kiss sent terror racing through her, resurging all her memories of Mardya, a woman in the palace harem who used to force kisses from her during the short time she was there. Mardya had been in the middle of raping her when Ariana snuck in and rescued her.

Her fear must have shown clearly, for Sha'ul's smile faded. Concern washed once again through his brown gaze. "Don't worry, Lara," he said in a gentle tone, "I won't kiss you, not if you don't wish it."

Heat bloomed in her cheeks and she avoided his gaze, afraid at the same time of offending him. In truth, a part of her emerged suddenly that wished such intimate contact. Something about him made her feel safe, the way she did with Ariana whom she trusted completely. "I ... I can't ... yet." She braced herself, waiting for a reproach.

"I understand," he said. "However, I do need to look."

Wordlessly she nodded.

Sha'ul stood and pulled his chair directly in front of her. He sat down so close that their knees practically touched. A smile curved his lips and that look of kindness she'd seen several times during their meeting radiated again through his features. "This isn't supposed to be painful, but if you feel at all violated, I'll stop. Alright?"

Lara's heart gave a thud in her chest. "Yes, my lord."

"You may call me Sha'ul, if it makes you more comfortable. I know I'm older than you, but I've only just reached my thirty-second year."

She stared at him. The thought of addressing him so familiarly horrified her. In spite of how grateful she was to be out of slavery, servitude had been ground into her. The fear of punishment for disrespect had become as natural to her as breathing. "I'm sorry," she said, her voice barely a whisper, "I can't do that, either."

His expression softened even more. "I don't have to look inside you to know you've

suffered horribly. I give you my word I'll do my best never to hurt you."

"Thank you." She looked down at her hands. She didn't trust herself not to burst into tears if she saw the same sympathy in his face she heard in his voice.

He moved forward in his seat, a bit closer to her. "I have an idea. I'll let you look into me first. If you can see anything, I'll know you have the mark. Only a Being of Power can delve that deeply into another's soul simply by touch. Would that be better?"

Slowly, Lara brought her gaze up to his. The suggestion made her feel more in control, more empowered. She'd had enough of being at the mercy of those in power. "Yes, thank you."

He smiled again and Lara watched tiny lines etch the bronzed skin of his rugged cheeks. Her heartbeat quickened again and her body weakened in a pleasant way. A tingling sensation flushed her breasts, all the way to her nipples and her breathing deepened. Terrified that he'd see what was happening to her, she took a deep breath and straightened her back.

"What should I do?" she asked softly.

Sha'ul held out his hands. "Hold my hands."

His hands were large, the palms callused, she knew, from the swordplay Danni had told her he and Sha'ul practiced together over the last several years. Danni explained on the way to Sha'ul's cottage that Sha'ul had been a captain in the Veltish guard when Solen had seen the mark on him as well and Sha'ul had undergone his own training in magery.

Lara put her hands on his, their palms touching. The contact sent a frisson of sensual warmth through her entire body and she almost pulled away. Her fingertips rested lightly on the network of veins in his wrists and her thumbs wrapped over the sides of his hands. She took another deep breath.

"Now," he said, his voice close to a whisper, "Close your eyes and just watch."

Obediently, Lara closed her eyes, her awareness resting solely in the warmth passing back and forth between their joined palms. For the first time since she was fourteen, she found herself enjoying the touch of another human being aside from Ariana. Her breath hitched when an image rose in her mind.

She saw a young boy about eight with long dark hair, tromping over barrens with his boots. In the background she recognized her father's longhouse. The image melted into another image with a dark-haired boy, a bit older than the first, standing beside a grave, tears running down his face. Lara recognized the boy's face as Sha'ul, and somehow understood she was watching his life. An older man stood at the grave next to him, one large hand on his shoulder. Lara saw the resemblance to his father and intuited that the grave held Sha'ul's mother. Sha'ul crouched down and released a handful of earth onto the grave. A tear ran down his face, yet Lara saw how his features strained from holding back the tears.

Time passed and she saw him as a young man. He looked the same as he did now, only younger, wielding a heavy broadsword. His father stood nearby, apparently instructing him in the art of swordplay. She saw him in the Veltish guards, fighting in battle, his face and body smeared with blood and dirt as he felled Pierran soldiers. In the next vision, he was standing with a young woman. She was pretty with dark hair, her eyes gazing on him. Moments later, the vision turned dark and Sha'ul was wielding his sword again, fighting to free the same woman from a Pierran officer. Sha'ul's opponent

wore a fierce expression, his eyes glittering, thirsty for Sha'ul's life. Sha'ul slew the man and picked up the woman who appeared to be dying, and cradled her in his arms. Her dress was torn and dirty and Lara watched as she closed her eyes and went limp.

Lara heard herself whimper as the scene tore into her heart. The visions continued and she kept her hands in Sha'ul's. Time passed and he was older, much as he appeared now. She saw an old man, apparently instructing him in magery. Sha'ul stood by a roaring fire. He reached his hands into the flames and pulled them out, a ball of orange flames glowing in his hands, yet not appearing to burn his skin. More images passed and Lara saw Sha'ul sparring with Danni, sparks flying from the blades of their broadswords as they clashed. She saw him standing in front of the cottage, watching her and Danni approach. Lara recognized the very gown she wore and realized she was watching the moment of their meeting.

Suddenly, the images shifted and she watched Sha'ul instructing her in the use of a broadsword. His arms were around her, his hands over hers as he helped her lift the heavy weapon into the air. She saw the two of them out in the barrens. Sha'ul pulled a plant out of the rocky ground and showed it to her, explaining something about it. Then, she saw them in his cottage, sitting together on the fur skins of Sha'ul's bed. Lara was wearing a blouse and bodice and Sha'ul unlaced the bodice and then pulled the blouse up over her head.

Lara gasped at the vision of Sha'ul staring down lovingly at her bare breasts. One large hand closed gently over one breast and he leaned into her, pressing his lips to hers...

Her eyes flew open and she pulled her hands back as if Sha'ul's skin had burned her. Heat burned in her cheeks and she stared at him.

Sha'ul furrowed his brow and worry crinkled the skin around his eyes. He frowned. "Lara, what's wrong? Was it the battles? I'm sorry. I should have warned you." He closed his eyes and shoved a large hand through his hair.

"No, my lord, I'm ... I'm fine." Lara struggled to steady her breath as the last image of Sha'ul, his hand gently closing over her breast, rang in her mind. She remembered the expression of pleasure on her own face as he touched her. Her eyes closed, her head tilted back, her lips slightly parted, waiting for his kiss. Heat continued to burn in her cheeks and swirl through her body, concentrating especially between her thighs and in her breasts. Her body raged with unfamiliar sensations, tinglings and burnings she'd never before felt and she was torn between wanting Sha'ul to pull her into his arms and kiss her and wanting to rise and flee.

Sha'ul rose and poured some more tea into her cup, which he handed to her. "Sip this," he told her.

Lara held the small wooden cup with both hands, but they trembled so badly she almost spilled the tea. Sha'ul put his hands over hers, steadying her to bring the cup to her lips. She took a small sip and let him take the cup away, immediately missing his warm touch.

He sat back down in front of her. "I'm sorry, Lara. That was foolish of me. I should have known better." He sighed heavily. "The Pierran raids," he went on. "Their armies made it all the way up here, where only the Beren traders had been before." He shook his head. "Of course, I should have realized you'd see that. It must have brought back terrible memories for you." He looked at her, his sorrowful gaze trapping hers. "I beg your

forgiveness.”

She stared at him a moment, registering the fact that he didn't know what had shaken her. His ignorance of that image calmed her a bit and she found her voice. “There's nothing to forgive, my lord. I'm honored that you trusted to show me your life.” A tug pulled in her chest as she felt the truth of her words, initially only meant to reassure him. “You ... have suffered as much as I have.” As soon as the words left her lips, she realized they were true. In that moment, she felt less afraid of Sha'ul. She saw he was simply a man, not another cruel slaver who would have power over her as her Pierran captors did. She understood deep down that the sorcerer was good hearted and would not treat her as they had done.

Sha'ul bowed his head. “Thank you, Lara.” He looked up at her, his brown eyes misted over. “Your words mean a great deal to me.”

Lara stared at him again, bewildered. When Danni brought her here to meet Sha'ul, she had not expected the sorcerer to let her see into his life. She had not expected him to treat her with respect and humility. She had prepared herself for reluctant submission to his authority. She found herself suddenly hoping that she had the mark of a sorceress, just so she could spend her time in Sha'ul's presence. The sensual vision of them together resurged and she looked down at her hands. She even found herself hoping for more...

Sha'ul smiled at her. “Lara, the fact that the visions came to you when our hands touched shows that you have the mark.” He moved in his seat, leaning in a bit closer to her. “You could not have seen so much this soon if you didn't have it. Your grandfather was right.”

Lara blinked as Sha'ul's statement coursed through her consciousness. You have the mark of a sorceress. The reality of his words had so many implications, her mind, still reeling from the visions, could not absorb them all and the power of speech eluded her yet again. She cleared her throat. “What do I do now?” Her voice came out in a whisper.

“Just show up for your training,” he answered softly. “I'll take care of the rest.”

“Do I ... need my father's permission?”

Sha'ul sighed. His eyes once again looked troubled. “Unfortunately, no. The Council of Mages asks no one's permission, not even the one whose life is about to change completely for having the mark.”

She blinked. “Change?”

He nodded. “Aye. A sorcerer or sorceress' life is not his or her own. I will be honest with you from the first moment, Lara. You are to serve your fellows and your planet now. Your wishes or desires are secondary.”

Her heart wrenched. “Oh.”

He reached out and put a hand over hers. His touch was warm and alive and she found it as comforting as it was thrilling. “It's not horrible, Lara. I shouldn't have made it sound that way. But my teacher didn't warn me until much later. He would have saved me some heartache if he had.”

She nodded. Nothing he said made sense to her, but in the moment she didn't care. All that mattered was that Sha'ul was to be her teacher now.

Sha'ul stood and drew her up with his hand still over hers. If she wasn't mistaken, he seemed reluctant to release her hand. “We will begin tomorrow morning,” he said. “Do you have any questions?”

She shook her head, her mind reeling, making thought impossible.

“I must make preparations then.” He smiled. “I know you’ll want to get back and tell your family what’s happened.”

She nodded again. “All right.” To her disappointment, he was leading her toward the door of the cottage and she lifted her gown a bit so she wouldn’t trip, nervous as she was from his touch.

Danni was in the front yard, waiting when they emerged from the cottage. A lock of his dark blond hair had come loose from its tie and hung over his forehead, which Lara suspected was a result of his tryst with a lovely forest witch. At their approach, Danni turned and stood at attention, looking respectfully at Sha’ul. The other man had been, after all, a higher rank in the guards before his calling to magery.

Sha’ul signaled to him and Danni relaxed his stance and turned an expectant gaze on Lara. “Your friend here begins her training tomorrow,” Sha’ul told him.

Lara watched Danni’s green eyes cloud over. The jealousy she’d sensed from him simmered once again in the air and she shifted her weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other. In the nine months since her father had brought her and Ariana back to the Veltlands, Danni had become a faithful companion. During the recently passed *Grudin arhev*, the Veltish festival day celebrating love, he had even had offered her a bunch of wildflowers, the traditional offering for the festival. But unfortunately, in all that time, he’d never affected her the way Sha’ul had in mere moments of meeting him.

Danni looked down at her, his jaw muscle tight. “Congratulations, Lara.” His voice was as strained as his jaw and she felt hot tears threaten her eyes. Until this moment, she hadn’t realized how important Danni’s friendship was to her and feared losing it.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Sha’ul’s hand come out and gently clap on Danni’s shoulder. “This is going to be very hard for her,” Sha’ul told him. His voice was gentle yet firm. “She needs your support.”

Lara’s gaze whirled to the sorcerer whose dark eyes glowed meaningfully into Danni’s. When she looked back at Danni, the younger man looked chastened and nodded with humility. “Yes, Sir,” he murmured. “Lara has my unspoken loyalty, always.”

Sha’ul nodded and released Danni’s shoulder. “Thank you for bringing her. You’ll do the same tomorrow?”

“Aye, Sir.” Danni turned to her. “If you want, I’ll take you back to Ariana.”

She nodded. The mention of Ariana’s name made her want to curl up next to her like a little girl. Ariana was the one person in the whole world whom she could tell about the new feelings and emotions coursing through her.

Remembering that Sha’ul was her teacher now, she looked up at him. His brown eyes, the color of warm chocolate, brimmed with unspoken affection. The depth of feeling unsettled and surprised her. Sha’ul barely knew her, yet he radiated kindness and empathy.

“Go in peace, Lara,” he said softly.

Lara bowed her head. “Thank you, my lord.” With her heart pounding, she turned and left with Danni at her side.

*

Sha’ul watched his new student move down the dirt path from his cottage back in the direction of Karan-ver. He sighed, his gaze trapped on the long heavy braid of silvery-blond hair hanging down her back. He hadn’t expected Lara bat Karan to be as lovely as she was. Apparently, Lara’s mother had been Pierran, giving Lara the golden tint to her

skin as well as the almond shape of her eyes. Their color, however, the pale blue and the dignified set of her jaw and demeanor were all from her Veltish father, the general who had, through skill and strength, helped Pierra become the empire it was on the planet.

Of course, Sha'ul knew, if Karan had had any inkling of the way the Pierrans had used him to gain a strategic foothold on the world, he probably would have mutinied, taken his family and made his way home sooner, before his wife was murdered and his daughter imprisoned in the palace.

Lara had disappeared down the path, her silver blond mane and delicately curved figure in the rose-colored gown too far in the distance for him to see. Something tugged at his heart, a yearning he'd thought long buried with Ramasse after her murder. Lara had the same large, wondering eyes, full of sadness and intelligence. The two women also shared similar histories. Ramasse had been enslaved to the Pierrans as well, forced to travel with one branch of the military corps, servicing the soldiers on campaign. Sha'ul had freed her and kept her with him for a time, until the men he'd taken her from caught up with him and overpowered them.

Sha'ul sighed deeply as he began to pile up the logs he'd been splitting when Lara arrived. What had happened to Lara was common knowledge, but the details had come to him in the first moments of meeting her when he touched her hand to his forehead. Her screams had reverberated in his soul and her mother's blood spilled before his eyes as if he'd been there with her.

In that single touch, he'd witnessed Lara's years of imprisonment in the palace, her drudgery in the kitchens; being beaten and scolded by other slaves who took their frustration and anger out on her. He had watched a man whom he didn't know, rip off Lara's gown and sneer at her lasciviously while she held back her tears. The poor young woman's terror hadn't ended until Ariana had gone into the *haram* and stopped the other slave woman from raping Lara. He saw their escape and their journey back to the Veltlands by Beren caravan. He saw Lara curled up in her stepmother's arms, crying on her shoulder. He saw Lara coming to meet him and becoming his student. And then he'd envisioned making love to her in his bed, the firelight glowing on her bare golden skin while he pleased her with his mouth and hands. All that he'd seen in just one touch of her hand.

*

Danni's silence was unnerving. He hadn't said a word since they'd left Sha'ul's cottage. She stole a glance at him. Times like these made her wish she weren't so empathic. "Danni," she ventured softly, "Are you mad at me?"

The question seemed to startle him and he blinked several times, his long lashes moving quickly over his green eyes. To her surprise, he stopped and turned to her, studying her face. The emerald pools of his eyes reminded her of Ariana's eyes. Danni's mother was Marean, like Ariana and the resemblance was striking. Danni was distinctly different from Veltish men in that he wasn't as broad and large. His musculature, lean and sinewy had a fluid grace. She caught the flexing of small muscles in his neck above the lacing of his tunic. "No, Lara," he said after several painful moments of waiting. "I'm not mad at you."

"Then wh..."

"I'm..." He sighed and shifted his weight from one boot to the other. Tiny stones on the path ground under his soles. "Jealous."

Lara nodded. "That's what I thought. I'm sorry, Danni. I didn't mean to..." She fell silent, pushing back tears.

Danni sighed, his demeanor softening. "Don't worry, Lara. I'll always be your friend. Even if Sha'ul hadn't said what he did, I wouldn't stop caring about you. I couldn't. You're very ... special."

Tears of relief burned in her eyes, blurring her vision of Danni's handsome face, an intriguing combination of boyish and rugged. "Thank you," she whispered, her throat painfully tight.

Danni exhaled a deep breath. "May I ask you just one thing?"

Wordlessly, she nodded, feeling her chest tighten.

His green eyes clouded over again. "Is it because I go to the forest witches that you don't ... want me? Because if it is, I'll stop."

The pleading tone in his voice cut straight into her heart and she let out a shuddery breath. She thought briefly of Danni's horror when he'd found out his sisters had told her about the forest witches. He hadn't spoken to them for nearly a fortnight. "No," she said immediately, knowing her answer was true. She didn't judge her friend for taking pleasure or comfort where it was offered. "It's not, Danni. I don't know why I see you only as a dear friend. I only know it has nothing to do with you." She paused and took a deep breath. "If my heart chose of its own accord, it would have chosen you from the first moment."

Danni's green eyes lit up. "Do you mean that?"

Lara smiled, feeling much of the tension between them drain away. "Aye, I do. I mean it with my whole heart."

For the first time that day, Danni's lips curved in a smile. "Thank you, Lara. That means a great deal to me."

He gazed down at her a moment longer and suddenly Lara understood. Danni had sworn his warrior's fealty to her. He hadn't come out and told her in words what he'd done. Not even Renna and Kira knew about this, for they certainly would have chattered such news to her as soon as they found it out. A twinge of guilt nagged at her. She'd known Danni for almost a year now and was familiar with the deep vein of stubborn loyalty that formed the foundation of his character. No matter what she did, Danni would be there in the background, waiting for her. Even if he loved another woman, he would always feel the same for the woman to whom he'd sworn the precious gift of his warrior's fealty.

The longhouse loomed ahead of them, an above ground warren of fire-warmed halls and rooms, couched between a meadow, the Great Veltish Forest, and vast rocky barrens in which luscious do'or berries proliferated in late summer. No other dwelling Lara had ever experienced before was quite like a Veltish longhouse. The red-wood walls, packed with mud were impervious to the winds and rains that ravaged the do'or barrens in winter, and the clean rushes and dried herbs covering the dirt-packed floors, absorbed sounds and released their meadowy scent under her feet. The stone chimneys and hearths kept the structure safe from the huge hearthfires, whose reflections danced off the dark richness of the wooden halls and trestles. Karan-ver, which housed Karan's entire clan, had swiftly taken its place in Lara's heart as home.

The main hall was dark and cool due to lack of fire in summer days. A few of the young men had set up the trestle tables for the mid-day meal and delicious smells wafted

in from the summer kitchens down another long hall.

Danni turned to her. "Ariana will be waiting in the kitchen."

She shook her head. "Not today. She told me she'd be resting. She's due any day now and it makes her so tired."

He nodded. "Well, I'll see you later. I have to get back to the barracks."

Lara felt suddenly awkward and shy. "Thank you for bringing me today."

"You're welcome, Lara. I'll take you tomorrow, too, if you want. It's a big occasion, starting to train as a sorceress. At least, I would think it is."

The word sorceress sent a frisson of chilly tingles through her nerves. "Yes, I suppose it is a big occasion." She looked into his eyes, shadowed in the dim light of the hall. "You don't mind?"

He smiled. "Of course I don't mind." He brushed his fingertips across the rose shoulder of her gown. "See you later. Send my respects to Ariana."

She returned his smile. "I will." She watched Danni turn in the direction of the entry hall before turning in the direction of the corridor to the sleeping rooms. The quiet shadowy corridor enveloped her like a womb. Her slippers made soft brushing sounds on the clean rushes.

She found Ariana lying in her parents' bedchamber. Ariana's eyes were closed, her coppery eyelashes resting on her pale skin, her swelling stomach large and round. As a bed-slave, Ariana had been sterilized, but Lara's father obtained a reversal potion and Ariana became pregnant within the first few days of taking the antidote.

Lara was about to back away and leave her stepmother to rest when Ariana's eyes fluttered open and her gaze fixed on her.

Ariana smiled, her emerald eyes lighting the way Danni's had earlier. "Hi, sweetheart." She held out her hand. "Come and sit with me."

Lara stepped into the room. "I didn't mean to wake you..."

"Nonsense. I'm sorry I couldn't go with you today." She patted her stomach with one hand as Lara went around to her father's side of the large bed and climbed on next to Ariana. "I feel as if I'm carrying around a boulder inside my belly. My feet ache all the time." Her bright red hair fanned out on the pillow around her delicate face. She looked up at Lara and smiled again, tiny lines crinkling around her eyes. "So? What happened? Tell me everything."

Lara looked down, fixing her eyes on Ariana's stomach, which unwittingly reminded her of her awakening desires. "Well," she began slowly, "Sha'ul says I have the mark. I begin training with him tomorrow morning."

The green in Ariana's eyes intensified. She picked up Lara's hand and squeezed it. Several moments passed before she spoke. Lara knew the news was as mixed for her stepmother as for herself. "Is it what you want, Lara?"

The gentle waves of Ariana's voice washed through her and tears surged in Lara's eyes. "I don't have a choice. Sha'ul said my life is not my own anymore. The Council of Mages doesn't even have to ask Father's permission."

Ariana's brow furrowed and her eyes clouded over the way Danni's had upon hearing the news. Gently, she tugged Lara down to lie beside her. Lara took the chance to snuggle against her stepmother's comforting warmth. Ariana had the sweetest scent to her skin and hair and Lara let her tears soak into the soft wrap Ariana wore while the older woman stroked her hair soothingly.

“How did Sha’ul know you could be a sorceress, sweetheart?”

Lara lifted her face and looked at Ariana. “He had me look into him. I saw his whole life. Well, parts of it.” Her face burned again at the memory of her future vision. “He said I couldn’t have done that if I weren’t a Being of Power.”

Ariana nodded against the pillow. “I see.” She remained quiet for a few moments, caressing Lara’s hair. “What about Sha’ul?” she asked softly. “What’s he like?”

Lara’s breath hitched softly. “He seems very kind and gentle. I’ve ... never met a man like him. He let me look into him instead because I seemed afraid for him to do that with me. He’s suffered a great deal, too.”

Ariana looked at her, her green eyes twinkling. “Lara, there’s a sound in your voice when you speak of him that I’ve never heard in you before.”

Lara smiled, feeling suddenly shy.

Ariana squeezed her gently. “I won’t pry, sweetheart.”

“You’re not prying, Ariana. Sha’ul is very ... handsome.” She rose up on her elbow and looked at her stepmother. “I don’t understand what happened,” she went on. “Danni is handsome too, and kind. But I don’t ... feel this way about him.”

“What way, if I may ask?” Ariana asked gently.

Lara considered, reliving her meeting with the sorcerer. The word slowly formed on her lips. “Safe.” She looked at Ariana. “I felt safe and then every part of me came alive.” Her confession brought a flush of heat into her cheeks and she looked down. “I mean I feel safe with Danni, but it’s different.”

Ariana sighed. “Yes, I know that feeling. That’s exactly what happened to me with your father.”

Lara looked at her. “Even though he’d captured you?”

Her stepmother smiled, a dreamy look in her eyes. “Yes, even though he’d captured me. And even though he thought the queen had sent me to spy on him.” Her expression grew more serious. “I looked at him and immediately, in spite of my own desperation, I felt how much he’d suffered and that he was a good man. My heart just melted for him and I fell madly in love.”

An odd chill passed through Lara’s body. “Do you think that’s what happened to me?”

Ariana pushed Lara’s hair behind her ear, studying her face with a gentle expression. “It sounds very possible.”

Lara frowned. “Ariana, the thought of ... you know ... with a man ... it terrifies me.”

Ariana brought her to snuggle with her again. “I know, sweetheart. After what’s happened to you, of course it is. One thing I do know is if he’s very tender and caring, he’ll help you not to be frightened anymore.”

“Is ... my father ... that way?”

“You mean tender?”

She nodded.

Ariana chuckled softly. “Yes, he is. I, too, needed tenderness, even though Maya had always treated me kindly. I didn’t realize it at the time until after I’d been with your father, that even though Maya was gentle in her own way, I was still her slave. I still didn’t have a choice. Even the way my body responded to her was for her pleasure. Given freedom, I would not have been with her. I was made for your father. Choice is important.”

Lara shuddered at the mention of Queen Maya. Anything that had to do with her past brought back all the feelings she never wanted to feel again. She could not hear about that time of her life without a wave of despair gripping her. “Ariana, doesn’t it horrify you to speak of that time?”

Her stepmother sighed. “Yes, it does. But I’ve realized in recent months that when I suppress the sadness and horror, I can’t feel any of the good things in my life, either. I can’t bear the thought of not experiencing joy from the two most wonderful experiences of my life.”

Lara looked up at her. “Two experiences?”

Ariana nodded. “Yes. The first is being with your father.”

She had figured that one already, but wondered at the second.

“You can’t guess what the other one is, can you?”

Lara shook her head. “No, I can’t.”

Ariana squeezed her gently. “Having you in my life, of course.”

Lara buried her face in the hollow of Ariana’s shoulder. “Thank you,” she murmured. “I feel the same way about you. I wouldn’t even be here if it weren’t for you.”

Ariana leaned over and pressed a kiss on the top of her head. They lay together quietly and Ariana’s words echoed through Lara’s mind, especially the word choice. The word shimmered through Lara, all the way into her bones. Sha’ul had given her a choice in the very first moments of their meeting. He’d let her choose whether to be looked into or to do the looking. She realized now that was a large part of what made him gentle.

Once again, the vision of Sha’ul fondling her breast and leaning in to kiss her surged in her mind. Tingling heat suffused her cheeks and her body with an ache like she’d never known before. With her stomach fluttering, she wondered if the vision had truly been one of the future, or if it had been her own wishful thinking.

Either way, she realized, for the first time in her life, she hoped it would come true.

Chapter Two

Sha'ul was waiting outside the door of his cottage when Danni dropped Lara off. Her stomach danced nervously the moment her gaze alighted on the sorcerer's darkly handsome visage. His long raven hair was pulled back with its leather tie, causing her eye to follow its path down his broad back to the muscles straining against his thin white shirt.

He smiled, holding the door open for her, ushering her inside. As she passed by, his raw masculine energy shimmered right through her blouse and bodice, like warm fingers caressing her skin. "Have you had breakfast, Lara?" He closed the door behind them and indicated the seat at the table she'd had the day before.

Obediently, she seated herself, shaking her head. "I'm too nervous. My stomach will not accept food this morning."

Sha'ul chuckled, a warm rich sound that sent a rush of heat through her body. "I understand," he said, ladling something from a kettle onto a plate, "but you'll need your strength." He set the plate in front of her and took his seat. "Magery requires great physical as well as mental strength. Try this."

Lara recognized Ariana's bread under the mound of stew, the scent of which she didn't recognize, yet which made her salivate. The aroma wafted upward, into her nostrils, coaxing her appetite to life.

She picked up her spoon and scooped it full of Sha'ul's offering, embarrassed at the sudden ravenous hunger that gripped her. The flavors melted on her tongue and when she swallowed, her entire body felt relaxed and nourished.

Sha'ul sat watching her, sipping from a mug. His dark eyes glowed warmly and the corners of his masculine lips worked into a widening smile. "I think you like it."

She nodded, swallowing one spoonful after the next, struggling not to appear as piggy as she felt, until her plate was empty. She wiped her mouth with a napkin and took a long sip of cool water from a goblet by her plate, avoiding the sorcerer's compelling gaze. "That was the best food I've ever tasted," she murmured. "Thank you."

Sha'ul laughed gently. "You're very welcome. It's a secret recipe the forest witches taught me. I'll be passing it on to you before long."

She nodded as an ugly stab of jealousy shot through her. Undoubtedly, the forest witches consorted with Sha'ul as well as with Danni, which probably meant the sorcerer would not return the powerful attraction she felt for him. She looked down at her empty plate. "I'll wash this." She stood from her chair and picked up the plate.

"There's no need." Sha'ul stood and took the plate from her gently. "I'll set it to soak for now. You must change before we begin your training."

Lara stared at him, her stomach clenching. "Change?"

He nodded. "Aye. You cannot train in your skirts. The forest witches made you some trousers and a pair of boots. They're over there." He pointed in the direction of his bed. "I'll wait outside for you."

She nodded, swallowing past a lump in her throat. "Thank you, my lord. The witches were kind to make clothing for me."

The sorcerer smiled. The dimple that formed on the clean-shaven plane of one cheek

nearly mesmerized her, touching off a rising hunger that pulsed down between her thighs. "You're welcome, Lara."

When he was gone, Lara approached his fur skin-covered bed. The mere sight of it touched off her memories of the visions. Yet, now she realized that the image of Sha'ul making love to her was wishful thinking on her part. He had the forest witches, who probably kept him satisfied.

With a sigh, she divested herself of her skirts, folding them in a neat pile on the bed and stepped out of her slippers. She put the trousers on over her stockings. The new item fit perfectly and she cinched the waist with the corded belt before tugging on the soft chaya-skin boots.

Lara emerged from the cottage. Sha'ul stood a few feet away. She frowned when she saw his broadsword dangling from one large hand. He took a step toward her. "Come," he said, touching her lightly on the shoulder. Obediently, she fell into step beside him down the path.

The morning was cool, with a smoky mist hanging over the tops of the tall fir trees that made up the forests at the edges of the barrens. Gray clouds blocked the light of the sun and the air was still, punctuated only by birdsong.

Sha'ul led Lara off the path into a meadow of high grasses and wildflowers. He stopped and turned to her. Her eye fell on the glinting steel blade of his broadsword. To her surprise, he set the weapon on the ground at his feet. "Lara, before we begin, we must exchange our vows, the vows of master and pupil."

Her eyes widened, locked on his serious, dark gaze. She nodded.

His hands came up, lightly grasping her shoulders. "I, Sha'ul ben Lodron, vow as your teacher, to be a friend to you, to teach you the art of magery to be used for the common good only and to protect you to whatever degree is in my power. The bond between us in this sacred relationship shall be honored in this embodiment and beyond, until both our souls reach the final dissolution."

Lara's heart pounded wildly in her chest as Sha'ul recited his part of the vow. Each word sank deep into her consciousness and she felt the bond between them strengthen even from his speaking of mere words.

He fell silent and bowed his head. She was afraid she should be saying something in return, but had no idea what was expected of her.

"Lara bat Karan," Sha'ul began quietly, "Do you vow as my pupil to honor the sacred bond between us, to fulfill your obligation as one with the mark to claim your full powers of magery and use them for the common good alone?"

She nodded. "Yes, my lord." The moment she responded, she felt an infusion of strength deep inside her and straightened her shoulders a bit more under his hands.

A tiny smile tugged at her teacher's lips and he squeezed her shoulders gently before releasing them. "Let's begin then." He reached down and retrieved his broadsword from the damp grass. "If you remember, I said to you earlier that a mage must be physically strong. This is because in practicing magery, you will, at times, defy the laws of nature that govern the physical realm. I'll give you an example."

Sha'ul closed his eyes. His body, as well as the air around him, grew still. The next moment, he vanished.

Lara gasped. "My lord?"

"I'm still here, Lara. If you reach out, you'll be able to touch me."

Tentatively, she held out her hand, feeling the heat from his body as she drew closer. Her fingertips alighted on the corded muscle of one arm, which quivered at the light contact over his thin shirt.

“By the gods,” she breathed. Catching her mild oath, she recoiled and stood straight, at attention. “I’m sorry, my lord.”

He chuckled, slowly becoming visible again. “It’s quite all right. The oath I let loose was far worse when my teacher first demonstrated this move to me.”

Lara grinned in spite of herself.

“So,” Sha’ul continued, “You need to be strong in order to perform such feats.” His expression grew serious. “You never know when you’ll need them.” He held out the broadsword. “Take this from me. Use both hands.”

Lara reached out and took hold of the hilt. As soon as Sha’ul released the weapon, the weight of it dragged her over and the blade sank into the earth.

Sha’ul put his large hands over hers and lifted the broadsword up, keeping his hold on her. “All right. Your low level of strength is as I thought. I certainly don’t expect you to wield this weapon as I or Danni or your father would, but after some training, you should be able to swing it around more easily. Once you can, you’ll be able to begin training in the Defiance level of magery.”

With his hands still over hers, Sha’ul maneuvered his body until he stood directly behind her. Lara felt her back rest lightly against Sha’ul’s chest. His powerful arms covered hers. Her heartbeat set to galloping and she swallowed nervously, her legs threatening to give out under her.

“Now, Lara, lift your arms.”

Lara did as she was told and the sword rose in the air, blade pointed toward the sky, with the help of Sha’ul’s strength.

“Very good. Just follow my movements.” He proceeded to swing slowly to the right, then the left in a graceful arched movement. Lara’s arm muscles strained against the heavy weapon, in spite of Sha’ul’s hold on it.

Sha’ul moved her through an entire series of movements that brought them back to the beginning position. He then lowered the sword and took it from her.

Lara breathed heavily in relief. Her arms ached horribly from just the little bit of movement and she realized how weak she had been kept in the palace even though she’d been put to work in the kitchens for a while. Once she was near to age for the *haram*, she’d been removed from the kitchens and trained in the sexual arts, none of which had required her physical strength, only her compliance.

Unbidden, hot tears sprang to her eyes. She bowed her head shamefully, working unsuccessfully to fight them. Before she knew what was happening, Sha’ul had set down the sword, stepped forward and wrapped her in his arms. One large hand cradled her head, pressing it gently to his chest.

“It’s all right, Lara,” he crooned. “You must feel your sadness, all of it, if you’re to be strong. Don’t think that’s not part of what we’re supposed to work on together.” As he spoke, his hand caressed her hair.

In spite of her grave embarrassment, his touch soothed her and she sagged against him, one hand clutching the rough material of his shirt. She felt safe and warm in her teacher’s embrace and in moments, the wave of sadness had passed.

Wordlessly, Sha’ul brushed the tears off her cheeks with the pad of his thumb and

stepped back.

"Thank you, my lord," she whispered.

His dark eyes smoldered as he looked back at her. "You're welcome." His voice was slightly husky and he appeared to be struggling inwardly. "Now, if you're ready, we'll go through the movements once again and that will be enough strengthening for the day."

Lara nodded, her heart racing. When Sha'ul positioned himself behind her again and had her take hold of the sword, she found herself squashing the impulse to turn to him and ask for his kiss. He covered her hands again with his own and guided her through the movements with the sword, taking most of its weight on himself, yet leaving just enough for Lara's muscles to work.

When they'd finished, Sha'ul stepped back and lowered the broadsword to his side. "How was that?" he asked quietly.

She smiled shyly under his gaze. "Difficult. But good."

He returned her smile, although his dark eyes looked troubled.

In the time that followed, he taught her some gentle stretches to prevent too much soreness in her muscles. Many of the movements he showed her required that he hold her hands and gently pull on her arms or have her pull on his. Lara was surprised at how much he needed to touch her in the course of teaching her, yet she didn't mind at all. Sha'ul's touch was always gentle yet firm, conveying without words a tenderness she'd only felt from Ariana.

They spent the rest of the morning in the meadow for instruction on herbology, which Sha'ul explained was an essential part of magery. Sha'ul explained the medicinal properties of the various flowers and plants. He had her taste them and feel their textures, familiarizing her with their names.

When they finally went back to Sha'ul's cottage, Lara felt the tightening of soreness in her muscles. Sha'ul offered to let her rest, but she insisted on serving him the meal of smoked fish, cheese and bread her aunts had prepared as an offering for Sha'ul.

Halfway through the meal, Sha'ul regarded her, his brow furrowed. "You're beginning to move stiffly," he remarked. Setting down a chunk of bread he'd been eating, he rose from the table and stoked the fire in the hearth. "You need to soak in a hot tub immediately," he told her. "If you don't, you won't be able to move tomorrow." He sighed. "I'm sorry. I tried to push you as little as possible. I don't want to hurt you." He picked up a bucket and started for the door.

"It's not your fault I'm so weak, my lord. It's because of ... the Palace."

He regarded her with sympathy pooling in his obsidian eyes. "Aye, I know. I just don't want to make it worse."

She bowed her head. "You've already made it better, my lord."

He nodded solemnly. "Thank you, Lara." With his hand on the door he paused again. "I swear to you I'm not trying to ... misuse you ... with the bath."

"I know. My body grows stiffer each moment."

"I'll only be a moment." He went outside, returning moments later with a large bucket of well water, which he poured into a kettle over the fire.

Lara watched him from her seat. Her stomach coiled warmly as she pictured him in the tub with her, his bare wet skin glistening...

Sha'ul opened a large chest at the foot of his sleeping pallet and retrieved a small pouch tied with a leather cord. "These are special crystals I've made that dissolve in the

bath water. Once you soak with these, you won't have any trouble." He placed the pouch on the table near her.

Without thinking, Lara rose from her chair. "Thank you, my lord." His nearness made her slightly dizzy. Her gaze was even with his broad chest. Dark hairs peeped through the laces of his shirt. She squelched the potent desire to graze her fingertips across them.

"Are you all right, Lara? You seem a bit unsteady. Perhaps you should sit back down." He reached for her upper arms, squeezing them gently. His touch weakened her and a reflex made her tilt her face upward, her eyelids fluttering. His dark eyes radiated a heady mixture of sympathy and desire.

"I don't want to be afraid anymore, my lord." Her voice trailed out in a whisper. She felt the huskiness in her own throat. Her breasts tingled, aching for his touch. She caught her breath, realizing the truth of what she'd said.

Sha'ul continued to gaze on her and she felt him delve more deeply into her soul. "How do you mean afraid, Lara?" he answered, his voice notches lower than before.

Her lower lip trembled. "Of ... love." Her mind reeled. She couldn't believe the words that were slipping from her, yet was unable to stop herself. Since the first moment she met Sha'ul, something within her had changed forever. "I ... love you."

The obsidian pools smoldered as his gaze swept her face and neck, to her chest, which had begun to rise and fall more heavily.

Lara braced herself for his rejection. "I know you visit the forest witches, my lord, but I..."

To her shock, he chuckled, the dimple folding in his cheek. He cupped her face in his hands, his thumbs brushing across her skin. "I haven't been to the forest witches since the Wise Ones told me you were coming," he said softly.

A tear pooled in her eye and slipped onto her cheek. He brushed it away, the pad of his thumb gliding on her skin with incredible tenderness.

"I love you, too, Lara." He leaned down and brushed his lips across hers, softly at first, then more firmly.

Lara's eyes fluttered closed and a soft whimper escaped her throat. She reached up, her fingertips pressing on the corded muscles in his arms. She parted her lips, offering herself to him, breathing in his musky scent, blended with earth and herbs and wood smoke. She moaned softly into his mouth as his tongue danced lightly against hers, smoothing across her teeth in languorous motions.

Her body weakened. She stepped into him and sagged against his hard chest, pressing her body the length of his. His maleness, hard and pulsing, pressed into her stomach as his hands slipped around to her back, pulling her more firmly against him.

Lara allowed her hands to explore the ridges and bulges of his arms and shoulders before smoothing her palms over the wide expanse of his back. The sheer strength that quivered under her hands stoked the rapidly building heat in her sex and when her fingertips skated down his spine between ridges of muscle, he groaned softly into her mouth, sending a warm vibration skittering through her entire body.

Sha'ul pulled his mouth away from hers and held her, breathing heavily into her ear. The soft wind tickled her skin and his chest heaved against hers. "Lara," he breathed close to her ear, "are you certain you want this? I'm determined not to force you in any way."

At his question, Lara fisted his shirt in her hands and stared up at him. The heavy fringe of dark eyelashes rested halfway on his eyes and the skin of his face flushed with obvious desire. "Aye, my lord." She took a small step backward. "Don't you?" Her heart already began to plummet.

"Of course I do." His voice was almost a growl. "I want to make love to you. But ... after what you've been through, I want it clearly to be your choice."

Hope surged again, along with the fire pulsing through her loins, pooling heat in the core between her thighs. "It is my choice," she whispered.

He nodded, smoothing his hand down the length of her silver blond braid. "Praise Galen," he murmured. With both hands, he worked open the laces of her bodice.

Lara felt her breasts swell forward when they were unbound.

"You're so very beautiful, Lara," Sha'ul breathed, gently covering her left breast with one hand over her blouse. With gentle fingertips, he squeezed the hardening tip, causing it to tingle.

Shards of heat radiated into her belly and downward. She felt her sex moistening and swelling. Her heart fluttered like a bird trapped in a cage.

She gasped when a sudden pounding came on the door to Sha'ul's cottage.

"Sha'ul, sir!"

Lara recognized Danni's voice. Sha'ul withdrew his hands from her and went to it. Lara's hands flew to the laces of her bodice and she pulled them closed again.

Sha'ul opened the door. Danni's face held an expression both of sheepishness and urgency. "I'm sorry, Sir." His gaze stole inward and found Lara, still standing by the table. "Forgive me."

"What is it, Danni?" Sha'ul asked.

"Ariana. She's in labor."

Lara gasped. "Is she all right?"

Danni nodded. "Ariana asked for Lara. Can she come?"

"Of course she can," Sha'ul said. He went over to Lara and put his hands on her shoulders. "Go in peace," he said softly. "Just let me know what has happened."

Lara nodded, her eyes open as far as they would. "Thank you, my lord."

He released her shoulders and reached for the pouch he'd placed on the table earlier. "Whatever you do, Lara, make certain you soak with these before too long."

Lara accepted the pouch. Sha'ul steered her toward the door where Danni waited before she could respond. Already, her muscles groaned from the movement and she wondered how she would even walk the short distance to Karan-ver.

Her inner question was immediately answered. Danni's tame chaya beast, Growlie, stood in the yard, licking absently at his chops. Lara shuddered. The sight of the large beast with its coarse hair, glittering eyes, large jaws and griffin-like talons always inspired fear in her. Yet Danni had found the creature as a wounded pup and had hand-raised him. Growlie was unerringly loyal to Danni, his adopted master and had fast earned his place as mascot of the guard barracks.

Danni gave Lara a leg up onto Growlie and seated himself in front of her on the creature's back. Normally he refused to ride Growlie, insisting his friend was not a beast of burden. Apparently, he had made an exception for Ariana.

Lara glanced at Sha'ul.

He watched her, his eyes reflecting a mixture of desire and concern. He held up a

hand in farewell and she returned the gesture, suddenly forced to grasp Danni's shoulders as he bid Growlie to move. She held him firmly, clutching the pouch of bath crystals while bracing her aching body against the chaya beast's rocking gait.

"How far along is she?" Lara asked as Growlie loped down the path in the direction of Karan-ver.

"I'm not certain," he answered over his shoulder. "But as soon as the news reached the barracks, I knew you'd want to be with her, so I jumped on Growlie and rode right to Sha'ul's."

Lara bowed her head. "Thank you," she murmured as a pang of guilt stole through her heart. The memory of Sha'ul's touch on her breast remained. She'd only known him a day and had been about to make love with him. She'd known Danni for nearly an entire year, and although she found him handsome, she'd never let him touch her. She wondered why she hadn't fall in love with Danni who obviously cared so deeply for her.

When they stopped at the door of Karan-ver, Danni slipped off Growlie and helped Lara down. The bumpy ride on the chaya beast had not helped ease the soreness gathering quickly in her muscles. The pouch in her hand reminded her of the bath she needed to take, but her need to go to Ariana took priority. "Thank you, Danni, for coming to get me."

He nodded. "Don't worry about it." He watched her for a moment and Lara could see him suppressing the longing in his eyes. He went to the heavy door, an ornately carved slab from which hung a giant iron knocker, and pulled it open for her. "I have to get back," he said as she passed over the threshold.

She stopped and looked at him. "Go in peace."

He smiled. "You too."

Lara turned and made her way through the great hall into the corridor that led to their sleeping rooms. Ariana's labor cries echoed off the walls, urging Lara to move more quickly in spite of her stiffness.

She found her father in the hallway outside the bedroom he shared with Ariana, pacing. His large, muscled form practically filled the hallway and the torchlight in the sconce by the door, glinted off his silvery-blond mane. One large hand stroked his thick beard absently.

Lara's gaze locked with his and he came to a stop. She approached him and came to stand a few feet away. In that moment, seeing him so distressed, the usual tension she felt around him was absent.

"The midwife won't let me go in," he growled. "She says I'm making Ari nervous." He sighed and raked a large hand through his hair. "Perhaps she's right. I'm a wreck."

Lara stared at her father. Seeing him in moments like this was unusual, considering he'd led so many men into battle and was still known as one of the world's greatest and fiercest warriors, as well as once with a conscience.

He looked down at her, his blue-gray eyes sad and nervous. "I was exactly this way when you were born," he said. "The midwife forced me out of the room then, as well."

Her father's admission warmed her to him, going a bit further to convince her of the suffering he'd had being unable to rescue her from the palace. She smiled shyly. "I ... didn't know that."

He returned her smile, reaching out and squeezing her shoulder, just as Ariana cried out again. Both Lara and her father's heads whipped in the direction of the sound, which

was followed by the tiny scream of a newborn.

Her father's hand sagged heavily on her shoulder as they both sighed in relief. Karan slipped his arm across Lara's shoulders and they stood together, waiting, until one of Lara's aunts poked her head out the door and smiled warmly. "Brother," she said softly, "come meet your son."

Aunt Valia looked at Lara. "And you, young lady, come in and meet your brother. Ariana asked for you."

Lara followed her father into the room. Ariana lay propped against the pillows, cradling the newborn. Lines of exhaustion ringed Ariana's eyes and mouth and perspiration glowed on her skin, her red hair damp and clinging to her forehead. But she looked content, glowing with joy as the infant, tiny and pink with a swirl of red hair on the crown of his head, suckled at her breast.

Lara stood at the foot of the bed while her father knelt down beside Ariana, his gaze locked on the child in her arms. She stared at her brother, mystified.

"Meet Eshav," Ariana said to them. She looked at Lara. "That was my father's middle name. I wanted something of him to carry on after..." She stopped speaking. They both knew her father had been slaughtered by the Pierrans during their quest to dominate all of Adamah. Not long after they'd kidnapped Karan himself.

Her father smoothed back Ariana's hair with a gentle hand. "Thank you, Ari," he said softly.

Ariana looked up at him, her green eyes misted over. "Thank you," she whispered. She smiled at Lara. "Do you like him, Lara?"

Lara nodded quickly, an ache tugging at her heart. She set down the pouch of crystals and took a few steps closer. "I do. He's beautiful."

Ariana relaxed against the pillow. "I'm sorry I interrupted your first day of training."

Lara's cheeks burned as her memory rose along with the shadow of feeling on her breast. "You didn't ... interrupt. We'd just finished."

Ariana sighed. "I'm glad." Eshav finished nursing and Ariana lifted him gently to her shoulder. "Valia said to do this after he finishes." She rubbed her hand gently over the swaddling cloth covering the baby's back.

Lara felt suddenly like an intruder and wanted to leave her father and Ariana alone in this special moment. "I'm going to help in the kitchens," she murmured. "Do you need me?"

Ariana smiled at her. "No, sweetheart. I'm so glad you were here."

Lara bowed her head. "Me too." She looked at her father who rose from kneeling. "Come here, Lara," he said.

She approached him and he held his arms out to her. Her breath caught softly in her throat at the gesture. There had been other times he'd wanted to show her affection, but she'd refused. Now, she stepped into his arms and let him embrace her. The words he'd said earlier had gone a long way to healing her anger, irrational as it may have been.

"I'm sorry, daughter," he said. She felt his caution in not holding her too tightly. His physical strength could be overpowering and he knew it.

Tears crowded her eyes. She felt like more of a baby than her infant brother and hoped she would grow up. Still, the tenderness in her father's voice meant so much to her. She pulled away gently and looked up at him. "I'm sorry, too," she answered. "I know you couldn't have done anything."

He cupped her cheek with one large hand. "It means everything to hear you say that, Lara." Behind her father, she heard Ariana sniffle.

"You should let her go before I begin to bawl," her stepmother said.

Lara smiled and moved reluctantly away, her body more sore than it had ever been in her life. Carefully, she bent down and kissed Ariana's cheek. "I'll come back later, if it's alright."

Ariana nodded. "I'd like that."

Lara smiled at her again and left, carefully hiding the limp that now formed in her sore hip. She made her way slowly to her room a few doors down from her parents and sank down on her bed. Renna and Kira, with whom she shared the cozy chamber, were absent, each doing her chores. Guilt washed through Lara who had been exempted from most of her duties in the longhouse because of her training. She was incredibly grateful that her cousins did not hold any resentment toward her for it and determined that after a short rest, she'd go to the kitchens and help prepare the evening meal.

She stretched stiffly out on her fur skin pallet and closed her eyes...

When next she opened them, she caught her breath.

Sha'ul stood in the doorway of the bedroom, smiling at her.

Chapter Three

“Hello, Lara.” Sha’ul’s large frame filled the doorway. The torchlight glistened off his hair like sunlight off a raven’s wings. “May I come in?”

Lara blinked hard several times, not sure if this were a vision. She tried to sit up and found she couldn’t. Her body felt like a sack full of rocks and pain shot through her muscles with the slightest movement. “My lord.” Her voice squeaked out in a strained whisper as she realized she’d fallen asleep without her prescribed bath. To her mounting horror, she couldn’t even remember what she’d done with the pouch of crystals. “I ... forgot ... can’t move.” She felt the tears coming again and clenched her teeth in determination to fight them.

Sha’ul chuckled gently and approached the bed. He knelt down beside her and tenderly pushed her hair back off her face.

Lara caught sight of a small clay vial in his other hand.

“I thought as much,” he said. “It’s not everyday your stepmother gives birth. I realized after you left yesterday that this might happen.”

“Yesterday?” Her heart pounded even as relief swept through her. “I fell asleep soon after I got back here and visited Ariana. Oh, I promised her I’d see her again before bed. I only meant to rest for a minute.”

He nodded. The pad of his thumb brushed lovingly across her forehead. “Your first day of training must have been exciting and stressful both. Between the sword and Ariana and...” His voice trailed off.

Lara caught her breath at the reference to what had happened between them. His touch on her forehead began to stoke her desire in spite of the guilt churning within her. “I’ve already failed my vow, my lord. After only one day you had to come fetch me because I disobeyed you.” She avoided his gaze.

“That’s not how it is, Lara. I came here for several reasons of my own.”

She stole a glance at him, surprised to see the gentle smile curving his masculine lips. “You did?”

“Aye. The first was to pay my respects to the Lady Ariana. The second was that I couldn’t wait to see you.” The dark of his eyes smoldered a deeper shade of brown. “The third was to help you be able to move again.” He sighed. “So you see, sweetling you didn’t fail. Don’t be so hard on yourself. You’ve been through enough already.”

The endearment washed through her like a sensuous wave, as well as the reasons he’d enumerated for coming to Karan-ver. She cleared her throat, afraid her nervous voice would fail. “I’m sorry, my lord, but how will I be able to train today? I can’t even move.”

His smile widened, even though the color in his eyes continued to darken sensuously. “I can help you with that, Lara, that is, if I have your permission to touch you.”

She swallowed hard past the sudden lump in her throat. Her heart pumped madly. She nodded. “Aye, my lord,” she breathed, “you have my permission.”

He furrowed his brow. “I will need to touch you ... familiarly.”

Lara stared up at him, wondering how much more familiarly he could touch her than he had yesterday.

“Not quite as familiarly as yesterday, but, well, you’ll need to undress.”

Her breath caught softly in her throat. Had he read her mind? Or were her thoughts so clearly readable on her face? She swallowed hard as her heart pumped fiercely. She nodded. “Aye, my lord.”

Sha’ul withdrew his hand from her forehead and set down the vial in his other hand. He moved to the foot of the bed and slipped off Lara’s boots, one by one. He looked at her. “Are you able to move enough to undo your trousers?”

She pulled her hands upward, but found them void of strength. “No, my lord.”

On his knees, Sha’ul maneuvered to the side of the bed. His large hands took hold of the corded belt and untied it. He stood and slipped his hands under the small of her back, pushing the trousers over her buttocks and hips before pulling them the rest of the way off by the legs.

Letting them drop to the floor, he kneeled by her once again. He undid the bow on her bodice, loosening the laces and with a hand on her back, gently lifted her and pulled the article off.

He let her back down carefully and looked at her, his eyes remaining fixed on hers. “I need to remove your garters and stockings,” he said quietly.

Lara swallowed hard. The garters and stockings were her only undergarment and the thought of his hands so close to her sex, his fingertips grazing her bare flesh, sent up a throbbing in her core that both exhilarated and frightened her. “All right,” she whispered.

Sha’ul pulled down the tails of her blouse, covering her to mid-thigh and reached underneath, his gaze fastened on hers.

Lara caught her breath as his warm fingertips grazed the flesh of her stomach, working open the ties of her garter belt. She heard the leather straps fall open and Sha’ul’s hands emerged. He pulled down her left stocking. The light material sliding down her skin along with his touch touched off waves of heat in her lower belly, down to her woman’s core, which ached for his caress. The same sensations and desires assaulted her when he removed her other stocking.

Now she lay nearly naked, except for the blouse. Sha’ul slipped his hands under her back again, helping her to ease over onto her stomach. Lara stared at the mud packed wall, which was all she could see. She couldn’t see Sha’ul, but she could feel his simmering energy close to her and hear his breathing, heavier, as if he were fighting for control.

Her ears tensed, listening to his sounds. He uncorked the vial he’d brought with him and poured some in his hands. She heard the quiet swoosh of palms rubbing together and then his hands, warm and strong, were slipping under her blouse and splaying over her bare skin. In slow, even circles, he rubbed her muscles, his fingertips easing away the soreness. Her muscles tingled pleasantly, from his expert touch or from the oily substance he’d put on his hands, she couldn’t tell; but the sweet aroma of herbs wafted to her nose and her body loosened and her eyelids fluttered closed.

The hem of her blouse played along the back of her thighs and gradually over her buttocks. She knew her bottom was now exposed to his view and her heart fluttered in her chest.

“What is that oil you’re using, my lord?” She needed to speak to ease the crashing of her heart and gut.

“Oil of dewberries,” came the murmured answer as his hands slid upward on her

back, releasing the pain and tension. “A liniment you’ll be learning how to make before long.” His voice had taken on a velvety tinge.

“It has a beautiful smell.”

“Aye.” His large hands paused, palms down behind her shoulder blades. “Lara, do I have your permission to work on your ... lower extremities?”

Her heart scrambled upward to her throat; or at least that’s what it felt like on the heels of his question. Almost as disturbing was how very much she wanted his hands all over her, exploring every fold and curve. She nodded. “Aye, my lord.”

Slowly, Sha’ul’s hands slid downward, past the small of her back, over the swells of her buttocks. Her breath hitched softly as he gently pushed the heels of his hands in and kneaded the flesh in tight circles, releasing the knots of tension. Pleasant waves of warmth shimmered through her bottom and into the slit between her thighs. His hands were only inches away from the hidden center.

Sha’ul worked the tightness out of her buttocks. He paused and Lara heard him pour a bit more of the dewberry oil into his hands, rub them together before the warm touch resumed on the back portion of her right upper thigh. He worked his way down her thigh to her calf and foot and back up. She suppressed a soft moan when his fingertips dappled over her sensitive inner thigh, moving dangerously close to the lips of her sex.

“Are you feeling better?” he asked. The tenor of his voice had grown husky and Lara swallowed hard.

“Aye, my lord. I can move again.”

He cleared his throat softly. “Good. I’m nearly done.” He moved his hands to her left leg and repeated the sensuously arousing process he’d done on her right.

In spite of her nervousness, Lara caught herself grinning like a satisfied cat.

Sha’ul lifted his hands off her leg and remained quietly kneeling by the bed. “I just have to do your arms when you’re ready.”

Her heart fluttered again. To massage the oil into her arms, he’d need to remove her blouse. “I’m ready,” she answered in a near whisper.

Sha’ul rose up and helped her to a sitting position before sitting down next to her. He picked up her left hand and rubbed it gently, his fingers still slick from the oil. “I’m glad this has helped you.” He looked at her, his eyes smoldering with obvious desire.

“Unfortunately, my hands are too large to fit into your sleeve.”

Lara’s bottom lip trembled. “Unfortunate, my lord?”

A small, sideways grin teased at his lips. “Well, perhaps unfortunate is the wrong word.”

“May I ask you something, my lord?” She forced herself not to avoid his gaze, which caused her insides to melt.

He reached up and pushed a strand of her hair off her cheek. “Of course you may, Lara.”

She took a deep breath, shocked at the boldness she was about to exercise with her teacher. “Ariana told me that it ... love ... can be beautiful.” She felt her face cloud suddenly. “I would have had to serve Dogon, one of the queen’s ministers. Ariana saved me from that fate. He used to do terrible things to her. He ... hurt her.” Ariana refused to tell Lara the details of what Dogon used to do to her, but she already knew because the day Dogon had come into the *haram* quarters and ripped off her gown, leering at her, he’d described in detail his wicked plans for her body on the night of her initiation as a

bed-slave.

Sha'ul brushed his thumb across her cheek. "Praise to Galen that you and Ariana are both safe now."

Lara nodded. His touch comforted her as much as it thrilled her and she savored the potent sensuality simmering between them. "Aye, my lord. I would have thought she'd fear intimacy, but she's madly in love with my father and seems to have healed."

He smiled gently, capturing her gaze. "I see that she is contented now. So, sweetling, what is your question?"

She swallowed past the lump forming in her throat. "I wanted to know if you feel the same as Ariana does."

Sha'ul's eyes darkened with a warm glow and his lids lowered, the long lashes forming a sensuous line across them. "Aye, Lara," he whispered. "I do." He leaned in toward her, sliding his fingers into her hair.

"I thought maybe ... with you ... I could heal ... the same way."

He gazed on her a moment longer. "I'm honored that you feel that way, Lara. I certainly want you to heal."

"Then you would try?"

He smiled. "You told me yesterday you love me and I told you the same. The healing has already begun." Cradling her head with his large hand, he slanted his mouth over hers in a tender kiss.

Lara's eyes fluttered closed as his lips pressed against hers. His warm, musky scent mingled with the herb from the oil in an intoxicating blend. Her lips parted as her body weakened. Sha'ul's tongue mated with hers, tasting her, stoking the already white-hot blaze in her loins.

After several moments, he lifted his face from their kiss and gazed down at her. "You're enchanting, Lara," he whispered in a husky tone.

Heat infused her cheeks and she looked down. "Thank you, my lord."

"Now, I want you to be able to move your arms again."

She glanced back up. "So do I."

Sha'ul took hold of the hem of her blouse. "Lean forward," he told her.

She obeyed and he slipped the blouse over her head, down the length of her arms until it was completely off. Her blush deepened as Sha'ul's gaze roved from her face, over her breasts and stomach, to the vee between her thighs with its light curls.

His face darkened visibly from appreciation and desire. "By the gods, Lara, you are absolutely exquisite," he murmured.

"Thank you, my lord."

Reaching out, Sha'ul brushed his fingertips along her jaw, down her throat and across her chest. As he had the day before, he cupped her breast tenderly, this time, directly on her bare skin, brushing his thumb across her almond colored nipple. The soft tip pebbled immediately under his touch and Lara moaned softly, her eyes fluttering closed.

In the next moment, she felt Sha'ul's lips pressing against hers again and parted them to let his tongue plunder her mouth with mounting urgency. Her fingertips stole up to his cheek, brushing across the masculine skin. Though he was clean-shaven, she could feel the rugged whiskers of a heavy beard.

Emboldened, Lara reached around and pulled the leather tie from Sha'ul's hair. The

silky tresses spilled over his shoulders. She let it slip between her fingers, to the ends, which reached the middle of his broad back.

Sha'ul pulled away from their kiss and pulled off his jerkin and shirt. Lara's gaze went immediately to his bare chest, perusing each hillock and sculpted line, to the small dark nipples and swirls of silky black hair, a line of which trailed down the center of his taught stomach and disappeared below the belt of his trousers. He chuckled softly. "It appears as if the appreciation is mutual."

She nodded, looking down. "It is, my lord," she murmured.

"Good," he answered. "That's the way it should be." He turned and pulled off his boots and then undid the belt of his trousers.

Lara stared as he pulled them off, revealing his powerful legs, dusted with dark hair, and his buttocks, round orbs of hard muscle.

He turned back to her, giving her her first view of the intimate part of his anatomy, already fully erect. Her gaze was trapped by the thick shaft of purplish skin and veins, springing from a nest of dark hair. In spite of the fate she'd nearly met as a bed-slave in the palace, she'd not yet seen a naked man up close.

"Touch me, if you want to." Sha'ul's voice was a tight whisper. "Whatever you want, Lara. I'm yours."

His invitation caused a trail of fire through her belly into her core. Gingerly, she reached out, splaying the fingertips of one hand on his chest. Her hand looked so small against the bulge of muscle, which quivered under her touch. His skin was warm and his breathing rose and fell raggedly under her palm. The pad of her index finger grazed his nipple. The skin was smoother and tightened when she rubbed across it.

Sha'ul moaned softly in his throat as she ventured back across his chest, feeling the etched definitions of the muscles, honed and strengthened from years of disciplined training and fighting with heavy broadswords.

Her fingertips grazed lightly down his abdominal muscles, savoring each warm inch of taut flesh. She heard Sha'ul's breath catch softly as her hand drew closer to his erection, hard and pulsing.

"Don't stop, Lara," he whispered.

His obvious enjoyment of her touch encouraged her, in spite of the fluttering in her heart. She held her breath as she pressed her fingertips tentatively on the head of his cock. It made a small jerking motion at her touch and she pulled away, alarmed.

"It's all right." Sha'ul was breathing raggedly now as he reached for her hand and gently guided it back, helping her to close her fingers around the shaft. With his hand over hers, he moved her hand up and down in small motions, moaning as he brought them to a quicker tempo. "That's right, Lara," he whispered.

The skin was velvety soft against her fingertips and her hand slid over the veins and hard muscle. Sha'ul removed his hand from hers and began to feel her breasts, squeezing one gently then the other.

Lara moaned softly, finding it difficult to concentrate on pleasuring him while he touched her.

He chuckled. "It's all right, Lara. Come here." With his hand on her upper arms, he laid her back on the fur skins, her head on the pillow and half-covered her with his body. Lowering his mouth to hers, he sipped from her lips, mating his tongue with hers, moist and hot, coaxing the fire within her to the surface.

Her arms went around his broad back, exploring the ridges of muscle with growing eagerness, slipping strands of his silky hair between her fingers. Sha'ul kissed her deeply, his hand venturing tenderly over her breasts, caressing the swells of flesh and kneading her nipples into tingling peaks.

Lara arched her back into his hand as her fears dissolved under his loving touch. Slowly he made his way down her stomach, smoothing his hand over her hip while he nibbled on her lower lip and teased her jaw with tiny love bites.

Sha'ul raised his face and caressed her hair, his gaze simmering into hers. Lara thought he was about to speak, but instead, he lowered his face down to her breast, closing his warm lips over her nipple.

The pleasurable sensation made her gasp. She wove her fingers into his hair, closing her eyes as he tugged gently on the tiny peak between his lips and tongue while kneading the other one between his fingertips. Jolts of heat traveled down from her breasts through her belly into her sex, which pulsed wildly. Instinctively she parted her legs and Sha'ul nested his body between them, his erection pressing into her slit. The tiny rubbing motions touched off more waves of heat and before she realized what she was doing, she grasped his buttocks, trying to pull him inside her.

"Sha'ul," she whispered, her mind and senses whirling from Sha'ul's sensual assault, as if she'd ingested too much mead.

He raised his face from her breasts, his face darkly flushed, his eyes smoldering like fiery coals. "What is it, love?" he whispered.

"I'm ... ready, my lord ... please."

A wickedly mischievous grin spread across Sha'ul's handsome face. "Are you?" he breathed. "Let me see for myself." He rolled slightly to the side and slipped one hand down to the juncture of her thighs, whispering his fingertips along the fleshy lips of her sex.

Lara caught her breath at the intimate contact that sent shivers of pleasure through her core.

Sha'ul bent his head down. "Open your legs," he breathed close to her ear before gently nipping her earlobe.

She obeyed and Sha'ul spread her vaginal lips open gently, caressing her swollen pink flesh. Her juices had gathered and coated his fingertips.

"Yes, sweetling," he crooned softly, his voice husky and tight. "You are ready. But I'll wait just a bit longer."

Lara almost groaned her disappointment, until Sha'ul slipped two large fingers inside her, sheathing them as deeply as they would go. He moved them in and out, caressing her clitoris with his thumb at the same time. The pleasure was so exquisite, she cried out, grasping his back, her vaginal muscles clenching around his fingers as they contracted, releasing the most blissful spasm she'd ever experienced.

Sha'ul didn't stop his ministrations until the waves had passed and she lay back, limp underneath his hand, her chest heaving.

She stared up at him. He was smiling down at her and withdrew his hand from her sex.

Her musk coated his fingers and he licked them off. "Mmm," he murmured deep in his throat, "you are as delicious as you are beautiful."

Heat flushed her cheeks. "What happened to me, my lord?"

Sha'ul smiled again and settled his body between her legs as he'd been before. "It appears you had an orgasm," he answered. "And based on your question, you've never had one before."

She shook her head against the pillow. "No, my lord. Never." She looked up at him. "Ariana would have told me about them. She's offered to tell me anything I wanted to know," she added, "but until now, I didn't want to know."

He smiled and kissed her lips tenderly, fondling her right breast. The touch on her nipple began to re-ignite her desire and she arched her back upward, pushing her breast into his hand. "Is that what it is, my lord? Don't you have your pleasure too?"

Sha'ul reached down and spread open her lower lips again, guiding the tip of his erection into her swollen, moist opening. "Aye, sweetling, I do have my pleasure. But so much of it is giving to you."

He inched his way into her slowly.

Lara moaned softly. She loved the feeling of him so intimately joined, a part of her body, the shaft stretching her open, filling her.

Finally he bumped up against her maidenhead. "I don't want to hurt you." He punctuated his sentence with a tender kiss on her cheek.

"You won't, my lord. Please."

He nodded and braced his large, muscular body on his elbows. In one swift motion he tore through her virginity.

Lara cried out softly at the mingling of pain and pleasure that followed as he began to move inside her.

"How is that, Lara?" he breathed close to her ear.

"Wonderful, my lord." She closed her eyes, gripping his hips, following his rhythmic motions.

After several moments, he stopped moving and rolled slightly to the side. Reaching down to where their bodies were joined, he found the swollen nub of her clitoris and rubbed it lightly with his fingertips while he began to move inside her again. Before long, a second orgasm built and exploded, causing her to cry out and squeeze her eyes shut as she grabbed at his back muscles.

Sha'ul leaned down and captured her mouth again, sensuously laving her tongue with his. He pulled his hand out from between them and put his arm around her, pulling her against him as he slid in and out. His movements increased and he pushed a bit harder before his body twitched and he moaned into her mouth.

Apparently, he had an explosion of bliss too, for she felt his cock pulsing inside of her. He groaned softly until the pulsing inside ceased and he collapsed gently on top of her, his lips pressed to her temple.

Lara snuggled in closer to him and he caressed her hair with one large hand.

"I love you, Lara," he whispered.

His words thrilled her and tears pooled rapidly in her eyes. Ariana had been right. The physical act of joining could be beautiful, gentle and passionate. Her heart soared with the understanding that she didn't have to be afraid. "I love you too, my lord. Sha'ul."

Sha'ul held her quietly in the little room. Their bodies were molded together, damp from lovemaking. The bed was soft and cozy, enveloping them in a little world of their own.

For a moment, Lara wondered if their union would produce a child, but then she remembered with horror, that she'd been sterilized with herbs back in the palace. Disappointment stabbed her. She sighed and let Sha'ul's warm, masculine strength envelop her. Perhaps he, too, could make a potion to reverse it and they could have a child together. If Ariana had been able to, maybe she could too.

Lara lay quietly, listening to Sha'ul's steady breath as he lay holding her. For some reason, a deep sadness welled up inside her and she was overcome with terror, a strange, horrifying premonition that one day, she and the man she loved would be torn apart.

No! The thought exploded in her mind with force. She would not let that happen. She had finally found some happiness after years of suffering and torment.

She wished desperately that she wasn't a Being of Power, but an ordinary woman, like Ariana, who could marry her soul mate and bear his child.

But somehow, she sensed that would never happen.

* * * *

"Sha'ul is doing well with his student," Morden said. "Only three years of training and he has already begun the Defiance methods with her."

The Wise Ones, cloudy figures in white shrouds, stood around their vision ball, watching the scenes pass before them. In one scene, Sha'ul stood before the daughter of Karan in a field, watching her attempt to make herself vanish. She succeeded most of the way, yet a pale shadow of her figure remained visible. When she reappeared, her lovely face was cloaked in frustration.

"Aye. She is not the mouse of a girl she was the day he took her as his student. Perhaps it is because he has taught her more than magery." The other shrouded figure spoke with a distinctive tone of wistfulness.

"Tsk tsk, Pellean." Morden did not take his gaze off the vision ball as he chided his fellow Mage. "You've been watching the love scenes?"

"Well, only a moment here and there."

Morden sighed, watching another passing scene of the young woman wielding her master's broadsword with both hands. Her strength had increased admirably and she ran through the maneuvers the sorcerer had given her with coordinated grace. In the heat of summer she wore only a jerkin, exposing tanned arms lean with long, toned muscles. Her face wore its customary determined expression, her pale blue eyes glinting with the desire for revenge. *Yes*, Morden mused, she was the one to vanquish the Abusers, and she didn't even know yet that this was exactly her destiny.

"Pellean, I would have thought you'd burned out desire for pleasure of the flesh. I have found that without the encumbrance of a physical body, I have no such desire."

"You are far older than I." The answer came without hesitation. "I was a captain under Solen, who still lives. My memories of warriorhood and loving maidens are still painfully fresh."

Morden suppressed the wave of compassion that threatened to seize him. In this troubled time, such an emotion had no place. He never completely succeeded. "Try to allow them their privacy, at the very least. It is not long now before she is forced to leave him. In spite of the prophecy, there are no guarantees she will return to him. Give her these last few years to enjoy her master."

At his words, the scene on the vision ball changed. This one showed violence,

bloodshed and greed as Pierran soldiers pillaged a small coastal town in Marea.

"They are making too much progress." The Mage who spoke this time was Wizen, the eldest of the Council. "This time, there is no stopping them. Their physical power is enhanced by magery as well as the thirst for power. King Dorian is completely under Dogon's control, unlike his mother who always retained a vein of her own mental strength."

"Karan ben Solen is receiving reports on the slaughters as we speak," Morden added, observing the scene of the large, platinum-haired warrior, listening to a messenger, his expression stone-like as he received the report of the Pierran imperialist forces.

"What was begun with Maya's assassination now continues. If they have their way, Karan's wife will be found and brought to justice, in spite of her innocence." Pellean's voice shivered. He had followed the woman's clever escape from Pierran injustice and found her to be one of the most blessed, as well as beautiful, humans on the planet.

Morden knew that if it had been in Pellean's power to save the redheaded beauty himself, he would have. "All right, some questions remain," he said, cutting the silence that followed their last exchange, "when do we inform Sha'ul about the prophecy and when is he to tell her?"

Pellean sighed. "Is that not already decided as well? Wizen was one of the first Beings to witness the Scrolls. He would know."

"Aye." Wizen's gravelly tone ensued. "In four more years, he will be told and then inform her of her mission."

"Why four?" Righteous anger infused Pellean's voice. "How many more must be tortured and die at the hands of the Pierran dogs before they're stopped once and for all?"

Morden shook his head, remembering his own ignorance long ago. Even the Wise Ones had their weaknesses. "Their crimes must outrage the entire planet. The horrifying reports of their deeds must be heard in the farthest reaches of Weir before such injustices will not be permitted to have birth again in our history." He fell silent, his gaze fixed on a scene of unspeakable horror portrayed in the vision ball. "Besides, as we all know, Lord Galen made a pact with mankind never to interfere directly in his affairs."

"All right." A voice, which had remained silent throughout, now spoke. Azena, the Council's sole female stepped into the sphere of the vision ball's light. Her ethereal features glowed, showing that she had once been very beautiful. "My question. I'm given to understand that Sha'ul will not be permitted to accompany her. Why is this so?"

Morden looked at her. "Because of the other sorcerer."

Azena furrowed her brow. "Elan? Maya's son?"

"Aye. He is the other one Being mentioned in the prophecy. He is the other one who has great reason for revenge and will channel his powers effectively."

"Ah, I see." Azena nodded her understanding.

Morden, too, nodded. "Sha'ul's passion for the girl is helping to mold her into a most powerful mage. But just as easily, that same passion could turn to jealousy, which would not permit even the lightest of intimacy with the other male. Sha'ul could destroy everything if he interfered, including the planet."

"We do not wish to put Sha'ul into stasis," Wizen interjected, "but we will have to at the slightest sign of interference."

Azena shook her head. "What we've come to," she said softly, closing her eyes against the horrifying visions passing before them.

Part Two

Unwanted Mission

3,554th Year of Galen

Chapter Four

“Bastards. Bloody bastards,” Sha’ul muttered under his breath for the thousandth time. He tossed another log onto the fire he built while waiting for Lara. All the joy of her formal initiation as a mage this night was ruined by the blow the Wise Ones had just dealt him. “Bastards.” He’d used the epithet vociferously whilst standing before the Council this morning. Of course, Sha’ul had to be the one to inform Lara of the mission on which she was being sent.

Nothing big. Just to save her planet from the very people who’d murdered her mother, ruined her father and enslaved her.

“Bastards!” He tossed another log after the first one, watching the orange spray of sparks against the velvet black night.

He knew in his rational mind that Wise Ones had nothing to do with the reality that Lara had been named in a prophecy thousands of years old. It wasn’t their fault that she was about to be sent on a quest that could end her life from innumerable possible sources.

But, he felt, it was their fault for forbidding him to go with her and protect her. “By the gods,” he murmured, even though there was no one to hear him. Sometimes a Being of Power’s solitude was too much for even him to bear. Powerlessness over destiny had always been something that enraged him, especially when it concerned the fate of a sweet, beautiful young woman. He would protect her as much and for as long as he could. Sadly, he knew he could only exert influence so far. When the time came, she would be forced to fulfill the prophecy alone. The only consolation either of them would have was the love they shared, both as teacher and student, and as lovers.

Galen’s teeth! After all his service! After sacrificing his own life and heart for magery and for humankind, the Council could not even trust him to put the welfare of an entire planet above his own possible jealousies. He knew how much Lara loved him, how absolutely devoted she was to him. He felt it whenever they made love. When their bodies were joined, he always could see into her soul. She would die for him.

Damned if he would reward such loyalty with abandonment. He loved her, more than he’d ever loved a woman in his life. The Wise Ones could shit in their robes. They could threaten him with every conceivable punishment, but he would die first before he’d let Lara go on such a quest alone, or even with Danni. The young man was a fierce warrior and would defend Lara to his last breath, but even he was no match for a corrupt mage.

Sha’ul growled as he draped a fur skin on the ground a small distance away from the fire. If he had to be the one to deliver the heart-breaking news, at least they could have some pleasure first. That is, after he had made sure her powers had gained full strength. There was no way he would have her reach into the fire if there was an iota of chance she would be burned.

With his heart sinking in his chest, he left the clearing for the watching spot, allowing the blackness of the sylvan world around them cloak him in darkness.

*

Lara’s heart pounded as she made her way to the clearing. Each step on the loamy path to the clearing brought her closer to her destiny. Her greatest fear was that once her training was complete, Sha’ul would send her away, even though he loved her.

The clearing was just ahead now through the trees, illuminated by the glow of the

fire Sha'ul had built before going to the watching place. Lara treasured the clearing, for it was in that sacred spot her handsome master had spent much time teaching her the arts of both magery and love.

Though it was summer, night in the Veltlands was always cold. Anticipating the warmth of the blaze and of Sha'ul's body against hers, Lara pulled her cloak more tightly against the chilly air, squared her shoulders and picked up her pace.

Once in the clearing, she removed her cloak, letting it slip to the ground, revealing her gown of light crushed velvet, the red of rubies. Red was Sha'ul's favorite color on her. He loved the way it offset the almond tint of her skin and silver blond hair. Lara did not think she was as pretty as Sha'ul did, but wore the dress to please him nonetheless.

She sat down on the fur skin Sha'ul had set by the fire, a safe distance from the flames, but close enough for hearty warmth. Staring into the undulating white gold of the blaze, Lara held her hands toward it. As the fire warmed her, she tried to imagine where the watching spot was, scanning both the surrounding shadows of trees and the star-studded night sky above. Its location, however, remained a mystery to her, the one thing that her exquisitely honed senses were not permitted to know.

She could, however, feel Sha'ul watching her, his loving gaze appreciating the silken fall of her hair and the soft curves of her breasts outlined by the gown, even as he watched to see if the magery he'd taught her these past seven years had taken root. He had explained to her before tonight that if the magery had synthesized with her being, the effects would show in a halo of light around Lara that only he and the Council of Mages could see. If it had, Sha'ul would know that her training was complete and that all the elements of the creation were at her command. As long as she used them only to serve Lord Galen, the Creator.

So she waited, listening to the song of the night crickets while she worked to steady the trembling that had begun in her hands and heart. Becoming a Being of Power was no small matter. It set her apart from everyone else, except others like her, of which there were a mere few. She both desired and feared this distinction. Such a path held its promises as well as its difficulties.

Lara turned when she heard Sha'ul's footfalls on the loamy ground. Though he was still a distance away, she knew his sound. Her training had honed her senses to the utmost level of sensitivity. But even if it hadn't, her four years as a slave in the Pierran Palace struggling for survival had deeply sensitized her.

She stood in anticipation of Sha'ul's approach. She was both anxious to feel his touch and kiss and to know what he would tell her. She caught her breath when he stepped into the clearing and moved toward her. She studied his face, searching the chiseled features for the answer to what he'd seen, yet at first, she saw only the tenderness he had for her, reflected in his dark, velvety eyes.

Sha'ul smiled at her, his sensuous lips curving upward into the smooth planes of his cheeks. He touched the fingertips of both hands to her cheeks, gently tilting her face upwards toward his. "You are magnificent, daughter of Karan," he said.

Lara felt her skin quiver pleasurably under Sha'ul's touch. She loved how gentle he was with her, the way he touched her, with both passion and appreciation. His love for her reminded her of her father and Ariana. Only, unlike Karan who had retained the hot blood of a warrior, Sha'ul, a Being of Power for whom temper would be disastrous, rarely raised his voice in anger. Lara had needed such patience and careful handling, raw

as she still was from the trauma of her mother's murder, her father's punishment and her enslavement.

Lara gazed into Sha'ul's dark eyes. Beyond the reflection of the firelight dancing in the obsidian pools, she now saw sadness. Her stomach caught and her heart gave a sharp lurch. There could only be one reason for it: magery hadn't worked. She was not to be a sorceress. She began to tremble, fearing that her time with Sha'ul was over. Yet, he was still gazing on her tenderly, as he brushed his fingertips over her cheeks and neck, into her hair, entwining his fingers in its abundance. Her eyes fluttered closed in expectation of his kiss, the press of his warm lips against hers. Sha'ul's kiss was a great delight and comfort to her, second only to his lovemaking.

But the kiss never came.

Lara opened her azure eyes and looked directly into his for an answer. Without a word, she knew something was terribly wrong. "What is it, Lord?" She reached up and pressed her fingertips to the smooth plane of Sha'ul's clean-shaven cheek. "It didn't work, did it? I failed you." She pulled her hand away and averted her eyes. She had wanted so badly to please him, to make sure she was always worthy of his love, even though he swore he'd love her, whether she was a Being of Power or not. Even though she would not be a...

"Sorceress," Sha'ul uttered, as if finishing her thought. He cupped a warm, strong hand to her cheek. "My lady is a sorceress now."

Lara's eyes widened and she gasped. "You mean...?"

Sha'ul blinked and nodded, the air of sadness around him thickening. "Aye, Lara. Your hard work has come to fruition."

Lara wanted to smile, to leap up in her joy. To throw her arms around Sha'ul and kiss him. But the sadness in his voice and in his dark eyes stayed her. Something was still wrong. Perhaps the deep fear that had plagued her since the first time they'd made love was real. Once again, her stomach tightened and fear crept into her heart. "I don't understand, my lord. "Are you not proud of me?"

Sha'ul brushed a thumb tenderly over her lips. "Yes, beautiful one. I am proud. It's every sorcerer's dream to find an apprentice such as you."

"Then why..."

Sha'ul stifled the question with a soft kiss, gently slipping his tongue between her lips. He pulled her against him, his large hands slipping around to her back, caressing it over the velvet dress.

Lara felt her body soften and melt into Sha'ul's sinewy frame. She reached up and put her hands on his arms, her fingertips pressing into the round hardness of his shoulders and triceps. He had an intoxicating scent, a heady mixture of earth, wood smoke and sandalwood. Her desire rose wild as their kiss deepened. Lara felt Sha'ul's erection rise and press into her pelvic bone, hard and ready. She moved against it as she hungrily tasted his lips and tongue. She wanted him to lay her down on the fur skin and take her. She knew her body was ready, for his kisses alone touched off the rush of sexual moisture between her thighs.

She slipped her arms around him, completely lost in the passionate heat of their kiss. Her hands splayed out over the hard ridges of muscle in his back through his robe, just below his shoulders, exploring them with eager fingertips. She moved downward, anticipating every inch of him, anticipating the smooth plane of his lower back, down

where it melted into the hard round buttock...

Over the part of his back that covered his heart, she stopped, her hand splayed out over the wide muscle. An image from Sha'ul's heart appeared in her mind's eye. Whether or not he'd meant for her to see it, she did, a vast, dry plateau between them. She was clad in her sorceress' robe and cloak, wandering. He was on the other side, unable to touch her. So this was it! The true cause of his sadness! Her heart lurched and she pulled away from their kiss, her gaze boring into his. In her hands she clutched fistfuls of his robe.

"You're sending me away!" she choked out. "When were you going to tell me?"

Sha'ul bowed his head. His large hands had been on her shoulders, but now, to her dismay, he lifted them and turned, out of their embrace, toward the fire. His robe fell away from her hands. The glow of the flames shone on his skin and on the dark mane of hair that fell about his shoulders. "After we'd made love," he answered softly.

Lara stared at him, her hands balled into fists. The worst thing she'd always feared was happening and now she was desperate for him to turn back and take her into his arms again. To make everything all right. But he didn't.

"Why, Lord?" Lara willed him to turn with her plea. "Why?"

Sha'ul sighed. A log, devoured by the crackling flames, fell, sending out a tiny shower of sparks. He picked up a stick and tended the logs, controlling the direction of the flames. "You are the one chosen to vanquish the abusers of magery on the planet."

Lara continued to watch Sha'ul as his words sifted into her consciousness. She knew only too well who the abusers were even though they concealed themselves with the power of magery garnered from corrupt Beings. They were the same ones who had bewitched the Pierran Queen Maya into believing her father had tried to murder her in her sleep. It was because of them he had been brought down and her mother murdered. It was because of them she had almost languished in the palace as a bed-slave. It was they who'd actually murdered the Queen and framed Ariana. By Galen's grace she had escaped and had rescued Lara. Lara had dreamed for years about avenging herself on these evil creatures. And now she had a chance to destroy them. But she didn't want to. Not if it meant leaving Sha'ul.

"Why me?" Lara was determined to steer this mission away from herself. "Are there not other sorceresses in the world? Ones more experienced and powerful than I?" She fell quiet, waiting for his answer. A night owl hooted softly from a nearby tree, breaking the ensuing silence.

Sha'ul sighed. "Aye, Lara. There are a few." He turned to her. "But none of them was named in the prophecy."

Lara's eyes widened. "Prophecy? What prophecy? Why didn't you tell me about it?"

He sighed. "Because I only knew myself this morning." His already dark eyes stormed in the firelight. "The prophecy is as old as Weir itself. Lord Galen created it. His word is law." He sighed and bowed his head. "No one has access to the scrolls except the Wise Ones. The entire history of our world is recorded inside it, past, present, as well as future." He looked at her and cupped her cheek. "You know how the Pierrans have once again tried for domination of the planet. This time they're succeeding." His thumb brushed her skin tenderly. "You also know that they have nearly reached the Veltlands. They've never been able to penetrate our part of the world. They're about to succeed." He stepped in closer to her. "You also know why they've been able to come this far."

She dug her nails into the soft flesh of her palms. Tears had begun to stream down her cheeks. "Yes, I know." She hated how emotional she always was, but couldn't change, no matter how hard she tried. "Why can't you go with me?" she cried, unable to keep the rising hysteria from her voice. Before she could stop herself, she reached out and grasped a fistful of his robe, like a frightened child. "Tell them, lord!" she begged. "Tell them I can't do it without you! They'll listen to you!"

To her relief, Sha'ul enfolded her in his arms. The warmth of his strong body emanated into hers, calming her. With one hand, he caressed her hair. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I'm sorry."

He waited patiently until Lara had exhausted her tears. When she had, Sha'ul held her gently away from him, brushing the salty droplets from her cheek with his thumb. He looked down at her lovingly, with a sad smile. "It's not my destiny to go with you, loved one."

Lara sniffled, her large, teary eyes looking into his. As if she could change the course of destiny with her tears! "Why not?"

Sha'ul reached up and smoothed back her hair. He placed a tender kiss on her forehead. "All lovers must be tested," he said. "Even mages." He kissed her again, this time on the cheek. "I will be here when you come back from Pierra."

Lara gasped. "No! Not there! I can't!" The nightmare of memories threatened to flood her as they still did in her sleep.

Sha'ul's grasped her shoulders and his features darkened. However, his eyes were like those of a wounded animal. "Don't make this harder than it already is," he told her. His grip relented, softened. "I know what you've suffered. I, too have fought the Pierran dogs, right here on Veltish land. Of course, it was before you came back, and they slaughtered many of us. Galen knows what it's taken for you to heal." He sighed and touched her cheek. "You won't be alone. You'll have help. I promise that." He leaned over and kissed her forehead. "Now, your initiation."

She nodded, pushing back the tears, saving them for when she could be alone, and turned to the fire. Screwing her eyes shut, she stepped toward the blaze, reaching her hands to the flames. Searing heat assaulted her skin and then suddenly cooled. Opening her eyes again, she saw a ball of flames in her hands and stepped back, balancing the small blazing sphere. She waited several moments then pulled her hands apart, sending the flames toward the sky. They splintered then showered into sparks that whirled and danced in the air, then vanished.

She exhaled a deep breath, her first as a mage.

"I'm proud of you, Lara." Sha'ul came to stand in front of her, his hands on her upper arms.

Lara reached up and pressed her palms flat on Shaul's broad chest. She closed her eyes at the pleasure of feeling his strength. "Please, my lord," she whispered. "Let's not waste this time." She began to tremble and pressed her body to his, feeling his response in his ragged breath and the surge of hardness against her soft woman's stomach. She tilted her face upward to his, eyes closed, begging for his kiss.

Sha'ul slipped his hands into her hair as his lips claimed hers, making her lose herself once again in deep pleasure. Sha'ul's scent and taste filled her as his muscular body filled her arms.

With eager hands, Lara pulled open the ties of his robe, slipping her hands inside,

letting them roam over his broad chest of dark silky hair. His skin seared her touch, weakening her yet further with her desire to be taken. Yearning for every inch of him, Lara pushed his robe off over his shoulders and he let it fall away to the ground. To her, Sha'ul was the most handsome, magnificent man she'd ever seen and she gazed on his naked form with both admiration and desire.

Sha'ul smiled at her. The duskiness of arousal in his eyes temporarily replaced the sadness and he reached out and lifted Lara's gown over her head, dropping it onto his discarded robe. Lara saw the heat fill his dark eyes as he gazed on her naked flesh, its golden color glowing in the firelight. "Lara," he uttered in a husky whisper. He reached for her and pulled her against him.

Lara's eyes fluttered closed as their bodies touched. Sha'ul covered her neck and throat with soft warm kisses, tasting her, devouring her golden skin as he moved down to her breasts. Lara clasped her arms lightly around his head, her fingers lost in his dark mane as he feasted on the soft roundness of each breast and nipple with tender passion. The tingling pleasure of his tongue circling and suckling the sensitive buds to stiffness made her moan. She threw her head back, gasping breaths of delight, her breasts heaving under Sha'ul's mouth. Each gentle swipe of his tongue caused a surge of desire between her legs and she melted open, feeling the moisture of arousal gathering. She reached down, closing her hand gently around his erection, stroking it up and down.

Sha'ul's breath was hot against her skin. He groaned and dropped to his knees, pulling Lara down with him.

Wildly, he took her mouth again, his tongue plunging deep and hot against hers. He grasped her shoulders, lowering her down underneath him on the fur skin. With their bodies pressed together, Sha'ul reached down and caressed Lara's thighs, teasing the soft skin with his fingertips, circling closer and closer to the secret place at the apex. Once there, he ran a light touch down the length of her slit, eliciting a soft cry of pleasure.

Lara spread her legs apart, moaning as they kissed, her body begging him to slide his cock into her wet sheath.

Though he was hard and ready, his erection pressing into her thigh, he played with her a bit longer, readying her to come by sliding his large fingers into her, gathering her nectar and rubbing it over the swollen pearl that held the desire and the pleasure. Gently he slicked his fingertips up and down over her clit, bringing her to the edge of orgasm and back just before she went over. By the time he took her, sinking his cock deep inside her, it took only several long slow thrusts to bring her to ecstatic release.

As she came, Sha'ul lowered his lips once again to her breasts and suckled them, intensifying her pleasure, her fingertips entwined in his dark hair as the spasms released in her. When they'd passed, Lara fell limp, saturated with the erotic loving he'd given her. For several moments she lay caressing his hair as he moved inside her, moaning with the pleasure of her sheath around his cock. When she had regained her strength, Lara tightened her muscles around his hardness and moved her hips with him, bringing him closer to his own release.

Just when she thought he was going to come he pulled out of her. His lids were heavy over his dusky eyes, his damp skin flushed with the heat of arousal. He kissed her deeply then lifted his lips. "I want you to come again, Lara," he whispered huskily. He lowered his face down between her parted thighs and pressed his lips to the swollen pink rose, suckling and stroking it with his tongue until Lara cried out from another climax.

Only then did he slip back into her, thrusting in hard strokes, devouring her mouth with hungry deep kisses until he, too, came, spilling his warm seed into her. When his climax passed, he gently collapsed onto her, their perspiring bodies entwined, his lips pressed into her neck as they rested.

Lara felt several moments of contentment in Sha'ul's arms, her body relaxed and satisfied from passion. Until she remembered all that had passed before they made love. This would be one of their last times together. Maybe the last time, ever. She sighed and closed her eyes, pressing her cheek to Sha'ul's soft hair. She knew he sensed her feelings and thoughts by the way he reached up and touched her cheek.

"Lara," he murmured, raising his face from her skin. "If Galen wills it, I'll be here, waiting for you. I don't want to live without you."

She hid her fingers more deeply into his hair and kissed the top of his head. "I know, my lord," she whispered, struggling not to ruin their loving moment with sorrowful tears. She sighed and settled more firmly against him. They would be able to rest here together a little while before he saw her back to the longhouse.

The thought of telling Ariana about her leaving caused Lara to squeeze her eyes shut. As if the evening hadn't brought enough grief, she now had the dreaded task of telling her stepmother about her upcoming journey back to that dreaded land. Ariana was more protective of her stepdaughter than a she-wolf her pups, and would not take this news well.

Her heart squeezed painfully in her chest. "My lord," she whispered.

"What is it, love?"

"When do I leave?"

Sha'ul sighed and pressed a small kiss to her throat before answering. "Three days," came the reply in a sad whisper.

"Three days, my lord? How will I be ready?"

"I will help you, Lara. I'll be with you every possible moment."

"But isn't there..."

"The Council's decisions are always final. You leave in three days."

Chapter Five

Lara's dread mounted the closer she and Sha'ul drew to her father's house. Telling Ariana of her departure would be almost as painful as leaving Sha'ul. She pressed her body closer against his for warmth and comfort, squeezing his arm as they made their way up the craggy rise to Karan-Ver longhouse. Ariana loved Lara almost as if she had given birth to her. And Lara, in turn, had come to love her stepmother with her whole heart. She would never forget the first moment in the haram quarters of the palace when Ariana, disguised as a Sinayan bed-slave, burst into her cubicle and saved her from being ravaged by a fellow slave. Ariana had risked her own life to help Lara escape so that the young woman would never know the pain and suffering of bed-slavery. For that rescue, she would do anything for her stepmother. Anything in her power. She would even stay here if Ariana wanted her to. If it were in her power.

But it wasn't.

Lara clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering as they neared the large front door.

Sha'ul reached up and put a strong arm across her cloaked shoulders as they neared the door. In front of it, he turned to her and embraced her, pressing a tender kiss into her hair. Then he rested his cheek on the top of her head as he squeezed her in his arms. "Be brave, sweetling," he whispered. He lifted his face and cupped her cheeks in his hands, smiling down at her. "You are like a warm cup of mead. Strong, sweet and fortifying to the soul. You will prevail."

Lara gazed into Sha'ul's eyes, captured by the love and faith she saw in them. Could she possibly be as strong as he believed her to be? Her lip trembled and she reached up to grasp his arms, feeling his warm strength right through his heavy robe, emanating into her hands. "Will you still love me?" She hated her weakness in asking the question, but it had slipped from her, beyond her control.

Sha'ul leaned down and kissed her tenderly. His lips were warm and strong, like his body. And his heart. To her, Sha'ul was her home.

For several sweet, delicious moments he tasted her. His tongue caressed hers, and his large hands, warm and protective, cupped her cheeks. Once again, his kiss ignited her desire and she embraced him, her eyes closed, her body against his. She felt him respond to her as well, the hardening in his groin, the deepening of his breath.

To her dismay, Sha'ul ended the kiss. Once again, he held her away, his large hands engulfing her shoulders. He gazed down at her, the Weiran moon illuminating his obsidian gaze like glowing pools. "Did you feel my answer?" he asked softly.

She nodded. "Aye, lord." She could never deny the deep care and affection for her that radiated from his heart. For seven years he had taught her all that he knew. He'd given her what was best inside of him.

Sha'ul touched her cheek. "It is I who will fear losing your love," he said.

She felt a rush of blood to her cheeks that caused her skin to prickle eerily. "What do you mean, lord? How could that be?"

Sha'ul's gaze poured into hers, so intensely that his fear showed itself to her exactly as he saw it. In this image, he was old, his magnificent dark man of hair faded to white.

He sat by the fire in his forest-side cottage, bent down, tending the hearth fire. His dark eyes, couched in the folds of age, were sad. And he was alone.

Lara understood. "No, my lord." Her voice choked on the words.

But Sha'ul nodded. "There will be temptations, Lara," he whispered. "Temptations that will force you to find what your heart truly wants." He ran a tender fingertip across her lips. "This journey is as much for you as it is for the well-being of Adamah." He spoke with finality. Lara recognized the tone he'd used many with her many times and knew he was about to send her inside.

To her dreaded task.

Lara clasped Sha'ul's powerful torso in her arms, pressing her face into the folds of his heavy robe. If there were a way never to let go, she would find it. One day. "Thank you, my lord," she murmured, her words muffled by Sha'ul's robe.

Sha'ul kissed her hair, but said nothing.

From the depths of the nearby forest, a wolf howled as if to signal the lovers' parting. She knew she could no longer delay.

Sha'ul must have known too, for he ended the embrace. "Go in peace, my love," he told her as his touch receded.

She looked one last time into his eyes, wishing she could lose herself in the obsidian pools. "I love you."

The smile Sha'ul gave her in return made her heart trip. It always did. "And I you," he answered. "With all my heart." He stood quietly, waiting, and she knew that if she hesitated a moment more, he would order her inside.

She braced herself inwardly and pulled open the heavy door. She felt Sha'ul watching her as she went in. Behind her, he pulled the door closed, taking care to do so quietly, so as not to disturb the quiet halls. For a moment, she stood on the other side of the door, listening, imagining Sha'ul turning and walking back down the path, toward the forest to his sorcerer's cottage. She then turned and made her way into the warm, cocoon-like depths of Karan-ver.

* * * *

Tonight was Lara's cousin Gregor's turn to tend the fire in the Great Hall, and Lara swept her gaze through the vast room as she entered from the foyer, searching for his head of yellow curls, so that she could bid him good night before going to her parents' chamber.

The grating scrape of snores echoed through the hall. Lara smiled. Gregor never made his watch through the night. That would mean one thing. Danni would be there. She brightened at the thought of seeing her cousin. Next to Ariana and Sh'ul, Danni was the deepest in her heart.

As she'd known, Danni sat on the long bench against the wall, next to Gregor's hunched, sleeping form. They grinned at each other when she approached and Danni jumped up and was face to face with her in three long strides. Love and eagerness shone in his eyes. The firelight glowed off his hair and skin and off the golden hair and skin of his broad chest, exposed through the open ties on his tunic. "Well?"

Lara smiled, feeling the sadness come back into her eyes. The bit of humor over Gregor's hearty snore had passed. "Aye," she whispered. She noticed an errant lock of Danni's soft hair fallen across one eye and reached up to push it back.

Danni caught her wrist gently in a large hand and pressed it to his lips. She watched his eyes close briefly as he kissed the exposed skin before slowly releasing her. "I knew it," he said softly. His happiness for her shone in his eyes, even through the pain of unrequited love that was often there. "Didn't I tell you? You never believe me."

"Aye, Danni. You were right."

Danni grinned widely. "Of course I was." He stood quietly, gazing into her eyes. Almost immediately, he wrinkled his brow, the familiar expression of concern. "You don't seem happy about this."

She blinked back a sudden rush of tears as she shook her head. "I have to go away." She fought to keep her voice from breaking. As she reached to rub her eyes, she felt Danni's sudden grasp on her shoulders.

"No, Lara!" His fierce whisper echoed through the hall, over the background snoring.

His reaction pained her. She hadn't even thought of him. "I must. The Council is sending me to destroy the abuse of magery."

Danni squared his shoulders as he released her. "I'll go with you." His voice and green gaze were both quietly determined.

She sighed. "I couldn't ask such a sacrifice of you, Danni."

Her cousin's handsomely sculpted features crumpled. He winced visibly. "I know you're a sorceress now," he said, "But even Beings of Power have weaknesses. They also need some protection."

Chastened, Lara reached out and touched his arm, his sinewy muscles hard under her fingertips, through the rough material of his tunic. She had already forgotten one of Sha'ul's first lessons: never refuse others a chance to serve. "Forgive me," she said softly. "Of course I would welcome your protection and your company."

The tension in Danni's body released. She could feel the muscle of his arm relax under her touch. She had to admit to herself that having her cousin with her softened the harsh reality of her journey. "I'm just dreading having to tell Ariana," she added. "That's where I'm going right now. You know how she'll feel."

Danni nodded and covered her hand with his. "Aye, I do."

"Thank you, cousin," Lara whispered, feeling her tears threaten again.

Danni leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Go in peace," he said. Then he grinned and nodded toward Gregor. "He's the one who needs protection right now."

Lara chuckled in spite of her sadness. "Maybe if you let him get into trouble just once, he wouldn't fall asleep on his watch nights."

Danni bowed his head. "I know you're right. But I can't help it. He's a good-hearted lad. I don't want to see him yelled at. Not by your father."

She nodded. "Agreed." No one wanted to be on the biting edge of Karan's temper. The only one who managed to avoid it was Ariana.

"See you on the morrow."

"Good night, Danni." Lara managed a smile even though she shivered with dread. Feeling Danni's gaze on her back, she disappeared into the shadowy, torch-lit corridor that led to the sleeping rooms.

* * * *

Lara stopped first in the children's room to gaze a moment on Eshav, her little

brother.

The torches in the hallway threw just enough light on the rows of sleeping children on their beds of fur skins, boys on one side, girls on the other. Between the ages of three to ten, the children stayed in this large room. After the age of ten, each child went into the girls' or boys' rooms until marriage.

She knelt beside the boy, now in his seventh year. He had his mother's red hair and green eyes, and his father's strength and bravery. No other child could hop around on the crags quite like Eshav, who also took every opportunity to barrage his older half-sister with questions about her training in magery.

Her heart ached as she gazed on the small, sleeping form, already missing him. Eshav's wiry little body released deep breaths of sleep. She reached out and tenderly ruffled his fiery hair. At her touch, the boy stirred, rubbing his nose in his sleep with a small fist. She allowed herself another few moments' watching, then rose, heaving a deep sigh as she retreated from the children's room.

Her parents' sleeping chamber had its own private corridor further down. As Lara neared the opening, she saw torchlight glowing from within, reflected off the walls. They were anxious to know the Council's decision, but would not expect her this early. She moved slowly toward their bedchamber, hoping she did not disturb them in the midst of coupling, something they did very often. Karan and Ariana's passion for each other was now legendary, the knowledge of it having spread like wildfire through the Veltlands over the last seven years.

Lara stood, hushed to listen. None of their customary love sounds carried into the hall, so she went forward, her heart rioting painfully in her chest. Her blood stormed in her ears as she stopped by the heavy velvet drape that covered the doorway to her parents' bedchamber.

Through a narrow slit, Lara glimpsed her father and stepmother, seated facing each other on their bed. Karan's broad, muscular back was to her, and Lara winced at the deep angry criss-crosses of whip scars slashed permanently in his skin, below his silver-blond mane, the marks of his punishment all those years ago when the Pierran ministers had used magery to set him up for an attempt on his queen's life. Lara's blood heated, and for one brief moment, she felt her thirst for vengeance rise above her dread. For a brief moment, she thrilled at the possibility of vengeance.

Her stepmother, facing her father, was half-hidden by his massive physique. Her eyes were closed, her head tilted back, a smile of pleasure on her soft, full lips. Lara's eye fell upon her father's hand, cupping his wife's left breast, his thumb caressing the dusky nipple. "My lord," Lara heard her whisper.

She caught her breath, suspended between erotic fascination and guilt of intrusion. She began to turn and make a silent retreat. Her news could wait until the morrow.

"Lara." Karan's voice carried through the curtain.

She froze in mid-step. She should have known her father's warrior-senses would detect her presence. He could hear a mouse scuttling on the far end of a field when he needed to.

"Come in, daughter."

Lara squeezed her eyes shut, slightly longer than a blink and sighed. She turned and pushed aside the curtain. "I'm sorry, Father."

Her father turned and smiled. "Don't be. We intended to have finished before you

came.”

Ariana had tied her wrap around her nakedness. Her abundant mane of red curls tumbled about her shoulders, and her green eyes shone with love as Lara moved slowly toward the bed. “Lara,” she said softly, reaching out a hand.

Lara accepted it, resisting the urge to collapse against Ariana like a little girl desperate for comfort. Ariana’s embrace was one of the sweetest places in the world for her. She hated that she was about to break the woman’s heart. Her stomach squeezed painfully as both Ariana and her father’s expressions fell to concern.

Ariana’s grip tightened and her breath caught softly. Even though Ariana was not a Being of Power, her years of survival as a bed-slave in the Pierran palace had left her with the near-empathic levels of a white mage.

“Lara,” she breathed, “Something terrible has happened, hasn’t it?”

Lara sighed. “Well ... not ... terrible.” She averted her stepmother’s gaze, not wanting to see the pain she knew would be in those emerald eyes.

“Lara.” It was her father’s voice. In spite of his volatility, he had a deep capacity for calm in the most trying situations. “Were you not made a sorceress?”

She blinked back tears. They were gathering with more force in spite of her efforts to quash them. “On the contrary,” she answered. “I’m a sorceress now.”

Ariana leaned in to her. “Then what is it, sweetling?” Mounting panic filled her soft voice.

Lara steeled herself and looked up at Ariana. Pain squeezed her heart at the fear in her stepmother’s eyes. She cleared her throat past the horrible lump that had formed. “The Council is sending me...” she froze on the words.

“Say it,” Karan said gently but firmly.

“The Council is sending me to Pierra, to rid Adamah of the abusers.”

Ariana released a strangled cry and pulled Lara into her arms, squeezing her tightly. “Karan!” she cried. “You must stop them!”

Lara’s tears began to fall. Her stepmother only addressed her husband by name from the depths of distress. Not even in childbirth had she called him anything but “Lord.”

“They cannot do this!” Ariana went on. “How dare they send my little girl back there! No!” She sobbed, rocking Lara in her arms as if she were indeed, a small child.

“*Sha*, Ariana, *sha*.” Lara heard her father’s voice inject reason and calm amidst his wife’s anguished cries. From the corner of her eye, she saw his large hand reach out and smooth back Ariana’s fiery hair. Then she felt his caress on her own hair. His touch calmed her, and apparently, had done the same for her stepmother who now wept softly, one delicate hand cradling Lara’s head to her breast.

“I will speak to Sha’ul in the morning,” he said.

“Please do, my lord. I cannot bear the thought of her back in that wretched place.” Ariana’s voice was thick with tears.

Gently, Lara extricated herself from her stepmother’s arms and looked into her eyes, red-rimmed and glazed with fear and misery. “I’m sorry, Ariana,” she whispered. “I dreaded telling you.”

Ariana sniffled and smiled weakly. She touched Lara’s cheek. “Forgive my hysterics,” she said. “You are burdened enough.”

Lara heaved a deep sigh. “There’s nothing to forgive,” she said softly. Ariana had risked her life to rescue her from the palace *haram*, saving Lara from a lifetime of misery,

rape and degradation. She could forgive Ariana anything. "If it helps, Danni is coming with me."

She felt her father's large hands on her shoulders. "Aye," he said, "Danni is fiercely protective of you. A fine warrior. There is no better choice of companion."

At that, Ariana looked pleadingly at her husband. "My lord," she whispered.

Karan cupped her cheek in his hand, caressing the skin with his thumb. Lara had never seen him so gentle with another human being, not even her mother. "I will speak to him, Ari," he said softly.

Lara heard the resignation in his tone. She knew that he understood. The Council of Mages possessed its own ways, guided by a wisdom so deep, that no human mind could comprehend, a wisdom instilled by Galen the Creator, who had breathed life into these subtle beings long before He created mankind. These mages relied on sorcerers to do their work in the physical realm and existed to carry out the will of Galen, the Creator.

"There is another Being who will help me." She looked into both their faces as she spoke. "Sha'ul does not know who it is, only that I must find him and combine our forces. It's written in the prophecy." She heard the plea in her voice and knew she was merely convincing herself of the inevitable.

Ariana was quiet, her soft sniffles filling the air of the bedchamber. Lara saw the understanding fill her eyes, mingling with deep sadness. She reached up and smoothed back Lara's hair. "I remember when your father first told me about you." Her voice was a thick whisper of melancholy. "Of how you were trapped in the palace about to be made a bed-slave."

She continued her soft caress on Lara's hair, and Lara relaxed under her stepmother's nurturing touch. "I knew immediately I had no choice but to go in and get you. Nothing else mattered, only that you were spared the horrors of slavery." Tears gathered in Ariana's eyes, causing the emerald irises to glisten. "I'm not foolish," she whispered. "I know you have no more choice than I did."

Lara began to sob, falling forward into Ariana's embrace. She felt her father's quiet presence behind them, and although he said nothing, she felt his churning emotions in the air around them.

When Lara and Ariana finally released each other, Lara wiped her eyes, gazing up at her father's chiseled countenance. His slate-blue eyes had darkened with anger and guilt, the guilt she knew he carried for all those years she had languished in the palace. He would have died trying to rescue her. With him dead, she would have been without any hope. They both knew that, yet the agony remained.

The same shadow of emotion fell over his entire handsome face. He clenched his heavily bearded jaw, causing the brand of punishment on his right cheek to stretch with the subtle movement. "Lara, I'm very proud of you," he said softly.

She smiled at him as new tears stung her eyes. "I know, Father. You tell me often. I'm sorry I ever blamed you."

"Would that I could accompany you as well. My time will be spent shoring up our defenses. The Pierran wolves are nearly at our door."

Pain stabbed her heart. Her father, too, could never be free of the ones who'd nearly destroyed his life until she'd carried out her destiny. "I know that, too," she whispered.

Karan heaved a deep sigh. "Go, rest now, daughter," he said gently. "There is not much left of the night. He reached out and gathered her in his strong embrace.

She rested for several long moments in her father's arms.

Karan kissed the top of her head, then gently released her. "See you on the morrow, daughter," he said.

"Good night, Father."

She embraced Ariana before slipping off their bed and retreating, followed by her stepmother's quiet weeping, muffled, she knew, by her father's broad, muscular chest.

Outside her parents' bedchamber, she stopped and sagged against the wall of mud-packed timber, her face in her hands. Images of the past assaulted her mind, shooting slivers of icy fear into her heart.

Let them be. Her master's voice rose above the noise. His being was deeply embedded in her consciousness from years of love and rigorous training. *The fear will dissolve if you let it wash through you, unhindered.*

She gave herself several minutes to obey Sha'ul's voice. His counsel always worked when she applied it. Her fear passed for the time being.

Suddenly overcome with weariness, Lara sighed and continued down the corridor to the bedchamber she shared with Renna and Kira.

The sound of Ariana's quiet sobs, audible only to her, followed her the rest of the way.

Chapter Six

Lara spent her last night with Sha'ul.

The night swirled with a cold wind howling around the mud-packed stone walls, whistling over the wattle and daub roof. But Sha'ul's cozy dwelling was built with a potent force of love and magic and no outside elements could ever intrude. The large hearthfire crackled and danced above the noise of the wind, and Lara felt warmed almost as much by it as by Sha'ul's arms around her.

The fur skins that made their bed were deliciously soft as was Sha'ul's breath pulsing warmly on her neck.

But nothing could dull her relentless heartache, not even the feel of her master's strong body against her back, his arms holding her close, his long dark mane loose about his shoulders, blending with hers of white-gold. She closed her eyes, wishing the rest of the world would disappear and leave her in peace.

"There is one lesson of which I must remind you before you before you go." Sha'ul's voice vibrated warmly on her skin.

She opened her eyes. "My lord?"

He sighed, his strong chest heaving, lifting her with the deep breath. Gently he turned her to face him, trapping her, as always, in the dark glow of power in his eyes. "Power, Lara, a sorcerer's power is finite. The Creation has allotted every creature a certain amount of life force. No more, no less. And not even the Council of Mages has a say in the matter. The giving or taking of power is beyond even their authority."

Resting his large hands on her upper arms, he squeezed gently. Heat radiated into her body from his touch, through her the sleeves of her red velvet gown.

"Use your powers wisely and sparingly. Your mission is deep and dark. It will take you to the limits of your abilities, and you'll need all your strength."

Sha'ul's words evoked a dark foreboding that made her tremble. Her mind flew to the thoughts of the worst possibilities. Danni! What of his safety? Though he was a young warrior of great strength and valor, so had her father been as well. And how easily Karan had been felled by these dark forces! Involuntarily she whimpered.

"I see your worries, sweetling." Sha'ul caressed her cheek gently, bringing his palm to rest on the curve of her neck. "All I can tell you is that service done for love can never end badly." He smiled tenderly, yet Lara could see pain in his obsidian gaze.

Hot tears rushed to her eyes and her heart ached with love for Sha'ul, her teacher and lover. Her healer.

Sha'ul lifted his hand from its resting place on her neck, skating his fingertips lightly along her jaw and over her lips. "I have one last gift for you, Lara," he whispered. He then held her shoulders and leaned in to her.

Her eyes fluttered closed as he bent his head to hers. A sorcerer's kiss was never to be taken lightly, not even by a fellow mage, for it always imparted the mingling of souls.

Her heartbeat quickened, sending her heated blood through her veins. She caught her breath softly as Sha'ul's lips touched hers. He parted them slightly and his breath pulsed warm and soft in her mouth, filling every tiny cavern.

Lara moaned softly as a rush of life entered her. A soft swirling of heated energy

danced in her body, spreading like a million caressing fingertips the length of her limbs and into her breasts and loins. Her chest rose and fell heavily as the force filled her and she felt her consciousness rise, floating in a gray space. There was no sound or feeling, only peace and strength, the timeless solidity of earth.

Gently, Sha'ul pulled away, bringing her awareness back to the physical world. Once again she felt the softness of the fur skins underneath her and the heat of Sha'ul's body close to hers.

The absence of his mouth against hers, the lack of sensuous heat and moisture from his tongue felt like life being withdrawn and she cried out softly, reaching her arms out to him.

But he caught her wrists in mid-air, gripping them with tender authority. "No, Lara. Don't panic. I'm with you, always. Feel my presence inside you."

She stared at him, still breathing heavily as if his force inside her, mingling with her own soul, had been a great exertion. As the moments passed, she surrendered to the peace still there even though he was no longer kissing her. She relented, lowering her arms.

Sha'ul opened his hands as if to release her wrists, yet kept them there, resting on his open palms. "Lara," he said softly, "Don't ever doubt that I love you." His gaze bore hypnotically into hers with a dark, liquid glitter. The glow of the hearth fire danced off his skin and made the velvety depths of his eyes appear to smolder. "Ever."

A teardrop pushed its way from her eye, and she let it run down her cheek.

Sha'ul bent and kissed the moisture away. By the touch of his lips, she felt his authoritative strength giving way to husky desire.

His sensual heat sparked her own yearning, which she felt swell her breasts against the bodice of her gown and tingle between her thighs. When he claimed her mouth the second time, it was a lover's kiss, that of a man possessing the woman he loves.

Heatedly he tasted her, swirling the tip of his tongue around every moist crevice. He wove his fingers into her hair, cradling the back of her head as he kissed her with deep openness.

She embraced him, surging with desire as his back muscles filled her hands through his shirt. She gripped the material, pulling it up out of his trousers so she could put her hands underneath, against his bare flesh.

He moaned under her touch, pulling away from their kiss long enough to shrug hastily out of the shirt and toss it to the floor.

Her eyes were level with his broad chest, the muscles flexing with his ragged breaths under the silky dusting of dark hair. She reached out and rested her palms over his pectorals, which quivered under her heated touch.

"I please you?" His voice had been reduced by desire to a husky whisper.

Lara jerked her gaze into his. She had never considered her master would ever have been concerned about such a thing. His dusky eyes were tinged with vulnerability, and she realized the truth: she was leaving on the morrow for a very long journey. He had spoken of temptations, which perhaps would lure her from him. For the first time she understood his humanness. She had always worshiped him as her teacher. But he was still a man. Her heart ached with love for him.

"You're beautiful, my lord," she whispered, feeling hot tears fill her eyes. "I love you so." She leaned forward and pressed a kiss into his chest, the hair soft against her lips. His masculine scent of earth mixed with meadow herbs filled her, made her heady.

He groaned softly, and Lara felt him tug gently on her sleeve.

"Take this off," he whispered raggedly.

An ecstatic shiver passed through her. "Aye, my lord." She stood up, off the bed of fur skins and slipped her gown over her head, letting it cascade into a red velvet puddle at her feet.

She stood before him naked. He always liked to gaze on her before lovemaking, and she felt the dark caress of his appreciation almost as vividly as his physical touch.

"Magnificent," he whispered, unbuckling his trousers and slipping them over his hips and buttocks.

Lara went down on her knees, pulling each trouser leg off, watching the rugged material slip over the bulges of muscle in his warrior's thighs. "As are you, my lord," she breathed as she knelt between his legs, whispering her fingertips along the length of his thighs.

Leaning in to him, she dappled small kisses across his chest, wending her trail slowly downward, in the valley between his pectoral muscles over his stomach. At his thick dark nest of pubic hair, she paused, breathing in his male musk, feeling his cock harden and press into her cheek.

Her eyes fluttering closed, she brushed her lips the length of his shaft, tracing the ridge of the swollen head with the tip of her tongue, which she pressed into the small opening at the tip. Sha'ul groaned softly, entwining his fingers gently in her hair.

Lara loved the sound of his pleasure, and endeavored to bring him to the fullest enjoyment with her mouth. She delighted in the velvety skin over the hard muscle and engulfed it in her mouth, taking in as much of its length as she could. Lightly grasping the base, she rubbed up and down, meeting her lips with each motion, creating just enough suction with her mouth to elicit a moan from her master with every stroke.

His heavy breathing filled her ears as his musky scent filled her nostrils, causing her to pulse madly down between her thighs, swelling and moistening.

"Lara," she heard him whisper, his hand following the bobbing of her head. "Lara."

Several droplets of his seed seeped from the tip and Lara suckled them off before plunging downward again on his cock.

She felt Sha'ul remove his hand from her hair and gently grasp her upper arms, staying her movement. She looked up at him.

"Come up here, Lara," he said huskily. "I want you."

"Yes, my lord." Obediently, she rose and climbed on the bed, opening before his magnificent strong body, which he immediately lowered onto her, nesting between her thighs. His cock, which had a moment before been between her lips, now pressed against her slit, seeking its way between her vaginal lips. She opened her legs wide as he sought her weeping swollen crevice.

"Did I please you?" she asked softly, still tasting the saltiness of his male fluid on her tongue.

Sha'ul smiled down at her, his raven eyes smoldering. "Always," he whispered. "The forest witches instructed you well." He gently fingered her, spreading her labia wide open, guiding the tip of his erection to her opening. Lara moaned as he buried his cock deep inside her, his shaft grazing her clit as he drove in. He lowered his lips to hers, devouring her mouth in a deep soul kiss, melding his tongue to hers with wet heat.

At first he pleased her with long, slow strokes of his cock, punctuated with hot

kisses on her mouth, her neck, down to her nipples, which he suckled with the same tender passion until they puckered with aroused stiffness. But as their heat rose, he thrust harder and faster, grinding his pelvis hard against hers, rubbing her clit with the base of his cock to bring her closer and closer to the edge of release.

Lara entwined her fingers in his long mane, reveling in its silkiness. "My lord," she whispered in her heat as he suckled on her neck. She thrust her hips against his movements, skating her hands downward, over his back muscles, to his buttocks, squeezing, pushing him as deep inside her as possible.

Since the very first time Sha'ul had made love to her, Lara had always felt the molten heat of desire whenever he was between her legs, joined with her. The fervor and depth of love was, to her, the greatest magic of existence, reducing sorcery to a mere game. Now, she felt every inch of his flesh, let every hot breath he took fill her, as his cock filled her. She memorized the feel of his skin under her hands, a remembrance to fill the nights she would spend away from his arms.

Her heart surged with the pain of love and she began to cry. Sha'ul kissed her tears away, one kiss for every thrust that brought their bodies together. "Be here now, sweetling," he whispered. The heat of his breath pulsed on her cheek and she obeyed, lifting her knees up, completely open underneath him.

Sha'ul reached down and rubbed her clitoris with his fingertips. Swiveling them round, pushing the tiny nubbin against his hardness. The abundance of stimulation brought her to orgasm. The tiny muscle erupted in spasms of deep pleasure, and Lara squeezed her eyes shut in ecstasy.

The intensity of her release made her limp underneath Sha'ul and she lay open, massaging and kneading his back and buttocks as he continued to slide his cock in and out of her sheath. She squeezed the ring of muscles tightly around his hardness, bringing her hands to rest lightly on his hips.

"Lara," he moaned. "You are undoing me."

She smiled, gazing up at him through her half-closed eyes. "Aye, my lord," she whispered. "I want you to have your pleasure." Gently she massaged his hips, then gripped them more firmly, something she knew brought him great pleasure and erotic stimulation.

Her ministrations worked, for in moments, she felt Sha'ul pulsing inside her, his warm seed spilling into her womb. He groaned as the spasm of his climax shuddered through him and he captured Lara's mouth in the deep kisses of satiation before gently collapsing onto her.

She smiled as he pressed small kisses into her neck, caressing the length of her naked body where his own did not cover it.

"I love you, my lord," she said softly, feeling her tears collect once again.

Sha'ul raised his lips from her neck and gazed into her eyes. Tenderly he smoothed back her hair off her damp forehead. The heat of their bodies warmed the air around them. "And I you, beautiful Lara."

Lara could no longer force back her tears and they spilled, making warm salty tracks down her cheeks.

Sha'ul bent and kissed them away.

"I'm sorry, master. I'm such a baby."

"We all are babies deep inside, Lara." He kissed her tenderly on the lips. "Now, try

to sleep. The morrow will be here all too soon.”

She wanted to protest, to cry out the injustice of the Council, but knew how vain such a protest would be. Sha’ul would only tell her so, and that she was wasting precious moments in his arms, railing about something she could never control.

So she settled in his arms, her body molded to his. His embrace was warm and strong, like his body and spirit, and she lay in it, listening to the quiet rise and fall of his breath.

“I have faith in you, Lara,” he said softly. “You have been a good student.”

“Thank you, my lord.” She squeezed her eyes shut against a new onslaught of tears.

Outside, the winds continued to whoosh and howl, sounding very much like the wolves and coyotes deep in the forest. By this time the following night, she and Danni would be sleeping in their midst, probably with a caravan of Beren nomads. She tried not to think of the future and invite sleep to take her.

But sleep wouldn’t come, for fear that a deep blackness would swallow her, taking her away from Sha’ul forever.

* * * *

“Sha’ul!”

Lara woke herself with her own cry, flailing her arms helplessly to stop the scene before her.

Only after several moments did she realize where she was. A cheery blaze crackled in the hearth, and gray light showed through the window of Sha’ul’s cottage.

“I’m here, Lara.”

The calm sound of his voice made her turn. He stood by the heavy wooden table near the hearth, a steaming bowl of food in his large hands. A second bowl was on the table, along with two steaming mugs. She could smell the herbs in the tea; the familiar aroma of Sha’ul’s blend calmed her. That, and the fact he was alive. By Galen’s grace.

She blinked and stared, as if to confirm he was really alive before her. He wore his trousers but was bare from the waist up, his ebony mane flowing about his shoulders and down his back. “Sha’ul,” she whispered, holding out her arms.

He put the bowl down and went to her. In one swift movement he was beside her on the bed, his arms around her, letting her wet his chest hair with her tears.

The nightmare had felt so real. A hideous monster with gaping jaws and numerous tentacles, too many to count, was devouring Sha’ul while Lara watched, helpless to do anything but listen to her master’s agonized screams.

But now, his gentle caress on her hair calmed her. “Come, Lara,” he said softly, “You must release this nightmare and rise.” He continued to caress her hair, his hand sliding gently the length of it to the ends, which lay against her lower back, almost to her buttocks.

She felt the change in him as he touched her. The heat of desire flushed through his body, charging his caress. Yet, she felt also his disciplined resistance.

He bent and kissed the top of her head. “Have your breakfast,” he said. “And while you bathe, I’ll plait your hair.” Gently but firmly, he lifted her away from him and stood from the bed.

Tearfully, she gazed up at him.

He was watching her in turn, his expression appreciative of her nakedness,

uncovered by the fallen blankets. From the corner of her eye, she saw his fists clench, something he did when tamping down his desire for her.

"Eat first," he told her. "While the water for your bath heats." He smiled, though his eyes were visibly sad and he appeared tired to a degree she had never seen in him before. He turned and went back to the table where he proceeded to spoon honey into their tea.

Like all sorcerers, Sha'ul had learned domesticity from as well as herbal preparations from the forest witches. The Council charged the witches, intoxicatingly beautiful women who inhabited the depths of forests all over the planet, with the task of training sorcerers in these arts. The forest witches also consorted with every sorcerer during his training, heightening his sensitivity as a Being of Power by teaching him to unlock the secrets of women's bodies. For sorceresses, this part of their training was usually limited to verbal instruction, as it had been with Lara who practiced what the witches taught her on Sha'ul.

She didn't want him to have to remind her to get up, so she rose slowly, pulling the covers up neatly over the fur skins. She found her red gown lying neatly across the foot of the bed and slipped it on.

Sha'ul put her bowl and spoon before her as she sat down. He sat across from her. "Please try and eat something," he urged.

Obediently, she forced herself to eat as much of the porridge and boiled eggs he'd prepared for her. Her stomach had tightened severely and only the herbal tea with honey went down easily.

Sha'ul quietly sipped his tea, gazing on her as she picked at her food. She looked up and their eyes met. Lara saw his sadness.

"Turn everything over to Galen," he told her in a soft voice. "He created all of us. Truly, the burden is His alone."

She nodded, fighting back the tears brimming in her eyes.

When she had finished breakfast, Sha'ul filled a tub with steaming water. She slipped her gown off and folded it neatly, placing it in Sha'ul's hands. "I'll wear this when I come back to you," she whispered.

His return gaze simmered. "God willing," he murmured.

Sha'ul combed Lara's hair while she bathed and he plaited the long silvery fall in one braid for her journey. He helped her out of the tub and sat on the bed, watching her dry herself and put on her traveling clothes of breeches and a heavy tunic. He held out her cloak for her, closing it around her when she stepped into it. Holding the edges together, he pulled her against him.

Lara held onto her master, pressing her face into his chest. She felt his large hand stroking her hair.

Sha'ul allowed the embrace until the very last moment before gently holding Lara at arm's length. "Come, Lara," he said gently. "They'll be waiting for you to say good-bye."

* * * *

Every man, woman and child of Karan-ver stood, waiting to see Lara and Danni off. Lara could see Ariana's tears even from a distance. Her stepmother's anguish, though visibly suppressed for her sake, was not hidden from the sorceress' heart.

The moment she reached the gathering, she went into Ariana's arms. She rested in her stepmother's embrace, feeling the woman's warmth and protection for the last time.

After this moment, she would have only the memory on which to draw.

Ariana wept, gently pressing Lara's head to her shoulder. "Come back to me," she whispered.

Lara looked up and pressed a kiss into Ariana's soft, pale cheek. "I will. I promise."

Releasing Ariana, she went to her father who stood close beside his wife. Karan grasped her shoulders, his azure gaze pouring into hers. "Daughter of fire," he said, his voice choked. She saw how difficult her parting truly was for him. "Always remember who you are. The knowledge will give you strength."

Lara blinked out the tears that gathered. She gazed up at him, seeing the strength in his chiseled, scarred face. She had blamed him for being weak, but it had been his strength that had kept him in the caves beyond the palace. He had chosen life, to wait, so that she would not be alone in the world at if he were killed, leaving her a bed-slave with no future but misery and degradation.

She knew that, and her heart burned with love for her father. "Father, you never failed me," she said. Her words were the greatest parting gift she could give him.

In case she never came back.

Before Karan could answer, Eshav stepped between Lara and their father. His little face, already handsome with strength, was alive with anger. His lip curled like the snarl of a chaya beast in attack. "Why aren't you taking me with you?" he said.

Lara heard the anguish that the boy's show of anger attempted to mask. She knelt and gathered him into an embrace. His wiry body remained tensed for several moments before she felt him relent and surrender to his true emotions. His arms tightened like iron bands around his sister. She felt the strong warrior he would one day be.

"You must take care of our mother, Eshav," Lara whispered to him. "We cannot both leave her at once. She would be too sad." She felt her words hearten him, strengthening his sense of manhood in spite of his early age, and thanked Galen for having put them in her to say. "I love you, little brother." She closed her eyes and kissed his temple.

Finally Eshav released his sister so that she could bid farewell to Renna and Kira, and all her other kin who had grown to love and accept her as their own. Danni, too, was in their midst, accepting final embraces and handshakes. This was to be his first journey away from his kinfolk.

When Lara emerged from the thick of her gathered clan, Sha'ul pulled her into a final embrace. She did not speak to him, nor he to her, and she breathed in his aroma, as if to carry it with her, inside her.

From the corner of her eye, Lara saw Danni emerge from the crowd with his sisters clinging to his arms, their pink cheeks damp with tears. He whispered to each of them, ending his words with a kiss on the cheek and Renna and Kira reluctantly let him go. He stood waiting for his cousin, his crossbow slung on his shoulder, his dagger sheathed in his belt. He, too, was dressed for their journey, in rough trousers, tunic, cloak and boots, his shoulder-length hair caught at the nape in a thin braid.

Though he stood patiently, Lara knew his thoughts. They must leave now so as to reach the port city by nightfall. The ferry across the Velstish Channel left at dawn. There, the Beren caravans, ready for their annual migration south, would take them down the midlands toward Pierra. Should they miss the caravan's parting, they would have to travel the upper portion of the continent alone, an arduous and treacherous journey for any two people, even a mage and a warrior.

Just then, a loud growl, rising into a wailing shriek, pierced the air. The ground shook under their feet as the noise increased.

Lara turned, along with everyone in the gathering to see Growlie, lumbering up the road toward them, his eyes blazing, vapor rising in puffs from his nostrils. He ground to a halt in front of Danni and lowered his gigantic muzzle to Danni's face.

"I'm sorry, Growlie," Danni said. "I'm not abandoning you. I didn't see how we could bring you with us."

Growlie's lip curled in a frightening way and a snarl vibrated in his throat. He thrashed his head so violently, his scraggly mane looked wind blown.

Danni turned to Lara. "He insists on coming with us. I tried to explain to him many times."

"Let him go with you." Sha'ul approached the beast and laid a large hand flat across Growlie's nose. "He'll be of great service to you both. And this way, you can go through the mountains. There will be many fewer soldiers that way."

Sha'ul patted Growlie then approached Lara, standing only inches from her. A gentle hand on her cheek bid her to look up. For one last time, she immersed herself in his obsidian gaze. Her heart fell, like a stone, in her chest. "You'll be safer."

She nodded. "Of course he should come."

Sha'ul bent his face to hers and pressed a soft kiss on her lips. "Go in peace, sweetling," he said softly. He bent closer to her ear. "I will never abandon you."

When he stood up, Lara raised herself up on her toes and kissed him, lingering with her lips against his, not caring that all of Karan-ver saw her. Stillness fell over the clan, as if their kiss sealed the finality of her and Danni's parting.

Reluctantly, Lara pulled away from Sha'ul's embrace and took her place at Danni's side. They each shouldered a sack of food that Ariana and the other women had prepared. They turned for one last look and one final wave.

"Go in peace," Karan said, a comforting arm across Ariana's shoulders. The other hand rested on Eshav's red curls.

Lara blew a kiss to her parents and brother and made a sign of love to her kinsmen. Danni did the same and they started down the path with Growlie behind them.

Chapter Seven

“Well, so far, Sha’ul has not interfered.” Pellean watched the vision ball. The sorceress and her warrior companion trudged across a tundra of dry grasses, trailed by the giant chaya beast. Why the two humans didn’t just ride the creature he didn’t understand. “They’ve been traveling nearly a month now and I haven’t seen any sign of him.” He had watched them closely, each night making camp, bathing, squabbling at times like siblings. The girl sobbed herself quietly to sleep each night by their campfire.

Morden stood next to him, seemingly deep in thought as he, too, watched the scene. “Don’t be naïve, Pellean,” he said. “It doesn’t suit a former warrior of your skill and prowess. Of course he’s going to interfere at some point. When he does, we will act.”

“Why must we?” Azena’s voice cut through the air. “I know what you’ve explained, but don’t we owe Sha’ul a bit of credit? He understands the import of keeping his emotions at bay. Besides, if we can interfere with Sha’ul’s powers, why can’t we simply interfere with that of the Dark Mages? Why send a young girl who might die?”

Morden chuckled ruefully. “Azena, I appreciate that you credit me with the knowledge of Galen’s will, but I am as ignorant as you of His motives. Until such time, we must do as the Scriptures command.”

Azena glared at him. “For you, Morden, it’s more than assuring Galen’s will. You derive some sort of pleasure from these humans’ suffering.”

Pellean watched Morden stare into the ball, seemingly undaunted by Azena’s accusation.

Morden finally looked up at her. “My dear, mages, embodied or disembodied as we are, are not chosen because we are pleasant characters who simply love people. We have strong likes, dislikes and some very ugly faults. I had mine and some of them have not left me, as Pellean’s desire for sex has not left him.” He fell silent and turned back to his quiet observation of the vision ball. The scene had changed to show the Veltish troops amassed and preparing for possible battle with the Pierran forces should they reach as far as the Veltlands. General Karan rode at the head of the troops on one flank of the maneuvers, his broadsword wielded in a drill.

Pellean glanced at Azena who had also dropped her mournful gaze to the glowing ball.

“I am not free of my darkness either, Morden,” she murmured. “That doesn’t make it right.”

“Right or not, my dear, that is reality.”

* * * *

Sha’ul paced in front of the cold hearth, praying for a moment the Wise Ones would not be watching him. Although they’d exacted a promise from him not to interfere, both sides knew his word was tenuous. Having all had disciples themselves, they knew the bond forged between master and student could often be stronger than blood.

He stopped pacing and sank down onto the fur skin. For nearly a month he’d waited for Lara to reach the mountain pass so he could join her for at least a little while. His

heart and body ached to touch her, to breathe in her scent, to bury himself deep inside her. If his plan worked, she would be in his arms within another day.

He took a deep breath. The amount of Defiance practices he was about to employ endangered him in more ways than he could count, but joining Lara and making sure she was safe were all that mattered. The prospect of waiting here in this little cottage day and night drove him to near madness. Sitting up straight, he stilled his mind and heart, drawing in the deep breath necessary for his transformation.

* * * *

“There’s something I don’t understand.” Danni spoke the first words to pass between them in the hours since they’d left last night’s camp. Until then, the only sound had been the constant birdsong in the trees and the scrape of Growlie’s claws on the dirt and stones.

Lara glanced sideways at him. “What don’t you understand?”

“Well, many things, I suspect.” He looked at her. “Mages are able to bi-locate and do things like that, right?”

She nodded. “That’s correct.”

“So, how come you’re not able to project yourself into Pierra, fulfill the prophecy and get back home where you want to be, without this long, heart-wrenching journey?”

She sighed deeply and continued walking. The foothills of the Veltish mountain range loomed ahead. By dusk, they expected to reach a Beren village where a guide waited to help them through the pass. “I’m sorry, Danni, I’m not able to tell you.”

Danni’s frustration filled the air around them. She knew it was because he’d watched her feeling unhappy for the last month. “Not able because you don’t know, or because you’re not supposed to tell?”

She looked down at the toes of her boots, lightened with dust from the road. “I’m not supposed to tell.” Looking up at him, his furrowed brow made her want to reassure him. “Not because you would misuse the knowledge,” she added quickly, “but because I mustn’t say it out loud. Someone without your ... kind heart ... could hear and use it to destroy us.”

Her words hit their mark and Danni’s visage lightened considerably. “I can understand that. I wouldn’t ever want to knowingly endanger you.”

She smiled. “I know.” Very early on in her training, Sha’ul had warned her about the reality that each mage had a certain allotment of power, and that she must ration hers as carefully as she would water during a drought, especially now. Once she and Danni reached the other mage who was to help them, she didn’t know how much of her newly gained powers she would need. The reason for not revealing this truth out loud was valid. There were always those beings who would use a mage’s limitations to his or her own advantage. The secret needed to be guarded vigilantly, even though, by now, it had probably been revealed and discovered by the very Abusers they were out to destroy.

The closer they drew to the mountains, the drier the landscape became. Grassy meadows eventually gave way to dusty, pebbly ground with sparse, dry grass and the wind blew chillier, unobstructed by tall trees.

Lara’s heart ached in her chest. She’d barely been gone a mere few weeks from Sha’ul and already she grieved as if they’d been separated for years. Panic mounted at the thought she might never see him again. So many things could happen during a separation,

she didn't want her mind to even consider.

She glanced at Danni, who usually sensed her anxiety without her expressing it, but he was looking straight ahead, appearing deep in thought.

"Danni."

He turned. "What is it, Lara?" Looking at her directly, his green eyes registered her distress. He reached out a hand to her shoulder. "Just a bit longer for today," he said. "I'm keeping an eye out for the village."

She nodded, comforted by his understanding.

The Beren village was nothing more than a small collection of rounded huts on the gravelly ground. A large cook fire burned in the center with a cauldron suspended from a brace of poles. From the distance, the inhabitants of the village appeared to be rounded small figures wound in layers of brightly dyed cloths. As they drew closer, the figures grew more distinct, the smaller ones, children running around playing, their pet dogs chasing them, while women worked around the cook fire. To the side, a large pen of sheep picked at the dry sparse grasses, their bells tinkling with their movements.

A whimpering sound emanated from Growlie who watched the grazing animals with his ears pricked in keen interest.

Danni stopped in his tracks and turned to his large friend. "Growlie, you know you'll need to stay right here and behave, don't you?"

Growlie's huge brown eyes turned watery and he whimpered like a pup.

Lara suppressed a chuckle at the sight of this huge beast who could snap Danni up in his jaws, groveling instead like a baby.

Danni reached up and petted Growlie's nose. "I'll bring you something to eat myself, friend," he said gently. "These people have been very kind to us over the years and you can't go hunting their livestock. Do you understand?"

Growlie hung his head and lowered his large wiry-haired body to the ground.

He was still whimpering when Danni rubbed his forehead playfully and then turned to join Lara on the path to the village. "He'll be all right here for the night. Of course, I'll go and check on him and feed him." Danni looked almost as disappointed as the chaya beast. He resumed his pace and she followed, listening to Growlie's plaintive sounds behind her.

"I'm sure he'll be fine," she offered.

"Aye. Many of the men went with the caravan," he murmured, "but your father assured us there would be a guide through the mountain pass."

No sooner had he spoken than a figure appeared from inside a hut and began to walk toward them. As he drew closer, Lara saw that he stood only a shade taller than she.

His hair was so smooth and dark, the sun glinted a bluish sheen off of it, and his skin was several shades darker of gold than hers. His eyes were almond shaped, like hers, his nose straight and wider at the tip. A goatee surrounded his full lips. Like the other Beren inhabitants, his compact body was wrapped in layers of colorful cloths and coats above his trousers and boots. He bowed his head. "I am Japhu," he said, extending a hand to Danni. "I was told you would be here this day. Welcome."

Danni accepted his offered hand. "I'm Danni and this is Lara bat Karan."

Japhu released Danni's hand. He did not offer his hand to Lara, but smiled and bowed.

Lara bowed in return, remembering the Beren people she'd met during her journey

on the caravan with Ariana and her father. The Beren men did not make physical contact with women who weren't their wives or daughters. However, she did look him in the eyes, finding an odd comfort in their brown depths. He was a handsome man and looked to be about the same age as Sha'ul, although the Beren people had such smooth skin, it was difficult to tell. Guiltily, she looked away and followed Danni and their host into the village.

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Sha'ul did his best to avoid direct eye contact with Lara. He led them into a round hut, out of the wind and chill that swept from the snow-covered mountains. The owners of the hut had left on the last caravan and the village elders had permitted him to use their dwelling as long as he cared for it.

Such a task would be easy, for there was not much to care for. A few sleeping pallets of furskins and some carved wooden trunks and cooking utensils made up the meager furnishings, leaving plenty of space for a large fire in the center of the hut to warm it.

Sha'ul bowed to Lara and Danni when they followed him through the semicircle opening of the canvas and pole structure and showed them to their sleeping pallets on the opposite side of the hut to his. "Welcome to my home," he said, bowing again. "You must be hungry and tired." He crouched by the fire where he'd been warming *arsha* butter tea and flatbreads.

"We are," Lara murmured as she took a place by the fire.

Sha'ul rose and brought her a pail of clean water and a cloth. "For you to wash, *kesa*," he said softly, using the Beren title for a respected guest.

A shy smile stole across her lips as she accepted the cloth from him. She was so obviously working to avoid his gaze that a vein of jealousy snaked through him. Was she attracted to this man, Japhu, or did she somehow sense her lover's presence? His heart squeezed painfully in his chest and he longed to simply tell her who he was. Damn the Wise Ones for making this so excruciating for them both!

She turned to Danni. "Come here and wash. You may use my cloth."

Japhu watched Danni kneel down by the bucket and take the cloth from her, deeply disturbed by the sudden, overwhelming jealousy that stormed over him. Perhaps the Wise Ones were wiser than he'd thought. Sorcerer or not, he was a man, after all. For his own safety and hers, he would need to find a discreet way to reveal to her his true identity.

Danni smoothed the damp cloth over his face and handed it back to Lara. He turned to their host. "I cannot have any food until I've looked after our companion," he said.

Sha'ul knew he spoke of Growlie, who waited for his master on the outskirts of the village. However, he feigned ignorance of Growlie's existence so as not arouse suspicion. "You can invite your companion to share this hut tonight."

A sheepish grin spread across Danni's unshaven face. "That's kind of you, Japhu, but Growlie won't quite fit through the door."

"Ah, I see."

"He's a *chaya* beast."

Sha'ul smiled. "Well, then, I will keep your meal warm for you."

Danni stood up and bowed. "Thank you." He turned to Lara. "I won't be long."

She nodded and turned her attention onto washing her hands, leaving no doubt in Sha'ul's mind that she was nervous about being alone with him.

When Danni had gone, Sha'ul cleared his throat and made a show of stirring the

namu stew in the pot. Chunks of meat floated against the crude wooden spoon and steam rose tantalizingly. He took a ladle and scooped a generous portion into a carved bowl, bringing it to her. His servile offering belied the churning inside him. His heart crashed suddenly in his chest. Danni's absence was his only window of time to reveal his true identity to her.

Lara avoided his gaze as she accepted the bowl of food. "Thank you, sir," she murmured, setting the bowl in her lap.

"You're welcome." Sha'ul took a seat on a nearby cushion and tried not to stare at her. "I've been told the nature of your journey," he said softly.

Lara nodded and took a small bite of stew. She chewed slowly, a thoughtful expression on her face, then swallowed. "The food is very good, thank you."

"I'm glad you like it." He waited a beat before speaking again. "Will your warrior friend be able to protect you from corrupt mages?"

His question was rewarded with an abrupt turn of her head. Large blue eyes opened wide, staring at him. "What kind of question is that?"

Sha'ul warmed inside at the strength lacing her voice. He'd taught her well and she'd grown from the frightened girl who'd first been brought to him. "A fair question, I would say," he answered. "I am surprised the Wise Ones did not provide you with adequate protection."

Her hands trembled on her bowl. She set the food down on the rug in front of her and looked at him. "I have all the protection I need." The delicate muscles in her jaw tightened as she spoke and her blue eyes stormed. "Your words are a slur on my teacher, sir. You have been hired as a guide, not an advisor."

Sha'ul stifled a chuckle. Her spirit had begun to churn his desire like a wind gathering up fallen leaves. He affected a humble stature. "Forgive me," he said. "I thought only of your safety."

She glared at him. "My master taught me all I know to protect myself. Not that it's your business. His love will keep me safe."

Sha'ul resisted the overwhelming need to reach out and gather her into his arms. However, he had to proceed carefully. The Wise Ones would know of his ruse with one glance into their vision ball. All they needed to see was Lara's reaction to finding that Japhu was actually her lover to make them immobilize him. "My apologies, *kesa*. I did not mean to insult you." He glanced through the small opening of the hut. No sign yet of Danni. The young man would undoubtedly return soon. He had to speak now. "May I tell you something, *kesa*?"

He felt her reluctance to answer. She had retrieved her bowl and taken a spoonful of stew. Her delicate throat moved as she swallowed, stirring his hunger for her.

She looked at him. "You may."

"I wish to tell you a secret. But you must promise that no matter what I say, you will only look at me as if I've spoken to you of a simple matter such as the weather. If you react strongly, the Wise Ones may see you."

He heard her small intake of breath at the mention of the Wise Ones. Her golden hands tightened around her bowl, but she nodded calmly. "Tell me."

He leaned a bit toward her. Restraining the urge to reach for her, he stared at her profile, at the soft upturn of her nose, the glow of firelight off her golden skin and flaxen hair. "Lara, your master is right here with you, in this hut."

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Lara kept her gaze on the contents of her bowl. Her heart hammered against her chest. "My lord? Is that you in Japhu's body?" Her voice escaped in a whisper.

"Don't move, Lara. Aye. None other."

She restrained a gasp. Her heart leapt joyfully and she struggled to maintain her somber demeanor. Suddenly, the attraction she'd felt for Japhu upon meeting him made perfect sense. Her guilt washed away when she realized the beautiful eyes that had drawn her heart in that first moment were Sha'ul's. "How could I not have known?"

He chuckled softly. "I have practiced magery a long time," he answered. "I'm good at it."

A smile curved her lips. "My lord, I couldn't be happier."

"Nor could I, sweetling." He broke off a piece of warm flatbread and held it out to her.

She turned to him and reached for it, a shiver of delight racing through her as their fingertips touched. Looking down, she made a show of breaking a piece of bread and dipping it into the stew. "Will I be able to ... will we ... touch, my lord?" she asked softly.

Before Sha'ul could respond, the flap to the door of the hut moved open and Danni walked in. He approached the fire and looked at Lara, then at Sha'ul. A flicker of emotion passed over his face.

Lara sensed her companion's jealousy, even though his loyalty to her helped him hide it well. Danni was incredibly sensitive and she knew he would sense the sexual energy coursing between her and the man he believed to be their guide.

She breathed a small sigh of relief when Sha'ul turned to the fire and ladled stew into a bowl for Danni.

Danni accepted his meal graciously and set his attention to breaking off a piece of flat bread and dipping it into the stew.

Lara smiled at Danni's murmurs of appreciation as he ate with undisguised relish. "Danni," she said softly, "I have to tell you something and you have to pretend not to be surprised, okay?"

Danni froze, his cheeks bulging around a mouthful of stew. He looked at her and swallowed. He washed the food down with a swallow of water. "What is it, Lara? Are you hurt?"

She shook her head. "No. It's nothing like that. It's our guide, Japhu. He's..." She dropped her voice to a whisper. "Sha'ul." She put up her hand. "Pretend that nothing unusual is happening." Watching Danni, she saw his jaw flex and work as he visibly restrained astonishment.

Slowly, Danni turned and looked at the compact, golden-skinned man with almond-shaped eyes and goatee. "Sir, is that really you?"

Sha'ul smiled and nodded. "I know my way through these mountains as well as any Beren guide," he said. His smile faded. "But I'm in blatant disregard of what the Wise Ones have demanded of me. I am not supposed to be near Lara at all. Please help keep my secret."

Danni nodded. "Of course I will, Sir." He bowed his head. "I'm honored that you and Lara have brought me into your confidence."

Sha'ul regarded him with a solemn expression. "You've earned that level of trust

Danni," he said softly. "So I will tell you both one more thing." He turned to Lara. "Again, you must feign nonchalance."

Lara stiffened at the warning note in his voice.

"As you know, Lara, there are limits imposed on magery. I am bi-located as well as morphed. I will only be able to guide you through the pass before my strength gives out and I must go back to the Veltlands."

Lara used every ounce of her discipline to restrain a cry.

"I will need to re-gather my strength and then, I promise, I will do my utmost to come back to you wherever you are."

Fighting back tears, she clenched her jaw, her hands closing into fists inside her sleeves. "Aye, my lord," she managed to whisper.

Sha'ul watched her for several moments. His love for her warmed the deep chocolate hue of his eyes. "I promise, sweetling."

She looked down before she began to cry.

"It's almost night," Sha'ul said, breaking the silence. "I'd advise you both to finish eating and get some sleep. We must leave before dawn."

Lara nodded and forced herself to finish her meal even though her stomach felt tightly drawn.

A small plump Beren woman entered the hut and retrieved their dishes, washing them in a barrel. When she'd finished, she made up their beds, soft pallets of fur skins, which looked very inviting after weeks of sleeping outside on the ground in the cold night air. The woman approached her and pointed one plump finger in the direction of one of the pallets.

Lara nodded. "*Ekres*." She thanked her hostess in one of the few Beren words she knew.

Her hostess smiled, her eyes disappearing in slits couched in plump cheeks and bowed several times before bustling back out into the gathering night.

Lara watched Sha'ul rise from the fire and move to a pallet on the far side of the round hut. Her heart sank. Desperately she wished she could curl up with him, safe and warm in his arms the way she'd done so many nights in the past seven years. She glanced at Danni, whose sleeping pallet was not far from hers.

He had lain down his weapons on the floor beside his pallet and was pulling off his boots. He must have felt Lara's eyes on him for he looked up and grinned at her. "Sleep well, Lara," he said softly.

She returned his smile, grateful that he didn't seem jealous like before. Knowing that Japhu was not a stranger whom she'd fallen for at first sight seemed to quell him. "You too, Danni."

Danni winked then turned his gaze in Sha'ul's direction. "Good night, sir."

Sha'ul, too, had pulled off his boots and lain down on his pallet. "Good night, Danni." He looked at Lara. "Pleasant dreams, sweetling," he said softly.

"Good night, my lord." A pang gripped her heart as she looked at his golden face, soft in the firelight. The flames made his dark eyes glow and the light glinted off his smooth ebony hair. She watched him clasp his hands behind his head and look up at the thatched roof. She turned and lay down on her pallet, pulling up the warm fur cover to her chin.

I will be able to hold you tomorrow night, Lara. Sha'ul's voice spoke clearly in her

mind.

Lara's breath caught softly. She flicked her gaze to his side of the hut. His eyes were closed and his breath carried softly to her ears. He seemed to be sleeping peacefully.

She turned and stared up into the shadows, listening to Sha'ul's breath rising and falling and wishing with all her heart she were in his arms.

Chapter Eight

"I don't trust that guide, do you?" Morden cast a sideways glance at Pellean. If anyone could detect a sorcerer in violation of his commands, it would be Pellean. A hot-blooded warrior always knew one of his kind.

Pellean's gaze did not waver from the vision ball. The glow of light showed the three figures couched in their fur skin pallets, asleep in a Beren hut. "What is the nature of your suspicion?"

His fellow council member's tone conveyed he already knew why Morden had asked the question. He cleared his throat. "I have reason to suspect that this 'Japhu' is none other than out Sha'ul."

The vision ball switched to a scene of Sha'ul's cottage in the Veltlands. The sorcerer was sitting by the fire, stirring a pot of something cooking over the fire.

The vision ball's glow illumined Azena's delicate features. "The sorcerer is at home," she said softly. "As far as I can see, he is obedient."

Morden chuckled. "Come now, my dear. You're too soft. You know as well as I do he very well could be bi-located as well as morphed." He looked at her profile. She was always the romantic.

Azena sighed. "We don't know yet for certain."

Wizen stepped closer to the ball. "Aye, true enough. However, we cannot be too careful. I suggest that we let this Japhu guide them through the mountains before taking any action. The geographical terrain will be easier to negotiate after the pass. They will not need him after that. Sha'ul can be put into stasis then."

Pellean leaned toward the vision ball, which had switched back to the sorceress, her warrior companion and the guide. The three Weiran suns had risen, although they remained hidden behind packed gray clouds. Lara and her companions, accompanied by a giant chaya beast, followed the guide over rocky mountain terrain, their heads bent against a flurry of driven snow. "I agree, though reluctantly. I certainly hate to see them kept from each other this way."

"So do I," Azena added.

Morden stepped back. He hated how even the Wise Ones could let compassion cloud their view. "All in the name of our planet's survival," he murmured.

"Yes." Wizen's voice cut through the tension. "Survival."

* * * *

Lara's body tingled in anticipation of Sha'ul's touch. She cast furtive glances at him as they made their camp in a cave for the night, out of the reach of snow and biting winds. Growlie curled up nearby, snuffling the stony floor in front of him.

Danni crouched down and unrolled the fur skins. When he rose to put one furskin on the opposite side of the fire Lara had conjured in the center of the cave, Sha'ul held up a hand.

"Keep them together," he ordered.

Danni furrowed his brow. "Sir? All three?"

Sha'ul nodded. "Aye. In spite of the fire, the cave will freeze during the night. We need the heat from all our bodies, including Growlie's."

Lara watched the exchange between the two men, her body heating intimately in the crevice between her thighs. She glanced at Danni to gauge his reaction.

Danni sat quietly, his jaw tensing. The glow of the firelight danced off the planes of his cheeks, his frustration clear on his face. "Sir, no disrespect intended, but ... Lara..."

Sha'ul sat back and pulled strips of dried *namu* meat out of his pack. He handed some to Lara and to Danni. "I understand your concern," he said softly, "But our survival comes first."

Danni nodded, solemnly accepting the offer of food. "Aye, Sir." He turned to Growlie, sharing with him his portion of *namu* strips. A thoughtful yet tense expression creased his handsome face as he stared into the fire.

Lara, too, stared straight ahead as she nibbled on her food. She was about to spend the night sleeping between two men. Sha'ul would once again be close to her holding her and her body sparked to life, coursing with molten heat.

She remained silent. The only sound in the cave was Growlie's grunting and chewing on the *namu* strips, which blended with the whistling and swirling of the snow-filled winds outside the cave.

Sha'ul had gathered snow into a canister and heated it over the fire. He removed it from the heat and offered Lara and Danni sips of water to wash down the dry meat. When they'd drunk, he took the canister back, sipped from it and set it aside. "We should sleep now," he said, coming over to the fur skin bedding on the cave floor. Slipping off his boots, he climbed underneath. "Have Growlie come and lie down close to us."

Danni nodded and called the large beast who had risen and stuck his head outside the mouth of the cave to eat some snow.

Obediently, Growlie backed up and lay down, his large body forming a crescent-shaped wall around the three people.

The heat from Growlie's body warmed the entire space as Lara pulled off her boots and settled in next Sha'ul.

Immediately, he reached for her, pulling her back against him.

With their bodies spooned together, Lara fought to hide the joyous smile threatening to break out on her face.

Danni looked at them, slowly pulling off his boots. His reluctance to join them in the bed filled the air, mingling with the heat shimmering off the slumbering *chaya* beast. When he did finally lie down, he left a noticeable gap between his body and Lara's.

"Good night, Danni," she whispered.

He turned and looked at her. The glow of flames dancing off the walls of the cave cast shadows on his face. His expression was unreadable in the half-light. "Good night, Lara. Good night, Sir."

"Sleep well, Danni." Sha'ul's voice vibrated close to her ear.

He pulled Lara closer to his body and even through their layers of clothing, she could feel the bulge of an erection rise and press between her buttocks. The sensation caused her to melt against him, her body growing languid, quickly drowning out the tendrils of guilt toward Danni she felt.

Sha'ul's hand stole under her blouse, causing her to gasp softly when his callused hand closed over her breast. The rough skin brushing over the soft swell of flesh sent

spark of heat through her and she arched her buttocks against his groin when he delicately pinched her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. In tiny movements, he manipulated the soft bud into a tingling peak. The pleasure rippled all the way down to her loins and she felt the moisture seep from her slit, which swelled and throbbed with need.

His breath pulsed warmly on the back of her neck and she felt the tip of his tongue feather back and forth on her skin as his hand left her breast, his fingertips trailing down her stomach to dip underneath the waist of her trousers. The soft hair of his goatee tickled her skin pleasantly.

Lara's struggled to breathe quietly, which was very difficult when Sha'ul's fingertips raked through her pubic hair and caressed the outer lips of her sex.

She heard his breath catch softly as he dipped two fingers inside the soft folds and found the wet, swollen nub of desire.

In soft strokes, he rubbed her clitoris, stoking her desire to a raging white heat. She cast a glance to Danni who lay still only a few feet away and wondered if he could hear her or Sha'ul, who both were breathing raggedly.

Her wondering was whipped away as Sha'ul rose on one elbow and turned her over. His dark eyes, glimmering in the firelight, stared down at her with unbounded passion. In spite of the different face, she felt his love and desire for her unchanged. She pushed down her trousers and felt him working open his.

The next she knew he settled his body quietly over hers, his hands on her thighs, keeping her legs from spreading apart while he pushed his cock, swollen and hard into her opening. In one thrust, he sheathed himself deep inside her, crushing out her gasp of pleasure with a kiss.

His lips were softer and fuller in his Beren body. But Lara's body and soul knew Sha'ul's kiss and she surrendered completely, parting her lips for the warm, sensuously moist intrusion of his tongue. His goatee tickled her lips pleausrably as he swirled his tongue deeply around hers. She reached up, slipping her fingers into the silk of his ebony hair.

With her legs pressed together, Sha'ul's cock rode against her sweet spot with driving force. Her pent up longing for him took only moments to release and she clamped her mouth hard against his, moaning softly into his throat as she came in one wave after the next.

Her hands left his hair and sought his back under his shirt. Her palms settled over his warm golden skin, the muscles solid and compact, flexing with the movements of his erection inside her. After several minutes, his body twitched and Lara felt his warm seed pulsing into her womb, filling her.

He moaned softly into her mouth as his climax took him. He trembled and then went still, his body wilting heavily on hers. Slowly, his erection softened and he slipped out rolling onto his side and pulling her against him.

Lara closed her eyes and lifted Sha'ul's hand to her lips, pressing it firmly against them. *I love you, my lord.*

I love you, sweetling. His arm closed over her protective and warm.

Lara pushed back tears, remembering that Sha'ul would have to leave her once they'd gotten through the pass. She also knew from her training that what he was doing would probably take its toll on his physical body, not to mention the consequences he

might suffer if the Wise Ones learned of his disobedience.

A strain of dark anger snaked through her. The very Beings who could protect her from the Pierrans who'd destroyed her life were now forcing her back into her slavers' nest. Not only that, they would not freely allow her the protection of the man she loved. She quailed inside at the possibility of having to face Dogon again, to watch his lustful sneer as he abused young women and played out his wicked perversions on their bodies. Knowledge shone deep inside her that it was he, and he alone that was the source of the corruption, the embodiment of evil who destroyed one life after the next.

Deep in her heart, she vowed to fulfill the prophecy, if only to remove the threat Dogon posed to other human beings. And she vowed to do it as quickly as possible so she could go home to Sha'ul.

Nearby, Danni heaved a deep sigh. Lara looked at him in the shadows. His back was to her, but she knew, without a doubt, he wasn't yet asleep and had heard her and Sha'ul making love. *I'm sorry, Danni*, she told him silently. Unfortunately, however, unlike Sha'ul, Danni couldn't hear her.

She sighed and snuggled closer to Sha'ul, praying that her friendship with Danni also survived this horrible journey.

Chapter Nine

“Sha’ul is a very powerful sorcerer. Rare are those that can remain bi-located and morphed for this long.” Morden had to admire the mage’s determination. He’d been observing the trio and the chaya beast’s trek through the mountain pass for over ten days now, and Sha’ul showed only the slightest signs of wear.

“Unfortunately for both him and the girl, I see that his time as Japhu is nearly at an end.” Azena experienced a pang for the lovers. She hated also to think of what physical repercussions the sorcerer would suffer from having used so much magery for so long.

“His time as a mage is also nearly at an end,” Wizen interjected.

Azena’s gaze whipped to his. “What are you going to do to him?”

Wizen looked down. “I’ll do what I must, of course. Strip him of his power.”

Azena glared, glad that her look cowed the other. “How can you? Have you no heart at all?”

“Haven’t you?” Morden took a step toward her, turning from the images of the three figures bundled against the biting mountain air. “You’ve watched them these last ten days. He knows full well that we’re observing him. I have no doubt that his intention was to act with as much caution as possible, and yet, from the first night, his coupling with her was more than evident. The sorcerer’s passion for his student far outweighs his ability to aid this mission and you know it.”

Azena accepted Morden’s rant stoically. He spoke the truth. That didn’t, however, alter her sympathy for them. “Yes, Morden, you’re right. I understand he must pay the consequences for his actions. I implore you, though, to allow him at least his telepathic communication with her. At least let him guide her.”

She watched Morden look down at the vision ball, his brow creased. The depth of pensiveness in his expression led her to believe he wasn’t as heartless as she’d thought him to be. She looked down at the vision ball to see the three figures nearing the end of the mountain pass.

“Very well, Azena. I will grant you your wish for them. Sha’ul will be stripped of all power except his telepathy.”

She nodded. “Thank you, Morden.” Her gaze remained in place. She saw her request was timely, for a moment after thanking her fellow mage, Sha’ul stumbled and dropped to the ground.

He lay on his back, his chest heaving. Lara knelt by him, a frantic expression on her face. She and the young warrior both knelt by him, supporting his fallen body, which had returned to its normal appearance. For a few moments he lay in Lara’s outstretched arms, looking deathly ill. The next moment he vanished.

The vision ball passed to the next scene. Sha’ul lay in his bed, back in his cottage, his head moving back and forth against the pillow, his near naked body dangerously red with fever.

Azena stifled a cry of her own. Perhaps she had prevented the sorcerer from losing all his power, but she realized with horror that his telepathy would not serve him if he died.

* * * *

Sha'ul opened his eyes to see an angel's face hovering before him. Pale skin, a fiery crown of hair and eyes the color of emeralds. I must have died. The heat of the afterlife was searing. If he hadn't been ripped from Lara the way he was, the angel staring into his eyes would have been a most pleasant sight.

"Lord Sha'ul." She spoke, placing a hand on his forehead. Her touch was light, soft. And real. "You're burning with fever." She looked away. "Eshav, bring a cloth soaked in water."

Sha'ul stared up. His gaze met with the rough beams of a cottage ceiling. His cottage. The question of whether he was really dead now teased the edges of his consciousness. "Lara. Lara," he mumbled, straining to rise.

"Don't move, Sha'ul." The woman spoke again. Her voice was familiar. He cast about in his fevered memory for her name.

"Shhh." Something cool and wet touched his forehead. Her name passed through his mind with the contact.

Ariana.

Gently, she wiped the cloth across his cheeks and neck. The sound of water sloshing in a bowl and the cloth was moving over his chest and down his arms. She squeezed his hand then gently laid it on the bed. She turned again and a young boy, his hair as fiery as Ariana's, appeared in his purview.

A second set of green eyes, more piercing than Ariana's looked into his. The resemblance to his sister was obvious. "What's wrong with him, Mama?" the boy asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know. He's very ill. We'll stay with him and help him get well."

* * * *

Lara's blood chilled. She stared at the empty space on the rocky ground. Sha'ul had been in her arms one moment. The next, the wind swirled around her, replacing the warmth of Sha'ul's body.

"Lara." Danni's voice sounded from where he crouched across from her, but her gaze remained fixed on the ground.

She couldn't speak or move. Her hands went out to support her sagging weight.

Danni's large hands closed around her upper arms. Absently, she let him pull her to her feet and into his arms. He squeezed her close.

Lara slumped against him. A mangled wail emanated from somewhere deep inside her and she fisted his outer closing against the force of her screams.

Danni's hand moved over her hair, caressing it like she was a child. Between her guttural sobs, she heard him crooning softly to her. In her outer awareness, she felt Growlie's muzzle snuffling the top of her head in an animal attempt at comfort.

Gradually, her sobs abated and she drooped in Danni's arms, suddenly overcome with exhaustion.

Danni held her away from him, his gaze trapping hers. "I'm sorry, Lara," he said above the wind.

"I'm so tired," she said, weeping fresh tears. "We've barely begun and I'm already exhausted. I want to go home. I'm not fit. I can't do this..."

“Stop it!” Danni shook her gently. “Pull yourself together now. It’s what Sha’ul would demand of you if he were here.”

Lara stared at him. “I can’t, Danni.”

To her surprise, Danni glared at her. His jaw muscles worked fiercely. “You can and you will.” With his hands still on her upper arms, he turned her with gentle firmness in the direction Sha’ul had told them to go after he collapsed.

Growlie nudged Danni’s back. When Danni turned around, the beast knelt down.

Danni sighed. “Growlie, I’ve told you, you’re a friend, not a beast of burden.”

The chaya beast tilted his head and grunted.

“All right. Thank you.” He lifted Lara up onto Growlie’s back and started off in the direction that would take them out of the mountains on the other side.

Lara rode obediently, her head practically lolling side to side, her hands loosely woven into Growlie’s scraggly mane. The chaya beast’s steps grew longer and more clipped as he started the descent from the mountain pass.

Hours passed and the three Weiran suns shone with greater warmth as they slanted in their descent toward the horizon.

Danni’s pace never slowed as he led them toward a landscape of wild fields spreading in all directions as far as the eye could see.

Suddenly he stopped and stood quietly, listening.

Lara, still absorbed in her world of numbing shock, sat listlessly on Growlie’s back, staring absently ahead. Growlie’s large ears flicked back and forth and a low snarl erupted suddenly in his throat.

Movement in the corner of her eye engaged her attention. She saw Danni was pull his broadsword from its scabbard at his hip as he scanned the area around him. Her heart pulsed to life and she sat up, watching the warrior in Danni take over. She looked in the same direction, seeing nothing but large boulders and rocky, sparsely vegetated ground. Yet something was wrong, she felt it in her bones.

“Danni...” she called, but he held up a hand, silencing her. Beneath her, she felt tension coil in Growlie’s large body.

Before she took her next breath, the narrow rocky corridor swarmed with men. Though all were swathed in heavy white clothing against the cold, the steel of their swords glinted in the late afternoon sunlight. Lara gasped, barely having time to grab Growlie’s mane before he reared up, screeching and howling.

The sound of steel clashing against steel thundered in her ears. “Danni!” she cried out, just catching a glimpse of him fending off one attacker after another while trying to cling to Growlie who reared and thrashed his claws, forefront and hind, snapping his beastly jaws at the sword-wielding assailants.

She gasped again. Danni was surrounded by them, like a hive covered with bees. His breastplate would be no match against so many. One wrong angle and a sword could slice him in a vulnerable spot.

He had managed to fell several of them, the superior Veltish techniques of combat proving useful when outnumbered.

There was no time to think. Only time for spells.

“Lara!” She looked up seeing him fighting his way over to her and Growlie. Under her breath she mumbled the incantation for invisibility.

The attackers around her suddenly put down their swords, staring at what appeared

to be empty air.

If only she could make contact with Danni, she could render him invisible as well. Thankfully, the shock of her spell gave Danni a split moment to vault himself onto Growlie's back, behind her.

A sword hissed through the air, slicing suddenly into her leg. She cried out, realizing one of them had seen her. She scanned their eyes. The spell no longer had hold on them. "Hold on, Danni," she cried, feeling his arms tighten obediently around her middle.

She closed her eyes and conjured more Defiance. The air around them blurred, a whirl of colors, burning one moment, freezing the next.

*

When she opened her eyes again, she was on her back, breathless, her lungs burning for air. What seemed like an eternity passed before she could breathe normally. Only then did she remember what had happened. Danni.

"Lara?" Danni's voice sounded far away.

They seemed to be enveloped in darkness. Sounds grew more distinct. She heard the hum and chirp of night insects. Dark shapes loomed tall above her. Slowly, in the night sky a velvety purple glowing with the orange Weiran moon, she could see they were trees. "Danni," she whispered, catching her breath as a biting pain, unlike any she'd ever known sliced through her left leg.

"I'm here, Lara." She felt a hand on her arm. His face appeared above her.

"Where are we?"

"I don't know. A forest somewhere. You got us away from the Pierrans, though."

A rush of icy fear swept through her in spite of her immobile state. Her body clenched and she struggled to sit up. The pain in her leg throbbed mercilessly. "Pierrans? Pierrans attacked us?"

"Aye." A large hand splayed on her back, holding her steady. Gently, he raised her to her desired position.

The small movement took her breath away. She fought back tears, hating herself for being such a baby, especially in the face of Danni's bravery. "Where's Growlie?"

"Hunting. He'll bring us some game. We need to eat and keep up our strength." He eased himself into a sitting position behind her, holding her up with their backs pressed together. "I dare not light a fire just yet. Who knows where those dogs might still lie in wait?"

Lara shut her eyes, remembering the glint of so many swords. Her first spell had only worked momentarily, giving them time to slice her leg. "I'm hurt, Danni." Waves of heat invaded her body and her heavy clothes stuck to her, suffocating her, making her feel choked for air.

"Me too." He shifted his weight from her and eased her back to the ground. "Let's get some of these heavy things off you," he said tenderly. "It's much warmer here." He undid the ties of her heavy sash and the layers of chaya skins and coat fell open. Deliciously cool air wafted against her skin. "Your skin is feverish." He unlaced her bodice then moved to her feet, pulling off each boot.

"Danni, where are you injured?" She asked as a bolt of pain shot through her leg. She gritted her teeth.

"Near my shoulder. It's nothing serious."

In the moonlight, she caught the glint of a knife blade. The sound of material ripping

and the rush of cool air against her leg. She lifted her head, trying to look. "Is it bad?"

"Could be a lot worse," Danni murmured. There was light pressure from his fingers probed the skin around the wound. "It's a bit deep. I'll need to wash it."

A sudden burst of energy coursed through her. "There's no time for that. I'll have to close both our wounds."

She looked around her, gathering her bearings. They seemed to be in a small clearing, which, painfully, reminded Lara of her special place with Sha'ul. Biting back a pang of heartache she looked at Danni whose face was shadowed by the night. "We need a small fire," she told him. I can't work when I can't see."

She felt his reluctance.

"I don't know, Lara..."

"Please. I want to close these wounds now!"

"All right." His hand moved comfortingly over her hair. "Stay here."

Lara tried to rise and help him gather kindling, but she felt too weak. Her body was in shock from the Defiance magery. She'd never used so much at once and so swiftly. Sha'ul had warned her repeatedly of the toll such spells took on the physical body. The thought only made her frantic with worry over him and how he was probably suffering from his stint as Japhu. Emotional agony squeezed her heart and she forced her mind to focus on the quiet sounds of Danni's boots on the forest floor and the rustling of sticks and leaves as he gathered branches and built a small fire.

Once he had a small but sufficient blaze crackling, Lara dared to look at her wound. She sucked in her breath at the sight of blood and cut skin, made only slightly less hideous by Danni's earlier ministrations pushing the edges of the wound back into place. Her desperation not to die of an infected wound and then have Danni die of one as well spurred her to draw on her reserves. She leaned over and held her hands in the air just over her wound. Screwing her eyes shut, she whispered the spells, fighting against the assault of knife-like darts of energy flowing down her arms, into her hands.

She held her hands in place until the wound had completely sealed, then fell back onto the ground, panting. Staring up at the sky while she caught her breath, Danni's face appeared above her.

His green eyes were wide. The glow of the flames glinted in them and danced off the dark blond growth of beard sprouting on his cheeks and jaw. Locks of his hair, loosened from their leather binding, hung down. "Lara, that was extraordinary."

She felt his fingertips graze her leg where the wound had been. His touch comforted her.

"Your leg is completely healed."

Exhaling a deep shivery breath of relief, she looked at him only to tense up again with worry. He'd removed his outer clothing as well and the fire gave her enough light to see the blood seeping through his shirt by his right shoulder. "You're next," she whispered.

"Lara, you need to..."

"Take off your shirt," she commanded.

Danni's shirt hung loosely around his muscular torso. Without another word, he lifted it off, over his head and dropped it onto his lap.

Lara sat up slowly, giving herself time to steady the swimming motions in her head. All this magery would take its toll on her in the hours to come, but for now all she cared

about was healing Danni.

When she'd gotten her legs under her to support her tired weight, she looked at the sword cut more closely. Her breath caught softly and she uttered a silent prayer of thanks for Danni's breastplate and the thick layer of muscle, which had protected him from being mortally wounded. As she'd done with her leg, she held her hands over the bleeding laceration and murmured the healing incantation once again.

The same prickly shards coursed down her arms, taking her breath away. The force of the storm of healing power channeling through her body nearly knocked her back to the ground but she fought against it, strengthened by the closing up of Danni's skin. When nothing was left of the injury, she lowered her hands.

The rush of energy suddenly drained from her and she went limp.

Danni's arms shot out and he caught her before she hit the ground, gently lowering her onto her back. He bridged her upper body with his hands on the ground, looking down at her, his green eyes glowing with love and desire. "You saved our lives, Lara," he said softly.

She smiled weakly. "I didn't know what else to do."

Danni lifted one hand and tenderly graze her cheek with the back of his knuckles. Concern furrowed his brow. "I need to make you more comfortable." He helped her out of the heavy outer layers and spread them out like a bedroll, which he gently helped maneuver her onto.

Growlie returned with a jawful of game birds, which he dropped proudly on the ground by the fire.

Danni chuckled and rubbed his huge snout. "Thanks, mate," he said. "I'll cook these up for me and Lara. You, I assume, have already had your fill."

The chaya beast licked his chops, seemingly as an affirmation and settled down on the other side of the fire while Danni prepared his friend's offering.

The smell of the food did not stir her appetite at all and Lara lay, listless, staring into the flames. She still couldn't hear Sha'ul speaking to her and wondered with mounting fear whether he was even alive.

Hot tears rushed to her eyes, and slipped out, streaming down her cheeks. She was too tired even to wipe them away.

Danni turned to her with some cooked meat. A frown immediately creased his features when he looked at her. "Lara."

She looked up at him. "I can't hear Sha'ul anymore." She choked the words out of her parched throat.

Danni set aside the food and picked up a skin bag with water. He slipped a large hand under her head, gently lifting it so she could drink. The cool water slipped mercifully down her throat, quenching the fire of thirst. He set her head back down gently and pushed back her hair. "It'll be alright, Lara. You'll see. If the magery you practiced today is the cause of your weakness now, then he's probably going through the same. As soon as he's rested, he'll speak again."

Danni's voice soothed her and she heaved a deep breath. "Do you think so?"

He nodded. "Aye, I do. Now eat something. You need to keep up your strength."

"I'm sorry, Danni, I can't eat. My stomach is too tight."

He caressed her hair gently, smoothing it from her forehead. "All right then. Try to sleep. Growlie and I will keep watch."

Lara blinked more tears away. "I'm glad you're here, Danni. I'm so sorry about ... everything."

He smiled gently. "You've nothing to be sorry for, Lara. I'm ... honored to be here with you. Now try to sleep." With one more caress, he turned away, toward the fire and picked up the food he'd cooked.

Lara closed her eyes, listening to the night sounds. Only thoughts of Sha'ul and the last ten nights she'd spent sleeping curled up in his protective warmth allowed her to relax enough to begin to fall asleep.

Chapter Ten

Lara opened her eyes and blinked. The third Weiran sun joined its two companions shining into the clearing. “Danni?” she whispered.

A shadow suddenly covered the sun. Lara blinked as her vision cleared.

A tall woman with golden hair crouched over her, looking down into her eyes.

Lara stared at the green gold eyes that watched her unwaveringly.

A long silky gold braid of hair hung over the woman’s shoulder and Lara noticed she was scantily clad, her breasts and lower parts covered by ornately woven leather strips. The skin of her long arms and legs, which were sleek with muscle, was browned by obvious long days in the sun. A large crossbow rested in one hand, its point on the ground.

The woman turned her gaze on Danni who, Lara now realized, crouched on her other side. Behind them, birds called in the forest trees. She absently noted that Growlie stood in the background, snuffling the forest floor, unconcerned. Apparently, the stranger had been here some time before Lara herself awakened.

“What is wrong with her?” the woman asked Danni. Her voice was strong with a slightly husky tenor. Yet, at the same time, there was a regal dignity in her tone, mingled with what sounded like gentleness.

Lara found herself reacting deep inside to the soft womanly sound. How she wished Ariana were here right now. Her stepmother would be fussing over her and stroking her hair, making her feel safe again. “Magery,” she managed to whisper.

The woman furrowed her brow. “A mage did this to you?”

“No, your Majesty,” Danni spoke for Lara. “A troop of Pierran soldiers attacked us at the mountain pass. She used magery to help us escape them.”

Lara blinked. “Majesty.”

The woman looked down at her. Though she wore a regal expression, her green-gold eyes were not unkind. “I am Sarna, Queen of the Women’s Village. You are in my part of the Sylvan Lands.” She lowered her face closer to Lara’s, as if studying her. After several moments, she turned to Danni. “When did these Pierrans attack you, Warrior?”

Danni cleared his throat. “Yesterday, your Majesty.”

A look of wonderment stole over Queen Sarna’s eyes. “By the gods,” she murmured, “You have traveled nearly halfway across Adamah in less than a day.”

“Less than one minute, your Majesty.” Lara found her voice as a bit of strength infused her.

Queen Sarna put a hand, palm down, onto Lara’s forehead. The gentle touch shimmered through her, unexpectedly stirring a torrent of emotion.

“She’s warm,” the woman said with concern. She looked down into Lara’s eyes. “Do you think you can walk if aided? I will bring you to my home where you can be nursed.”

Lara blinked back embarrassing tears. “You’re very kind. I don’t know if I can walk.”

“We’ll help you, Lara,” Danni said. He put her boots back on for her and gently took hold of her left arm.

With Queen Sarna on her right, Danni and she lifted Lara to her feet. Once standing,

with strong support on each side, blood rushed to Lara's head and she blinked several times. As her vision focused, she saw a band of women, dressed similarly to the queen, though not as ornately, standing before her.

The women, whose skin and hair tones ranged from the darkest browns to lightest pale and gold, watched her with curious, though not unfriendly interest. They all carried crossbows and several of the women had game creatures slung in braces across their shoulders. Somewhere in the back of her consciousness, she remembered her father mentioning this unusual band of women, led by a huntress queen that inhabited the Sylvan lands on the outskirts of Pierra.

The walk through the forest seemed interminable, though Lara knew the distance was not so great. They reached another clearing, obviously the village, with rounded huts constructed of tawny colored poles and woven leaves for the roofs and walls. Like the Beren village, a large cook fire formed the center of the village and steaming cauldrons sat on grates above the flames.

What must have been more than one hundred women collected as she, Danni and Queen Sarna entered the village, followed by Sarna's hunting companions. All the women stared curiously at her and at Danni, who, Lara noticed even in her weakened state, received many appraising looks.

"Bring her to my hut," the Queen said, steering them in the direction of the largest hut in the village.

The interior was shadowy and cool, keeping out the mounting heat of the day. Lara could not discern the furnishings in the half-light, but clearly felt the cushiony depth of the large bed onto which Danni and the queen lowered her.

Danni removed her boots and set them aside. He knelt by the bed and picked up Lara's hand. "How are you feeling?" His thumb moved across her palm.

She managed a weak smile. "Could be worse. I'm better than last night."

Relief washed over his chiseled features.

Sarna appeared at the bedside with a pretty young woman in a white gown beside her. The Queen's height made the girl look like a child. "My maid, Kirya, will look after you," she told Lara.

The maid's name caused her heart to squeeze and she gazed up at Danni. "Her name is almost like your sister's," she said softly.

He nodded. "Aye."

"What's your sister's name, sir?" Kirya asked.

He looked at her. "Kira."

Kirya smiled and nodded.

"Come, Warrior, let Kirya attend her." Sarna gestured to the doorway of her hut. "You are probably ready for a meal."

Danni looked reluctant to leave but Lara squeezed his hand. "I'll be fine, Danni," she said. "These women are very kind."

"All right." He gently released her hand and stood up.

"Take good care of her, Kirya," Queen Sarna told the maid. She looked back down at Lara with a troubled expression in her green-gold eyes.

Kirya curtsied. "I will, my lady."

* * * *

After three days of lying flat, Sha'ul was able to sit up with Ariana's help. She leaned him back against the pillows and perched on the edge of the bed, a bowl of soup on her lap, which she spoon-fed to him.

"Thank you, Lady Ariana," he said after a swallow of soup. "Your care is bringing me back to health."

Ariana smiled kindly and Sha'ul could see why Karan was so deeply in love with her. And why Lara was so devoted to her.

"You're welcome, my lord. I just want you to be alive for when Lara comes home." Her green eyes darkened with a potent mixture of sadness and anger, a swirl of emotions he well understood. She looked intently at him. "What happened to you? Why were you so ill?"

He heaved a deep breath. Speaking was difficult and required more energy than he had, but Ariana had more than merited his struggle to explain. "I went to her. I guided her and Danni through the mountain pass. But to do so, I needed to bi-locate and shift my outer appearance." He closed his eyes briefly.

When he opened them, Ariana was staring at him, her green eyes glistening.

"You saw her?"

He nodded. "Aye, my lady."

Ariana's lower lip trembled. "How is she?"

"By Galen's grace she's fine. Danni takes good care of her."

Ariana nodded and gave Sha'ul another spoonful of soup. Out in the cottage yard, Eshav whooped and hollered, caught up in a game he was playing.

"I had to change my appearance to get her out of the palace." Ariana said, her voice a near whisper. "Karan ... he bought a potion from a conjuror. The pain was some of the greatest I'd ever experienced."

Sha'ul murmured his understanding. "Aye," he said softly. "Magery is a very demanding master."

Anger flickered in Ariana's eyes and a tear rolled down her cheek. She brushed it away with her fingertips. "It's taken my husband and my daughter from me."

"Only for now, my lady." Sha'ul's heart slammed in his chest at what he knew was probably an empty assurance. Karan was on the battlefield, preparing to fight soldiers whose fighting powers were enhanced by corrupt magery. Lara was only Galen knew where, fighting a force that represented her worst nightmares and with whom her survival was not guaranteed.

He closed his eyes, unable to stomach another spoonful of soup.

"I want them back," he heard her say. His heart ached.

He opened his eyes and gazed at her. "So do I, my lady. So do I."

* * * *

Lara.

Lara's eyes flew open. For a moment she forgot where she was. A lantern glowed on a nearby table, revealing the silken pillows, fur coverings and carved furniture of Queen Sarna's hut. On the other side of the hut, the queen lay asleep on another bed her servants had set up for her. The woman's steady breathing filled the quiet space.

Lara.

The voice that spoke to her was so comfortingly familiar, joy overwhelmed her. *My*

lord, I'm here! How I miss you.

I miss you, sweetling. I long to hold you.

Lara smiled into the shadowy light. *What happened to you?*

I was forced to end the Defiances. They left me quite exhausted and ill. The lady Ariana nursed me back to health.

The mention of Ariana made Lara feel her loneliness as a deep ache. Ariana. *Tell her I love her, my lord.*

I will. She has asked me to tell you the same.

Ariana's message brought a measure of comfort. *I love you too, my lord.*

And I love you more than anyone or anything.

Lara's heart sped up. *Will you come back?*

There was a brief pause. *I cannot, sweetling. The Council has stripped me of all my powers save our telepathy.*

Lara stifled a cry.

Lara, as long as you are safe, that's all I care about.

I'm safe, my lord. Queen Sarna has taken me and Danni in. I ... had to use magery and it left me exhausted and ill as well. I am almost healed.

Thank God. I would come to you if I could, you know that?

Lara could not stop the tears that streamed down her cheeks. Aye, I know that. She rolled onto her side, her body curled into a fetal position.

We must both rest now, my love. I'm here always.

Sha'ul's voice was quiet inside her. She pushed her face into the pillow, her shoulders quaking from the sobs she tried in vain to stifle. Her heart ached so badly she feared it would fall from her chest.

A gentle hand on her back stilled her sobs and she turned over.

Sarna was looking down at her, concern etched in her regal, beautiful face. The huntress queen had been very attentive and caring with Lara since finding her and Danni in the forest and had barely left Lara's side these past few days.

Lara expected Sarna to speak, to try and say something to comfort her. But there truly were no words to ease the hopeless feeling that engulfed her.

Sarna seemed to know this, for she remained silent. Instead, she raised her touch to Lara's brow, softly caressing her hair.

Sarna's touch was soft and soothing, much like Ariana's but more sensual.

A tiny fluttering sensation moved in Lara's gut and her heartbeat quickened slightly. Sarna's touch conveyed to her more than she meant to, perhaps, but Lara sensed the woman's loneliness, much like her own.

"Are you better now?" Sarna asked softly.

Lara sat up, raising herself enough that the pillows propped her back a bit. "Yes, your Majesty. Very much thanks to you and your women. You've all been very kind."

Sarna's hand did not stop its gentle caress in her hair. "Please call me Sarna." The lantern light glowed off her tanned skin and made her large eyes appear as shimmering pools. Sarna's full lips were slightly parted and she appeared to be enjoying her ministrations to Lara's hair. "I don't even know your name, Sorceress."

Sadness enveloped Lara, for she could not share her name with the huntress queen. Galen forbid the Pierrans captured her and tortured her name from her. Better if Sarna did not know. Better for both of them. "I cannot tell you, my lady," she answered in a near

whisper. "Not because I don't want to. I very much do. It's for your own safety."

The huntress sighed. "You are on some important mission, it would seem."

Lara nodded. "Aye, my lady. Perhaps such news has not reached the depths of the Sylvan lands." She told her the nature of the evils occurring on Adamah.

Sarna listened with a thoughtful expression. Her fingers slipped more deeply into Lara's hair. She sighed. "You poor woman," she said. "I do not envy you, so far away from home. Undoubtedly your tears are for those you love and miss."

Sarna's words seared her heart. She felt that Sarna understood her anguish. "They are, my lady. I miss my master so."

Sarna's hand stilled in Lara's hair. "Your master?"

Lara nodded. "I ache to be with him again."

Sarna resumed her caress. "I see. I apologize. I had assumed the warrior with you was your life mate."

Guilt tugged at Lara for Danni's unrequited love. "It's all right. He's a dear friend and cousin. Sha'ul is my lifemate."

"Sha'ul is your master."

"Aye." Just speaking of her beloved teacher lifted her spirit. "He taught me magery. He loves me."

A note of wistfulness passed through Sarna's eyes. A tiny smile touched her lips, yet there was no mirth in the expression. "That's wonderful. You are very fortunate."

Lara's spirit fell again. "Not if I never see him again."

Sarna moved her hand from Lara's hair and took her hand, gently pressing it between her own. "Is that a possibility?"

A shudder passed through her in spite of Sarna's warming touch. "If the dark mage triumphs, then yes." She fought back a fresh wave of tears.

Sarna squeezed her hand. "Don't go there in your mind, Sorceress," she said gently. "You will only nurture despair. Believe me, I have fought in battles and I've been wounded, too. Your mind must remain strong and centered. You can shape your destiny in the ways it is possible."

In spite of her grief, Sarna's words comforted her. "Thank you, my lady. You've helped me immensely this night."

Sarna smiled and again that look of wistfulness spread over her features. "I speak for my own benefit as well. There are areas of my life in which I need the strength of belief, areas as of yet unfulfilled."

Lara sensed that the woman spoke of love, considering her response when she had mentioned Sha'ul. She remained silent, however, not wishing to pry.

"Perhaps we will talk more on the morrow," Sarna said after a few moments of companionable silence. "You are still in recovery from your ordeal and need the night's rest."

Lara smiled at her. "I couldn't rest before, but now, after speaking with you, I feel I can."

"I'm glad. I'll sit with you until you fall asleep, if that will help."

She looked at Sarna, astonished at her kindness. "You would do that?" She felt foolish for wanting to accept her offer, yet unable to resist the comfort.

Sarna nodded. "Yes, of course."

Lara's eyelids grew heavy. "Thank you ... Sarna."

“You’re welcome.”

Sarna held her hand as she drifted closer to sleep, her thoughts on Sha’ul. She prayed that what Sarna had said about remaining centered and strong could be true for her. If she believed it was possible to survive, then she would see him again. She would feel his arms around her and taste his kiss on her lips.

Chapter Eleven

Danni entered Sarna's hut shortly after breakfast the following morning, a troubled expression marring his face.

Lara had been waiting for him alone, as the queen was holding a council that morning for her village. She smiled up at him from the chair in which she sat, then frowned. "Danni, what's the matter?"

He stopped in front of his chair and held a hand out to her. "Try walking a bit. We'll stay in here."

She accepted his hand and he assisted her to her feet, not missing the flicker of appreciation across his hazel eyes at the sight of her in a soft white gown that clung to her curves. Linking her arms through his, they moved slowly around the spacious interior of Sarna's hut. Her heart had begun to race at the tension she felt coiled in Danni's body. "Please tell me what's wrong, Danni."

He sighed. "All right. It's the council the queen's holding today."

"What about it? Sarna told me they meet every fortnight."

"The fortnight of their meeting had just passed before we got here. This is a special council."

"How do you know this? Oh, never mind. I already know." If Lara knew her kinsman, he had found this out from the women in the village who had taken him for their lover.

"Aye."

Lara did not like the apprehensive tone in his voice. "What are they discussing, exactly? Do you know?"

Danni sighed again, more deeply this time as they began a second round of Sarna's hut.

His hesitation made her blood chill in her veins. Somehow, she sensed, the meeting was about her. "Danni, please."

They had reached the plush chair Lara had been sitting in and gently he ushered her to sit again and knelt before her. "From what I'm given to understand, the queen's followers believe that you've put a spell on Her Majesty."

Lara stared at him, wide-eyed as goose bumps erupted on her arms. "What? A spell? To what purpose?" She slumped back against the cushions, feeling what little strength she'd regained drain from her again. The thought that she'd bewitch another human being when her vow was only to use magery for the common good horrified her. "I would never..."

"I know that, Lara."

"Then why do they believe such a thing, Danni?"

"Some of the women are saying that Sarna has changed since you arrived here, that she's ... not the same woman she always was."

Lara held her hands in a pleading gesture, wishing desperately she had the strength to flee. "How is she different?"

He put his hand over hers. "I don't know. The words they use are entranced, sad, disturbed. I don't know what it all means. They've never seen her this way before, and

some of them have known her since she was a babe.”

Lara exhaled and stared straight ahead at the woven wall of the hut, remembering the previous night when Sarna had caressed her hair and spoke to her soothingly. Even then, the queen had appeared troubled and sad, but Lara had no reason to believe it was because of her. “I swear I’ve practiced no magery on her. Nor would I. Even if I had the inclination, I barely have the strength to walk, never mind perform spells.”

Danni squeezed her hand. “I know that, Lara. I’ve never met a sweeter, kinder person than you. I’m certain this matter will be cleared up. Queen Sarna appears to be a levelheaded woman. She doesn’t seem someone to fling accusations.”

Lara rubbed her forehead. “Apparently, some of her women are.”

“Some of them are from superstitious cultures.”

Danni’s certainty heartened her somewhat, but her heart lurched painfully when a shadow loomed in the hut and Sarna approached her chair.

The Queen looked at Danni and then at her. Indeed, the huntress’ green-gold eyes reflected sadness and her demeanor was solemn. “May I speak with you alone, Sorceress?”

Lara swallowed past a lump in her throat. “Of course, my lady.”

Danni gave her hand a light squeeze before releasing it and bowing politely to the queen.

When he was gone, Sarna began to pace in front of the chair, her hands clasped behind her back. She, too, wore a gown, the color of fresh cream, the skirt of which swished around her long tanned legs. “Did the warrior tell you the purpose of our council?” she asked, her head bowed as she paced.

“Aye, my lady.” Lara sat up straighter, watching the huntress’ lithe movements. “And I assure you, I’ve practiced no magery on you. I would swear it on my own life.”

Her words seemed to sink into the queen like an arrow. She halted and turned to Lara, her eyes glistening. “I don’t wish to accuse you of such a thing,” she said, “But I have no other explanation for the change that’s come over me.”

“Change, my lady?”

Sarna knelt down in front of her. A tear slipped from her eye. “Since you’ve come here, I’ve not been able to think of anything but you. You are the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen and your mere smile makes my heart gallop. I can barely eat or sleep. All I want to do is be in your presence, to look into your eyes and hear your voice.” She wiped the tear off her cheek with her fingertips. “If I am not bewitched, then how can you explain my state? I’ve never experienced it before.”

Lara stared at her. The woman’s fervent confession frightened her. She, herself, recognized the described symptoms, for she had experienced each and every one of them upon meeting Sha’ul. She knew immediately what Sarna was telling her.

The huntress queen was in love with her.

Her hands tightened on the arms of the chair. “I believe I can explain, my lady, if you wish.”

The Queen nodded. “Please do, I beg of you.”

“From what you told me, I believe you’re in love. I know because it happened to me with my master.”

At this, tears began to slip freely from Sarna’s eyes, trailing down her high cheekbones and dropping off her jaw like rain. “In love?”

Lara nodded. Her heart pounded fiercely and she struggled to remain soft with the woman before her whose heart was vulnerable. For Lara, a woman's attentions reminded her only of Mardya in the palace *haram*. Mardya had raped her and terrorized her until Ariana rescued her. "Aye, my lady."

Sarna looked down, appearing to chew on these words. "Love," she whispered, "I'd never thought." Her gaze snapped up. "No, it can't be. A force this powerful must be magery."

Lara shrank back in her seat. "I promise you, my lady, it's not. I have absolutely no desire to invite a woman's attentions." She explained to the huntress queen her nightmare ordeal at the hands of her fellow bed-slave.

"Perhaps you want revenge then," Sarna countered. "I'm a woman of stature, of power. Perhaps you'd want to bring me down this way, even though I've shown you only kindness."

Panic rose in her and Lara desired only to escape. "No! I've taken a vow that I will only use magery for the common good. Even if I were inclined to do such a thing, I would do so at the risk of being stripped of my powers." She watched Sarna's face intently for her reaction.

Sarna wiped her tears with the heel of her hand. "I believe you, Sorceress." She sniffled and bowed her head. "Forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive, my lady. Love is a most powerful force."

The queen looked at her pleadingly. "I've never taken a slave in my life and would not. The women who live here stay only of their own free will. I abhor slavery." She reached out, then pulled her hand back before making contact with Lara's hand. "The way that I feel, I would only wish you to be well and happy. I could never imprison you. That would be a hostile act." Her brow furrowed and her eyes darkened. "If I met that woman now, the one who hurt you, I would put an arrow through her heart."

Lara stared at Sarna, at the fierce protectiveness she demonstrated. Certainly the woman spoke the truth, if the way she'd comforted her the night before were an indication of her feelings. "Thank you, my lady. You remind me a bit of my stepmother. It was she who rescued me from Mardya and threatened her with bodily harm if she didn't release me."

Sarna sniffled again and tears still slipped from her eyes, but a smile curved her lips. "I think I would like your stepmother."

"She's a wonderful woman."

Sarna gazed at her longingly. "So are you, Sorceress."

Lara's cheeks flushed with warmth and her stomach trembled inside. Aside from the emotional scars Mardya had left her with, Sarna represented one more person whose feelings she didn't reciprocate. A tendril of guilt wound around her heart and pulled fiercely.

Sarna must have read her thoughts in her face. "I know you don't return my feelings," she said softly. "I understand. You love your master."

"I'm sorry, my lady."

"Don't be sorry. I see that one cannot control one's heart in love. It goes where it will."

She nodded. "That is so. I pray one day I can return to him, when ... this mission has been fulfilled." She heard Sarna's breath catch softly and the queen's sadness filled the

air.

“When will you leave here, Sorceress?”

Lara’s heart ached for the beautiful woman who had lain open her deepest feelings to her. “I must leave as soon as my strength has returned. I cannot say exactly.”

“Of course, you may stay here until then.”

She bowed her head. “Thank you, my lady. I can never repay you for your kindness to us.”

“I don’t want you to repay me,” Sarna answered. “I would never have experienced this love if you hadn’t come. It makes me feel powerless and small, yet I wouldn’t want to live without it now.”

“I feel the same way.”

“Sorceress...” Sarna reached out and touched Lara’s hand lightly, “May I ask you something?”

Her heart fluttered. “Yes?”

“Do you think your master would ... let me ... love you, just once? That is, if you would allow it.”

Lara took a deep breath. Sarna’s request caused her skin to tingle, not unpleasantly, although the thought of a woman’s desire for her frightened her so. A man, too had terrorized her. Dogon had made promises of cruel acts to her body and he had ripped off her gown in the *haram* while he did so. Yet he had never touched her as Mardya had. “I ... don’t know, my lady. I would have to ask him.”

Sarna’s eyes lit up and she nodded. “I would never force you, of course. I just ... desire you so, my heart and body ache with it.”

Lara’s mind swirled and her vision blurred. She couldn’t formulate thoughts clearly and her body filled with flutterings and stirrings that were as familiar to her as desire. She ached to speak with Sha’ul and wished suddenly to be alone so she could summon him inside her. “I will ask him while I rest,” she said softly.

“Thank you.” Sarna stood, retaining her hold on Lara’s hand to assist her in rising. “Rest for as long as you need.” She ushered Lara over to the bed and waited while Lara lowered herself onto the soft bedding.

Lara’s heart pumped madly and she shivered in spite of the warm air. Lying in the queen’s bed had suddenly taken on a different meaning. She closed her eyes and thought of Sha’ul. *My lord, are you there?* She heaved a deep sigh. Praise to Galen the Council had allowed him to keep his telepathy with her.

I’m here, sweetling. Are you better today?

Lara’s breath caught at the sound of his voice inside her. *Yes, much better. And you?*

Nearly recovered. Ariana has been a kind nurse. But I hear something is troubling you, Lara. What is it? Talk to me.

She took a deep breath and then told him about her conversation with Sarna. When she’d finished, Sha’ul remained silent. A prickle of fear passed through her. *My lord, are you angry with me?*

Angry? Of course not. Why would I be angry? Sha’ul’s voice sounded a bit husky, the way it did when he was ... aroused. *Truthfully, Lara, I couldn’t answer right away because I was busy ... picturing you and the queen ... together.*

Lara raised her brows. *My lord?*

He chuckled. *You’re an innocent in so many ways, Lara. You would be hard pressed*

to find a man who didn't think it was the most erotic thing in the world ... two beautiful women loving each other.

Lara's face filled with heat. She'd never heard Sha'ul say anything like this before. *I didn't know, my lord.*

It would seem that Lord Galen has offered you a chance to heal this part of your life. She furrowed her brow. *My lord? Are you saying I should ... be with her?*

Only if you want to.

But ... but I love you.

I know you do.

Isn't that unfaithful?

Sha'ul was quiet a moment. *Not for you, sweetling. No one's heart could be more faithful to me than yours.*

Then why—

Don't worry about it, love. I would ask only one thing of you.

What is that?

Sha'ul cleared his throat. *If you do decide to make love with her, please, I beg of you, let me see your memories when we are together again.*

Lara let his words sink into her mind. When understanding dawned, her eyes widened and her cheeks tingled with the heat of embarrassment. Never had Sha'ul spoken this way to her. In spite of her surprise, she laughed, the mirth erupting from deep inside her. Life had been so without laughter since she and Danni left the Veltlands nearly two months ago. How glorious it felt to laugh again. To her delight, he joined her.

When their amusement had passed, Lara smiled. *Of course, my lord, you may see my memories.* Her smile faded and she pressed one hand over her heart. *Everything I have is yours, my lord. I love you.*

I love you more each day that passes, Lara. Come home to me.

Tears rushed to her eyes. *I will, my lord. I promise.*

Chapter Twelve

“The huntress queen has taken quite a liking to the sorceress.” Pellean’s voice dripped with envy and he knew it. Sarna’s strength and beauty were legendary and she had always been one of the women on the planet he’d hoped to sample. “Do you think she’ll pose a problem?”

Morden watched the vision ball, his gaze intent on the two women strolling arm in arm through Sarna’s village. This had been their routine for nearly a fortnight while the sorceress regained her strength. “Actually, I don’t believe she will. The sorceress’ demeanor is clear. She’s fond of the queen, but not in love with her. The queen has resigned herself to the fact that the sorceress will leave. Unlike some others we know, Sarna is not inclined to ... thwart completely the dictates of a council of mages.”

His accusation of Sha’ul was clear.

“The sorceress is nearly ready to continue her journey,” Azena said.

Pellea nearly snorted. The only reason Azena wanted the sorceress to move on was so that she could finally be reunited with Sha’ul. Always the romantic. He sighed, recognizing the envy in his annoyance.

“Aye.” Morden did not lift his gaze from the vision ball. “Tomorrow would not be too soon.”

* * * *

“I’m so sorry you are leaving.” Sarna squeezed Lara’s hand where it rested on the sleeve of her gown.

The two women were walking about the village, observing the preparations for the farewell feast Sarna had insisted on giving the sorceress and her warrior friend. The three Weiran suns had begun their descent, washing the pale sky in splashes of pinks and golds.

Lara was surprised at the wave of sadness that washed through her at Sarna’s words. She touched the queen’s sleeve. Her linen gown was soft under fingertips. “I am too, my lady.”

She saw the hopeful light in Sarna’s eye and her stomach fluttered. Until today, she hadn’t had the strength to be with her even though she’d relayed her conversation with Sha’ul to Sarna nearly a fortnight ago. The time that had passed, however, had allowed her to know Sarna better and to learn that she was to be trusted. Lara did not at all feel that Sarna would hurt her the way that Mardya had. “I’m sorry, my lady, that it’s taken me so long to be able to...”

Sarna touched her cheek. “Don’t be sorry.” She sighed. “Until now, I didn’t realize how haughty and self-assured I’ve always been, so lacking in humility. You’ve shown me that another human being is someone to care for, not to win, like a prize.” Her thumb brushed Lara’s skin, making it tingle pleasantly. “I can only be grateful to you.” She looked at her, with tenderness simmering in her green-gold eyes.

“Your friendship has truly been a comfort to me, my lady.”

“Please call me Sarna, as I have asked, at least if you mean to allow me your gifts.”

Then I will know. If not, no more need be said, and I am always your friend.”

Lara’s lip trembled. The queen had showed her great kindness and deserved a prompt answer, either way. Sarna’s touch still tingled on her arm, right through her sleeve and she wondered at her own burgeoning desire. She remembered Sha’ul’s words about healing and about Sarna’s chance to experience love. “I’ve meant to call you Sarna,” she said softly. “I haven’t had the strength until now.”

The gold tones in Sarna’s eyes appeared to glow and her tanned face flushed a touch of deeper bronze. “Come, sweetheart,” she said, ushering Lara toward her hut. “It’s time to bathe and dress for your feast.”

The warm air in Sarna’s hut pulsed with the steam from a large tub of hot water that sat, ready when they entered. A rich exotic scent emanated from the water, which Kirya had obviously perfumed with scented oil. The handmaid had set out towels and brushes as well as clean gowns, but she, herself was not to be seen.

“I think my maid meant for you to have your privacy for the bath,” Sarna told her, eyeing the preparations. “Do you wish to be alone?”

Lara looked up at the tall, magnificent woman. Her own body had begun to tense and tingle in all the same places it had when she’d awakened to Sha’ul’s masculine beauty. The sensations frightened and thrilled her at the same time. She hadn’t ever imagined to experience it this way herself. Not after what had happened to her. She shook her head. “No, Sarna, I don’t.”

Sarna smiled and reached her hand out, picking up Lara’s braid from where it rested over her breast. With gentle fingers, she undid the silky cord that bound it and unwound the plait. “Your hair is magnificent,” she breathed as Lara’s tresses fell free, spilling over her breasts and down her back. She caressed the silky fall with an air of reverence, her fingertips grazing Lara’s neck and breast over her gown.

“Thank you.” Lara sucked in her breath at the contact, as intimate to her as if Sarna had touched her bare breast. Her eyes fluttered closed.

“You like that?” Sarna asked, her voice fluid and silky.

Lara nodded, unable to speak.

Sarna brushed her fingertips again over Lara’s breast, several gentle strokes that caused her nipple to pebble right through her linen gown. “So beautiful.” Her other hand came up and cradled the back of Lara’s head. The queen bent her face to hers and brushed her lips softly across Lara’s.

Barely lifting them away, Sarna paused and pressed her lips down again.

Lara parted her own lips as a surge of energy stormed through her. She raised her hand, splaying her fingertips on Sarna’s cheek, their open mouths resting against each other’s.

Tingling heat radiated through Lara’s body with blinding force, as if Sarna’s essence were entering her through their joined lips. The energy swirled and eddied inside her, filling her insides with a pleasant warmth. Sarna’s flowered perfume, the sandalwood in her hair, invaded Lara’s senses in a musky hot rush and she felt as if her insides were melting open, pulsing with overwhelming desire. Her sex flushed with pulsing need, and she felt her woman’s moisture gather and begin to seep.

Without understanding in her mind what had just happened, she knew she had experienced her first mage’s kiss, the kiss Sha’ul had meant to give her on their first meeting, the one she’d feared. She pulled her lips from Sarna’s, her lids heavy, her lips

and breasts swollen and surging. She had felt Sarna's essence and knew the woman's heart to be pure.

Emboldened, she let the hand on Sarna's cheek slide to her throat. The woman's breath caught, but she remained still, her breasts rising and falling raggedly as Lara's hand ventured over her chest and came to rest on her right breast over her gown, testing the firm roundness of flesh under her touch. With two fingertips, she explored the tip, feeling it harden as she brushed over it. Sarna was breathing heavily, her hand sliding into Lara's hair, her fingertips playing over the nape of her neck.

Lara looked up at her and Sarna bent her mouth to hers again. The kiss remained soft and tender, like the petal of flowers brushing together in a breeze. Sarna's tongue lovingly prodded the seam of Lara's lips, which she parted, allowing the moist heat of the queen's tongue to venture against hers. Like a soft pulse, Sarna's tongue danced delicately against hers while her fingers wove more deeply into Lara's hair. With her other arm, she embraced Lara, her hand splayed gently on her back, drawing her body closer.

Their breasts pressed together. The soft pressure on Lara's erect nipples sent a tingle through her breasts and her body relaxed a bit more, melting against Sarna.

The taller woman murmured low in her throat, clearly absorbed in their kiss. When she finally pulled away and looked down at her, Sarna's full lips were swollen and moist, her green-gold eyes smoldering like flames. She released Lara from her hold and reached for the hem of her own gown, lifting up over her head and dropping it over a nearby chair.

Lara gazed on the queen's naked body, taking in the sight of her long tanned limbs, her full breasts with dusky pink nipples, wide lush hips and triangle of golden curls covering the pouty lips of her sex. "You're very beautiful," she said softly.

Sarna smiled. "Thank you." She held out her hands. "Do you need help with your gown?"

"I don't believe so, thank you." She removed her sandals then lifted her gown off and set it next to Sarna's gown. When she looked up, Sarna was gazing on her nakedness, an expression of wonder in her eyes. "No wonder your master loves you so," she said softly.

A blush erupted in Lara's cheeks, spreading down her neck into her chest. "Thank you, Sarna."

Sarna picked up her hand and led her over to the steaming tub. Her golden eyes glowed. "Go on." She held Lara's hand as she stepped over the high curved rim of the tub and then climbed in after her, settling into the rose-scented water. The steam moistened the skin on her face and shoulders, making it gleam. She reached for a cloth and dipped it in the tub. The water made a soft rippling sound as Sarna moved forward and began rubbing the wet cloth over Lara's shoulders.

With a gentle hand on Lara's arm, Sarna bid her to rise to her knees and laved her breasts with the cloth. The wet fabric brushed pleasantly over her nipples, stiffening them again. "How is that?" she asked.

"Very nice, Sarna." She closed her eyes, enjoying the relaxing yet sensuous slide of the cloth over her wet skin. Suddenly, something hot and wet closed over her nipple. She sucked in her breath, her eyes opening to see the queen's head bowed to her breast. Hot strokes of moisture sent darts of pleasure through her breast, traveling like an invisible

path into her sex. She moaned softly as Sarna gently tugged and suckled the tawny bud until the pulsing between her thighs heightened to a roaring throb.

Sarna's golden hair spilled over her shoulders and breasts, the ends damp from the water. Lara reached up and stroked her hair as Sarna moved to her other breast, suckling and tugging it between gentle lips, her hands caressing tender circles on Lara's back.

After what seemed a long time, Sarna trailed her kisses back up Lara's chest and throat, reaching her lips, which she claimed with growing urgency. Her hands slid down Lara's wet back, caressing and squeezing her buttocks.

Lara smoothed her hands over Sarna's back, marveling at how soft a woman was compared to a man. She allowed her touch to venture around to Sarna's breasts. When her hands closed tentatively over the soft swells of flesh, Sarna's breath caught and she lifted her mouth from Lara's, her head tilting back, eyes closed, silently pleading with Lara to touch her more.

Lara didn't know what else to do, but what Sarna had done to her, so she skated her fingertips over Sarna's nipples, watching them pucker and harden to dark pink buds.

Sarna moaned softly, her chest heaving, her hands lightly grasping Lara's shoulders.

Lara leaned over and touched her tongue to one of the nipples, imitating the gentle stroking and suckling motions Sarna had made on hers.

"Yes," Sarna breathed, "Oh thank you, yes." She slid both her hands into Lara's hair, clearly lost in the pleasure of Lara's ministrations.

Encouraged, Lara moved to her other breast, lavishing the same erotic attention on it.

One of Sarna's hands slipped from her hair and went to her breast, gently squeezing it and kneading the nipple between her fingertips. The sensation radiated through her and she felt Sarna's hand slide down her stomach and flatten over her mound.

Her breath caught at the deep intimacy of Sarna's touch. She lifted her mouth from Sarna's breast and gazed up at her. Sarna's lids were practically closed and her tanned face was flushed. Her breathing rasped harshly in the air. She was obviously enjoying her exploration of Lara's body. "Do you wish me to stop?" she whispered.

Sarna's fingertips played lightly on her silver-blond curls, the pads of her fingers grazing the fleshy lips of her sex. The touch felt so exquisite, Lara found her body aching to be caressed intimately, for Sarna to take her to completion. She shook her head. "No, please don't."

"I won't then." Sarna lowered her lips to Lara's neck, dotting her tender skin with petal-soft kisses. Her hand slid further between Lara's thighs until her hand cupped her sex. Her fingertips ventured within the intimate folds, exploring her inner sex, swollen and slick from arousal. The pads of Sarna's fingertips sought her clitoris and pressed lightly down on it, manipulating it in tiny circles.

Lara sucked in her breath, anchoring her hands on Sarna's shoulders. Sarna's lips made a delicious suction on her neck, suckling the skin in a rhythm with her fingers. Heat burned deep in Lara's loins and the pressure built in her sex. She gasped when Sarna slipped a finger inside her, pulsing it in and out of her sheath.

Sarna bent her head once again to Lara's breast and captured an erect nipple between her lips. Her finger slid from her passage back to the hungry nubbin just above it.

The assault of pleasure sent Lara's body careening over the edge. Her body trembled as the blissful waves of completion passed through her sex. She sagged against Sarna, her heated breath pulsing onto Sarna's damp flesh. As her body unclenched and her breath

calmed, a sense of peace stole over her and she wanted only to give Sarna the same erotic contentment.

Sarna held her and stroked her hair. She lowered her body to a seating position in the tub, taking Lara with her as she reclined, Lara's body half-covering hers in the deliciously simmering water.

Without speaking, Lara touched Sarna's thigh under the water, caressing her skin with her fingertips. Sarna's breath made a hot rhythmic wind on her cheek as she explored the same parts of her body Sarna had touched. Her fingertips dragged through Sarna's curls and dipped between her thighs.

Sarna slid down at her touch, parting her legs as much as the tub would allow her. She tilted her head back, her eyes closed, her breasts, the nipples turgid, jutting from the water. Her breath caught when the pads of Lara's fingertips slid up and down her slit before spreading her gently open.

Lara found Sarna's inner sex swollen with longing and sought to give her release. She caressed the slick skin, allowing the queen's intake of breath to guide her to the most pleasurable spots. She slid her index and middle fingers into Sarna's moist sheath, pulsing them in and out as Sarna had done.

Sarna moaned, her hips gently bucking against Lara's hand.

Following the path Sarna had taken, Lara slid her massage upward to the woman's clitoris, rubbing it in small circles. Her movement was rewarded with several short sharp gasps from the queen, whose body trembled, her breasts bobbing against the surface of the water.

Sarna cried out and then went limp against the back of the tub, her cheek resting against Lara's. She turned her face and pressed her lips to Lara's, kissing her softly for several moments. Contented, they lay quietly in the steaming water.

"Sarna, may I ask you something?"

Sarna's hand moved in Lara's damp hair, caressing it tenderly. "Of course you may."

"Do you ever ... do this with a man?"

Sarna chuckled softly. "Aye, I do. I love men. My mothers chose my first man very carefully, that he would be gentle with me and initiate me with tenderness and care."

"Who was he, if I may ask?"

"You may. He was a commander in the Sinayan Army. We went very well together. I suppose I would have remained with him had he not been killed."

"I'm sorry. Did you love him?"

"I suppose in a way I did. But what has happened to me this past fortnight is completely different." She sighed, conveying to Lara her deep sadness that her love was not returned in kind.

Lara's heart squeezed in her chest. She so much wanted this kind, beautiful woman to be happy. Whatever she could do for her she would. She raised her face to hers and gazed into her golden eyes.

Sarna returned her look, her eyes appearing to melt with affection.

"Do you want to know if there's a life-mate in your future?" Lara asked her softly. It was a spell Sha'ul had warned her to use the most sparingly of all, not because it would deplete her strength, but because most future events in a person's life were better unanticipated.

Understanding shone in the queen's eyes. She nodded. "Aye, I very much do."

Lara touched Sarna's cheek. She closed her eyes and pressed her lips to Sarna's, silently repeating the incantation that unlocked the portion of the soul in which time had not yet passed. Inhaling a deep breath, a vision materialized in the darkness of her closed eyes. A shimmering pool with a waterfall rippled and spilled. Large ferns covered the edges of the bank, on the edge of which stood a man, naked. His physique rippled with sinewy muscles. Sunlight glinted off his raven hair, the same obsidian shade as Sha'ul's hair. He carried himself with the bearing of a fellow Being of Power. She watched him wad into the water and dive under its surface, causing the vision to fade with his dive.

She opened her eyes and lifted her lips from Sarna's. "I saw him," she said softly. "A beautiful man."

Sarna's eyes widened. "A man? For my life-mate?"

She nodded. "I'm not given to know where or when, only that he's meant for you. When the time is right, you will find him."

Sarna's gold-green eyes glistened and she appeared to reflect deeply on what Lara had just told her. "Thank you, Sorceress," she said in a near-whisper. "I am grateful to know that love is in my future." She pressed her lips to Lara's, dappling the tip of her tongue across Lara's bottom lip.

The light friction renewed the stirring in Lara's loins and she parted her legs under the water. Sarna's thigh filled the space, the moist flesh causing an erotic suction along her slit.

Sarna ended the kiss and looked down at her, eyes smoldering. "But for the present, I have you here with me. There is more I wish to show you."

She bid Lara to sit up and took the cloth from the side of the tub. She wrung it out and warmed it in the hot water, rubbing over Lara's buttocks and swabbing it in her pulsing cleft. Wordlessly, she handed the cloth to Lara and rose to her knees.

Lara washed the queen, watching the water sluice off her tanned skin, the rivulets gleaming on her sleek curves. She ran the cloth between Sarna's thighs, hearing her breath catch. She dipped the cloth back in the water and smoothed it over her breasts, watching the rosy nipples pucker again in anticipation.

Sarna stood and stepped out of the tub. She held her hand out to Lara and assisted her. She picked up a towel and lightly dried Lara's body, allowing Lara to do the same for her. Then, without speaking, she led Lara over to the bed and guided her to lie down on her back.

Sarna's lids draped sensuously over her eyes. Her lips and breasts pouted, swollen with renewed desire. She crawled onto the foot of the bed and put her hands on Lara's knees, gently parting her legs wide.

Lara watched her, her sex quivering and pulsing, aching again for release.

Sarna lowered herself onto her stomach and ran her fingertips down Lara's slit. Her touch was exquisite and sent shivery heat through Lara's loins. When Sarna leaned her face in closer to Lara's open sex, Lara's caught her breath.

Sarna's breath was warm on her sensitive, inner sex. The woman pressed her lips to the slick inner folds, causing Lara's eyes to flutter closed.

A hot stroke moved up her swollen bud, circling and teasing. Rivulets of heat traveled through her sex. She tilted her head back, moaning softly. She opened her eyes and looked down. Sarna was feasting on her clitoris, laving it in gentle but firm circles, alternately suckling and nibbling the warm moist flesh. She slipped a finger into Lara's

sheath, filling her, tugging her opening, pressing inside the walls of her sex as she flickered her tongue over the swollen nubbin.

The icy heat of Sarna's mouth caused the explosion again. Lara cried out, her vaginal muscles clenching around Sarna's finger.

Sarna continue to lick her clitoris, drawing out every last moment of pleasure until the very last ripple had passed, leaving Lara breathless.

When she had gone limp against the soft bedding, Sarna smiled up at her, her chin gleaming from Lara's nectar. She moved up and lay alongside Lara, closing her mouth over hers.

Lara smelled her own tangy musk, mingled with the perfumed oil from their bath. She opened her mouth, letting Sarna's lips smear her with her own juices. Sarna's hand closed over one of Lara's breasts and Lara could feel the coiled up desire in her touch. "Let me pleasure you the same, my lady," she breathed.

Sarna's breath hitched lightly at Lara's words. "Only if you wish it."

Lara smoothed back Sarna's hair. "I do wish it." She touched Sarna's arm, gently turning her onto her back. She kissed Sarna, lingering at her mouth for several moments. The taste of her lips made her want to taste the woman's skin and breasts again. She found an awakening hunger to smell her musk and sample it on her tongue, to hear Sarna's pleasure.

Lifting her mouth from their kiss, she trailed small kisses down Sarna's neck and over her breasts, stopping at each nipple to suckle tenderly. The dusky buds tightened under her tongue, giving off a pleasantly musky flavor. Sarna's hands wove into her hair, following the path her head was taking down her body.

Sarna parted her legs and Lara knelt between them. She ran her fingertips over the fleshy lower lips, stroking the hint of her bud that peeked out from the folds.

Sarna moaned and arched her pelvis, obviously hungering for Lara's touch. Her musky scent permeated the air and Lara went onto her stomach as Sarna had and spread her lips open with careful fingers.

Sarna's inner sex glistened, swollen with desire. Lara swiped gently at the clitoris with her tongue, wiggling it back and forth over the soft flesh, guided by Sarna's cries of pleasure. She copied Sarna's motions of sliding her fingers around inside her while licking the swollen nubbin. In moments, Sarna moaned, her hips bucking in the obvious throes of an orgasm. She released several husky, shivering breaths and then wilted, breathing heavily.

Lara looked up at her. "Did I please you?"

Sarna's flushed skin gleamed and her eyes smoldered. "More than pleased, Sorceress. You gave me ecstasy."

Lara smiled and lay down alongside Sarna who kissed her, eagerly lapping her own musk from Lara's lips and chin. Then she pulled Lara into her arms. "Thank you so much for this gift," she said softly.

"I have as much to thank you for," Lara answered. "You've helped to heal me from the pain of the past."

Sarna kissed Lara's hair. "I'm very grateful for that."

Lara closed her eyes and rested, feeling content for the time being. The rest was temporary, for tomorrow, she and Danni would continue their journey. A journey she knew would lead her back to the frightening man who had tried to destroy her life.

Chapter Thirteen

Sarna assembled the entire village the following morning to see Lara and Danni off.

The sky was lightening from gray to pink as everyone gathered. The grounds of the village showed the signs of the large riotous banquet of the previous evening. Bones from roasted game, empty plates and goblets lay strewn about, on the grounds as well as the tables. The large cook fire in the center still smoldered and tankards of ale and mead lay on their sides.

Danni and Lara had abstained from an excess of food and drink, but had enjoyed the dancers and the bawdy stories some of the women and a few of the male guests had told during supper.

Lara turned to Sarna and took her hand, holding it to her cheek, trying to push away the painful image of Sarna's green-gold eyes laced with glistening tears. "Thank you, my lady, for everything," she said. "For the shelter, the friendship and the healing."

"Are you certain I cannot accompany you?" Sarna's voice was tight with sadness. "You may need help."

Lara smiled but shook her head. "You are, as always, most kind. But I cannot allow it. Best if we travel only in a pair." She looked up at Growlie, who also appeared refreshed and happy from his fortnight of hunting and cavorting. He'd had no scarcity of playmates who brought him on their hunting trips and let him take them for rides on his back. "Well, a trio, I suppose."

Sarna nodded. "Very well. I will miss you."

"And I, you."

Sarna brought Lara's hand to her lips and pressed a brief kiss to the back of her hand. She released her hand and turned to Danni.

"Thank, your Majesty for all your help." Danni bowed to her.

"You're welcome, Warrior. I'm glad you were able to ... avail yourself of our hospitality." She smiled, a knowing twinkle in her eyes.

To Lara's surprise, a bloom of color stained Danni's cheeks. Indeed, he had enjoyed himself, if the threesome she'd caught a glimpse of him engaged in the night before was any indication. On the way back to Sarna's hut, when the feast had disintegrated to small individual parties and couplings, Lara had passed the hut Danni had been staying in. The flap of the door hung open and Lara had been treated to a full view of Danni's naked muscular body entwined with the softer nude bodies of two women, one golden-haired beauty and the other a voluptuous dark-haired minx. Giggles and sighs had carried out into the air, stirring within Lara a deep ache in her loins and heart for Sha'ul.

"Good bye, my lady," Lara said, unable to restrain the unexpected onslaught of tears. She held Sarna's gaze for a moment longer before turning in the direction of the route Sarna had mapped out for her and Danni before their feast.

Danni took his place at her side and Growlie joined them as they made their way out of the village, a chorus of companionable farewells ringing out behind them.

* * * *

“I’m certain you’ve had quite an eyeful this past fortnight, Pellean.” Morden’s mocking gaze pinned the mage who at least had the grace to look sheepish.

“May I remind you, sir, I do not control the images which pass across this glowing sphere.”

“Nor do you seem able to avert your gaze.”

Pellean’s eyes glistened with a hint of the fierceness of the warrior he had been when alive. “I suppose I should be made of ice or stone like yourself. You say you were once a man, you can turn away from the chance to gaze upon woman-love.”

“Enough, both of you.” Azena’s pretty countenance appeared pained by the exchange. “We are called the Wise Ones,” she went on. “What kind of wisdom is there in quibbling about human foibles?”

Morden smiled. “You are right, my dear. I suppose that thread inside us that was once human will always remind us of what we were.”

“Of course it will.” Wizen, mage of little words, finally spoke. “If we did not retain these threads, our hubris would make us impossibly cruel. We would have put Sha’ul to death for his little trick.” He sighed. “But we understand his motivations and cannot condemn him too much.” He looked at the vision ball.

As they were speaking, the scene showed the former sorcerer, bundled against the cold, standing on the deck of the ferry that would take him across the Veltish Channel.

Azena sighed. “Even now, he goes to her,” she said sadly, “even though he can do nothing for her.” She gazed at the solitary man, watching the open water from his place at the railing of the crescent shaped vessel, the wind lifting his dark hair.

The vision shifted to the sorceress and her warrior companion, embedded on their path deep in the Hidden Forest, their chaya beast at their heels. They had been traveling the same path for several weeks now and once again looked weary after their rest in the Women’s Village.

Morden looked carefully at the sorceress’ expression. He expected her to appear bewildered and frightened as she had previously, but her face wore a look of calm determination and strength. He nodded approvingly. This journey so far had seasoned her a bit. Her brief affair with the queen had deepened the healing Sha’ul began with her. The deep-seated strength Morden had seen in her face, watching her wield her master’s broadsword had begun to surface.

All praise to Galen.

She would need that strength and determination. She was coming ever closer to facing Dogon, her nemesis.

* * * *

Lara spotted the small cottage in the clearing. Her heartbeat quickened. Smoke curled from the chimney nestled in the thatched roof. A small well sat in the front yard and a vegetable and herb garden proliferated off to the side. In spite of its innocent appearance, something about the little dwelling spoke of magery.

She stopped walking and stood, staring at the cottage, searching for a sign of life aside from the chickens scratching and pecking around in the front yard.

“Lara, is something the matter?” Danni’s voice held concern.

She glanced at him. Behind him, Growlie leaned down and nudged Danni’s shoulder. Danni sighed, pulled a dried strip of meat from his pack and offered it.

“Nothing’s the matter. I’m going to go knock on the front door.”

Danni’s brow furrowed and his hazel eyes darkened with worry. “What door? Where?”

She pointed. “Of that cottage just a few feet away.”

Danni turned in the direction of her finger. She saw his eyes were blank as he looked where she pointed.

“You don’t see it?”

He shook his head. “No. I see a bare spot of earth surrounded by forest.”

Lara’s breath hitched. So, her intuition had been correct. “Magery,” she murmured. “There is most definitely a dwelling in this spot. Wait here.”

Danni reached for his crossbow. “No. I’ll go with you. What if they’re Dark Mages? Or something equally horrible?”

She looked at him, trying to ignore the fierce pumping of her heart. “If there is a Dark Mage within, Danni, your crossbow would not even serve to give a pinprick.”

Danni’s face fell, and he lowered the crossbow. “Bloody hell,” he muttered, his frustration painfully evident.

“That is the problem, my friend,” she said gently, “The Abuser has made the world unnatural and a warrior cannot have his proper place.”

Danni stepped up to her and put his arms around her. “Please be careful, Lara.”

She looked up at him, her hands squeezing his upper arms. The muscles quivered under her touch. “I will.”

Gently he released her and she turned back to the cottage. Step by step, she drew closer, her heart galloping at a frightening speed. Approaching the crude wooden door, she lifted her hand and knocked.

A moment passed with no response, but momentarily she heard a scraping sound, presumably the legs of a chair dragging across the floor. The latch of the door lifted and the door creaked open, a mere few inches.

“Who’s there?” The demanding voice was deep, rich, and male.

“Forgive my intrusion, sir, I am Lara bat Karan. My friend and I are traveling through this forest and are in need of rest. May we...”

The door swung open revealing a tall, strikingly handsome man. The man from her vision. The man Sarna was destined to love.

Lara gasped. “You?” she breathed.

The man’s features, an obvious blend of the sleek cat-like appearance of Pierrans and the carved strength of Veltlanders, were utterly familiar. His ebony hair, sleek and long was pulled back at his nape. His skin was the color of burnished gold, a few shades deeper than Lara’s skin. He raised his eyebrows. “I should be the one saying that,” he answered.

He opened the door fully and looked past her. Lara saw by his expression he’d spied Danni and the chaya beast. “By the gods,” he muttered. “A tame chaya. I’ve never seen the like.”

Lara nodded. “Why, sir, did you say you should marvel at my presence on your doorstep?”

He looked at her, nearly taking her breath away by his sheer magnificence. “They sent you to me without telling you of my whereabouts?”

“The Council, you mean?”

“Aye, those caring souls.” The sarcasm dripped from his tone.

Her stomach fluttered. “You mean, you’re the one who will join your powers with mine?”

The hint of a smile touched his lips. “I’m said *one*.” He held out his hand. “Elan.”

She accepted the handshake, her hand disappearing into his large, strong one. He reminded her much of Sha’ul, making her ache for her master all the more.

“I’m honored,” she said softly. “My companion, Danni, he couldn’t see the cottage. For all I know, he sees me talking to air. Why?”

Elan chuckled, but then his grin faded quickly and he sighed. “Bring him in. I’ll give you some food, drink, and explanation.”

* * * *

“Queen Maya was my mother.” Elan set down two tankards of mead to accompany the freshly baked bread he served his guests.

Lara had given Danni an enchantment that allowed him to see Elan and his home. Growlie lounged comfortably in the yard, resting after his hearty meal of *pancha* meat stew. At the mention of the Pierran queen, a sharp pang stabbed through Lara’s chest. “Queen Maya was your mother?”

He nodded, seating himself on the opposite bench across the table from her and Danni. “Aye. My father was a Veltish minister. I was their love child. She hid me here from her avenging husband to be raised by her oracle whom she trusted with my life. He was my teacher. He recently passed on.”

Lara absorbed his story in silence, aware of Danni’s gaze on her. She wondered if Elan knew about her father. “You must have been young,” she said softly. “I was a slave in the palace for four years and I never saw you.” Elan appeared nearly as old as Sha’ul.

“I was but four when she put me in hiding. My brother Dorian, the legitimate heir, was born shortly after that.

Dorian, the king whom Ariana had seduced in order to rescue her.

Elan looked squarely at Lara with an assessing gaze. “The Wise Ones did tell me about you. I’m ... very sorry that your father suffered so at my mother’s hands.”

The sympathy in his voice softened her. “You can hardly be to blame,” she said. “You were as much a pawn as I.”

He took a thoughtful sip of mead. “Perhaps, Lara. But she was my mother and I cannot help but feel there was something she could have done for the General.”

“Ariana, my father’s wife, rescued me from the palace after Queen Maya’s death. Ariana told me that your mother had been tricked by magery.” Lara fell silent and took a soothing sip of the warm mead. The sweetness of the fermented honey and the light sting of alcohol swam in her veins, making her feel slightly heady and relaxed.

Elan nodded. “That has the sound of truth. Orax allowed her telepathic communication with me. So I grew to know her mind quite well. She was an intelligent woman, yet believed herself invulnerable to dark magery.

Lara sat quietly. Speaking of the queen brought the chill of her memories to the fore. She wished she could banish such thoughts, but couldn’t. She would have to face them soon enough for real.

“I can see from your eyes alone, you had an ordeal you wish not to remember.”

Elan’s voice cut through her reverie. His words shot like an arrow right into her heart.

She didn't realize she was staring at him until he smiled gently. When he did so, tiny lines formed in the planes of his cheeks and a glow came over his brown eyes. She wondered if he knew that there was a beautiful queen in his future. "I'm sorry, Lara, I didn't mean to speak invasively. It's just that I've lived in hiding for so long, I've become both out of touch with communication and highly sensitized at the same time. I've no skill with basic human interaction. It's a strange state to be in."

"You're doing fine. But I understand," she answered. "It's taken me over seven years to begin to heal." She recounted her story of Ariana's rescue, their escape from the palace and journey back to the Veltlands. She told him about how her grandfather had seen the mark of the sorceress and brought her to Sha'ul. She could not hide her affection from her tone when she spoke of her master and how he'd trained her and then come to her and guided them through the mountain pass. She saw understanding in Elan's expression, that he guessed the relationship between her and her master. Her desire to return to him was undeniable even when unexpressed.

She looked at him and then at Danni who gazed back at her, his eyes simmering with concern and sympathy. "I'm terrified," she confessed. "I haven't wanted to come out and say it, but I am." Her delicate yet strong hand closed tightly around the handle of her tankard. The warmth of the mead infused her skin, bringing a small measure of comfort. What she really wanted was Sha'ul. He'd told her he was on his way to find her, but Galen only knew when that would be since he had no magery to shorten his journey.

Danni reached out and closed his hand over hers, which rested on the table. The warmth of his callused skin brought a familiar comfort, even though it wasn't the haven of Sha'ul's arms.

"Are you brother and sister?"

Danni shook his head. "No, sir. Friends."

Elan studied Danni's face and Lara could see from his liquid gaze that he understood Danni's feelings for her. "Aye, I see." He turned his attention to Lara. "I wish I could say you have nothing to fear, but my knowledge of the true Abuser is very limited. The Wise Ones..." he paused and cleared his throat, as if suppressing a commentary, "Have chosen to keep me in ignorance until you found me." He leaned forward, the soft sunlight filtering through the cottage window played on his skin. "I can assure you, however, that you have my unflinching support."

Lara bowed her head. "Thank you, Elan."

"You're welcome." He paused and took a sip of mead. He broke off a chunk of bread and dipped it in a tub of freshly churned butter. "Now, if you feel ready, I need you to tell me everything you know."

Lara heaved a deep sigh. Danni's hand still rested on hers and she turned her hand over underneath it, lacing her fingers with his. She needed the strength he gave her to speak of the things that terrified her most. "I'm afraid that I have only surmised the truth of the situation, but I believe it to be what has happened." She paused and cleared her throat, feeling already that she would choke on the hated name she had to say. "I believe it was ... Dogon." Lara forced her mouth to form the syllables. "I have no doubt he is guilty for everything that's happened. For my father's undoing; for your mother's death. He ... he terrorized me in the *haram*." A heavy lump formed in her throat.

Danni squeezed her hand gently.

"The eve of my initiation was almost come. He had chosen me for that night. He ...

was ... going to ... rape me. But Ariana rescued me in time.” She could barely staunch the flow of tears that threatened to flow. “Somehow, the answer lies with him. I don’t know if he is, himself, a dark mage or if he has one that he employs.” She sighed again. “I do know that I will have to go in there and face him.”

Elan nodded, his expression solemn. He radiated an inner strength that bolstered her confidence a bit. “You won’t be alone, Lara. Whatever needs to be done, I’m going in with you.”

Danni cleared his throat, his fingers tightening on Lara’s with a protective force. “When is this going to happen?”

Lara looked expectantly at Elan.

He regarded her with gentle, yet troubled, sympathy. “I’m afraid that now you’re here, we must go as soon as possible. Tomorrow would probably not be too soon.”

Lara swallowed past a sudden painful lump in her throat. She was grateful that Danni’s hand did not leave hers. “All right.”

Elan rose from the bench and proceeded to pace, his dark features drawn in thought. “Now, to formulate our plan.” He clasped his hands behind his back. A fiery urgency seemed to fuel his pace.

As she watched him, she understood that Elan, too, would have a stake in vengeance. After all, he’d been torn from his mother at a tender age to live with strangers in hiding, only to have his mother murdered, knowing he’d never see her again. Somehow, the understanding of their shared pain gave her a measure of comfort. Elan emanated empathy, and perhaps his forced isolation had made him more open to connecting with her.

He stopped. One hand went to his chin, rubbing it thoughtfully. He turned to Lara, his dark eyes soft with a tentative expression. “Lara, there is only one way I can think of to penetrate the palace and find the source of the corruption, for certainly, with magery, it emanates from a center and sets off chains of effect.”

Her heart lurched. Somehow, intuitively, she knew, also. “What is that way?”

He sighed and took his seat again. “I’m afraid you’ll have to present yourself to Dogon. Allow him to think you’re at his disposal.”

“Absolutely not!” Danni’s fist pounded the table and he stood up, releasing Lara’s hand. “I will not let her put herself in such danger.”

Lara stared up at him. She’d never seen Danni so angry in all the time she’d known him. His face burned dark red and his eyes blazed a frightening shade of green. The muscles in his jaw and throat worked vigorously. He was every inch the fierce warrior he was bred to be.

“You’re both mages,” he said between clenched teeth. “Find a different way.”

She reached up a gentle hand on his arm. At her touch, he looked down. “Danni, it’s okay. Please sit down.” She looked at Elan who observed them both with a surprisingly serene expression. “He’s very protective of me.”

“Yes, I see.”

“Danni, Elan is right. If we go in there and begin using magery, even under concealment, Dogon will know. He’ll kill us and then escalate his war.”

Danni sat down slowly. The anger in his face drained to what appeared to be sorrow. He shook his head mournfully. “To my dying day, Lara, I’ll never understand.” His eyes gazed on her, the swirl of green-gold in his irises glistening and melting. “How they, up

here, or wherever they are, or Lord Galen can enforce a prophecy that makes you endanger your life and have to leave the people you love. It's despicable."

"You're right." Elan's voice carried softly across the table. "The whole situation reeks of injustice. But so does the very corruption that led to this pass. It must end, for all humankind to live in peace again."

Lara put her hand over Danni's. His distress temporarily displaced her own burden of fear. "Perhaps in a strange way, we need these adversities. They bring out what's best and deepest inside us. Your show of love for me a minute ago, for example." She smiled.

Danni nodded. "I understand, but I still feel the same." He looked at Elan. "I apologize for my outburst."

"No apology needed. I understand."

"What can I do?" Danni asked after a moment's quiet.

Elan sighed. "You will be needed here. When Lara and I return, we'll desperately need you to look after us. We'll be using the Defiances. They are the most draining. If you were to come with us, the power reserve would be dangerously taxed."

Danni's jaw clenched and Lara knew that was not quite the answer he desired. "Very well."

Lara nodded solemnly. She remembered how enervated and ill she'd felt after using the Defiances to get her, Danni and Growlie away from the Pierrans. It had taken her nearly a fortnight resting in Sarna's hut to regain her strength. Now she understood. If Danni and Growlie had not been with her, she wouldn't have been quite so drained.

"Danni, I won't let anything happen to Lara, I give you my word." Elan's voice emanated fierce determination. "I won't let her leave my sight. She may be visible to Dogon, but I won't be and I will not let him hurt her." He turned to Lara. "I'll have the forest witches make up the necessary garb for you so we don't have to go into the port town. We'll take this night to rest and then go to the palace at first light." He paused and Lara could see that he was reflecting on their plan. "You'll reappear to Dogon with a story of having been recaptured and brought especially to him."

Chills snaked furiously up and down her arms and spine. "Will he ... will he believe this?"

Elan nodded. "My mother used to speak to me about this man. She suspected he was plotting something against her with Dorian. Perhaps the reason she didn't believe he would ever succeed was that he could be blinded by a desire. Apparently, he desired to possess Lara. According to my mother, he had once behaved the same way with Ariana, but when she became my mother's personal slave, he did not dare violate that authority."

The mention of Ariana's name filled Lara with longing to see her.

"Another reason why the queen did not see her death coming from poison," Danni concluded. "She saw his acquiescence ultimately as loyalty."

"A loyalty he certainly did not possess." Elan fell silent and took a sip of mead.

Lara did the same to give herself something to do with her now trembling hands. She set her tankard down, grateful for the fermented sweetness of the beverage that helped soothe her nerves a bit. She told Elan about her exhaustion from the Defiance practice when escaping the Pierran soldiers.

Elan nodded. "Aye. That is most certainly why we are paired for this mission. Our combined powers will help preserve our strength, as well as allow me to protect you." He paused and directed an even gaze into hers. He leaned forward. "And I will protect you,

Lara. I will see you to return safely to your master's arms."

Chapter Fourteen

Lara.

Sha'ul! Lara nearly burst into tears at the sound of his voice. *Sha'ul, my lord.*

Sweetling, I'm with you in spirit.

Aye. He promised not to let me out of his sight as long as we're here. Where are you?

I'm just south of Marea.

Lara's heart ached. He was more than halfway to Elan's cottage. *I miss you so. I'm frightened half to death.*

I miss you too, love. You're strong and brave, my girl. I know you'll succeed. I must go now, my darling. He left to continue his journey and Lara took heart from the fact that every step he took brought him closer to her.

*

Sha'ul didn't want to leave Lara, but he also didn't want to alarm her by telling her about the spear pointed into his back through his cloak.

The night was dark for the new Weiran moon phase, yet the glow of his small campfire illuminated the Pierran soldiers surrounding him, all spears directed at his back and chest.

He sighed and held his hands up. There was no point in resistance. He had no magery to use on them and knew they did. To try and fight would be to die immediately.

A booted foot came out and kicked him in the hip. "Get up, Veltish dog. You're ours now."

Sha'ul went to obey, but another boot cocked him in the back. The shaft of spear cracked over his head. And the butt of a dagger against his forehead sent the world spinning into blackness.

*

Lara opened her eyes, unaware that she'd fallen asleep at all. She'd spent a long time speaking with Sha'ul who, though on his way to her, was still so distant. He'd urged her to try and rest, yet the never-ending roil of thoughts and worries kept her awake until she was certain dawn was approaching.

Danni stirred on his makeshift pallet on the floor beside her bed. Elan had given her his own bed to sleep in and had made himself a spot in another corner. Elan himself, she noticed, had already risen and built a fire in the hearth. His back was to her as he bent over, stirring something she guessed was for their breakfast. She sat up quickly, rubbing her eyes.

"May I help you?" she asked the sorcerer.

"It's all finished," he said, not turning around. "But thanks."

Danni sat up, rubbed his eyes and looked at her. Judging from the lines around his eyes, he, too, had remained largely sleepless. Without speaking, he reached for her hands, grasping them with warm strength. He brought her hands to his lips and held them there, his eyes closed, the heavy fringe of his lashes resting on his cheeks.

Lara closed her eyes too, feeling the years of friendship pass unspoken words between them about what they meant to each other.

“The forest witches left you the garb you need,” Elan said gently when Danni had released her hands and stood up.

Lara rose from the bed, her stomach a tumble of riotous nerves. She smoothed down the covers and went over to the table, her gaze on a small brightly colored bundle. “That was kind of them,” she murmured, picking up the folded piece and holding it in outstretched arms.

The material, a richly hued blue, unfolded and draped open in a whisper of gauzy silk. Her heart sank as she recognized the revealing silks of a Pierran bed-slave. “I had hoped never to see one of these again as long as I lived.”

Danni’s hand closed comfortingly on her shoulder. He squeezed it briefly then released her, going to help Elan serve the morning meal before their departure.

Lara went to the corner of the cottage to change. She noticed that Elan and Danni respectfully kept their backs turned while she removed her blouse and trousers and slipped on the gauzy shift that was a bed-slave’s only worldly possession. Bed-slaves, male and female, did not even wear shoes, for they never left the palace and spent most of their time in a bed. Undoubtedly, Elan would see much of her body before this ordeal was over as well as Dogon. She closed her eyes against the nightmarish prospect that the monster would rip her gown off again and rake a lascivious gaze over her naked flesh. Worse still, that he might touch her. The only thing that kept her from screaming was Elan’s assurance that he would always be there.

Since there was still a bit of time before they left, she picked up her blouse and slipped it over the sheer silk before joining Danni and Elan at the table. Elan had made porridge and a tea of sweet-smelling herbs. Her tight stomach could only accept a few swallows of tea.

“Lara, you must eat something.” Danni’s brow furrowed deeply with his obvious concern.

“I can’t eat, Danni. I’m sorry.”

“Your appetite will return when this is all over,” Elan said.

Lara looked at him. “You seem certain that we will survive and succeed. How can you be sure?”

Elan returned her gaze. He had finished his porridge and was sipping tea. Steam curled from his cup. “Because, Lara, we have no choice. For me, your not coming back to Sha’ul is not an option. My not having time to live in freedom and walk anywhere I choose, visible to the world, is not negotiable. I will have that. My mother’s death will not go unavenged. Your father’s suffering and yours will not go unrequited. Is that explanation acceptable to you?”

Wordlessly, she nodded.

Elan squared his shoulders. Apparently his outward serenity had been covering an impassioned determination and inward preparation for their mission. “Well then, finish your tea and we’ll go.”

Bolstered by Elan’s response, Lara drained her cup and rose from the table.

Elan stood in the space between the table and the hearth fire. “We can leave directly from here,” he said.

Again Lara nodded, aware that Danni had risen too and stood close to her, his roiling emotions bouncing off of her as if they were physical entities. She turned to him, forcing back tears. She saw that he was trying to hide the stricken look in his eyes, yet was

unsuccessful. "We'll be back as soon as we can." Her words choked out in a strangled whisper.

Danni reached out and pulled her into his arms. "You had better," he murmured, squeezing her tightly.

Lara returned his embrace. When they finally pulled away from each other's arms, Lara took up the hem of her blouse to lift it off.

Danni began to turn his back.

"Danni, no," she said softly. "Don't turn." She lifted the blouse over her head and handed it to him, watching him take in the sight of her in the sheer gown. His eyes widened, reflecting his reverent appreciation. "If it's the last time..."

"Don't even say it." He bore a sudden dark look into her eyes.

She swallowed hard. "I'm sorry."

His expression softened. "Go in peace, Lara." He cupped her cheeks and pressed a tiny, soft kiss onto her lips. The kiss lasted but a second and he raised his head and looked at her. "Go on."

One last look at her friend and she turned and joined Elan by the hearth. She looked up at him, her heart beating quickly. She felt naked in front of him, her breasts tenting the translucent gown. To her surprise, his gaze remained on her eyes, not venturing anywhere else. She remembered then her vision and realized this was the time to tell him. If something happened to her, and he survived to return, she wouldn't have another chance. *There's something I must tell you, Elan*, she said telepathically.

He raised his eyebrows. *What is it?*

Before Danni and I came here, I met a woman, a tall beautiful woman with a soft heart. She aches to love and be loved. I had a vision of her with you. I believe she's destined to come to you.

Elan appeared to start. *Are you certain of this?*

She nodded. *Quite certain. I don't know when she will come, but I do know she will.*

The deep brown of Elan's eyes appeared to melt. His longing for companionship became quite evident in the downward twitch of his lips and the melancholy that flickered across his eyes in that moment. *Thank you, Lara.*

She gave him a tiny smile.

Now, he said, *put your arms around me.*

She did as he said. Elan's body was sinewy and strong, as if he'd trained many years as an athlete or warrior. She knew he probably had undergone years of physical strengthening simply for magery, as Sha'ul had done with her.

Elan's strong arms enclosed her and he pressed the length of his front against hers. She expected to feel him harden against her, the way Sha'ul did when she embraced him, but he didn't, the power of his concentration channeled like a forceful wave of heat.

"Defiances, Lara," he said in a commanding tone. "Vanishing and traveling both. Now."

Lara pressed her hands into Elan's back and squeezed her eyes shut, invoking both spells. The air around her whirled in her ears, pulsing hot, then cold, then hot again. She gripped Elan as tight as her arms could flex, her cheek pressed against his solid chest. She felt the tingling of the invisibility spell coursing through her body as well as they dizzying lurch of the traveling spell.

Suddenly, the sensations all vanished and she felt as if they were quietly standing in Elan's cottage again, wrapped in their embrace of sorcery. She opened her eyes, blinking

the lack of focus from them.

The first thing she saw was the earthen tone of Elan's tunic. She slowly loosened her arms around him, not feeling nearly as dazed and ill as she had when escaping the Pierrans. She lifted her head from Elan's chest. His hands slid from her back to rest on her upper arms.

Are you all right, Lara?

She nodded. *And you?*

Aye. I've lived in vanishment my whole life. It's a child's game for me.

She blinked again and turned her head slightly, her vision connecting with a bright splash of scarlet. The color spread under her feet and Elan's boots. Carpet. Thick, plush, royal carpet. She glanced to where the edge of the carpet contrasted with the white coldness of marble.

Pierra. The palace. Here she was. Again.

Elan's hands tightened on her arms. *Easy, Lara. I'm here with you. No one can see us.* Gently he released her arms. To her relief, he slipped on hand over hers, holding it like she was a child. *We need to find Dogon.*

Lara shuddered. *I cannot begin to know where he is.*

We will begin at the haram. When a slave is dispatched to his quarters, we will follow her.

Her mouth went suddenly dry and a harsh lump formed in her throat. She looked about the rest of the large airy hall in which they found themselves. Massive columns lined the walls, alternated with statues of women in flowing robes and men in tunics. She gathered her bearings, remembering the grandeur of the main entrance. The *haram* quarters were in the back. A special narrow corridor branched off to this portion of the palace, heavily guarded and secluded. Gripping Elan's hand, she set off in the direction of the dreaded *haram*.

Once they reached the corridor, the massive wooden doors guarded by a heavily muscled guard in a loincloth came into view.

Lara froze in her tracks, staring at the wall of man, one bear-like hand closed around a vicious-looking spear. We should have ended up inside. How will we get in?

Defiance, of course, Elan reminded her gently. *Shift your appearance before you reappear. I will follow you through the door when the guard opens it.*

Shift her appearance. Her heart trembled and she felt dizzy. She was about to do what Ariana had been forced to do years before. Change her appearance and re-enter the place of her terrible enslavement.

Elan squeezed her hand. *I won't leave you, little one.*

Promise?

You have my word.

Lara closed her eyes and invoked the shifting spell. It wasn't until too late she realized in her nervousness, she'd forgotten to envision the physical characteristics she needed to take. Sha'ul had taught her that if she missed this step, she would take on the form of the woman who was closest to her heart.

The spell locked and she opened her eyes.

Elan was looking down at her, his eyes wide.

Did it work?

He nodded. *You are a beautiful transformation.*

Lara looked at her hands, pale and smooth. She picked up a lock of her hair, ruby red, like Ariana's. She gasped. *Elan, what color are my eyes?*

Green, like emeralds.

Sickening bile rose in her gut like a snake uncoiling to attack. *Elan, this is terrible! I look like Ariana. If they see me, they'll kill me! I need to turn back.*

Not now. You're visible and the guard has seen you. He clasped her shoulder. *He does not appear to recognize you. If you vanish now, you invite trouble.* Gently, he urged her to walk toward the entrance where the guard had already stood aside. Her body trembled and her legs felt like mush. Each step was the most difficult labor she'd ever experienced. Her terror was like a white hot flash of blinding pain.

Close behind her, Elan followed her through the doorway. *That's it, Lara. Steady.* His hand did not leave her shoulder.

In the main room of the women's *haram*, time seemed to have stood still. Except for many different faces, the bed-slaves of all races and colors still lounged about on silken cushions and divans draped with fur skins. None of the women seemed to recognize her as Ariana. Bowls of sugar candies, fruits and nuts covered the tables, providing the only diversion in the room aside from lounging and looking either bored or sullen. Here and there in the wide expanse of the echoing hall, women lay together in pairs, shunning the boredom with a bit of sex play with each other. Soft cries and moans bounced off the marble walls from distant sofas, the sounds of pleasure.

Except for one.

In a far corner, a young woman's cries carried to her ears. The woman was begging to be let go. Lara turned in the direction of the voice. A young woman with golden hair, dressed in a shell pink gown, her hands bound behind her back, was on her knees before another woman, seated on a divan. Lara fought down the urge to gasp as she recognized the woman sitting, holding the lead binding the girl's hands.

Mardya. She now wore the gold trimmed robe of the *haram* keeper. Galen only knew the things she'd done to advance herself to this position. The woman yanked hard on the tether, forcing the crying girl to shuffle forward on her knees. When she was close enough, Mardya leaned over and slid the girl across the slick marble so that her face was between Mardya's knees.

Lara froze, watching the horrible scene, remembering her own nightmares at Mardya's hands.

Mardya threw up the hem of her skirt, exposing her dark mound and leaned against the divan's cushions, her legs spread open. She wound her hands in the girl's golden hair, pulling her crying face against her crotch.

Lara looked wildly around for someone who would interfere. Of course, every woman in the room acted as if nothing were happening. Rape was a steady part of the diet in the *haram*.

Red hot anger washed away Lara's terror. *That's her, she told Elan. The woman who raped me. I'm going to stop her.*

No. Elan's hand tightened on her shoulder. *Don't bring attention to yourself. I'll do it.* He released her and wound his way swiftly through the maze of couches and lounging female bodies.

Lara followed him, discreetly pretending to be as bored as the other inhabitants, although her jaw muscles clenched and her hands were balled into fists.

Elan went up behind Mardya. His hands came out and gripped her neck.

Mardya's eyes flew open, her legs snapped shut, pushing the girl away. Then she went limp.

Lara went to the girl who was slumped over, crying hysterically. Her sound was undoubtedly that of a new arrival, alone and terrified, as she once had been. Kneeling down, she immediately untied the girl's hands. "It's alright, little one," she crooned. "She won't hurt you again." She worked off the bindings and cast them aside. She placed a soothing hand on the girl's hair.

With her hands free, the girl swabbed viciously at her mouth, wiping away Mardya's vaginal juices from her lips. Her wide blue eyes fastened on Lara's face. "Don't hurt me!" she begged.

Lara's heart squeezed painfully and she fought back tears. She had reacted the same way when Ariana pulled Mardya off of her. "I won't, sweetling. I promise." She reached out and pulled the hysterical girl into her arms. The girl sagged against her, wetting Lara's blue gown with her tears. Lara smoothed a palm over her back and looked up at Elan, who had knelt down nearby. *Is Mardya dead?*

He shook his head. *Nay. But she'll be out for quite some time. And when she comes to, she won't remember anything.*

"What have you done to Mardya?"

Lara looked up at the sound of the female voice, speaking Pierran tinged with a heavy accent she didn't recognize.

A dark-haired beauty in a bright green slave's gown was looking down at her, arms folded across her chest. A fan of brightly painted nails showed like claws against her skin.

"I've done nothing," Lara answered. "She must be ill. She fainted."

The woman drummed her talons against her pale skin. Behind her, a couple of other women rallied.

Lara's heartbeat quickened, but she was still angry and adrenaline rushed hotly through her veins. "Perhaps you should fetch a physician to attend her."

The woman raised an eyebrow. She glanced over her shoulder at the other women who eyed Mardya's limp body, her legs spread open, her head lolling back on the cushions.

Lara wondered at the eager grins spreading on their faces.

"You needn't concern yourself, Miss Red Hair," the brunette drawled. "We know just how to take care of this one."

Lara looked at Elan. He put a finger to his lips. *Let justice be done*, he said gently. *Tend to this poor woman in your arms.*

She nodded and turned back to Mardya's victim. "Come," she said softly, "Let's go into the chambers so you can rest." With Elan's invisible hands helping her, Lara rose to her feet, urging the girl with her. She led her away just as the women crowded around Mardya, each cackling in a shrill voice what she would love to see as the woman's fate. Each suggestion earned a round of high-pitched giggles.

The sounds grew fainter once Lara escorted the girl into the hall of sleeping cubicles. The girl stopped in front of the third curtain, indicating her own cubicle. Lara drew the curtain aside and had the young woman sit on her bed. She sat down next to her and held her hand. Elan stood just inside the curtain, guarding them.

“Don’t worry, little one,” Lara murmured, allowing the words of comfort to flow. “If I have anything to say, you’ll never have to suffer at Mardya’s hands again.”

The girl looked up at her, her huge blue eyes red from tears. Long golden lashes framed the large soulful pools. High cheekbones and a turned up nose accentuated her dusky lips. She was a very lovely girl. “How do you know her name? I’ve not seen you here before.”

Lara squeezed her hand gently. “I was a girl here long ago. Mardya used to rape me, too.”

“Oh.” Fresh tears spilled from her eyes. “Thank you so much for helping me. You’re the first kind person I’ve met here. I want to go home so much!” She fell against Lara, her head on her shoulder.

Lara stroked her hair and glanced up at Elan. He watched them with a sympathetic expression tinged with righteous anger.

“Where is your home?”

“Marea.”

Pain seared Lara’s heart and she rested her cheek on the girl’s head. “My name is Lara,” she said as he hand moved over the girl’s silky hair.

The girl sniffled and raised her head, wiping her tears with her fingertips. “I’m Petal.” She blinked tears off her lashes and sat up. A sudden wild desperation flashed to life in her eyes.

“Can you keep him away from me?” she asked.

A pain like a knife sliced through Lara’s gut. “Keep who away?” She asked the question though somehow, she already knew the answer. She flickered a glance at Elan, whose presence helped raise her courage.

The girl’s rosy bottom lip trembled and tears shimmered in her eyes. “D ... Do...”

“Dogon,” Lara finished for her.

Petal bobbed her head vigorously, her shoulders quaking with an onslaught of fresh sobs.

Lara squeezed her in her arms. “I’ll protect you, Petal,” she promised. “He won’t hurt you anymore.” She looked up at Elan. *Will I be able to keep this promise?*

He fixed her with a dark stare. *As I said before we left my cottage, you have no choice but to keep it.*

In the distance, the women in the main hall were whooping and hollering. Lara looked again at Elan. *What do you think they’re doing to her?*

He shook his head. *I cannot imagine. But whatever it is, she certainly has earned it.*

Lara nodded, her arms comfortingly over Petal’s shoulder.

Petal was still sniffing. “He hurts me,” she murmured in a thick voice. “How can you protect me? You’re a slave too.”

The word slave sent chills coursing through Lara’s body. “You’ll have to trust me.”

Petal stared at her, wide-eyed. Wordlessly, she nodded.

“When he calls for you the next time, I’ll go with you.”

“Praise to Galen,” Petal said. “I go alone every time.” Her pretty face crumpled in sorrow. “I had a fiancée. I was meant for him. They killed him and brought me here. Now I’m ruined. No decent man will ever have me.” She looked down. “Not that I’ll ever be free again.”

The grief in Petal’s voice nearly moved Lara to tell her the truth. A look from Elan

reminded her of the danger of such a confession. "Petal, I will do my best to help you. Just be patient and brave."

Petal nodded, wiping at the streaks of tears staining her cheeks.

Out in the main hall, the women had fallen silent. Lara looked at Elan. *I think they have finished with Mardya.*

Aye. It's very quiet out there.

She had to get Petal out of here before the poor creature died either of a broken heart or from Dogon's cruelty.

"Strange woman!" A female voice echoed down the long hall of cubicles. "Strange woman! Come out!"

Lara recognized the voice of the brunette slave who had asked her what she'd done to Mardya.

Elan peeked through the curtain then looked at Lara. Something has happened, he said silently. It appears as if all the women in the *haram* are heading this way to see you.

Lara's heart lurched. What did these women want with her? She looked up at Elan.

I'm here, Lara. They cannot harm you.

She swallowed hard and gently disengaged Petal from her embrace.

Elan stood aside for and she stepped out from behind the curtain just as a crowd of women, led by the brunette filled the corridor.

They came to a stop in front of her. The brunette pinned her gaze. "We don't believe you about Mardya," she said. "You did something to her."

Although her heart and stomach felt as if a pair of iron hands were wringing them mercilessly, Lara squared her shoulder and folded her arms across her front, returning the dark-haired woman's even gaze. "She was raping Petal. I had to stop her."

"There's barely a woman in this *haram* she hasn't had her way with," the brunette said. She put her hands, palms together, in front of her and bowed. "On behalf of every woman standing here, we thank you most sincerely." Behind her, each woman followed her movement. The entire hall echoed with the rustle of silks as what must have been one hundred women bowed to her.

Lara stared at them, her voice frozen in her throat. She dragged her gaze to Elan, still invisible, close behind her in the narrow corridor. He broke out into a grin.

The woman straightened and looked at Lara. "I am Saryn," she said.

Lara cleared her throat and bowed in return. "Lara."

Saryn's brow furrowed. "We have spoken amongst ourselves and the consensus is that you are no ordinary mortal. Are you a mage?"

It's all right now, Elan told her. Reveal yourself.

Trusting that Elan had his purpose for urging her toward truth, she invoked the Defiance to return to her normal appearance.

A collective gasp echoed through the hall. A hundred pairs of eyes, as far back as Lara could see, stared at her, then moved in unison to a point behind her. Feminine sighs of satisfaction rippled through the crowd.

Lara turned and gasped herself. Elan had revealed himself. From the corner of her eye, she saw Petal, standing with the curtain pulled aside, gaping back and forth between her and the sorcerer behind her.

Like a human shower of rain, every last woman dropped to her knees in a reverential bow.

“Please don’t!” Lara begged. “You mustn’t!”

Saryn rose first, her hands pressed together in a symbol of respect. “Please, my lady, let us pay you honor. You have freed us from a tyrant. We owe both of you our lives.”

The women behind her all nodded. Murmurs of assent undulated through the crowd.

Saryn looked at Elan, her expression sliding into a silky smile. “We know how to repay the sorcerer, my lady, but perhaps you are not so inclined. Please, think of some way we can repay you.”

Lara sighed. These women were grateful to her, and yet, for all their gratitude, they could very well remain enslaved in the palace indefinitely. Her burden weighed on her with a physical force that caused her shoulders to sag. “My friend and I have come here to rid Pierra and the world of the one who has abused magery and will enslave the entire planet. I need only to know where he is.”

“Name your man, my lady. “We know where all of them are at nearly all times. They use us so frequently, yet they think we’re mindless receptacles of their lust. We know better.”

Lara nodded, bowing her head. “I thank you humbly, Saryn. It is Dogon I seek.”

“I remember her now!” A woman cried from several women back. She jostled her way through. A plump woman with red hair and pale skin sprayed with freckles. “I remember you, my lady. Mardya used to terrorize her.” She curtsied and smiled with shining brown eyes at Lara. “I remember you disappeared one day.” Her smile faded. “We all thought he’d killed you.”

“You needn’t seek him out, my lady,” Saryn said. “He comes here each night to take Petal and any other girls that suit his fancy in the moment. They never come back without tears in their eyes.” Anger burned in her dark eyes. “We will help you in any way we can.”

Lara turned to Elan. “Elan, I cannot ask them to risk their lives. He is powerful and without conscience.”

Elan nodded. “I agree.”

Cries of protest immediately rose up.

“Please,” Saryn said, her hands out in a pleading gesture. “Dogon makes Mardya appear like a puppy dog. If what you say is true, and he is an abuser of magery, surely if you rid the world of him, we will be free to go home. Is that not true?”

Lara bowed her head. “I would pray that it is, Saryn.”

Saryn turned and looked at the women behind her, then back at Lara. Her lips pressed in a determined line, her dark eyes fierce. “We will take any risk to be free of this gilded cage, my lady. Any risk. If we die freeing ourselves, it is worth it. You were once a prisoner here, according to Fleya. You know that death is preferable to bed-slavery.”

Lara heaved a deep sigh. She could not deny the truth in Saryn’s words. She nodded. “Very well. I cannot thank you enough. You are a most honorable group of people.”

Saryn broke out into a wide grin, her eyes velvety. She flicked a seductive gaze at Elan. “We are not so honorable, you will find, if you put that delicious-looking sorcerer into our midst. If you want to show your thanks, let us have at him.”

The hall echoed with the deep rich sound of Elan’s laughter. “That is an offer I would normally jump at, kind ladies. However, I cannot let anything interrupt the flow of magery in which I’m engaged at this time.”

Saryn winked at him. “Very well, my lord. We’ll take this up again when Dogon is

vanquished.”

The women behind her all giggled.

Saryn’s expression grew serious and she looked again at Lara. “Wait with us this day, my lady. I assure you, after sundown, he will be here. And then we will help you fell destroy him.”

Chapter Fifteen

A sharp pain in Sha'ul's backside awoke him. He opened his eyes as a boot kick turned him over in the dirt. His hands were bound behind his back, making movement difficult, yet a gruff voice demanded he rise immediately.

"Get up, dog," the Pierran soldier growled at him. "We're moving on."

Sha'ul blinked hard several times as he struggled to his feet. Dried blood crusted one of his eyes shut and his head pounded fiercely. His throat felt swollen shut from thirst and every muscle in his body screamed out. His empty belly churned and gurgled, yet he knew it would not be filled any time soon.

Mustering his strength, he hailed Lara. She answered immediately. Praise to Galen she was well. He listened to her explain what had happened, from their Defiances that took her and Elan to the palace. She had accidentally shifted to Ariana's form, yet had gone unrecognized.

He took comfort in her voice, only absently registering the story about Mardya and how the women of the *haram* had rallied behind her and Elan. She told him about how Saryn and the others had taken Mardya, chopped off her hair, tore off her dress, bound her and smeared her cosmetic powders over her face to look like a demoness. They'd shoved her in her cubicle and left her there to get herself out. Really, she thought, they'd been quite merciful for what they'd suffered at her hands.

Lara, Elan and the others were now waiting for the evening until Dogon made his nightly call. That was the only part that distressed him, that and the fact that he could be dead before this was all over.

As he was marched with a group of other prisoners, crying women and children, men grunting from the pain of prodding spears, his hands still bound, he struggled with every ounce of discipline he possessed not to let his suffering come through in his voice. Lara was about to face her nemesis. Her life and his depended on it. He knew if she were aware of what was happening to him, she'd become hysterical and try to come to his aid. He clenched his jaw, fighting the words down. He told her only that he loved her and would be there as soon as he could.

* * * *

Lara watched the heavy door of the *haram* creak slowly open. She rose from the couch on which she'd been waiting. Behind her, Elan made himself invisible. After a day of deliberation, Elan had told her that the only way to disarm Dogon was the Sorcerer's Kiss.

Lara was the only one who could administer it.

Petal whimpered, but several of the women took her and held her protectively in their midst.

A cold wind preceded his entrance.

Lara's blood went icy hot in her veins and a cold sweat erupted on her skin. She struggled to keep her trembling invisible as he swept into the room with a swish of his minister's robes. Elan's presence, as well as the sense of protection she gained from the

women collected nearby were the only things suppressing the soul-ripping scream of terror in her throat from erupting.

Dogon looked exactly as she remembered him. Silver hair pulled back in a plait. A permanent sneer curled his thin lips. He was not a very old man, yet the anger in his face etched deep creases in his forehead and around his eyes, making him appear ten years older than his fifty. Dark eyes, blacker than coal, glittering like a rat's eyes, alighted immediately on Lara.

The minister halted. He stared at her, recognition causing the black malicious-looking pools to glow.

Lara felt Elan's hand press into her back, reminding her of his support.

Dogon stepped toward her. "A familiar face, I see."

Lara bit the inside of her lip to keep it from trembling. She fought to put an inviting expression on her face. "Aye, my lord," she said in a silky voice. Her heart raced like a small bird and her mind went blank.

A crooked finger with a sharp nail came out and swooshed across her cheek. The merest touch of this man sent chills slithering up her spine. "Dorian must have given you to someone else all those years ago, my dear," he drawled. "You slipped right out of my grasp."

His statement jarred her mind and words came. "That's right, my lord. But I've been returned and long for the chance I missed to pleasure you."

A glaze of lust filmed the obsidian eyes. The lips curled into a greedy smile. His hand slipped over her throat, skating slowly down her chest, to close over her breast, which he squeezed.

Elan's hand tightened on her shoulder, helping her to stifle a horrified gasp.

"Let me see your charms, my dear. Perhaps you're not as ripe as you once were. I like fresh blood and firm flesh." He removed his hand and looked at her expectantly.

Nausea churned Lara's gut. Every cell in her body screamed against Dogon's prying gaze seeing her naked, but if she were to maneuver herself into a place where she could put her lips to his and neutralize him, she had to. "Yes, my lord." She lifted off her gown, dropping it in a whisper of silk to the marble floor.

Dogon's gaze raked over her followed by a sharp intake of breath. "Aye, I see time has not diminished your beauty. Ah, finally." He reached out and lightly raked his fingernails over one breast and down her stomach.

Lara pretended to be pleased at his touch and moaned softly, tilting her head back.

Dogon's fingertips closed around her nipple and he pinched down on the dark bud. Hard.

She yelped at the fierce pull, but Dogon didn't let up. Instead, he used his hold on her nipple to yank her closer to him. He sneered and leaned into her.

Elan slid a hand to the side of her breast. His touch took the pain away.

"Don't think for a moment that because you're my prize, you have some sort of control over me, dearie." His voice hissed crudely in her ears. "Because if you try to control me, you might find me a bit more than you expected."

Lara sucked in her breath, fighting for control. If she used magery in this moment, she risked unleashing his wrath.

He pulled her in closer, his stranglehold on her nipple surpassing Elan's touch.

"Listen to me carefully, sorceress. You think I cannot see your assistant standing behind

you, trying to take away your pain, but I do.” He jerked sharply on her nipple then released it, grinning wickedly. He laughed. “Galen created me, my dear, as surely as he created you. He pointed to her. “Good?” He pointed to himself. “Evil.” He sneered at her. “But I know you harbor hatred and a desire for vengeance against me, the dark mage who’s caused all this trouble.”

He turned and thrust his hand outward toward the women gathered close to Lara, staring at him. The gesture caused an invisible that sent the women flying back, scattering them all as if they’d each been kicked by a giant.

Elan made himself visible. He began a spell to freeze Dogon, but the mage held his hand up again, deflecting the power back onto Elan.

Lara was alone with him. Alone and naked. She began the same incantation under her breath. And then he froze her.

“So, my dear, you were saying about pleasure?” He ran the tip of his sharp nail downward, between her breasts. The glitter in his eyes registered her humiliation and terror. She knew Elan was watching, helpless to defend her. Behind her, the women of the *haram* were picking themselves up, moaning from the impact with which they’d hit the hard floor. He followed his trail down the center of her stomach, dragging through the curls on her mound. To her horror, he didn’t stop until his index finger slipped between her lower lips and drove up inside her vagina with a painful thrust.

A whimper died in her trapped throat. She could breathe and she could feel the painful scrape of Dogon’s nail against the walls of her sex, but she couldn’t speak or move.

The women started for him again, but he halted them by raising his other hand. “Move and you all die.”

Perhaps the reason she didn’t believe he would ever succeed is that he could be blinded by a desire. Elan’s words materialized in her mind. He was reminding her of Dogon’s weakness! *Lara, pretend you’re enjoying his touch!*

At the sound of Elan’s voice in her mind, Lara almost cried out her relief. By Galen’s grace, Dogon hadn’t frozen their telepathy.

It’s our only hope, Lara.

Elan was right. Dogon had obviously practiced dark magery for so long, his power could hold them prisoner indefinitely.

Lara moaned and let her eyes fluttered closed.

Dogon jammed his finger inside her again.

She moaned louder.

With his other hand, Dogon grabbed hold of her nipple again, pulling it in a vise-like grip. The pain shot through her immobile body, causing her breath to hitch. She thought of Sha’ul. She couldn’t bear the thought of never seeing him again.

She moaned.

Dogon increased the rhythm of his rough massage in Lara’s sheath.

She ran her tongue across her lips. If she could just get him to kiss her...

The mage grinned. “Ah, my little vixen enjoys a bit of pain, I see.” He leaned into her, twisting her nipple again until her golden skin flushed red. “You wouldn’t be trying to win me over now, would you?” He moved a hand over her lips, giving back her power of speech.

“Nay, my lord. Never have I experienced such bliss. Please, do something else.

Something wicked.” Her words were flowing now and she numbed her mind to the physical pain. Her entire world consisted only of getting Dogon to put his lips to hers.

He exhaled a shivery breath.

Hope dawned deep inside her. “Please, my lord, I beg you.”

Dogon turned to the women. “You and you,” he barked at Saryn and Fleya who stood the closest. “Grab her arms and bend her over.”

They hesitated.

“Now!”

“I’m sorry,” Saryn murmured as she took hold of Lara’s arms.

Lara ignored her, keeping to her ruse.

The women bent her over, holding her tightly in place.

Lara could not see what Dogon was doing but she soon heard the hiss of something through the air and a sharp slap on her backside. She managed to make her yelp of pain sound like a holler of enjoyment.

She remembered Dogon’s love of the leather strap. He’d used it on her before, years ago. She’d sworn to see him pay for his cruelty, even then.

The next slap came down harder. She screamed out. “Yes! My lord, thank you!”

He groaned and Lara could hear his pleasure in the sound.

Tingles of movement crept back into her body. She moaned again and spread her legs apart, making it look like the women holding her had shifted her weight to give Dogon a full view of her open sex.

Her ploy worked. She heard the strap drop to the floor and he knelt behind her, the nails of both hands clawing into her soft buttocks. A sharp nail poked at the opening of her sex. He was planning to spear her again, but by then it was too late. Her body fell free and from the corner of her eye, she saw Elan free and already stretching his hand out toward Dogon, his lips murmuring an incantation.

Dogon yelped and floundered backward, landing on his back. He had just time to thrust his hand out, causing all the paned glass doors in the *haram* to explode.

The women screamed as all the water in the bathing pool spilled out and every vase in the room burst, spilling soil and flowers. The furniture flew and women scattered for cover in the chaos, some getting hit by furniture and getting knocked down.

Dogon’s blow was to no avail. Elan had him trapped.

Lara looked up at Elan. His eyes were closed, his clothing ripping from the strain of his concentration. Every muscle and sinew in his body flexed frighteningly and an aura glowed around him. She knew he couldn’t hold out too long in this state. She had to act immediately.

Lara turned around and knelt by Dogon’s head. She closed her eyes and pressed her lips to his, breathing inward with all her strength.

Her body jerked with the force of Dogon’s essence draining from him into her. Her hair flew straight back and her body shuddered with the pain of what felt like a million shards of glass digging into her skin.

Dogon’s body, though frozen in Elan’s hold, quaked and twitched from the draining of his life force. His eyes were stretched wide open and his mangled protest died in his throat.

Oh god, oh god! Lara’s body felt strained to the point of breaking from the blinding pain of Dogon’s poisoned soul entering her body. When she thought she’d die, the

transfer suddenly ended and she fell back onto the cold marble.

The room fell still. Women slowly came out of hiding, their anxious glances on her.

Lara looked down at Dogon's lifeless body on the floor. His mouth was still open, as were his eyes, staring, unseeing, a look of shock pasted on his ashen face.

Elan broke the spell and went to her side, assisting her to her feet. He walked her toward the broken doors. "Lara, spit it out or you'll die." He put a hand to her back and brought it down in a firm slap.

Lara coughed and the poisons began to run out of her. A black cloud, stinking of putrid meat puffed from her mouth, the force of it catapulting her forward. Elan caught her in strong arms and held her as she coughed out every last drop of Dogon's essence, which vaporized and vanished into the deep purple sky.

* * * *

Sha'ul struggled to remain in a sitting position. His hands were still bound behind him. His head still pounded from the beating the night before, but at least, by Galen's grace, his strength hadn't left him.

A strange light in the sky, flashing bright green several times drew his gaze. A tingle of hope rose to life in his gut and spread upward. Deep inside he knew what was happening. The pulsating glow increased, spreading in large undulating orbs across the sky.

The other prisoners noticed too and a chorus of awed sounds passed through the camp.

The Pierran soldiers had risen from their posts and were searching the sky, murmuring questioningly amongst themselves.

The green lights flashed downward, stroking each of the soldiers. Sha'ul smiled to himself.

It was time to find Lara.

He looked up at a guard who stood nearby, looking dazed. "Hey, Pierran dog, come and set me loose."

The man started and then looked down at him. "Not a chance in hell, Velt." He took three strides that brought him to Sha'ul and sent a boot out to kick him.

Sha'ul ducked down and rolled away from him. With lightning speed, he looped his legs through his bound arms so his hands were in front of him. Now, he could defend himself. His training in the Sinayan art of body combat would now serve him without the obstacles of dark magery.

The man charged him again and Sha'ul rolled, blocking the kick and tripping his attacker at the same time. The Pierran fell heavily to the ground, his weapon flying from his hand.

On the outer edges of his consciousness, Sha'ul could hear the other prisoners begin to rebel against the Pierrans who were now ordinary men again.

More Pierrans were coming at him with spears. Sha'ul did a rise kick, knocking each spear from their hands. He flipped his body into the air, twisted and brought a booted foot against the side of one head after the other until all his assailants were on the ground.

Another prisoner ran up to him with a dirk he'd wrestled from one of the soldiers and cut Sha'ul's bindings. Together with several of the prisoners who were strong fighters, they fought the remaining Pierrans until they had either fallen dead or injured, or had

fled.

Once the danger had passed, Sha'ul fell to his knees on the ground to catch his breath. He surveyed the camp around him. The remaining men were freeing the women and children from their bonds. Others were on the ground with varying degrees of injury.

Sha'ul slumped over and waited until his breathing returned to normal. It was going to be a long night nursing the wounded before he could set off for the Hidden Forest.

* * * *

"By the gods!" Danni breathed.

Lara and Elan materialized on Elan's bed before his eyes.

He stopped his frantic pacing and approached them. They were unconscious, but alive. Lara still wore her pink gown, though her skin was a strange ashen hue and her breathing rasped in a frightening way.

Elan's clothing was shredded and his golden skin was an unhealthy shade of gray.

Danni started. There was a third person on the bed. He looked closer. A woman with golden hair, one delicate hand entwined in Elan's large one.

He stared at the young woman. Her golden hair rioted in silken waves over Elan's chest, indicating the roughness of the journey by magery. She wore the same type of silken bed-slave's gown that Lara wore.

The girl's eyes fluttered open and she looked to her side, her blue eyes registering Elan's presence on the bed beside her. She sat up slowly, not seeing Danni at first. When she finally turned and saw him standing there, she gasped, her wide azure gaze fearful.

"I won't hurt you," Danni said automatically. "I'm Lara's friend, Danni."

She continued to stare at him, though the fear drained slowly from her gaze. "I'm Petal," she said softly after several moments.

Danni watched her, careful not to move suddenly. The girl seemed flighty as a doe. If she'd been a bed-slave, chances were she'd be as leery of him as Lara had been at first.

He turned his attention to Lara and Elan. "Are they ... are they all right?" he asked Petal, his heart lurching painfully at the thought of Lara's being hurt.

Petal looked down at them then back at Danni. She nodded. "They saved the world. Lara wanted me to come with her."

Danni heaved a breath of relief. These last two days had been the most hellish and fraught with worry he'd ever known. His shoulders slumped and he looked briefly down before looking at Petal again.

When he did, a tiny smile curved her lips and Danni's pulse quickened. If he hadn't been so worried about Lara, he would have simply spent the time staring at Petal.

"I would have begged her to take me away with her if she hadn't offered," she added.

Danni nodded. "She is a good soul. We must take care of them now. I've seen Lara affected by magery before. She and Elan need rest."

Petal looked at him tentatively before climbing off the bed. She pulled a fur skin up over Elan and Lara's sleeping bodies. When she'd finished she came around the other side and stopped in front of Danni. "I'll help you," she said softly.

* * * *

Lara opened her eyes. That now familiar heaviness weighed in her body, the effect of magery. She blinked several times her eyes unused to the sunlight that shone on her.

She turned her head, seeing the profile of a man lying next to her. Elan.

Soft fur brushed under her chin as she moved. She glanced down and saw the fur skin covering her body.

Slowly, she grew aware of her surroundings. She felt the softness of a sleeping pallet underneath her.

“Lara.”

A familiar voice called her softly. She blinked and turned her head the other way. Her eyes widened. Warmth flushed her body and a smile spread across her lips of its own accord. “Sha’ul,” she whispered.

He smiled, gazing down at her, his brown eyes melting with love. His hand covered hers. “Lara,” he said again. He bent over and pressed his lips to hers. When he rose up again, she saw an angry cut on his forehead, a gash that had healed up to form a swollen red ridge of puckered skin.

She cried out and hot tears rushed to her eyes and she began to cry before she could stop herself.

Elan stirred next to her. She felt him move around, struggling to rise up on his elbow. When she looked up, through the blur of tears, she saw him looking at her and Sha’ul, his eyes clearly disoriented. “Are you Lara’s master?” he asked Sha’ul in a voice thick with sleep.

Sha’ul nodded, gently squeezing Lara’s hand. “Aye. You must be Elan.”

Elan nodded and fell back against his pillow.

Lara sniffled. “My lord, what happened to you?”

He smiled down at her and caressed her hair with his other hand. “Nothing that hasn’t already healed, sweetling. I have you back. That’s all that matters.”

“I want to go home, my lord. I just want to be with you and Ariana.”

Sha’ul brushed the pad of his thumb tenderly across her forehead. “You will, love. As soon as you’ve rested and healed. You and Elan have been asleep for three days. You’re both beyond exhaustion.”

Lara felt sleep coming over her again, but she fought it, terrified that when she woke up, Sha’ul would be gone.

Her fear must have shown in her eyes, for Sha’ul brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. The tender warmth of his kiss radiated through her tired body. “I won’t leave your side, Lara, I swear it. I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

With his promise made, Lara gazed up at him, wanting his face to be the last thing she saw before falling asleep.

Epilogue

On the first night of their journey back to the Veltlands, Lara snuggled against Sha'ul on the bedding he'd spread on the ground. To their right, Growlie lay sleeping, his side of bristly hair rising and falling steadily. Petal and Danni were together on the other side of the campfire.

Lara had exhausted her powers. The sorcerer's kiss on Dogon had neutralized them as it had drained his life from him. She didn't care. The power of magery had never been something she wanted, only an excuse to be bathed in Sha'ul's love. Neither she nor Sha'ul truly needed the powers which they no longer possessed as far as she was concerned. They had each other now and the world was safe. They could make their way home at a leisurely pace.

Elan had retained his power and could report to her that her father had returned his armies home and no longer faced the threat of battle. He was joyous about the prospect of exploring the world from which he'd been forced to remain hidden, but had decided not to venture forth until the woman Lara had told him about, the woman who was his destined life-mate, had found him.

Soft feminine laughter wafted to them from the far side of the campfire. Petal's laughter erupted into giggles and squeals. Danni was tickling her again, Lara could see in the glow of the campfire. In the fortnight it had taken for her and Elan to recover, Petal had become quite attached to Danni. The young woman had responded to him the way she hadn't and she'd never seen Danni look so happy in all the time she'd known him. Danni's affection for Petal was obviously going far to heal the trauma she'd suffered as Dogon's bed-slave.

Petal fell back underneath Danni as she writhed and giggled. He stopped tickling her and began caressing her hair, gazing down at her. He lowered his lips to hers in a tender kiss. Petal closed her eyes, her body softening visibly in its surrender to Danni's kiss.

Lara meant to look away, but her gaze was riveted on the sight of Danni's hand slipping under Petal's blouse, tenting the thin fabric as he sought her breast. Petal moaned softly as Danni's fingertips explored her.

"Perhaps you're jealous." Sha'ul's warm breath ticked her ear. His hand caressed her arm lazily.

Lara sat up and looked at him, her heart pounding suddenly. "Jealous?"

Sha'ul grinned. The firelight glowed off his skin and hair, the shadows making him appear devilishly gorgeous. "Aye. Perhaps you wish me to tickle you as well."

Relieved, Lara smiled and lowered herself back down onto their fur skin bedding. She lay on her back and put her arms up around Sha'ul's neck. "Whatever you wish to do to me, my lord, I'll enjoy."

"I have something for you first." He reached behind him and lifted something from the ground. When he held it out to her, she saw it was a flower. A magnificent red and pink flower with hundreds of petals that emanated a delicately sweet scent.

"It's beautiful, my lord, thank you," she breathed, gently plucking the beautiful flower from his fingers and holding it to her nose.

"I guess you don't know what today is, Lara."

She looked at him above the velvety flower.

He smiled. "It's *Grudin arhev*, the day of love."

Hot tears immediately rushed to her eyes. Finally, after all this time, Sha'ul was able to make his claim for her. She set the flower down gently and threw her arms around him, burying her face in his hair. "I love you so much," she breathed.

"I love you, Lara. Always." Tenderly, he lay her back again and gazed down at her, his dark eyes glowing with the firelight.

Sha'ul touched her cheek, his smile fading. "It's not too soon?"

She knew he was concerned about her having healed from her experience. All of it, including the way Dogon had scraped her most intimate body parts with sharp nails.

This night by the fire was the first they'd been able to lie together, as she and Elan had spent most of their recovery time unable to move from Elan's bed. Sha'ul's body half-covered hers now and the mere contact of his arm through their clothing ignited a pulsing desire in her loins, which flushed rapidly through her breasts. "No, my lord. "It's not too soon. I'm healed."

Sha'ul smoothed her hair back tenderly. He surged against her and she felt his erection swell and begin to push into her thigh. From nearby, Danni and Petal's murmurs and sighs of carnal pleasure only added to her arousal.

Lara pulled him down onto her, pressing her hands into the muscles of his back. The hard slopes and ridges flexed with his movement as he took her mouth in a tender kiss. He parted her lips with his tongue, surging against hers.

She moaned softly into his mouth. She felt him repossessing her, reclaiming her from the events that had kept them apart, the forces that had forbidden them from each other. She slipped her hand into his hair, pulling loose the leather binding. His dark hair spilled over and she wound her fingers into it, stroking and reveling in the silkiness against her fingertips. She melted underneath him, parting her legs so he could settle between them, offering herself to him. He had risked everything to try and be with her. The wrath of the Council of Mages hadn't deterred him from coming to her side. A prophecy written into the very fabric of their existence by their Creator hadn't stopped him from at least trying to remain with her and protect her. And he had claimed her as his love.

She breathed in his musky scent, mixed with the wood smoke from the fire and the scent of leather from his clothing. Hungry to feel his bare skin against hers, she worked his shirt out from his trousers and skated her palms over his back.

He sat up, his eyes glowing in the firelight from under heavy lids. He pulled his shirt off and cast it aside. The sight of his broad chest, the silky dark hair glinting from the flames stirred her hunger. Moisture pooled in her sex and all she wanted was Sha'ul's erection buried deep inside her, their bodies joined as intimately as two bodies could possibly be.

She pulled open the tie on her blouse and Sha'ul slipped it up, exposing her breasts. He lowered his face to them and nuzzled gently.

Lara's eyes fluttered closed and she let out a soft *ahh* when the tip of his tongue flickered lightly on her nipple. He laved it in firmer strokes, his mouth hot and wet. The almond-colored bud tightened immediately under his loving mouth and he went to the other one, bringing it to the same puckered stiffness.

"Sha'ul," she whispered as his mouth moved over her bare skin. She let her touch roam down his back, her fingertips slipping over the flexing ridges of muscle along his

spine. She worked her hands under the waist of his trousers, hungrily seeking the hard globes of masculine buttocks.

Sha'ul moaned against her breasts and pulled open the belt to his trousers. The loose material gave and Lara pushed them down, skimming her touch over each flexing cheek.

Sha'ul's erection was fully engorged and he ground his pelvis against hers. He lifted his face from her nipples, trailing hot kisses back up to her mouth. "I want you, Lara," he whispered fiercely in between kisses. He tugged on her trousers, rising up to slip them off past her feet. He tossed them away and gazed down lovingly at her naked sex. "Lara," he murmured. "Lara." He smoothed his fingertips over her belly and across her mound. Gently he took hold of her thighs and parted them, settling his torso on the fur skin. He leaned down and kissed her sex, spreading the lips open. His breath passed hot over her exposed bud, the skin slick and swollen from need.

Lara panted and watched him pleasure her. She wound her fingers into his hair, following the movements of his head. His tongue laved hot strokes over her clitoris while one large finger sheathed itself tenderly into her passage.

Sha'ul brought her nearly to the edge of bliss only to pull back before she exploded. He sat up and worked his body out of his trousers, freeing his erection. The firelight glowed off the velvety skin of his shaft, illuminating each vein and orb of the swollen head. He bent over her, bridging her body with his hands pressed into the fur skins. Her musk gleamed on his chin. He bent to her and possessed her mouth in a deep kiss, spreading her juices on to her lips. He licked them off and lowered his body on to hers. "You're mine now, Lara. No one else will ever touch you. Not if you don't wish it."

Lara had shared her memories of Sarna with him earlier in the evening and his breathing had gone ragged at the pleasurable sight of the two women together. But she and Sha'ul both only wanted each other now.

"I wish only to be with you, Sha'ul. Now and always." Her body was now hers alone to give and she gave it to him out of love, a gift from her heart and soul to the man who risked his life out of love for her.

He smiled at her, one large hand caressing her hair back off her face. "Then let this be our wedding night." He kissed her and found her wet opening with the head of his cock. With a gentle push, he sheathed the head inside, pausing, gazing down at her with smoldering eyes.

When she sighed her pleasure, he slid in the rest of the way, until their pelvises pressed together.

Lara cried out softly and opened her legs as wide as she could, pulling him deep inside her and writhing her hips against him.

Sha'ul braced his strong body on his elbows and slid out to the tip and back in, teasing and pushing against her, bringing her to the edge and back, never quite letting her release. He took her mouth in deep, hot kisses and she felt his passion unleash on her, all the loving heat he'd been forced to keep stored inside until now.

The teasing, loving massage continued until Lara was whimpering loudly.

Danni and Petal laughed softly from the other side of their campfire, obviously wrapped up in their own world of love.

Sha'ul grinned down at her and gave one hard thrust, grinding against her wildly when he reached her sweet spot. White heat exploded and Lara's sex clenched with a blissful orgasm. The eruption shimmered for several moments, and she gripped Sha'ul's

hips, anchoring herself against the throes of completion. He captured her cries of pleasure in his mouth, caressing her hair, pulling her to him as her body went limp in the afterglow. He kept his lips against hers, increasing the speed of his thrusts until she felt his body quake and the pulsing in her sheath of his seed spilling out.

Still joined together, they lay quietly. Sha'ul was breathing heavily and Lara listened to the rise and fall of his breath, his hard chest pressing down the softness of her breasts. She looked up into the dark sky of purple velvet, wondering if the Council was watching her now, seeing her take her life for her own. *I'm staying with him for the rest of my days*, she told them silently. She wanted to remain just like this for the rest of their lives, never moving from this spot, never being even an inch apart.

She smiled to herself as her hand moved in his hair. If Ariana, her father and Eshav weren't waiting for her at home, that was exactly what she'd have done.

The End

About the Author:

Sedonia Guillone is a freelance writer who lives in Downeast, Maine. She enjoys writing erotic romance and takes her inspiration from what she has learned about love from the man in her life. She hopes that her erotic stories will provide a thoroughly enjoyable experience and wishes for all people a healthy, loving life.

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