

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

WOVEN  
*Dreams*  
TAPESTRIES

N.J. WALTERS

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Woven Dreams

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***TAPESTRIES:***

***WOVEN DREAMS***

**N.J. Walters**

## *Dedication*

This one is for all the wonderful readers who have embraced this series and continued to ask for more Tapestries books!

Thank you to my amazing editor, Mary Altman. You always make my work better!  
And to my husband, Gerard, who is a constant source of love and inspiration.

## Chapter One

Genita traced her finger lovingly over the rich, vibrant threads of the tapestry. She could almost feel the breeze that brushed the leaves of the trees and caused the flowers to sway, releasing their lush scent into the air. There were so many different species of trees and flowers, but she knew them all, was familiar with their properties. She knew which ones were good for healing and which ones were safe for consumption. She knew from experience which flowers, stems, berries and bark she needed to harvest to create dyes for cloth and threads.

The sun glinted off the gray stones of the castle that dominated the center of the two-by-three-foot cloth. Huge doors of oak and metal guarded the entrance to the domain. It was a fortress, yet it was a family home. Tall, slender windows were set high in the building, some of them full of wondrous pictures crafted from colored glass. How beautiful it must be to sit in one of those rooms when the sun shone through, spreading its myriad colors across the floors and walls. There was something about the building that called to her, urging her to find it. Here, it promised, she would find peace. Here she would be safe.

She glanced around her own small, barren room. It was barely large enough for the tiny bed that was pushed against one wall. She had driven hooks into the walls to hold her few meager pieces of clothing. Her one miniscule window was set high into the wall, admitting only a few thin rays of sunshine late in the day. There were no panes of colored glass to add life to her room—only dark wooden shutters that she had to stand on a low stool in order to reach every evening to close out the damp night air. The room was dismal at best. Cold and miserable at worst.

Her soul craved the heat and light of the sun, but rarely was she able to be outside taking pleasure in it. Usually she was hard at work. But there were moments like this one where she was able to escape the drudgery of her life and do what she wanted to do.

Returning her attention to the tapestry, she smiled as she stroked the fabric. It was almost alive beneath her hands. Her smile faded as her fingers touched the first of the two warriors standing guard in front of the castle. Standing tall, their legs were spread apart and their arms were folded across their chests. Strong and hard, the muscles of their torsos and arms seemed to ripple when she moved the fabric. Brown leather pants molded their rock-hard thighs and their leather vests hung open, displaying their wide chests. Bronze armbands encircled their wrists and forearms and swords hung from belts that hugged their trim waists.

They were both blond, their long, straight hair hanging to their waists. Their eyes were a pale blue, the color of a summer sky. They were brothers, but they appeared

different. Where one had the face of a god—a handsome visage that included high cheekbones, a broad forehead, a straight nose and full, sensual lips—the other was scarred. The scar ran across his left cheek, giving him an almost sinister appearance. She shivered as she touched it. Looking harder, she realized his hair was slightly different from that of the other warrior. Yes, it was blond, but there were touches of white as well.

Genita frowned. How had that happened? She'd set every stitch of this tapestry with her own two hands, all the while spinning romantic tales in her head about the two strong warriors depicted. But during the long months she'd toiled to complete it, she had no memory of adding the white to his hair.

She wanted to examine it further, but now was not the time. Later tonight, when everyone was abed, she'd light her single candle and study the pattern of the stitches.

A shiver ran down her spine as the eyes of the warriors seemed to watch her, seeing into her thoughts—indeed, into her very soul. She brought her fingers to her lips, tracing the tips over them. What would it be like to feel each of their mouths against hers? Would they be rough or gentle? Genita didn't know. What experiences she'd had with men hadn't been good.

But this was her fantasy and she could have anything she wanted. They would be gentle, she decided, but firm. Closing her eyes, she sucked in a deep breath.

Male hands sank into her hair and pulled her closer, holding her captive for his kiss. Her lips parted and she moaned as his tongue sank into her mouth, stroking hers enticingly, inviting her to play.

Another set of male hands gripped her hips from behind. She could feel the warmth of his flesh as he crowded behind her, bringing her back tight against his chest. Something hard dug into her bottom and she gasped when she realized that he was aroused.

His hands slid upward, stroking over her belly, hovering just below her breasts. They felt heavy, her nipples tightening and pressing against the bodice of her dress. She wanted his hands on her breasts, touching them, stroking them. Liquid heat gathered low in her belly, making her squirm. Both men crowded closer until their cocks were pressed tight against her, one against her behind, the other against her stomach.

Her sex throbbed in a deep, clenching rhythm. For the first time in her life she wanted a man. No, men. She wanted both of them. She wanted to feel their hands caressing every inch of her skin and then she wanted to do the same for them. Placing her hands against the chest of the warrior in front of her, she stroked the heavy muscle that rippled beneath her fingers.

The warrior behind her slid his hands higher, cupping her breasts in his palms. Tipping her head back, she gasped for breath. Her nipples tightened further as he rotated his hands, and she began to undulate her hips, unable to stop their primal

rhythm. The warrior in front of her growled as he gripped her hips, grinding his erection against her stomach.

Heat ran through her veins, setting her entire body on fire. She was completely surrounded by their strength and their need. Yet they gave even as they took. Her breasts ached, so she pushed them harder into the warrior's hands. He laughed as he leaned his head down and stroked his tongue across the nape of her neck. She shivered, her body trembling with desire. He captured the lobe of her ear between his teeth, nipping the sensitive flesh even as his thumb and forefingers gently pinched her swollen nipples through her dress.

Her body was no longer under her control. Rather than being frightened, she reveled in it. The warrior in front of her gripped one of her thighs, lifting it to wrap around his hip. The motion tilted her hips forward, bringing her sex closer to his rock-hard erection.

"Yes," she sighed as he ground his pelvis against hers. Hot cream slid from her core, dampening her thighs. An ache built inside her.

Gripping the warrior in front of her, she sobbed as she tried to bring him even closer. Her body cried out for his. For both men. Close. She was so close. Her body was going to explode. Every nerve ending was tingling. Breathing was almost impossible. Almost there. Almost...

"Genita!" The roar shook the floor beneath her very feet, vibrating off the walls around her.

The warriors disappeared, nothing but a figment of her imagination. Gasping for air, she blinked hard, trying to bring herself back to reality. She was standing next to her bed, staring blindly down at the tapestry. Her legs trembled and a thin sheen of sweat dampened her body. Her hand was shaking as she swiped it over her clammy forehead. Her breasts ached and the deep pulsing between her damp thighs reminded her of just how empty her life was.

"Genita!" Closer. Oh gods, he was almost here. She could hear his boots pounding up the stairs.

Grabbing the tapestry, she rolled it quickly into a bundle and stuffed it beneath her thin mattress. Rubbing her moist hands over her coarse, woven dress, she hurried toward the door. From the tone of his voice, she could tell her brother was in one of his moods. That didn't bode well for her or anybody else who got within striking distance. These black moods had come more and more frequently the past year, ever since the deaths of two of their brothers. All remnants of arousal were quickly replaced by a growing fear.

She was halfway to the door when it slammed open, striking against the stone wall. It hit with such force it bounced closed and was immediately hammered back again. She froze as her oldest brother strode in through the door. He rarely made the climb to her small tower room. She swallowed hard and forced herself to relax. Her brother was

a bully and enjoyed other people's fear of him. She tried not to give him that satisfaction.

"Where have you been, woman?" He stalked across the room to stand directly in front of her.

She had to tilt back her head to meet his gaze. He was a huge man, muscular and fit. At one point in his life, he'd been handsome as well. But years of drinking, hard living and bitterness had left their marks on his face. Deep lines encased his mouth and eyes, and his cheeks and nose were florid with a combination of never-ending rage and drink.

"Did you need me for anything?" She kept her voice low and respectful.

His laughter wasn't pleasant, but rather cruel. "You're not of much use, are you, little sister?"

She kept her tongue, knowing that anything she said at this point would only anger him further. He caught her chin between his thumb and forefinger, digging them into her skin. "Useless—that's what you are. Taking up space and eating food. And for what?" Practically shoving her away, he began to pace.

Genita began to sweat as nausea churned in her gut. Something was wrong and she strongly suspected that whatever it was, it wasn't going to be good for her.

"You just turned twenty, Genita." He turned and strode back toward her. "It's time to make yourself useful."

She almost snorted with laughter. Useful! She'd been running their home and taking care of her loutish brothers her entire life. She was more slave than sister, having less rights and respect than the scullery lads in the kitchen. She'd toiled from sunup until way past sunset every single day of her life and all she had to show for it was calloused hands, bruises and the scars on her body from years of beatings.

"We need to make a new alliance and you're going to help us."

She could feel herself paling. For years her brothers had threatened to marry her off, but it had never happened. They enjoyed dangling the prospect in front of potential allies, taking their gold and then laughingly sending them on their way. This time, she sensed, her brother was in deadly earnest.

"Why now?"

His hand shot out, striking her across the face. She stumbled backward but didn't cry out. "Why?" he roared. "I'll tell you why." His face turned such a violent shade of red, she wondered if he might be having some kind of fit. "Ever since our brothers were brutally murdered last year, we have been shorthanded. Beyond that, some of our allies have turned from us because of the vile lies of our enemies."

Genita curled her hands into fists at her sides. Her brother did like to rewrite history to suit his own purposes. Her other two brothers had brought on their own deaths when they ambushed another man. Their so-called allies were distancing themselves because they did not want to be part of any war that might result.



Swiping the back of his hand over his mouth, he wiped away the spittle that clung to the corner. His smile was filled with malicious glee as he made his pronouncement. "The Luther brothers are coming to visit."

She swayed as she lost all feeling in her legs. Oh gods, surely she'd misheard him! The Luther brothers were even worse than her own family. They were barbaric savages, and it was said that they'd already killed one wife. "No."

Her brother's eyes widened with disbelief. "No? You dare to say no?"

Genita took a step backward. "You can't mean it?" She knew her brothers had no love for her, but to give her in marriage to the Luthers...well, they might as well kill her.

He shrugged. "There are only two of them left in the family and their army is small, but they are willing to give us their alliance if we sweeten the pot with you. The fact that you are a virgin has them foaming at the mouth. They're even fighting over which of them gets to break you in." Laughing, he grabbed her by the shoulders, practically jerking her off her feet. "For once in your life, you have some value."

Hauling back her hand, she struck her older brother in the face. The blow hurt her hand and his head jerked to one side. Both of them froze. Never in her life had she fought back. He shoved her so hard that she fell, striking her elbow on the floor and scraping her hands as she tried to catch herself.

"You will pay for that." Never taking his eyes off her, his hands went to his waist. He hauled off the thick leather belt, wrapping one end around his hand as he strode forward.

Genita closed her eyes, pulled her legs tight to her chest and prayed for strength.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jarmon Bakra stood in the shadows. It was where he felt most comfortable. The corners of his mouth tilted upward ever so slightly as he watched his sister-in-law, Jane, flitting around the large trestle table.

Jane was a treasure, brought to them by a magical tapestry which had been created over five hundred years earlier by a sorceress who had woven it to give hope to the people of Javara during a time of great darkness. It appeared once in every generation, bringing with it a woman from another time and world as a prospective bride. The sorceress had long since passed into other realms, but the legacy of her tapestry remained. It had already appeared once in his generation, bringing the Garen brothers the beautiful Christina. That should have been the end of it. But it had come again, this time bringing Jane.

She directed Garrik to move several things for her as she arranged everything to her exact specifications. Jane did love to organize.

He raised his left hand, tracing the side of his mouth. The scar that bisected the left side of his face pulled at the corner of his lips, making it resemble a sneer more than a smile. But then, he didn't smile much these days.

Dropping it back to his side, he opened and closed his ruined hand. He'd regained all the strength and dexterity in his left hand, even if he was missing the last two fingers. It had been a year since he'd been almost fatally wounded. The scars on the outside were still visible, but the ones inside him were worse. He doubted he'd have even survived them if not for the woman he was watching. She had given him the will to live.

"Garrik, would you go and see what's keeping your brothers? Supper is almost ready."

Jarmon watched as Jane smiled at his twin brother, knowing he would do as she asked.

As soon as Garrik disappeared from the room, she turned toward Jarmon, striding into the shadows that surrounded him. Where others walked softly around him since his injuries, Jane treated him as if nothing had changed. Perhaps it was because she hadn't known him before, but Jarmon believed it was because she was fearless. The fact that she'd given up the only life she'd ever known and taken on his older brothers, Zaren and Bador, was proof enough of her bravery.

She'd reached out to him in the darkness once before when he'd been lying near death. It had been her voice and her prodding that had brought him back to the world of the living. Beyond that, she had decided to stay in Javara, forsaking her own world, even though she'd had only three days to make that life-changing decision. In doing so, she had made his older brothers happy and had brought joy to their home. There was nothing he would not do for her.

"Jarmon." She smiled up at him as she gently touched his arm. "Why don't you join me while we wait for the others?"

Sighing, he gave in to the inevitable and followed her. His left leg had a slight limp—a leftover from his injuries—but he ignored it. It was just something he had to live with, so he had adjusted.

Garrik strode back into the room and, for the briefest of moments, Jarmon envied his brother his healthy, whole body. Shame washed through him. He loved his twin more than anyone else in the entire world and would give his life for him. Never would he want his brother to suffer as he had. A year ago, they had looked exactly the same. Both of them had been tall and strong, their faces exact replicas. Now there was no trouble telling them apart.

The room filled up quickly. While everyone began to take their seats as supper was served, Jarmon watched his mother, brothers and sister-in-law, savoring the warmth that filled him as he observed them. They were a boisterous bunch, always talking and laughing, enjoying life to the fullest. He felt separate from them now, even though he

knew they tried their best to include him as they always had. It wasn't them who had changed. It was him.

He smiled inwardly as he watched Bador sweep Jane up into his arms, twirling her around in a circle before depositing her in her chair. He planted a quick kiss on her lips before dropping into his own chair on her left.

Zaren laughed as he sat on his wife's right side. Leaning over, he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her. The kiss went on so long that the thirty or so people gathered in the hall for supper began to laugh and cheer. When Zaren finally let her go, Jane's face was red and flushed. She smacked his brother lightly on the arm, but he could see the love and pleasure in her face even as she did so.

Women were scarce on their world, and to keep men from killing one another, it had been decreed generations ago that brothers would share a bride. For every three men, there was one woman. In their case, there were four of them, so they had the right to claim two wives if they could find them. There were always at least two men for every woman, but no more than three. Only one man could marry the woman, but one night each week, he had to share her with his brothers, and all children were his, no matter which brother actually fathered them.

The chances of he and Garrik finding a bride were slim, especially with him looking as he did. He felt as if his injury had placed a burden on his brother and the rest of his family.

Jarmon didn't expect to have the kind of relationship that his older brothers shared with Jane, even if he and Garrik did find a bride. Many a night, and not just the once a week that was required by law, Bador joined Zaren and Jane. They were happy. Anyone who witnessed them together could see it.

"Are you all right?" Garrik had leaned over so that no one else would overhear him.

Smothering a sigh, he turned to his brother. "I am fine. Stop worrying over me. I already have a mother." He glanced down to the end of the table and caught his mother staring at him, concern in her eyes. She offered him a wan smile before returning to her meal.

"I know." Garrik hesitated for a moment. "If you ever want to talk..." He let the words hang in the air. When Jarmon didn't say anything, his brother picked up a piece of roast meat and began to eat.

Jarmon sighed, rubbing his hand over the ruined side of his face. Leaning back in his chair, he picked up his goblet and drank deep. The cool cider slid down his throat.

He had never talked about the battle where he'd almost lost his life or about his injuries. He knew that fact had hurt Garrik and the closeness that they'd once shared. They'd once been inseparable, but he'd spent so much time trying to recover from his physical injuries, he'd never stopped to think that, in many ways, his brother had been injured too. Not physically, but the close bond they'd shared had been damaged. It was

time to stop thinking about himself and to concern himself with his brother and the rest of his family.

Plunking the goblet back on the table, he turned to his brother. "I've been thinking about a hunting trip." The words were out of his mouth before the thought was fully formed in his mind.

Garrik nodded and then looked away, but not before Jarmon glimpsed the disappointment in his brother's face. No one else might notice it since Garrik was a warrior and hid his emotions well. But, being twins, they had a special bond and, although they were no longer as close as they'd been, Jarmon could still read Garrik's emotions well and felt his brother's pain. His brother hadn't realized it was an invitation. He had taken to going off by himself a great deal lately and Jarmon realized that everyone had come to expect it. "Go with me," he said, resting his ruined hand on his brother's arm.

Garrik's head jerked back around. "Go with you?" He said the words slowly, as if he wasn't quite sure he'd heard them correctly.

"Yes." He nodded decisively. The urge to spend some time alone with his brother was suddenly overwhelming. "It will be like old times. We can leave first thing in the morning."

A smile gradually tugged at the corners of his brother's lips, making him appear younger. They'd both aged much this past year. "Just like old times."

Jarmon felt an answering smile on his face as he realized he was genuinely looking forward to spending the time alone with his brother. It would do them both good and maybe begin to heal the rift that had developed between them. Picking up his goblet, he raised it toward Garrik before taking a drink, sealing their pact. Garrik grasped his cup and did the same.

## **Chapter Two**

Genita swallowed back a moan as she carefully shifted onto her side. The room was dark even though the window was still open, so she knew that night had fallen while she'd slept. The breeze was cold, chilling her skin and making her shiver. She hurt all over. Her eldest brother had been particularly brutal with his beating, all the while yelling over and over that she would do as he told her.

Carefully, she rolled her shoulders. Biting her lip against the pain, she pushed herself into a seated position. Her vision dimmed. She gulped in mouthfuls of the cold, damp air. The last thing she could afford was to pass out again. She had much to do.

Very slowly, she came up onto her hands and knees. Resting for a moment, she gathered her strength and propelled herself off the hard floor. Staggering forward, she managed to get to the bed, sinking gratefully down onto the side.

Gasping for breath, she waited until the pain subsided and took stock of her injuries. She was bruised from her neck to her knees, but she didn't think anything was broken. This time. Thankful for that small blessing, she closed her eyes to think. She had to leave. There was no way she would allow herself to be married off to one of the Luther brothers. She'd rather run and take her chances.

A noise barely reached her ears, but her eyes flew open as she stared toward her door. Oh gods, was her brother coming back? Standing, she inched toward the darkest corner of the room, putting her back to the wall. Not that it would do any good. The room was too small for her to hide anywhere. The door opened silently, closing just as carefully. She squinted to see who was creeping toward her bed.

"Genny?"

"Radnor?" He was the youngest of her four remaining brothers and at twenty-two, he was only two years her senior. Unlike her other brothers, he wasn't cruel to her. For the most part, he ignored her.

He whirled toward the corner where she stood motionless. "You've got to get away from here."

She didn't know what to say to that. Didn't quite trust him. "What do you care what happens to me?" He'd never shown any inclination toward concern for her wellbeing before.

He swore long and fluently and then she heard the scratch of flame being lit. The light from the candle made her blink as he came toward her. She wanted to back away, but there was nowhere to go. "I care." His face was pulled into a hard mask and he appeared older than his years.

"I don't understand." The world that she'd known had been turned upside down this day, first with her eldest brother's pronouncement and now this.

"I know." Reaching out, he stroked his thumb gently over the curve of her cheek. "I haven't done as good a job protecting you as I've wanted. But I have tried. I ignore you, not because I don't care, but because I do. Any sign of concern would have been seen as weakness on my part and caused our older brothers to treat you even more cruelly. I've deflected their attention from you when I've been able." In the dim light, she could see that one of Radnor's eyes was black and swollen. "It doesn't always work."

Her perception tilted as images and memories flowed through her brain. How many times had Radnor casually turned her older brother's attention from her? And not just her eldest brother, but the rest of them as well. She'd thought it was because he'd found her beneath his interest. To discover it was because he was protecting her was almost unbelievable.

He wrapped his fingers around her chin and peered down into her face. "I promised our mother on her deathbed that I would not be like the rest, that I would look out for you as best I could. Unfortunately, my best has not been very good." Sighing, he released her and stepped back. "I cannot go with you. If we both disappeared, they would know you'd escaped immediately. If you go by yourself, I can buy you a day or two before anyone knows you are even gone."

"You would do that for me?"

He flinched at her words. "I know you have no reason to think otherwise, but yes, I would do that for you."

"He will kill you if he finds out." No need to say who *he* was. They both knew.

Radnor fingered the sword strapped to his waist. "He can try. I am no longer a boy who he can easily beat." Dropping his hand, he reached for her. "Hurry. There is no time to waste."

Every step hurt, but she swallowed the pain, knowing that the more she moved the less stiff she'd be tomorrow. Grabbing her thin cloak, she threw it over her shoulders, tying it at her throat. Yanking her other dress from the hook, she started to bundle it with her spare chemise. *The tapestry*. She couldn't leave it behind.

Hurrying to the bed, she shoved her hand beneath the mattress, sighing with relief when her fingers touched the fabric. Unfolding her dress, she carefully placed the tapestry on top and wrapped it. She bundled her belongings into her blanket and threw it over her shoulder.

"Quickly, Genny. I have some supplies for you."

Spurred on by the urgency in his voice, she rushed out the door without a backward glance. She'd spent every night of her life in that room, but she would not miss it. He blew out the candle and she followed him into the darkness.

They crept down the stairs and around several men who had passed out in the corridors. Radnor led her toward the kitchen, out through a side door and onto the grounds. Neither of them spoke as they walked.

The night sky was clear and dotted with stars, the moon adding its glow to beat back the darkness. The air was cool, but her dress was stuck to her back with sweat. A night bird emitted a low-pitched call. The woods and freedom were just beyond the walls. Genita concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. Her heart was pounding and her head was spinning. She was escaping.

Radnor paused long enough to haul a satchel out from behind a bush, but he kept going. Only when they were at the far corner of the outside wall did he stop. "There's several days worth of food, some cooking utensils, herbs and basic medical supplies to help you tend your injuries." He thrust the satchel into her arms. "Take this as well." He handed her a dagger and pressed several coins into her palm. "It's not much, but it's all I could get without arousing suspicion."

"Thank you." She was touched to tears by his efforts on her behalf. Having spent her entire life thinking that none of her brothers cared for her, it was surprisingly hard for her to leave him now. Her fingers closed over the coins, causing the rough metal edges to dig into her skin. She shoved them into the pocket of her dress. Gripping the handle of the dagger, she carefully tucked it into her satchel.

He shook his head. "I have done nothing. Less than nothing. And certainly not near as much as I should have." Bending down, he brushed a kiss on her cheek. "Take care, Genita, and send word to the blacksmith in town if you are able. He is loyal to me and will not give either of us away."

"Radnor..." She wasn't quite sure what to say—there was so much she wanted to tell him.

"Shh." He covered her lips with his fingers. "Go. Be free and find happiness for both of us."

In the next breath, he was gone. She could see his shadow slipping back toward the hulking building behind them. Taking a deep breath, she turned her back on everything she'd ever known and slipped out the tiny opening. It closed, the lock clicking with finality, and she faced the world alone for the very first time.

Staring up at the sky, she lost herself in the sheer vastness of it all. A light streaked across the night, disappearing as quickly as it appeared. A shooting star! The last time she'd seen one of those she'd been a child. Taking it as a good omen, she turned her back to her home and took the first step toward freedom.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jarmon stacked his hands behind his head and stared up at the night sky. The past few days had been the best he'd had in a long time. He'd enjoyed hunting and fishing alongside his brother. It was amazing how easily they'd fallen into old patterns, working side by side the way they always had.

Turning his head, he stared though the darkness at his brother, who was sprawled out on his own blankets a few feet away. They'd roasted fresh fish for their supper, supplementing it with the last of the bread they'd brought from home. Both of them

had eaten until they couldn't manage another bite, much like they used to when they were boys and Zaren and Bador would take them out hunting. This time, instead of making him sad, the memories made him smile.

The fresh air and relative quiet of the forest soothed his soul, almost giving him hope for the future. The hum of the insects had died down with the setting of the sun and now there was only the occasional buzz or chirp. He peered upward. Several nights ago, he'd watched a light streak across the sky. His mother had always insisted that a shooting star was a portent that something significant was about to happen in the viewer's life. Personally, he didn't believe in such superstition, but it had been a beautiful sight.

"Do you ever think about it?" Garrik broke the silence between them. Blankets rustled slightly as he rolled over on his side to face Jarmon.

He'd known this was coming. It was part of the reason he'd invited his brother on this trip, but that didn't mean he had to like it. "Sometimes." A part of him wished it was lighter so that he could see Garrik's face to read his expressions. On the other hand, he was glad that it was night. Somehow it was easier to talk in the dark. He didn't want to see horror or pity in his brother's eyes.

"I felt it."

His brother's softly spoken words made him stiffen. Pushing himself to a seated position, he shifted closer. "What did you say?"

Garrik scrubbed his hand across his face as he rolled up into a seated position as well. "I felt it."

Jarmon was almost afraid to ask, but he had to know. "What did you feel?"

"I felt it when Leon Craddock's sword sliced the fingers from your hand." Garrik rubbed the last two fingers on his left hand. "I thought I'd lost mine. I was surprised when I glanced down and they were still there." He was quiet for a moment as if gathering himself to continue. "I also felt your fear and horror as he struck his final blow. I thought you were dead. I think that for a short while, perhaps you were."

"I'm so sorry, Garrik." It horrified him to think that his brother had experienced even a small portion of what he'd gone through. Jarmon had always gathered strength from the knowledge that his brother had been spared injury during that fateful battle. To learn that he hadn't come away unscathed hurt Jarmon in ways he'd never imagined.

Garrik shrugged. "There is nothing to be sorry for. It is simply a fact. The void I felt when I thought you dead was worse than any injury. It was as if part of me was dead too."

Jarmon reached out and clasped his brother's hand in his. He purposely used his ruined hand. Garrik's fingers closed over his thumb and two remaining fingers. "I think that maybe I was dead for a short time. Everything was dark. Peaceful. Then I felt your pain and I could not leave you."



He could feel his brother's body trembling with emotion, but Jarmon wasn't finished yet. He didn't know if he'd ever be able to talk about this again so he had to finish it. "I came back, yet I have left you alone this past year. For that I am sorry and beg your forgiveness."

Garrik yanked him forward, enveloping him in a hug. "There is nothing to forgive," he whispered in his brother's ear.

Tears pricked Jarmon's eyes and he swallowed heavily. He wrapped his arms around his brother and held him tight. Emotion flowed between them although neither spoke. It was unnecessary. They both knew how the other felt. When the emotions began to subside, Jarmon sat back. Both of them swiped at their eyes, laughing as they watched the other do the same.

Garrik cleared his throat. "How do you feel about your injuries?"

Obviously his brother wasn't finished with his questions and Jarmon felt as if he owed him nothing less than the truth. He thought carefully about his reply. "They are what they are. The biggest challenge was adjusting for the differences in my arm. Everything is more difficult. Even though I am right-handed, I use my left in all aspects of fighting." It was his double-handed grip on his sword that had suffered the most. He'd had his sword clasped tight in his right hand with his left facing outward when Leon Craddock had sliced the bottom two fingers from his hand.

"But you've managed well." Garrik's voice was filled with pride.

"I almost gave up a hundred times. The injury to my left shoulder made it harder to build the muscles I needed to compensate for the loss of strength to my hand. Then there is my leg." He would always limp slightly. His leg was as good as it was ever going to be.

"But you did it."

He could hear the stubbornness in Garrik's voice and it made him smile. "Aye, I did it. With you and Zaren and Bador pushing and prodding me, I didn't have much choice." His brothers had loved him too much to allow him to wallow and he loved and respected them too much to disappoint them.

Garrik shrugged. "What else are older brothers for if not to plague the youngest?"

Jarmon chuckled. "You are older by mere minutes." His brother had teased him his entire life about being younger.

"And don't you forget it." Smug pleasure was evident in Garrik's voice.

"You'll never let me." He lowered himself back down onto his pallet and pulled his blanket around him. He could hear a light shuffling noise as Garrik did the same.

He stacked his hands behind his head again and stared up past the canopy of the trees to the night sky beyond. The stars were bright and the moon was half full. The buzz of the insects and the cries of the night birds as they hunted filled the air around him. The light breeze made the leaves of the trees swish in a relaxing cadence that was

almost musical. He could hear Garrik's breathing slowing and deepening beside him as his brother drifted off to sleep. All was as it should be.

Jarmon closed his eyes and allowed his thoughts to wander. He was glad he and Garrik had talked. They might not have said much in words, but he could feel the huge difference that the past few days had made in their relationship. It felt much as it did before. For that, Jarmon was grateful. He'd missed the special bond he'd shared with Garrik. He knew they still had some tough times ahead, but it was a good beginning, and that was all that mattered.

The more he relaxed, the more his thoughts roamed. His older brothers had a woman of their own. Would he and Garrik ever find one? What would she be like?

His body hardened at the thought of soft, feminine skin gliding over him. His cock lengthened and grew as a more complete image of her formed in his mind. Her hair would be long, falling in a dark curtain to her waist. He could imagine his fingers tangling in the thick mass as he held her tight to him and plundered her mouth. The ends of her hair would trail over his shoulders and chest, teasing him, heightening his pleasure.

Reality slipped away as he lost himself in the fantasy.

Her taste was addictive—a combination of mint and desire that drove him wild. Their tongues curled together as they explored each other. Her fingers dug into his shoulders, her short nails leaving small marks in his skin as he cupped her face with his hands, thrusting his tongue in and out of her moist mouth.

The scent of her perfumed soap rose from her skin as it heated with desire. He longed to bury his face between her lush breasts, breathing in her unique feminine fragrance. Her breasts were plump and full. He cupped them in his palms, allowing the softness of her skin to sink into his fingers. Leaning down, he stoked his tongue across her taut nipple. As he pulled his head back, he blew on it, making it pucker even tighter.

Reaching his hand beneath his blanket, he undid the laces of his pants. His erection sprang free and Jarmon wrapped his hand around it and pumped in a steady up and down motion.

He wished he could see what color her nipples were, but it was too dark. Rubbing his finger around the edges of her areolas, he learned their shape and size. Her nipples were large and sensitive. She moaned as he continued to circle her with his finger. An older man had once told him that some women could almost reach orgasm just by a man stroking their breasts. He wondered if she could reach her pleasure in this manner. He longed to spend hours touching her, tasting her, discovering the secrets of her body.

Long and lithe, her legs wrapped around his flanks as she ground her pelvis against him, her hips cushioning him, inviting him deeper. Moving his hands lower, he cupped her bottom, arching her against his cock. Her pussy was damp with her juices, her hips bucking against him.

The motion of his hand quickened and his breathing became more erratic.

He wanted to see her face, but a veil of darkness obscured it. He wanted to take the time to stroke every inch of her body, to spread her thighs wide and drink of her feminine desire as his fingers coaxed her even higher. But there was no time.

His balls drew up tight to his body.

She whimpered as he reached between their bodies, guiding his erection to the tight opening of her core. "Take me," she whispered.

His head almost exploded as pleasure unlike anything he'd ever imagined washed over him. She belonged to him in a way he couldn't explain. It didn't matter how he knew this, he just did.

"Mine," he growled as he flexed his hips, driving himself into her waiting depths. He felt her slipping away, her body becoming insubstantial. He grasped her tighter, but he could not hold her. She faded into the darkness of the night, lost among the stars...

His cock jerked as spasms of pleasure rocked him. Cum sprayed from the tip, coating his stomach as he continued to pump his hand up and down the hard length. Gritting his teeth, he swallowed his cries of satisfaction.

Spent, his hand slipped away, falling to his side. As his breathing slowed, the cool night air-dried the light sheen of sweat on his torso and face. He shivered, almost certain he could smell her perfume on the breeze. Sighing, he raked his hand through his hair.

Rolling silently to his feet, he hitched his pants over his hips, grabbed his sword and slowly made his way to the river that was near their camp. He didn't bother with his boots. The last thing he wanted was Garrik to wake up and question him. He snorted lightly. He hadn't had this vivid a fantasy in quite a long time. Well over a year in fact.

His bare feet made no sound as he all but glided across the mossy ground. The forest around him was alive as all the nocturnal creatures went about their business. Relaxing, he strolled onward, enjoying the peacefulness of the woods.

Stepping through an opening in the trees, he stood quietly on the banks of the river and gazed around. When he was certain he was alone, he knelt on the rocky edge. Bending forward, he scooped up the cool water with his hands, letting it fall over his neck and chest. He reached behind him and tore a large, flat leaf from one of the many plants that grew along the river. Using it as a washcloth, he cleaned the sticky cum from his stomach.

When he was clean, he laced his pants closed again and sat back on his heels. The woman from his fantasy was still with him, haunting him with her presence. If he closed his eyes, he could almost feel her behind him.

Swearing, he stood, rubbing his ruined hand over his belly. It was naught but a figment of his imagination. No woman would have a man as maimed as he, especially

not when Garrik was whole and hearty. He would have to be content with whatever time he could get with his brother's wife, and that was even assuming that they ever found a woman who would take the two of them. The odds weren't good, especially not when his older brothers already had a woman. Only time would tell if they would be as fortunate.

Turning his back on the river, he quietly made his way back to camp and stretched out on his bedroll. Taking several deep breaths, he allowed the calm of the night to soothe him again as he drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter Three

Garrik watched his brother out of the corner of his eye. It had been three days since they'd talked about Jarmon's injuries and the battle that had caused them. He felt that they were closer now than they'd been since it had happened, but he didn't think that they would ever reclaim what they'd had before.

The incident had changed them both in so many ways. Physically, they were both stronger and more skilled. Because of Jarmon's extensive injuries, he'd had to train harder to regain his muscle tone and dexterity. Garrik had trained alongside his brother, encouraging him, goading him and pushing him. As a result, they were both better fighters than before.

Although Jarmon hadn't really needed anyone to prod him. He'd been a man possessed this past year, training long after the rest of them had given up for the day. It was if he'd had something to prove to himself and to them all.

They'd also lost that youthful feeling that they were invincible. They'd learned all too vividly that that was not the case. In many ways, what Jarmon had gone through in this past year had made men out of both of them. They were both more serious than they had been, although the biggest difference was in Jarmon. Before, he'd been the joker in the family, the one who was always making others laugh and smile. Now he rarely smiled and Garrik had yet to hear him laugh since the injury.

Their relationship was different than it had been, but Garrik felt now that Jarmon had reached out, that it could be stronger and deeper than what they'd shared. They'd both been through the fires of pain and had come out the other side.

He trailed behind his brother as they made their way through the dense woods. Garrik was glad they'd made the decision to leave the horses at home and hunt on foot. They were on Bakra land and they were armed, so it was safe enough. They'd never ventured more than three days walk from the castle and at the moment they could make it home in two. They'd spent a better part of their childhood hunting, fishing and exploring every inch of Bakra land, and both of them knew it like the back of their hands.

Jarmon held up his arm, his hand fisted. Garrik stopped dead in his tracks and listened. If his brother thought there was someone or something up ahead, then Garrik believed him. They were all good trackers, but there was no one as adept at it as Jarmon. He was pure magic. His brother could follow either man or beast across any terrain, easily reading the signs where others saw nothing.

As hard as he listened, he could hear nothing. Jarmon crept back toward him and leaned close. "By the river." His voice was a toneless whisper. "I'm going to scout around to the back. Don't show yourself until I give the signal."

Before he could protest, Jarmon was gone. Swallowed up by the woods. Not even a branch swayed to reveal his passing. If he hadn't watched his brother steal away, he'd never have known which direction he'd gone in.

There was nothing else for him to do but to get into position and wait. Silently drawing his sword, he moved stealthily toward the river, staying within the protection of the trees. He could hear something now that he was closer. Crouching down, he eased the foliage apart and almost swallowed his tongue.

Kneeling down on the side of the bank was a woman. A half-naked woman. She'd stripped the bodice of her dress down her arms and it hung around her waist. As he watched, she leaned over, cupped some of the cool water in her hands and sluiced it over her torso.

Her nipples hardened and she shivered as the cool water hit her. Garrik's hands flexed at his sides. He wanted to cover her breasts with his hands to warm them, to feel the hard tips pushing against the center of his palms.

Swearing under his breath, he tore his gaze away and glanced up and down the riverbank. She seemed to be alone, but that didn't make any sense at all. He didn't recognize her, so she didn't belong to Bakra land. If she was traveling, she should be surrounded by her husband, brothers or father. Anyone. She shouldn't be out here alone. She was a woman and, as such, should be protected at all costs.

He frowned as she continued to wash her arms, unaware she was being watched. It was dangerous for her to be alone in the forest. There were all manner of beasts about. They would have to take her back to Bakra Castle until her family could be found. Maybe she was lost?

Garrik dismissed that thought immediately. She didn't act lost. In fact, if he weren't mistaken, she was humming a tune beneath her breath as she washed. She was a complete mystery, but a beautiful one.

The sun chose that moment to break through the clouds. Garrik sucked in a breath, finding it suddenly difficult to breathe. He'd thought her hair a plain brown. He was mistaken. When the light struck it, he could see it contained threads of mahogany, oak, chestnut and every other conceivable shade of brown. He'd never seen anything like it in his life. As she leaned forward, her long braid fell over her shoulder. Absently, she flicked it back. His fingers itched to release her hair from its confinement and spread it in a wide cape over his chest.

His cock swelled instantly, making his pants painfully uncomfortable. Grunting, he shifted, using his free hand to try to adjust himself. It offered some relief, but not much. A thin sheen of sweat covered his chest and face, and not all of it was brought on by the heat of the sun.

He licked his lips as he continued to stare at her, learning her features. Her skin was pale and appeared smooth. Her cheekbones were high, her chin strong. He wondered what her lips would taste like. The bottom lip was fuller than the top and appeared to

be a rosy color, but he couldn't be sure from this distance. He wondered what color her eyes were.

Her torso was slender, almost too much so, but her arms were strong, rippling with long, lithe muscles as she washed. His eyes narrowed as he noticed a slight discoloration on her torso. It could be dirt or possibly a fading bruise. She had the appearance of someone who'd been ill or injured.

Garrik wanted to strip off her dress and see the rest of her. Would her belly have a slight curve or would it be flat? Would the hair covering her sex be the same wondrous color as the hair on her head or would it be darker?

As still as a stone, he stayed crouched behind the bushes. She was just sitting there now, soaking in the sun's rays as they poured down on her. Tipping her head back, she closed her eyes and smiled. He found himself smiling in return, captivated by the sheer innocent joy on her face.

Finally she seemed to gather herself and open her eyes. Reaching down by her side, she picked up what appeared to be a piece of cloth. Dipping it in the river, she reached over her shoulder, trying to wash her back. He growled low in his throat. He'd love to wash her back for her – and any other part of her, for that matter.

He was so caught up with the mysterious water nymph across from him, he almost missed Jarmon's signal. The song of the lark rang clearly through the woods. The woman paid no heed to the sound at all, but frowned as she tried to reach her lower back with her cloth. It was time to offer his assistance.

Rising, he stepped out from behind the bushes. Her head shot up and she froze. Garrik held his hand out in front of him and offered a smile as he sheathed his weapon.

The piece of cloth slipped from her fingers to land with a plop on some rocks at the edge of the river. Jerking her dress to her waist, she jumped to her feet. He could see her hands trembling as she clasped the fabric to her chest.

"I do not mean you any harm." He kept his voice low as he stepped into the river. It wasn't deep and he could dry his boots later. Her eyes shot to the bulge in his pants. He couldn't do anything about that, but he stopped halfway across the river. The water rushed by his knees, but he didn't move any further toward her.

"Stay away." She backed away, almost stumbling as her foot hit a rock.

He kept his voice as nonthreatening as possible. "You shouldn't be out here by yourself. It's not safe."

Her chin tilted upward. "I'm not on my own. My family is close by. If you leave now, I won't scream."

Garrik had to admire her courage. Closer now, he could see that her eyes were a deep, velvet brown. A man could get lost in eyes like that. She was frightened, of that there was no doubt, but still she held her ground and faced him.

"There is no need to fear me." He took another step forward. "You're on Bakra land and I cannot leave you out here by yourself." He continued to move slowly forward, one step at a time.

Rather than reassuring her, she paled even more at his words, swaying slightly. For a moment, he feared she might faint. She glanced to the right side, and as he moved in that direction, she jerked to the left, swooping down and coming up with a small dagger in her hand. "Leave me alone."

He shook his head. "I cannot." There was no way he would leave an undefended woman alone in the forest. His own code of honor would not allow it. "Come. I will take you back to the castle." Garrik strode forward, his eyes never leaving her face.

Genita swallowed back the fear that threatened to overwhelm her as the stranger continued to move steadily toward her. She'd been on her own for many days now and this was the first time she hadn't heard someone coming in enough time to hide. There was no doubting the man was a warrior. If the four-foot sword strapped to his side wasn't enough of an indication, there was the man himself.

He was huge. She figured he stood about six-and-a-half feet—much the same size as her brothers, but the similarity ended there. Where her brothers were large, strong men, this man was massive. Bronze armbands wrapped around his thick biceps and wrists, and the open vest he wore gave her a clear view of his impossibly wide chest. Long blond hair flowed freely to his waist and his blue eyes glittered with some emotion she couldn't name. His lips were full, his nose straight and his jaw had a hint of arrogance as he tilted his head to the side to stare at her. He was a warrior all right.

It was the bulge in the front of his pants that frightened her the most. She'd lived around large, rough men her entire life and she'd heard them talk, heard them brag about their sexual conquests. If her brothers came across a lone woman in the woods, she had no doubt as to what would happen. The only question would be if the poor woman would survive or not.

She clutched the dagger that Radnor had given her. The sweat on her palms made the handle slippery and she tightened her grip. The edges of the handle dug into her skin. Still moving steadily toward her, he seemed totally unconcerned about her weapon and that added to her fear. He'd even sheathed his own sword. Given his sheer size, she had no doubt he could easily overpower her.

"I won't let you rape me." Brave words when she wasn't sure her shaking legs would support her much longer.

Her words stopped him cold. He was out of the water now, standing on the bank of the river several feet away. His blue eyes turned glacial as his eyebrows drew together in a scowl. Pure menace rolled off him in waves. "I would never do such a thing."

She snorted. As if she'd believe him! The bulge in his pants hadn't gone away. If anything, it appeared even larger now that he was closer to her. "Then just leave."



She'd meant her words to be strong and threatening as she brandished the dagger in front of her. Instead, they were little more than a whispered plea.

He shook his head and she almost believed the look of regret on his face. "That I cannot do."

Genita nodded in understanding. He would do whatever he would, but so would she. She hated to expose herself to him any more than she already had, but she couldn't fight with only one free hand. She silently cursed herself for having removed her chemise and giving in to the need to wash some of the trail dirt from it as well as her body. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but her actions then had now left her in a very vulnerable position.

Usually she waited until nightfall to wash, but the day had been so hot, she hadn't been able to resist the lure of the cool river water. It was too late to change what she'd done. All she could do now was use it to try to give herself an edge against this unknown man. Forcing her fingers to open, she released her death grip on the bodice of her dress, allowing it to slip to her waist.

His eyes went straight to her exposed breasts and it was then that she lunged.

Strong arms caught her from behind, wrapping around her upper body and trapping her arms at her sides. *Oh gods, there were two of them!* She struggled, jerking her body from side to side and kicking out with her feet. There was no escape. Her soft-soled leather boots struck what had to be his legs, but it was like hitting solid wood. There was no give in him anywhere.

He held her easily with one massive forearm as he used his free hand to pry the dagger from her grip. She gritted her teeth, desperately trying to hang on, but it was useless. The weapon fell to the ground beside them.

"I'm sorry," the low male voice whispered in her ear. "But I cannot let you harm my brother or yourself."

Genita slumped forward. She was caught. Worse, her only means of protecting herself was gone. She'd tried to kill the man's brother. She did not expect any leniency. Bracing herself for the attack, she did what she always did when one of her older brothers beat her—she withdrew inside herself. The world faded around her. They would do whatever they would to her body, but they would not touch her emotions or her spirit. She would protect that until the last breath left her body.

Jarmon felt the woman go weightless in his arms. She was slight, almost fragile, and he held her easily. He glanced at Garrik, an uneasy feeling settling in his gut. He shifted her in his arms so that he was cradling her instead of holding her captive. Her eyes were closed, her expression blank. He felt her slipping away from him.

Concerned, he moved back into the shade and sat. Brushing a stray hair from her face, he cupped her cheek in his hand. "Open your eyes, little one. We will not hurt you."

She didn't stir.

Garrik picked up the dagger and shoved it into his belt before settling beside them. A frown marred his features. Tugging the fabric of her dress over her chest, he then picked up her arm and began to chafe it with his hands. "She's cold."

Jarmon shifted her closer, trying to share some of his body heat with her. She lay limp in his embrace. He patted her cheeks gently. "Come back to me, little one," he crooned. "No one will hurt you."

Garrik stripped off his vest and laid it over her, tucking the fabric around her body. "I should go back across the river and get my pack. She needs a fire and blankets. Probably food as well." He didn't move but continued to stare down at the unknown woman. "Why did she think I would rape her?" He spat the distasteful word. "She is a woman. We protect our women here."

Jarmon sighed, his mind still reeling with what he'd seen. "Not all women are protected, my brother." Shifting her, he leaned her forward so that her back was exposed to both their views. Fading yellow bruises and angry red welts crisscrossed her back, but what fired his fury the most was the fact that it was obviously not her first beating. Older scars marred her flesh. There was no telling how old some of them were.

Garrik sucked in a breath. Jarmon could feel his brother's rage. It matched his own. He had a deep need to seek out whoever had done this to her and kill him. A man protected all those physically weaker than himself. At least any man of honor did. And that included all women and children.

Jarmon traced one of the scars and the woman sucked in a breath. "What happened to you?" Her body had tensed the moment he'd exposed her back. He knew she was aware of her surroundings again, back from wherever her mind had taken her.

"What do you care?" Her words were clipped and cold.

He shifted her against his arm and had to bite back a smile as she glared up at him. Her eyes were a dark brown and, even angry as she was, they were still soft and deep. "Why would you think I wouldn't care?"

"You're a stranger and a man. You'll take what you want regardless of what I want."

Jarmon could hear the bitterness in her voice. His gut clenched as a horrible thought occurred to him. "Have you been raped before?" Unable to keep his anger from his voice, he knew it was harsh.

She flinched slightly but tilted her chin up once again. Her eyes widened as she truly looked at him for the first time. Jarmon knew he wasn't a reassuring sight with his scarred face, but there was no way he was letting her go until she answered his question.

"Answer me," he all but growled.

"Jarmon," his brother warned. He knew Garrik was warning him not to frighten her further.

She bowed her head and shook it. "No."

Both brothers heaved a sigh of relief. Jarmon hadn't realized he was holding himself so tensely until she spoke. "I'm glad," he replied simply. "It will not happen this day."

She squirmed and he reluctantly released her, letting her slip from his arms. Putting some distance between them, she pulled the bodice of her dress back on, lacing it at the front. Once she was covered, she slowly stood. "Why won't you let me go?"

Jarmon could hear the confusion in her voice—see it in her eyes. She didn't seem to comprehend why they would not do so and he didn't know what else to say to make her understand. "You are alone on Bakra land. We cannot just leave you here."

Once again, he saw her fear the moment he said she was on Bakra land. She'd had the same reaction when Garrik had first told her. Why would that frighten her? What had she heard about their family to make her so afraid? Sighing, he slowly came to his feet. Beside him, Garrik did the same. They'd wasted enough time. They needed to gather their packs and find a good spot to set up camp for the night. The woman needed a warm fire and some food. They'd talk later.

Holding out his hand, he beckoned her forward. "Come. We will make camp for the day and then we will talk."

She glanced furtively to the forest.

"You won't make it," Jarmon assured her.

She scowled at him. "I wasn't planning on running. I wanted to get my belongings. I don't want to leave my blankets or the tapestry."

Both Jarmon and Garrik froze. Garrik found his voice first. "Tapestry?"

She nodded emphatically. "Tapestry."

## Chapter Four

Genita jumped as the second warrior stalked toward her. She realized he had a slight limp, but it didn't slow him down at all. Instead, it made him appear all the more menacing.

He was even larger than the first warrior, all strong bone and thick muscle. She could tell that at one point in their lives, they'd looked identical, but now they were different in appearance. This second man had a long whitish scar bisecting his cheek. The mark started at the tip of his left eye and ended at the corner of his mouth. His hair was different as well. It was long and blond, but there were streaks of white running throughout it. The white locks framed his hard face. His cheekbones were prominent and his nose had a bump in it. Obviously at some point in his life, he'd broken it.

He reached out his left hand to her and she jerked backward, unable to take her eyes from his ruined hand. His last two fingers were missing. Gone. He swore and her eyes flew to his face once again. Her stomach churned and she began to shake.

"I know I'm not pretty," he growled.

*He has no idea,* she thought. Genita slapped her hand over her mouth, swallowing back the hysterical laughter that threatened.

She'd spent the past year listening to her brothers ranting and raving about the Bakra family. Her brother had boasted that he'd killed one of them in battle. But that boast hadn't lasted. He'd been furious when he'd discovered the Bakra brother had lived. Her eldest brother's fury and bitterness had grown the past year as word had reached them that despite the fact he was missing two fingers, the warrior was stronger and better than he'd been before. That, coupled with the fact that the eldest Bakra brother had slain two of her brothers when they'd ambushed him and his woman, had driven her eldest brother half insane. He spent hour upon hour replaying the battle to any who would listen, berating the gods for not allowing the Bakra bastard to die. Her brother did not take defeat well.

She was Genita Craddock, and it was her eldest brother, Leon, who'd tried to kill him. Her brother was responsible for his injuries and his family's woes. She was the sister of his greatest enemy. They would kill her if they discovered who she really was.

"Tell us about the tapestry." The first warrior stepped beside his brother.

Her mind whirled with possibilities. She knew the legend of the tapestry. Everyone in Javara knew it. If they thought her a tapestry bride, she might be able to keep her secret from them for three days. At the end of that time, she could slip away and they'd think that the tapestry had taken her home. It was her only choice.

Stiffening her spine, she struggled to keep a blank expression on her face. "It's about two feet by three and has a picture of a castle and two warriors standing in front of it." It was only now that she realized that when she'd finally filled in the features of the warrior these past few months, she'd used the Bakra brothers as a guide. All those months of listening to Leon rant and rave about them during his drunken rages had obviously affected her. They were the ones who had defeated her brothers and emerged triumphant over their evil. Who better for her to weave her dreams around?

A smile slowly crossed the first warrior's face. "If the tapestry brought you, then you belong to us."

"I don't understand." She glanced away, the lie bitter on her lips. But it was better than the alternatives.

"I am Garrik Bakra." He gave her a solemn bow. "This is my brother Jarmon."

Jarmon continued to stare at her, his gaze unwavering. He was making her even more nervous. She focused on Garrik instead. "Pleased to meet you both."

He cocked his eyebrow at her. "And you are?"

Oh gods. Panic threatened to overwhelm her. She couldn't tell them her real name. She had no idea if they knew it or not. Radnor's face popped into her head and she closed her eyes in relief, sending up a prayer of thanks. "Genny. You can call me Genny." It was a name she would readily answer to and that was all that mattered.

"Genny." Her head jerked around to Jarmon as he said her name softly. "Well, Genny, let's go and gather your belongings and get moving."

He didn't believe her. She could sense it in the way he watched her. Every fiber of her being was telling her to run, that he was a danger to her. She forced herself to walk back to the river and retrieve the chemise she'd been using as a washcloth. Wringing out the cloth, she folded it and tucked it under her arm as she began to walk slowly toward the woods. "I don't understand what you mean about the tapestry." *Pay attention* Genita, she scolded herself. No, *Genny*. She had to start thinking of herself as Genny if she was going to keep up this charade for three days. It was the details that would give her away if she wasn't cautious. She had to remember that she wasn't supposed to know anything about the tapestry or the prophecy.

"We'll explain everything later." He was right behind her, matching her step for step.

Reaching behind a rock, she pulled out her satchel and bedroll, thankful that the tapestry was still safely wrapped in her spare dress within the blankets. She tucked the wet chemise into the satchel. Jarmon took it from her, easily tossing it over his shoulder. Wrapping his hand around her wrist, he tugged her deeper into the woods. His grip didn't hurt her, but there was no way she could get free. He had effectively manacled her to him.

Garrik joined them, his own pack on his back. They stopped only for a moment as Jarmon gathered his own pack from where he'd hidden it. With Jarmon leading the way

and Garrik following behind them, Genny found herself being pulled further into the unknown.

Jarmon held his tongue as he and his brother set up camp. They'd walked for several hours, wanting to reach a spot where there was plenty of food, water and shelter if it became necessary. He still didn't quite believe that the woman was out here on her own. The only reasonable explanation was that what she'd told them was true and the tapestry had indeed brought her to them. They'd kept their pace slow and stopped several times for breaks, not wanting to exhaust her.

*Genny.* He turned her name over in his head. She was wary of them, always watchful. Not that he could blame her. The scars and fading bruises on her back were a testament to the hardships she'd lived through.

He might be sympathetic toward her, but he sure as hell didn't trust her. She was lying to them. About what, he wasn't sure. But there was no doubt in his mind she wasn't telling them the truth. All the signs were there. She didn't meet their gazes, fidgeting when she answered their questions. That is, if she didn't outright evade them. Then there was the fact that her clothing was familiar. Perhaps she'd gotten them from someone else since the tapestry brought her here, but he didn't think so.

Jarmon watched her out of the corner of his eye as he spread his bedroll over the mossy ground. There was no denying her beauty. It shone from her like a beacon, calling him. Jerking his head back, he concentrated on what he was doing, but he was aware of her every single moment.

He glanced down at his left hand, cursing it. His disfigurement had upset her. She had been unable to hold back her reaction, jerking away from him, staring at it in complete and absolute horror.

She'd damn well have to get used to it.

He flexed his fingers, straightening to his full height. If the tapestry had brought her, then she belonged to them. It was up to them to do everything in their power to convince her to stay with them. He had no doubt that she would marry Garrik, but he didn't care. All that mattered was keeping her.

He had his doubts about her story. After all, the tapestry had already brought two brides to this generation. That in itself was unusual. If she was lying about the tapestry, well, no matter—he still planned on keeping her.

Garrik had started a small fire and now several large fish were draped over spits to cook. His brother had managed to catch them on one of their many rest stops. Genny kept her distance, sitting quietly on her own blanket. She didn't seem any more comfortable with Garrik than with him. If they wanted her to stay with them, that would have to change.

Jarmon strode to the center of the camp and settled himself on the ground. The sun was still shining, but from its location in the west, he knew it was late afternoon. Genny

watched his every move like a frightened animal trying to read the hunter, hoping to escape before he struck. He didn't like the image.

"The tapestry brought you here?" Leaning back, he propped himself up on one arm, wanting to have a good view of her face as she talked.

Her proud chin swept upward as she gave him a regal nod. "It did."

Once again, he was struck by her sheer loveliness. It was a subtle kind of beauty that a man noticed the longer he watched her. Her hair had appeared a plain medium brown until the sun struck it. Really, it was a mixture of just about every shade of brown imaginable. Her braid was the width of his wrist and he longed to unwrap the twisted mass and drape it over his body. He imagined that his brother was having similar fantasies.

Her skin was pale, almost translucent. As he continued to stare at her, a light pink tinged her cheeks. He could spend hours tracing the contours of her face with his fingers. Her cheekbones were high, her chin strong but feminine and her nose straight.

She closed her eyes as if to escape his heated gaze. He found himself wondering just how soft her eyelashes really were as they brushed her cheeks. Her eyes captivated him. They were a dark, rich brown that made a man want to promise her anything, everything. There was no guile to be found in them at all. She had no idea of her own beauty.

His gaze moved lower, over the slender column of her neck toward her breasts. She was breathing rapidly, her chest rising and falling, making her breasts sway. From the glimpse that he'd had of her, he knew that she had exquisite breasts. High and firm, they were more than a handful for sure.

His own breathing was deepening and his cock was swollen, pressing hard against the placket at the front of his pants. Jarmon sucked in a deep breath and slowly released it. Talk first. His sexual needs could wait.

He was struck by the silence around the campfire. It wasn't a comfortable one. He could smell Genny's fear permeating the air around them. He could feel the thick waves of lust pouring off himself and his brother. Shaking himself, he rolled up into a seated position again, bending one leg so that it blocked his erection from her view. The last thing he wanted was to frighten her any more than she already was.

"Do you know about the tapestry?" She shook her head and glanced away, staring toward the woods. Interesting. Perhaps she knew more than she was letting on. No matter. Taking his time, Jarmon gave her a brief history of the tapestry. "So you see," he continued. "The tapestry brings women from other times and places who do not fit in their own worlds. Women who have the ability to thrive here. The tapestry has already come twice in this lifetime. It brought Christina to the Garen brothers and then it brought Jane Smith to our family."

He smiled as he thought of Jane. If he brought Genny home, he had no doubt that Jane would have her full story within a matter of hours. His smile faded. As long as he was certain she wasn't telling them the truth, he would not take her back to Bakra

Castle. He would not risk the safety of his family. They had suffered enough. He did not think her malicious or cruel. Rather, she struck him as a woman who was afraid and on the run from someone or something. Pushing aside his concerns, he continued. "It has never been known to bring three perspective brides in one generation. This is indeed a blessing."

Genny was staring at him now, wide-eyed. "Three men to every one woman?"

"In some cases. But because we are four brothers, we are allowed two wives. Our older brothers, Zaren and Bador, have Jane. We will have you." He couldn't shake the feeling that he hadn't told her anything she didn't already know. Maybe she was telling the truth, but he wasn't convinced. He wanted her—his body made no secret of that fact—but he wouldn't let down his guard around her.

A horrible thought struck him. "You're not married are you?" Maybe she was running from an abusive husband.

"No!" she all but yelled before composing herself again. "No." Her voice was low and steady. "I have never been married."

"Good. Then you have no objection to us trying to convince you to stay with us."

She shook her head back and forth. "No. I mean, yes, I do have objections. I won't be staying." Her hands were fisted in the fabric of her dress, but she kept her body still as if trying not to attract attention. It struck him as a natural pose for her, one she'd learned and used often.

"Do you miss your home so much then, Genny?" Garrik kept his voice soft and inquiring.

"No." Once again she glanced away. She seemed to be struggling within herself over some issue. When she faced them again, she was calm and composed. Jarmon admired the way she was able to do so when she was obviously very afraid. Her courage pleased him.

"Three days." He'd had enough of talking around the subject. "For three days we wish to pleasure you, to be with you. It is our job to convince you to stay here with us, to marry one of us. But first we must pleasure you separately and together so you will know that you are compatible with both of us. If you stay, then you can make your choice as to which of us you wish to marry. The other brother still retains the right to share your bed one night a week, as I've already explained."

Genny jumped to her feet, her hands held out in front of her to ward them off. "No. I cannot." Tears welled in her eyes.

Both brothers stood slowly, neither of them wishing to frighten her enough to run. "No one will force you, Genny," Garrik crooned. "We only want to make you happy, to bring you sexual satisfaction."

She stared at them as if they were both out of their minds. "I do not understand either of you." With each word she spoke, she took a step away from them.



"You don't need to decide right now." Jarmon told the lie easily. In his mind there was nothing to decide. If they were not men enough to seduce her, then they deserved to be turned away from her bed. They would never force her. The very thought was abhorrent to him. But that did not mean they would not use every skill they possessed to convince her otherwise.

Genny stopped and stared at him. Jarmon knew he'd thrown her off kilter once again. What did she think they were going to do, toss her down on the blankets and flip up her skirt? Perhaps she did. And while the idea had merit once she was used to them, it would never do for her first time with either one of them.

"Come." Jarmon sat back down and patted the ground next to him. "Sit and we will eat. The fish are cooked. You are hungry, aren't you?"

Her hand slipped to her belly and she licked her lips. Jarmon stifled a groan at the innocent enticement. "Food would be good."

He glanced over at Garrik and nodded. Both of them ignored her as they busied themselves with the fish. Gradually, she crept closer to them. No, not to them—to the food. Her eyes never left the cooked fish as she slowly lowered herself to the ground some distance away from them.

Garrik pushed a large portion of the food in Genny's direction. Sitting back, he picked up his own food and began to eat as he drew Jarmon into conversation. Knowing what Garrik was doing, he joined in. Both men chatted easily about their hunting trip and about what they might do tomorrow.

Although neither man looked directly at Genny, both of them were very aware of her every move. She ate like a person who'd been half starved. When she finished the fish, she even licked the broad leaf that it had been served on before she caught herself. She tensed, but relaxed again when she thought they weren't paying her any attention.

Jarmon had saved a large portion of his own fish and casually pushed it toward her. He didn't so much as glance in her direction as he kept up the congenial conversation with Garrik.

He bit back a smile when she finally reached for it, pulling it close. She was like some untamed creature of the forest. They would not win her by force, but by gentleness and consideration.

Food was just the first step. By the time they lay down for the evening, she would be well fed and relaxed. Ripe for seduction.

## Chapter Five

Genny placed a hand on her stomach and sighed. She felt better than she had since she'd first began her frantic flight from her home. That was, she counted the days off in her head, seven days ago. At some moments, it seemed as if she'd run in the middle of the night just yesterday. At other times, it felt as if she'd been on the run forever.

It was good to have a full belly for a change, but she could not afford to let down her guard for one single moment. She didn't understand the Bakra brothers at all. They'd been nothing but kind to her since they'd stumbled upon her by the river. She felt heat creeping up her cheeks at the memory. They'd seen her half naked. No other man had seen her in such a state of undress.

She wasn't sure they bought her lie about the tapestry, but neither of them had disputed her outright. Not that she'd thought they would. This was Javara and women were scarce. Of course they would want to keep her.

Perhaps she wouldn't mind being kept by them...just for a short while.

The errant thought made her stiffen. *Where had that come from?* She'd never imagined being married before, of sharing her life with several men. She'd never dared to consider it before, instinctually knowing what kind of men her brothers would choose for her. *The Luther brothers.* She shuddered and the meal that she'd so recently consumed threatened to come back up again.

What would it be like to have a husband who cared for her, one who treated her kindly? She'd always wanted children and a home of her own, but had never dared to dream. The tapestry had done that for her. It had tempted her to dream. But more than that—it had given her the courage.

Three years. She'd put three years of her life into that piece of cloth. It had taken her months to plan the design and to slowly confiscate lengths of thread from all that she'd spun and dyed. Her brothers sold and bartered her threads and she'd never seen a penny for her efforts. She'd decided on her seventeenth birthday that she at least deserved to have some of the thread itself.

She'd started at the edges of the design, creating the trees and plants. From there she'd added some birds and animals as she'd worked her way toward the castle in the center. The castle itself had been one of her own creation. Made of gray stone, it stood proud and tall. A fortress, yet a home.

After two years, she was ready to begin the two warriors who'd stood in front of the castle. Why she'd settled on two and not more, she'd never know. Perhaps it was because she'd secretly longed for a husband of her own. To have that, she'd have to belong to at least two men. She didn't want to belong to three. She'd been around too many rough men her entire life. The fewer, the better.

It was in that final year that two of her brothers had been killed by Zaren Bakra, and Leon and her second-eldest brother Harmid had become obsessed with the Bakra brothers. Their obsession had obviously become hers and she'd used their descriptions of the men to complete her tapestry. They represented freedom to her. They had defeated her brothers and their victory had given her the courage to fight for her own freedom.

In her own way, she wasn't lying. The truth was that the tapestry had brought her to them. Without it, she'd never have had the sheer audacity to defy Leon and to flee the only home she'd ever known.

She couldn't stay with them. Oh it would be easy to give in to them. They were good men, kind men. A woman could do much worse for a husband. But no matter what she thought she might like to do, she could not stay. If her brothers ever found out, they would make outright war on the Bakras. They had already suffered enough at the hands of her family. She would not bring more hardships and strife their way.

But, a sly voice in the back of her head whispered, there was no reason she could not enjoy their sexual advances. They would be gentle with her. She didn't know how she knew that, but she didn't doubt her instincts—they'd kept her safe too many times for her to distrust them now. Genny had always feared losing her virginity to one of the rough, vile men her brothers called friend. She'd always known they would be brutal, taking pleasure in her pain. Not so Jarmon and Garrik.

They'd already had plenty of opportunity to make use of her body if they'd desired it. She was a woman alone with no protection and no real weapon. They were two exceptional warriors in their prime. She hadn't stood a chance if their intentions had been less than honorable.

Instead, they'd reassured her and fed her.

Perhaps this opportunity was a gift from the gods. She'd prayed to them for years, begging them not to let one of her brother's horrible allies be the one to take her virginity. Maybe this was the answer to her prayers. This was an opportunity to have men of her choosing initiate her into womanhood and the mysteries of sexual relationships.

Heat flooded low in her belly and her sex dampened with need. She'd never felt this way around any other men in her life. Could she truly let this opportunity slip through her fingers? They wanted her. They'd left her no doubt of that fact. She'd seen lust in men's eyes before, but it had always left her cold. The sexual desire in Garrik's and Jarmon's eyes warmed her blood, making it pump faster through her veins.

Her breasts ached and for the first time in her life, she yearned for a man's hands to touch them, to stroke them. Her nipples were tight buds, rubbing against her dress every time she shifted even the tiniest bit. She felt hot and flustered, not quite sure what she wanted but knowing these men could give it to her.

Jarmon had wrapped his arms around her earlier today, cradling her body against his much larger, harder frame and she could still feel the echo of his embrace. Once

she'd understood that he'd meant her no harm—in fact, wanted only to comfort her—she'd longed to sink back into his arms. Genny had wanted to curl into his body and never leave. She'd felt safe for the first time in her life.

Then she'd discovered who he was.

Sighing, she traced her finger through the soft moss around her, listening with half an ear as the brothers chatted softly between them. That was another thing she liked about them. They didn't feel the need to yell as her own brothers did.

They'd probably do more than yell if they discovered her true identity. She shivered and curled her legs up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. She didn't even want to imagine what they might do.

A blanket dropped around her shoulders. She hadn't even heard anyone move. Garrik smiled down at her. "The evening is closing in. Why don't you move closer to the fire?"

She blinked, noticing her surroundings for the first time in hours. While she'd been lost in thought, the sun had all but disappeared from the sky. The first day with them was almost gone. She would only have tonight and two more days. Did she dare to reach out and take what she wanted? Could she live with herself if she didn't?

She'd lived in fear most of her life, but everything had changed the moment she'd decided to run. This was her life now, for better or for worse. Her brothers might still find her and drag her back to Craddock Keep. She could easily find herself forced into a brutal marriage from which the only escape was death. At least if she took this opportunity, she would have the memories to comfort her for the rest of her life.

Her brothers would be furious if they ever found out she'd given away her virginity, but they'd never be able to discover who she'd given it to. She'd die before she'd tell. Besides, she was never going back there and she would probably never see them again. She was free now and this was a chance to reach out and grab something good from life. To experience something truly wonderful that wasn't tainted by her family. As she inched toward the low glow of the fire, she prayed that she had the courage to take it.

Genny lay under her blankets staring up at the night sky, wondering why she'd even bothered to pray for courage. It didn't seem as if she needed any at all. Both men had spread their bedrolls next to her and stretched out beside her. She'd expected one or both of them to reach out to her. Instead they'd both rolled onto their sides, each of them facing her, and closed their eyes. Their breathing was deep and even while hers was shallow and choppy.

Seems she'd worried for nothing. Obviously she'd been mistaken about their intentions. Her disappointment was overwhelming and she bit her bottom lip to stem the unexpected sting of tears. Now that she'd made up her mind, she wanted to explore her sexuality to its fullest. This might be the only chance in her lifetime to do so and now it seemed to have ended before it had ever really begun.

"You are not sleeping," Garrik murmured as he laid his hand upon her stomach. She could feel the heat of it through the coarse fabric of her dress.

"I'm fine." It was hard to concentrate on talking with his hand making small circles on her stomach. With each circle he made, his hand move higher on her stomach, taking it closer to the undersides of her breasts. When she realized she was holding her breath, she forced herself to take long, even breaths.

"Are you certain?" The side of his hand barely grazed the edges of her breasts. They seemed to swell as her nipples tightened. She bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out. Her breasts ached and it was all she could do to keep from grabbing his hand and pressing it over the swollen tip.

"Genny?" He paused, his hand hovering just below her breast. It was almost touching her. Almost.

She nodded, unable to talk. The ache in her breasts had spread low to her belly. Her legs moved restlessly across her blanket as she tried to stem the pulsing need springing to life deep inside her.

Jarmon propped himself up on his elbow as he stared down at her. The darkness hid most of his features, but his eyes seemed to glitter in the moonlight. His touch was gentle as he stroked the side of her cheek with his finger. "I can sense the tension thrumming through your body." His low, deep voice mesmerized her and she unconsciously leaned closer. "I can feel the need burning in you. Sense the yearning of your very soul."

Oh gods, was she that obvious? Shame filled her. Closing her eyes, she turned her head away, but Jarmon caught her jaw between his fingers and urged her head back toward him. Stubbornly, she refused to open her eyes. She didn't want to see concern, or worse yet, pity in his gaze.

Her eyes flew open when he stroked his thumb across her bottom lip. He'd leaned closer to her, so close that their noses were almost touching. "I can sense it, Genny, because those same cravings consume me as well." Before she could truly make sense of his words, his mouth lowered to hers.

She'd expected his kiss to be forceful. Hard. What she hadn't expected was for him to taste her, gently running his tongue across both her lips. The roughness of his tongue against her smooth lips seemed to accelerate the pulsing within her body. Her core ached, throbbing as cream slid from her, softening her sex.

Her mouth opened of its own accord. She wanted more, wanted to feel his tongue stroking hers. She felt more than heard his rumble of pleasure as he accepted her invitation, slipping his tongue inside.

Heat. She'd never felt such heat before. Her body felt as if it were burning from the inside out, being consumed by a need she'd never experienced before. From listening to the women gossip in her home, she knew that this was passion. Although from what they'd said and the stories they'd told, Genny had never expected it to be this out of control, this overwhelming. She felt as if her body no longer belonged to her.

Jarmon stroked his tongue across hers, coaxing it to play. Tentatively at first, she rubbed it against his and was rewarded with another rumble of pleasure from deep in his chest. Sliding her hand up over his shoulder, she cupped the back of his head, not wanting him to pull away.

There was so much more she wanted to experience, to try.

Taking her time, she leisurely explored his mouth. Jarmon's breathing quickened and he slanted his mouth over hers, fitting them even tighter together. Genny could hardly breathe, but she didn't care. Every part of her body was tingling. Her toes curled as he deepened the kiss, the movements of his mouth and tongue becoming more frantic, less practiced.

Her fingers curled into his scalp, her short nails biting into him when she felt him start to pull away. She didn't want it to end. Wasn't ready to let go. But he tore his mouth from hers, gulping air into his heaving lungs.

Genny reached her hand out to Jarmon but sucked in a deep breath as Garrik slid his hand over the front of her dress, across her hip and down to her knee where the hem had bunched. Leisurely, he slid his hand beneath. She hadn't had time to pull on her damp chemise that she'd washed earlier today at the river so there was only one layer of cloth covering her. Pushing the fabric out of his way as he went, he continued upward. His hands were hard and calloused but extremely gentle as he skimmed his fingers over her thigh. She shivered as he traced her hipbone. Whimpered when his finger dipped into her navel. His low laugh thrilled her to her toes. When his hand was resting just below her breasts, he stopped.

"Let us pleasure you." Jarmon leaned over her, briefly obscuring the moon and the night sky from her view. The scar on his face appeared deeper and he looked as if he were in pain.

Raising her hand, she cupped his ravaged cheek. The raised edges of the scars seemed to burn against her palm. She wanted to take away the pain he'd suffered. He flinched away. Hurt by his sudden withdrawal, she dropped her hand back to her side and began to chew on her bottom lip again. It was one thing to decide that she was going to give away her virginity. Quite another thing to actually do it.

As if he could read her jumbled thoughts, Garrik shifted his hand higher, skimming the edge of his fingers against the sensitive undersides of her breasts. "We want nothing more from you this night than to be allowed to pleasure you, Genny. All you have to do is lie back and enjoy it."

"That's not fair to you." She didn't know of any men who would forgo their own pleasure.

"It is a gift, Genny." Jarmon picked up her hand and slowly raised it until it was hovering just over his left cheek. Gradually, he pressed her palm over his ragged scar. "A gift of great value from you to us."

Not knowing what else to say, she nodded.

"The words, Genny," Garrik crooned from behind her. "We need the words from you.

Swallowing back all her trepidation and fear of the unknown, she nodded again. "Yes. Yes, I want you to touch me."

Jarmon didn't smile, but the corner of his mouth turned up the tiniest bit and the expression in his face lightened. Bringing her hand to his lips, he kissed her palm before pulling her upward into a seated position.

Before she could blink, Garrik yanked her dress over her head and tossed it aside. Totally naked, she instinctively curled her legs into her body and wrapped her arms around them, burying her face against her knees.

Jarmon tugged one of the blankets over her bent legs. "You do not have to do anything you do not want to, Genny."

Raising her head, she met both their gazes and saw only concern. There was no anger or irritation at all. That more than anything else gave her the courage to slowly uncurl her legs. When Jarmon urged her to lie back down on the blankets, she did so, allowing all her fears to slip away.

If they had meant to hurt her, they'd had plenty of opportunity to do so. It was strange to trust two men she'd just met, men she barely knew, but she did. Deep in her soul, she knew they would do nothing to physically harm her. When Garrik smiled at her, she felt the desire that had momentarily been smothered by her fears leap to life within her once again.

Both men stretched out on either side of her. She could feel the heat emanating from their bodies and longed to touch them both, to stroke her hands across every inch of their naked chests. Jarmon was closest, so she reached out and laid her palm over his heart. The heavy beat pulsed against her hand. "I want to touch you."

A deep groan rose from deep within him. "Anywhere. Touch me anywhere, Genny. Anything you want."

Genny tasted feminine power for the first time in her life. With just a touch, she had made this strong man groan with need. It was intoxicating. Licking her suddenly dry lips, she skimmed her hand over his impossibly wide chest. She could see the deep scar on his left shoulder but avoided it for now. She longed to touch it, to soothe any lingering ache that resided there, but that would have to wait until another day.

The hair on his chest was sparse, but there was a light covering in the center between his nipples. It arched downward in a thin line, disappearing into the waistband of his pants. Threading her fingers through it, she followed its descent. The muscles of his stomach were rock hard beneath her questing fingers.

Garrik, obviously tired of waiting, stroked his hand across her stomach before moving upward. This time, he didn't stop. Genny cried out, arching her back as he palmed her breast, pushing it more firmly into his hand. His fingers kneaded the pliant flesh and when he stroked his thumb over the swollen tip, she moaned. She felt that

small caress everywhere in her body. Her scalp tingled and her core burned. He did it again and liquid heat flowed from her sex.

Jarmon leaned down and captured her mouth with his. This was not the gentle kiss he'd given her earlier. No, this was the kiss she'd expected the first time. This was a claiming. But rather than fearing it, she embraced it as it fed the growing hunger within her. His mouth was hard and heavy, consuming her, sucking the very air from her lungs. Her fingers curled into his chest. She needed something to hang on to, something to anchor her in this growing storm of desire.

Jarmon pulled away with a growl of pleasure and kissed a hot path down her jaw and neck. She gasped when she felt the nip of his teeth at the curve of her neck where it met her shoulder. Her womb clenched hard. He didn't stop but kept moving lower until his head was poised over her breast.

Garrik plumped her other breast in his hand. She could feel his warm breath against her nipple. It puckered even tighter, making her moan. "Please." She wanted them to touch her, to put their mouths on her flesh. Something, anything to help ease the growing ache that was consuming her.

They moved as one, both of their heads lowering to her breasts. Their hot mouths covered the aching tips and they began to suckle. Genny cried out as lightning bolts of pleasure whipped through her body. They stroked their tongues over her swollen nipples. Instead of appeasing the ache, it seemed to swell, growing in strength. Her hips thrust upward, meeting only air. The blanket was long gone and she had no idea if one of them had pulled it away or if she'd kicked it away with her restless movements.

"Spread your legs." Jarmon's voice was so low and guttural she barely recognized it. "Your pussy is hot and wet. Give it to us."

"You know you want our fingers deep inside you, fucking you, making you come." Garrik swirled his tongue over her nipple and then blew on it.

Both men were pressed tight against her sides and she could feel the hard ridges of their erections stabbing against her. Her inner muscles constricted. In spite of the coolness of the night, sweat clung to every inch of her skin. Her breath was coming in harsh gasps as she spread her legs, unable and unwilling to deny them anything.

Garrik groaned as he rubbed his erection against her. His hand swiftly skimmed down her stomach. There was no gentle exploration this time. She felt Jarmon's hand slipping over her torso as well and she sucked in an expectant breath.

"Hook your legs over ours. Give yourself to us." Without thought, she did as Jarmon asked. The night air flowed over her sex but did little to quench the fire burning within her.

Fingers sifted through the curls covering her mound and quickly moved lower. She whimpered as they traced the wet folds of her sex, circling it once before dipping just inside her slit.

"More." She bucked her hips upward. They couldn't stop now. She needed those fingers inside her.



Both of them slipped the tip of their fingers just barely inside her. Two thick fingers pushed past the natural resistance at the entrance of her body. Her inner muscles clamped down hard, at once trying to stop them from going any deeper and at the same time trying to pull them further into her. The sensation was almost too much.

They continued to advance. Genny dug her heels into the ground and arched her hips higher, wanting them deep. "You're so tight," Garrik gritted out from between clenched teeth.

"I'm sorry," she cried as they continued to push into her resisting body.

Garrik emitted a strangled laugh just as Jarmon's hand stilled inside her. "Oh damn," Garrik muttered.

"You are a virgin?" Jarmon lifted his head to stare down at her.

She ducked her head and nodded. Anger overlaid the disbelief in Jarmon's voice. She didn't see what difference it made. They had their fingers deep inside her, she was burning with need and they wanted to talk!

"Genny?" Garrik's voice was softer than Jarmon's, coaxing her to reply.

"I'm a virgin. What does it matter?" The last words came out in a gasp. It was hard to think. Their thick fingers were still inside her, stretching her sheath. It felt so good, but she needed something more.

"It matters," Jarmon muttered. "You should have told us." He buried his face in the curve of her shoulder and took a deep breath. "We could have hurt you."

"Well, you didn't hurt me, but I'm in pain now."

Garrik chuckled and Jarmon groaned. She didn't care what they thought so long as they didn't stop.

"You are sure?" Garrik nuzzled his nose against her neck.

In answer, she grabbed a hank of hair and tugged him down to her breast.

"I'll take that as a yes." Both Garrik and Jarmon returned their attention to her breasts, covering them and suckling hard. They slowly pulled their fingers back to her opening until only the tips remained inside. She pumped her hips hard and they thrust inward. They still didn't push as deep as she wanted and she knew they were conscious of the barrier of her virginity.

One of them stroked the top of her sex with his thumb, brushing against her swollen clitoris. Every part of her body tightened at once. She hovered for the briefest of seconds, poised on the edge of completion. One more light brush on her clit and she exploded. Her hips jerked and her body spasmed as liquid gushed from between her legs. She lost all track of time as her orgasm consumed her.

When she became aware of her surroundings again, both men were staring down at her. She offered them a sleepy, sated smile and then gasped as they slowly withdrew their fingers from her still-pulsing core. They raised their fingers to their mouths and sucked her essence from them. She swallowed hard as her sex clenched. She became

aware that the solid ridges of their arousal were still poking into her hips. Neither of them had come.

She lowered her hands to stroke them, knowing she owed it to them after the pleasure they'd given her. Both her wrists were caught. Strong fingers wrapped around them, tugging them upward. "I don't understand." Their actions totally confused her.

Garrik offered her a slightly pained smile. "Tonight is all about you, Genny. Your pleasure is a gift." Leaning down, he placed a gentle kiss on her lips. "Although if you still want to do something about it any time over the next few days, I certainly would not object." His easy humor sank into her bones, relaxing her.

She could taste her own essence from when he'd licked it off his finger. It was incredibly arousing and gave her several ideas. There was so much she wanted to try, so much she wanted to do.

She yawned so hugely her jaw made a slight cracking sound. The stress of running, of always looking over her shoulder coupled with the mind-blowing orgasm she'd just had turned her limbs to mush. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so totally relaxed.

Garrik gathered her into his arms and she rested her head in the crook of his shoulder. She could feel Jarmon settling himself behind her and she snuggled her behind against his erection. He wrapped his arm around her waist and angled it upward, cupping her breast in his palm. Sighing, she snuggled tighter to Garrik and reached behind her to pull Jarmon closer. She felt the deep rumble in Jarmon's chest and it reminded her of the purr of some great cat.

Content, she allowed the warmth of their bodies and the safety of their presence to lull her into sleep.

## Chapter Six

Jarmon glanced at the path that Genny had taken a short while ago. It seemed to disappear within a few feet of the camp, swallowed up by the forest around it. He knew that it led to an area in the river that was deep enough for her to bathe in. He'd mentioned it to her as they'd munched on some berries that he'd collected to add to the leftover fish from last night's dinner. She'd taken the path soon after they'd finished eating, saying that she wanted to clean up.

They'd let her go, knowing that she was within shouting distance if she needed them. They had no doubt that she would be safe, as they were deep within Bakra territory. With all the distance they'd covered yesterday afternoon, they were now only about a day's walk to Bakra Castle. Otherwise, they'd never have let her go off on her own, no matter what she wanted. Both brothers had sensed her need to be by herself to examine what had happened the night before, so they hadn't protested when she'd announced her intentions.

He'd tensed when she'd taken her small pack with her, but relaxed slightly when he'd realized that she'd left her blankets behind. He didn't think she'd run from them, but he didn't want to take anything for granted.

Jarmon's head was still spinning over the fact that she was a virgin. Garrik had been blunt enough to ask her age while they'd eaten breakfast. She'd just laughed and told them that she was twenty. While he supposed it wasn't unheard of, it was unusual for a woman of her age to at least not have had some kind of sexual relationship.

"She'll be all right." Garrik's voice broke his reverie.

He hadn't realized he was still staring at the empty path in front of him. Sighing, he turned to his brother. "I still can't believe that she is untouched. At least she was until last night."

Garrik hunkered down by his blankets and began to roll them. "It is strange, especially for a woman with as much passion inside her as Genny."

Jarmon nodded absently. His brother was right. Genny was indeed a woman of great passion. She'd come so easily, embracing her need and taking what she wanted.

His pants became unbearably tight. Swearing under his breath, he adjusted his cock to lessen the pressure.

"Do you believe that the tapestry brought her?"

"Yes. No. I don't know." Jarmon raked his hands through his long hair in frustration. "She is hiding something. I know it in my gut and I see it in her eyes." His eyes narrowed. "What it is, I don't know."

"Should we take her back to the castle?" Garrik tied the blankets to the bottom of his pack and leaned it against a tree. Standing, he brushed some dirt from his pants.

Jarmon had been debating that very question in his own mind since he'd awakened with an aching hard-on. "It would take us a day to reach the castle. If we left now and walked all day, we would be there by nightfall. If she's lying to us, we might be bringing trouble right inside our own home. If the tapestry did truly bring her, then this is already day two. I, for one, do not want to waste the time we have together walking."

"I agree, but shouldn't we ask Genny? Perhaps she'd rather be somewhere that she could relax in a hot bath and eat a decent meal." Garrik paused and a huge smile split his face. "Sleep in a large, soft bed."

In spite of his growing tension, Jarmon smiled. His brother did have a valid point. After all, Genny was a woman on her own—how much trouble could she actually bring to their home if they took her there? Maybe he was being overly cautious. "I will ask her." His gaze wandered back toward the path. He strained his ears, but all he could hear was the faint rush of the river.

"Go."

He jerked his head back toward his brother, not quite sure he'd heard him properly. The look of understanding on Garrik's face rattled him and he shook his head. "It is better if you go first." He raised his left hand to his face and absently rubbed his scar. "I don't want to frighten her."

Garrik snorted. "Genny didn't seem to be afraid of you last evening."

"That was because it was dark," he growled. "It is light this morning and there is no hiding my disfigurement. You are whole and handsome. You should be the one to take her first." It burned his gut to think of any other man, even his beloved brother, taking Genny's virginity. To be the man she honored with such a gift was indeed a treasure worth fighting for. The only thing keeping him from fighting for the privilege was his concern for her.

Garrik scrubbed his hand over his jaw. "I suppose if it doesn't matter to you..."

"Don't push me," Jarmon muttered as he glared at his brother.

"So it does matter," Garrik taunted. His grin slowly faded to be replaced by an expression of understanding. "If she cannot accept both of us, then she is not the right woman."

Jarmon's emotions were in complete turmoil. Usually he had no trouble keeping them in check, but somehow Genny had gotten under his thick skin and was making a mockery of his control. The scar on his face throbbed as he clenched his jaw. He stared into his brother's face and what he saw there humbled him. "You will give her up if she cannot accept me."

"Of course."

Jarmon hung his head. Those two words said it all. *Of course*. The bond between them, the sheer love he felt for his brother, was overwhelming. How could he have kept his brother at arm's length for almost a year? It shamed him how selfish he'd been.

He felt Garrik's hand on his shoulder and reluctantly raised his head to meet his brother's fierce gaze. "We are brothers. Nothing will ever change that or come between us. Besides." He slapped Jarmon on the back. "Perhaps she will choose you and then I will be the one scratching at your door."

He snorted in disbelief but grinned as Garrik had intended. "That is not likely."

Garrik's eyes twinkled with mischief. "So I have your promise that if you are chosen to be husband, I will get more than one night a week in Genny's bed?"

Jarmon didn't even hesitate. "Yes."

Garrik's smile faded. "I will not hold you to that."

"I will." Jarmon spun on his heel and stalked toward the path. He didn't think that it was even an issue worth discussing, but he'd wanted his brother to know just how much he valued him.

Jane and his older brothers had taught him the value of a strong, accepting marriage. She was married to Zaren, but her love for Bador was evident. True, she rarely, if ever, spent a night alone with him, but it mattered not because Bador shared their bed at least half the nights of every week. It made the bond between all of them strong.

He did not expect the same thing if Genny married Garrik though. As long as she accepted him, he would content himself with his one night a week. That was enough. It had to be.

Taking a calming breath, he unclenched his hands that had curled tight by his sides. Shoving aside all thoughts and worries for the future, he crept toward the edge of the trees. It was all moot if Genny didn't accept either of them.

He heard her before he saw her. The sounds of the waterfall and the flow of the river faded into the background until all he could hear was Genny. She was humming and every now and then she would sing a word or two. He felt himself smiling as the soft sound of her voice swept over and around him.

Parting the branches in front of him, he stepped out onto the banks of the river. Sucking in a breath, he froze. Never had he seen such a beautiful sight. Totally naked with the water lapping at her waist, Genny raised her arm and absently ran a small piece of soap over her skin. The sunlight filtered through the leaves of the trees, giving her an otherworldly appearance. Like a water nymph from myth and legend, he expected her to disappear beneath the surface of the river any moment.

He must have made some sound because her head whipped around, sending a shower of water droplets from her wet hair arching through the air. Her arms folded protectively across her chest and she shrank back into the water.

He felt as if he'd been kicked in the gut. He'd been right. She could not bear him in the light of day. The beat of his heart was painful against his chest and he raised his hand to absently rub the ache.

Then she smiled at him.

It was if the sun had come out at the end of a storm, brightening the entire world. Genny smiled shyly and slowly unwound her arms, baring her breasts. "You frightened me. With the sunlight shining on the shoreline, for a moment I couldn't see who was there."

He swallowed the lump in his throat. She'd given him something he'd never expected. Acceptance. "I didn't mean to scare you." His voice was harsh, but there was no help for it. The last year had changed him, made him tougher both physically and mentally. His emotions had been closed off in order for him to survive. He yearned for the young man he'd been and reached back to find some of the gentleness he'd once possessed.

Lust flowed through his veins and fired his blood. He wanted Genny with every fiber of his being. All his muscles flexed and tightened until he felt as if his entire body was forged of stone. His cock jerked inside his pants, demanding release. Craving satisfaction.

His continued silence was making her nervous. He could tell by the way her smile slowly faded and her fingers clenched the soap tight. "How is the water?"

The corners of her mouth lifted again. "It's wonderful. Cool and refreshing." She laughed as she sank into the water and leisurely swam toward the small waterfall that cascaded over a twelve foot drop of rocks. "You didn't tell me about the falls." She paddled back to toward him and stood, lurching a bit as she found her footing on the rocky bottom.

"I wanted it to be a surprise." Her pleasure filled him, becoming his own. "Genny," he began, knowing he had to ask her. "Do you want to leave here and go to Bakra Castle? We can be there by tonight and you could spend your night in a soft bed. We would have tomorrow at the castle."

"No!" She stepped backward and stumbled slightly. "No," she repeated, this time more calmly. "I'd rather stay here. If I'm only going to be here for two more days, then what's the point of wasting time?"

Her continued assertion that she was leaving angered him, but he didn't let any of that anger show as he nodded. "As you wish." There would be plenty of time to take her home once he and Garrik convinced her to stay with them. Besides, until he discovered what she was hiding from them, he preferred that they keep her to themselves.

Genny smiled, her good mood restored. "That's settled then."

Jarmon removed his vest, tossing it to the ground. His sword was next. Unbuckling his belt, he carefully propped his sword against a rock. He could feel her eyes on him as he bent over and yanked first one boot and then the other off his feet. With his hands on

the laces of his pants, he paused. "Genny?" Both of them knew what would happen if he stepped into that water with her.

Gliding though the water, she returned to the center of the small pool. Resting her hand against a large, flat boulder that sat in the middle of the slow-flowing river, she stood. The water cascaded down her body. Her wet hair clung to her arms and chest. One of her breasts was almost completely draped in thick, brown tresses, but he could see the hard point of her nipple poking through the strands. The water barely covered her sex, lapping at her hipbones. She carefully laid the sliver of soap on the edge of the boulder.

"Should I leave?" he questioned, not willing to go any further until he knew it was what she wanted. He could barely push the words past his lips. It was the right thing to do, but one of the hardest things he'd ever done.

She shook her head and held out her hand. "Don't go."

Never had two simple words contained so much power. Jarmon felt his body swell even more. The vein in the side of his temple throbbed. His fingers moved of their own accord, rapidly untying the lacings of his pants. He groaned as his cock sprang free, the relief quickly abating as it pulsed hard, demanding its needs be met. Shoving his pants down his legs, he kicked them off and strode toward the river. Toward Genny.

Genny couldn't help herself. She knew she was gawking at him, but really, how could she resist? She'd seen naked men before. Growing up at Craddock Keep with six older brothers and their men-at-arms, it had been impossible not to. But never had such a sight affected her in such a manner.

Jarmon was like something out of a dream. Golden. That was the best word to describe him. His waist-length hair was blond, except for the thick streaks of white that ran throughout. Two large locks of white hair framed his face, giving him an exotic quality.

His face was strong, though certainly not handsome. The scar that ran from the edge of his eye to the corner of his mouth made that impossible. But somehow his face drew her again and again and she found herself sneaking peeks at him at every opportunity. He hadn't shaved yet today and golden stubble darkened his jaw. His pale blue eyes shifted constantly, always aware of his surroundings, always watching for danger. Now they were focused entirely on her.

She shivered in spite of the warmth of the sun beating down on her shoulders. As he walked toward her, muscles rippled. His body was tanned a golden-brown that was most appealing. While he wasn't taller than her brothers, he was certainly more muscular.

His chest and shoulders were wide and thick, and his arms and legs appeared as if they had been sculpted by the gods. A white scar marred his left shoulder but in no way detracted from his strength. If anything, it seemed to add to it, proclaiming that he had been injured but was now stronger than before. Wide armbands wrapped around his

biceps and wrists. Like some hero out of a legend, he strode toward her. But the determined gleam in his eyes and the hard erection rising up straight and proud from the nest of dark gold curls told her he was no legendary hero, but a flesh and blood man.

The water rose over his legs as he moved closer. She swallowed hard as her gaze fell to the vicious, jagged scar that ran from just above his knee to almost the top of his left thigh. No wonder he walked with a slight limp! It was a wonder he could walk at all, let alone with just a limp. It said volumes about the man's determination and stubborn nature.

He stopped in front of her, their bodies so close she could feel the tip of his erection prod her belly. Genny tipped her head back so she could see his face. His blue eyes missed nothing as he gazed down at her. Reaching out with his left hand, he cupped her breast, tracing his thumb slowly over her swollen nipple. Her toes curled into the rock and silt below her feet at the pleasure that simple caress brought her. Her mouth and lips were suddenly dry.

"Look at my hand, Genny." His voice was low and seductive, almost a physical caress. Looking down, she watched his thumb move across the rosy tip of her breast. The sight of his dark hand covering her much lighter skin filled her with a deep yearning for more of his touch. She leaned forward, pushing her breast more firmly into his hand. His fingers tightened briefly and then relaxed again.

"I cannot change what I am. My hand will never be whole again." His voice was harsh, but she wasn't the slightest bit afraid of him. "My body is scarred forever."

Wrapping her fingers around his wrist, she pulled his hand from her breast. Raising it to her lips, she kissed the stubs where his fingers had been. Frozen like a statue, he stood before her. Only his chest moved up and down as his breathing deepened. "I am sorry for the pain you have suffered. Recovering from such a severe injury could not have been easy." Cupping his hand against her jaw, she sighed. "But I am so very glad that you survived and that you are here with me."

"Genny," he began, but broke off suddenly as if he didn't quite know how to continue.

She shook her head. "It matters not. None of it does." She lightly bit the pads at the base of his fingers. "Not what happened. Not my life before. Not tomorrow." Tentatively she licked one of his fingers and smiled when he groaned. "All that matters is here and now."

Extricating his hand from her grip, he used his thumb to tip her chin upward. For a moment, she thought he might argue with her. Instead he shook his head and offered her a slight smile. "Here. Now."

She nodded. Jarmon had suffered at the hands of her family and she wanted to do something to repay all that he had lost. But beyond that, she felt a deep connection to him. He knew what it was to suffer and she knew that the marks on her back had affected him. She trusted him to be gentle with her, to make her first experience a



memorable one. The connection went beyond the physical though. Something about him called to her in a way that no other man ever had. It was as if her very soul was crying out for his. She knew that there was no way their relationship could last, but she wanted this time with him. She knew she'd have no regrets.

Gripping her waist, he lifted her, seating her on the flat rock. The surface was smooth and heated by the sun. "Lie back." Unable to deny him anything, she did so. His large hands supported her until she was flat on her back on the rock.

"Is it too hard against your back?"

It took her a moment to understand that he was asking about the almost-faded bruises and welts. She shook her head. "I'm fine." They didn't bother her at all anymore and she knew that within a few more days they'd be totally gone.

He shifted her slightly until her bottom was perched right on the edge with her legs hanging over the side and her feet dangling in the water. She had to close her eyes against the glare of the sun, but the heat felt good on her skin.

"Spread your legs," he murmured. She shifted them apart and felt his hips wedge between her thighs. His cock brushed against her sex. "You are beautiful, Genny."

The way he looked at her. The way he touched her. Jarmon made her believe that she was truly beautiful. "That feels good." Her voice was low and sultry – inviting.

Jarmon leaned over her, the movement pressing his erection more firmly against the swollen, damp lips of her sex. He traced his fingers around the edges of her areolas, not quite touching them. His much larger body blocked some of the sun's rays, so Genny opened her eyes, blinking several times until they adjusted. Jarmon's eyes were not on her body but on her face, and when she looked at him, he smiled. It wasn't a large one, but it made him look younger and oh so appealing. A strand of his long hair fell over his shoulder and touched her stomach. She sucked in a breath as it tickled her.

He chuckled. "Ticklish are you? I'll have to remember that." Catching her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, he gently squeezed. The unexpected caress made her cry out as pleasure shot from her breasts to her core. She could feel her juices flowing from her body and seeping around Jarmon's cock. "You're so responsive." There was awe as well as pleasure in his voice.

Lowering his head, he licked her torso from navel to just below her breasts. Genny laughed even as her inner muscles clenched with need. "Tickles," she gasped.

"I know." Raising his head, he gave her a wicked grin before nipping at her waist.

Her back arched right off the rock and she shrieked with laughter. Grabbing at his hair, she tugged his head away. "Stop. Stop." She was almost too breathless to speak.

He released her and stepped back. With a low growl, he clamped his hands around her thighs, spread them wide and dipped his head between her legs. His mouth was hard and hot as he caught her swollen clitoris between his lips and sucked.

The intensity of the sensations was almost frightening. She went from laughter to being poised on the edge of orgasm within a split second. Her fingers tangled in his hair

again, this time not to push him away but to urge him closer. His rumble of pleasure shot straight to her core. The stubble of his beard abraded her sensitive flesh in a most sensual way. She never wanted him to stop.

"You taste like the finest of wines." He licked up one side of her labia and down the other.

"Jarmon," she gasped. "More." She squeezed her eyes shut when she felt his finger probing at her entrance. He pushed it just the slightest way in and then retreated. "Deeper."

He obliged her and this time his finger went deeper, but it still wasn't enough. Lifting her legs, she planted her feet on the edge of the rock and raised her hips toward his hand. This time, he inserted two fingers. With great care, he pushed them deep. She could feel him probing at the thin membrane that signified her virginity.

His tongue lapped at her clitoris as he began to move his two fingers in and out, going deeper with every inward stroke. Her entire body was one large nerve ending. She could feel the hard stone beneath her back, the sun against her front, but mostly she was aware of Jarmon's mouth and hands touching her. The sight of his whitish blond head buried between her thighs was almost more than she could bear. Her heart was pounding, her breathing strained, and she knew she had to come. She couldn't take much more of this sensual torture.

"Come for me, Genny." He blew softly over her swollen, needy sex before lowering his mouth to suck on her clitoris once again.

"Oh yes. Yes!" Her legs began to shake and her thighs trembled as she came. Her heated passage clenched hard and she cried out. As her body jerked and heaved, he pushed his fingers hard and deep, breaking through the membrane. There was only the slightest moment of pain, but it disappeared almost immediately, lost in the waves of pleasure. She was no longer a virgin. That was the last coherent thought she had for quite some time.

When she came back to her senses, she was still sprawled against the rock with Jarmon placing lazy kisses across her belly. She could feel his erection brushing her leg and knew that she was the only one who'd found release. Technically, she wasn't a virgin any longer, but she still hadn't had a man inside her.

That was about to change.

Propping herself on her elbows, she smiled at him when he raised his head. "Thank you for making that pleasurable instead of painful."

"It was my honor and my pleasure." He nuzzled her navel, making her squirm.

"I want you to come inside me now."

He stilled and slowly stood straight. He didn't question her, but simply held his hands out. She grasped them and he pulled her upright. "Wrap your legs around my waist."

Genny wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. Jarmon stepped away from the rock, supporting her easily. Desire began to build within her once again. This time when she came, Jarmon would be inside her.

Jarmon struggled for control. It wasn't easy. Genny was warm, wet and willing in his arms. He wanted to do nothing more than impale her on his cock and fuck her until they both screamed with pleasure. His testicles were so heavy he feared they might burst if he didn't soon get relief.

The generosity of the woman in his arms astounded him. She gave herself to him so trustingly even though he knew this was her first time and she had to have some fears. The hard nubs of her breasts brushed against him. He loved how easily her body responded to his. And when she arched against him, rubbing them against the hard planes of his chest, he groaned.

The bulbous head of his cock brushed against her bottom. She squirmed and his arms tightened as he felt her warm juices coat the tip. Standing where he was, the water barely came to the tops of his thighs. That suited him perfectly. The water of the river might flow around his legs, but the only dampness he wanted to feel flowing over his cock was Genny's cream. He shifted her until he felt the head of his cock slip just inside her slit. He felt the bite of her fingernails in his shoulders even as her inner muscles tightened around the tip of his erection.

She leaned back in his arms, confident that he wouldn't let her fall. Her trust pleased him deeply. Her hand came up to push a lock of damp hair out of her face. He noticed that her nose was slightly pink. The last thing he wanted was for her to get a sunburn. Turning, he walked toward the waterfall. Each step pushed him deeper into her pussy, which contracted and relaxed to admit his girth.

He stepped beneath the waterfall and Genny laughed, sputtering as the water poured down over them. Jarmon didn't stop, but pushed through the falls to the other side. It was darker and cooler and she shivered. "I'll warm you," he promised.

"I know you will," she whispered as she lowered her mouth to his. Her tongue licked at his lips before slipping between them. Boldly, she explored his mouth, tasting and touching, stroking his tongue.

Jarmon cupped the back of her head with one hand, holding her steady as he plundered her mouth. The frantic sounds of pleasure she made fired his blood to an even higher level. Banding his arm around her back, he pushed her downward as he thrust his cock upward. He could feel her body fighting against his intrusion, but he didn't stop, pushing past all resistance until he was seated to the hilt.

Genny tried to tear her mouth from his, but he wouldn't let her retreat from him. He sensed her fear as her body struggled to accommodate his cock and he tried to soothe and reassure her with his kiss. He softened it, coaxing her tongue to play with his. His efforts were rewarded when she finally heaved a sigh and relaxed. The small action nudged him the slightest bit deeper and they both moaned.

"Just relax." He wrapped both hands around her waist as he nuzzled her neck. He flicked his tongue around the whorls of her ear and her tight passage contracted around him. Groaning, he nipped at her earlobe. "You are so hot, so wet." He could hear the amazement in his own voice.

"I feel so full of you. It's almost too much, but at the same time, it's not enough." Her voice was ragged, but he could hear the wonder beneath her words.

"Your body wants me to fuck it. To drive into your pussy over and over until we both come," he whispered against her ear as he sucked on her lobe. He could tell his raw words shocked her even as they excited her. Her inner muscles pulsed around his cock, making it hard for him to talk.

Lifting her slightly, he eased his cock partway out before lowering her again. Her legs tightened around his back and her fingernails dug deeper into his shoulders. He did it again and again. Her breathing got quicker, shallower.

"Jarmon," she cried. He could hear the desperation in her voice, knew she was as close to the edge as he was.

Taking a step to the side, he braced his shoulders against the wall of rocks behind the falls. He wouldn't risk scraping her skin. Her back had suffered enough abuse. Just the thought of someone marking her flesh in such a manner had anger rocketing through his body. As if sensing the change in him, she leaned back, searching his face. As he forced his anger away, desire came surging back in a wave too strong for him to restrain.

"Hold on to me, Genny." He began to thrust, leaning against the rock wall and spreading his legs for support as he fucked her. Her body softened around him, accepting him and finally sucking him deeper with each thrust. His balls were taut against his body and his skin felt stretched tight over his bones. Her cries of pleasure had him thrusting faster. Harder.

Her feminine muscles constricted and then began to convulse. Jarmon gave one final thrust and felt his cock explode. His roar of release echoed through the small cavern. His hips jerked as his cum spurted into her. He heard Genny cry out as her body continued to spasm around his. Never in his life had anything ever felt so good. Wrapping his arms around her, he held on tight.

Now that he'd had her, how would he ever be able to let her go?

## Chapter Seven

Dry and clothed once again, Genny began to plait her long hair. She was a bit sore between her thighs, but other than that small reminder of what had happened, she felt wonderful. She'd always wondered what having sex with a man would be like. Certainly she'd heard the other women back home talk about it—their ribald jests and bitter complaints had filled the kitchen as they'd worked. And growing up around animals, not to mention her brothers, she understood how sex worked. But she'd never known quite what to expect. Now she knew. With the right man, it was an absolutely amazing experience.

She knew that Garrik would attempt to seduce her next. Such was the way things were done in her world. There would usually be more time for her to get to know them, but because they were still under the misconception that the tapestry had brought her, they thought they only had three days and it was already halfway through day two. Genny just planned to enjoy the experience and file it away in her memory to pull out in the future when she needed a reminder of better times.

In spite of her uncertain future, which certainly didn't look bright at the moment, she was enjoying herself. Both men had shown her a kindness that was rare in her life. They talked easily to her, sharing stories of their lives and of their family. They both had a wonderful sense of humor, although it was more evident with Garrik. Jarmon tended to keep his thoughts more to himself, but every now and again he would make some dry-witted comment.

For the first time in her life, she had no one to take care of but herself and, since she'd joined the Bakra brothers, she'd had to do precious little of that. They fed her and protected her, leaving her free to just relax and soak up the fresh air and sunshine. She hadn't known how tense and stressed she'd been or how much she'd needed this respite until they'd given it to her. Or rather, forced it on her. Smiling, she shook her head. She didn't know which of them was the most stubborn, but they certainly were set on having their own way.

"Tell us about your family?" Garrik had hunkered down beneath a large tree. Settling with his back against the trunk, he spread his long legs out in front of him and rested his hands on his hard, flat belly.

She shrugged, not liking the direction of the conversation. "Not much to tell." She was afraid to talk too much about herself, afraid she might give away some clue as to her true identity.

"Are your parents still living?"

That she could easily answer. "No." She shook her head. "Both my parents have been dead for years now." She was grateful to be able to give him a straightforward and truthful answer. Hopefully that would satisfy Garrik's curiosity.

Jarmon strolled over and dropped to the ground a few feet away from her. His presence made her uncomfortably aware of what had happened at the waterfall earlier. Her scalp tingled and her breasts swelled the longer he stared at her with his intense pale blue eyes.

"What about other family? Sisters or brothers?" She could hear a tinge of annoyance in Garrik's voice and turned her attention back to him.

"No sisters." She picked at the fabric of her woven dress. When she'd redressed, she'd slipped her chemise back under it to help keep the rough fabric from chafing her skin. Before Jarmon had joined her, she'd washed her two thin chemises in the river, hanging them over some bushes to let the heat from the sun dry them. She'd had to scrub for a long time to remove most of the bloodstains that had soaked into them from the wounds on her back. Those wounds were all but healed now, and for that she was thankful.

It hadn't escaped her that Jarmon had been very careful of her back when they'd had sex. She wished she could have said they'd made love, but they hadn't known each other long enough to know if they loved each other. Certainly they desired one another. Besides which, she didn't want to fall in love with them or have them fall in love with her. It would make leaving them that much harder.

"Brothers?" Jarmon prompted her.

"I do have brothers," she hesitantly replied. She had to proceed very carefully here. The last thing she wanted to do was make them suspicious about her. She knew that both men had doubts about her story, but so far neither of them had voiced them in her presence.

"How many?" Garrik was still seated in his relaxed pose beneath the tree, but Genny sensed a tenseness about him that hadn't existed a few moments before. Even the muscles in his face had tightened and she could see a vein in his temple throbbing.

"Ah," she stumbled. "Too many." That was better than giving an exact number. "Two of them died." She hoped that little tidbit of information would distract them.

"I'm sorry." She didn't doubt the sincerity of Garrik's words, but he was making her uncomfortable with the way he was staring so intently at her. She half expected him to jump to his feet and declare her a liar.

Hanging her head so they couldn't see the guilt that she knew had to be stamped across her face, she nodded. With any luck, they would think her overcome by the memory of her brothers' loss. Truthfully, their deaths had not affected her life in the slightest. She certainly didn't miss either of them. They'd taken too much pleasure in her misery. She hadn't really known them all that well. That fact saddened her more than their loss.

"What did you do back in your world?"

Her head jerked up and she found both brothers watching her intently. She was growing increasingly uncomfortable beneath their scrutiny. *Think*, Genita, she scolded herself. They think the tapestry brought you from another time and place. "I create threads and weave cloth." That was the best she could come up with. She couldn't tell them that she ran a small castle for her miserable, cruel brothers.

"Do you like your work?" Garrik queried.

Sensing his genuine interest, she smiled and nodded. "Absolutely." This was one topic she could talk about for hours. By the time she was finished they would be sorry that they'd asked her. "There is an art to mixing the right amounts of dying agents to achieve specific colors."

She spent the next twenty minutes waxing enthusiastic about every aspect of spinning and dying threads and weaving different grades of cloth—she even threw in some detailed descriptions on embroidery techniques. She took pity and stopped when Garrik's eyes looked as if they were about to cross.

When she fell silent, it took them a moment to realize she'd actually stopped. Garrik cleared his throat. "I'm glad you enjoy your work." He hurried on before she could break into another long explanation. "Would you like to go hunting with me?"

His offer surprised her, but the more she thought about it, the more sense it actually made. Garrik obviously wanted to get some time alone with her and she could use the walk to work off some of her nervous tension. It hadn't been easy to chatter on for so long. Genny wasn't used to talking that much at all. Her brothers ignored her unless they were bellowing for her to do something for them. Most of the servants took their cues from her brothers and ignored her. No one wanted to be seen as being kind to her lest they bring the wrath of the Craddock brothers down on themselves. It was a novelty for her to talk for so long. It was also nerve-racking. Already, sweat had her chemise and dress plastered to her back, making it itch. She'd definitely need another bath later today.

"You can leave your belongings here with Jarmon." Garrik pushed himself off the ground and stretched his long arms over his head. The move accentuated his wide torso as the muscles in his stomach and chest rippled.

Genny wasn't sure about leaving her things. The last thing she wanted was Jarmon to poke through her belongings and discover the tapestry she had rolled up in the folds of her other dress.

Sensing her hesitation, Jarmon slowly stood and walked toward her. Catching her chin in his palm, he tilted her face upward. Immediately she was lost in the empathy and understanding that shone from his eyes. "Your belongings are safe with me. I would never trespass by searching through your things."

She could hear the underlying message in his words. *Trust me*. Trust didn't come easy to Genny. Too many years of betrayal and abuse at the hands of her brothers made it difficult. But she'd already trusted this man more than she ever had any other. She'd

gifted him with her virginity. It seemed silly not to trust him with her few meager belongings.

She'd taken more risks in the past week than she ever had in her entire life. Reaching down deep to find the remnants of her tattered courage, she nodded. Jarmon smiled. Not the usual slight turning of the corners of his mouth, but a true smile. Awestruck, Genny couldn't take her eyes off him as he dropped a quick kiss on her mouth. He seemed to find her expression funny because he chuckled as he tipped her chin up, closing her mouth, which had dropped open.

"If there is anything you need to do before we leave." Garrik gestured to the woods beyond their campsite. Genny blushed, but hurried off to take care of the call of nature before they left.

As soon as Genny was out of sight, Jarmon turned to his brother. "Be very careful, Garrik."

Garrik scrubbed his hand over his face and sighed. "You caught that too, did you?"

Jarmon nodded. "There are too many discrepancies in her story. She seems very familiar with this world. Even her clothing is locally made."

Garrik sighed as he strapped on his sword and hefted his bow and arrows. "I don't think that there is much doubt that she is from Javara. The question is, who is she?"

"And why is she lying to us?" Jarmon continued to stare at the woods. "Whoever she is, she is under our care." He turned to his brother and pinned him with a deadly gaze. "We cannot let anything happen to her. Obviously someone had mistreated her badly."

Garrik's eyes were just as deadly as he nodded. "I won't let down my guard, but truthfully, I think she is safe here."

"I hope you are right." Jarmon couldn't quite shake the feeling that this situation was going to explode in all their faces at some point. Still, there was nothing he could do until Genny was willing to talk to them. Warmth flooded him as he remembered their morning at the river. Genny was naturally a giving, generous woman. Very sensual in nature, yet there was a naivety about her that made him want to protect her.

"If she is not a tapestry bride, that means she will not disappear tomorrow evening." Garrik's hand absently stroked the pommel of his sword.

"Tomorrow evening should prove to be very interesting," he agreed. "Be careful with her, Garrik. I don't think her back is still sore, but the rest of her will be."

Garrik snorted. "Don't rub it in, brother. I know she gifted you with her virginity, but I too know how to pleasure a woman."

Jarmon knew he'd pricked his brother's temper, but he couldn't quite hold back his grin. Garrik's scowl deepened and Jarmon chuckled again. "I'm sure you do, my brother." Holding up his hands in a sign of peace, he backed away.



Garrik's frown disappeared as a slow, knowing smile covered his face. "I'll pleasure her so much that hopefully she'll forget all about leaving us."

"You want her then? As a wife," he qualified. "Even though we both know that she's not telling us the truth?"

Garrik crossed his arms over his chest and nodded. "If she would have me, I would gladly be her husband. I would be happy if she chose either one of us. Truly, I think she is lying out of fear. I sense no malice in her at all."

Jarmon had felt the same thing, but he was relieved to have his brother confirm his own suspicions. "Then we are agreed. We will do whatever it takes to try to convince Genny to stay with us."

Garrik stuck his hand out and the two brothers clasped forearms, sealing their pact. They parted when they heard Genny coming back from her trip to the woods. "Good luck, brother, and be careful." Jarmon turned and loped off toward the river, knowing the next time he saw Genny that Garrik would have claimed her just as he had.

Genny strode alongside Garrik, having no trouble keeping up with him. She knew that he'd shortened his normally long stride for her. Both brothers were like that though, always doing little things to make her life easier. And they did it without a thought. She never felt as if they expected anything in return for their kindness.

She knew her heart had softened toward both men. How could it not? For the first time in her life, she was being treated as if she had value, as if she was indeed special. She was enjoying tromping through the forest with Garrik. For the first hour, he'd regaled her with stories of his family. Genny was beginning to feel as if she knew his mother, brothers and sister-in-law very well. Since then, they'd both fallen quiet, but it was a comfortable silence. Both of them were content to enjoy the afternoon.

Several times, she wanted to stop and harvest some particularly wonderful specimens of plants, but she forced herself to keep walking. She wasn't supposed to be from here, so she shouldn't be familiar with the plant life. Sighing, she tucked her hands in the pockets of her dress. Perhaps if he got caught up in hunting later she could quietly pluck a few and stuff them in her pocket. She'd have to be very careful though.

Garrik glanced down at her and she gave him a serene smile. It wouldn't do for him to discover what she was thinking. "Are you getting tired, Genny?"

There he went and did it again, making her heart swell. "I'm fine."

He hesitated, but then accepted her at her word. "Just let me know if you'd like to stop for a rest."

She brushed a stray lock of hair out of her face as she nodded. There was barely a breeze this afternoon and the sun was getting hotter. It was a good thing that the trees provided them with a small amount of shade.

Tall and strong, Garrik moved slightly in front of her, shifting some branches out of her way so that she could easily pass. She studied him as they continued to move

silently through the forest. He truly was the most handsome man she'd ever seen. Garrik and Jarmon had been identical in looks before her brother Leon had maimed him. The right side of Jarmon's face, still perfect, was a stark contrast to the scar on the left.

Garrik had slightly less muscle than his brother, although that didn't mean much, because Jarmon was massive. Beside any other man, Garrik would look huge. She eyed his buttocks as he walked in front of her, feeling the heat of a blush creep up her cheeks as she did so. He truly did have a fine bottom.

He'd removed his vest and tucked it into the small pack he had slung over his shoulder. A deep furrow down the center of his back separated the muscles that bunched and moved as he continued to push branches out of their way. His body was bronzed from the sun and his long, pale blond hair—which he'd tied at the nape—hung all the way to his waist.

How would it feel to have him inside her body? Would he be gentle or rough? Would she enjoy the experience as much as she had with Jarmon? The two brothers might have looked alike at one point, but they were very different people. Garrik was the more easygoing of the two, chatting easily, while Jarmon was more reserved. And while both brothers were constantly aware of their surroundings, there was a guardedness about Jarmon, his eyes wary and watching. Genny wondered how much that had to do with what had happened to him or if he'd always been that way. She suspected they had similar codes of honor and beliefs, but beyond that, she was still discovering their personalities with every moment she spent with them. So far she liked them both. Too much.

Garrik turned and placed his hand on her arm even as he held a finger to his mouth to silence her. Fear spiked through her, making her tremble. Was there someone up ahead? Had her brothers found her?

Her feet were frozen to the spot, but Garrik tugged her behind him. When he reached the edge of a large clearing, he stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her. She began to relax and breathe again when she realized that she wasn't sensing any tension from him. He raised his hand and pointed to the far side of the meadow.

A mother and baby deer were munching away, oblivious to the danger of the man approaching. Genny bit her lip in indecision. Surely Garrik wouldn't kill one of the deer for them to eat. Not a mother and baby.

She knew that if her brothers were here, both animals would already be dead and they'd be boasting about the easy kill. Instead Garrik was holding her in his arms, sharing the magical moment with her. Everything inside her relaxed. He would not kill them. Garrik was nothing like her brothers. He respected nature and the order of things. These animals would live another day and the baby would one day grow into a fine animal. Perhaps some day they might end up as a meal on the table, but not today.

His forearm was brushing the undersides of her breasts and she could feel his warm breath on her neck as he leaned down. "Genny." He didn't say anything other than her name, but it set a whole group of butterflies to fluttering in her stomach.

She could feel his mouth, open and warm, on her neck. His tongue snaked out to lick at the vein pulsing heavily beneath her skin. Her head fell back against his shoulder. Between the warmth of the afternoon and the heat of desire beginning to course through her veins, Genny felt a sweet lassitude sweep through her body.

"Genny," he whispered again just before he caught the lobe of her ear between his teeth and gently tugged. That seemingly innocent sensation made her moan with pleasure. "Why don't you take off your dress? You'll be much cooler without it."

His fingers were already at the laces in the front, loosening them. He eased her away from him long enough to sweep the dress over her head. Without the heavier garment, her body felt immediately cooler. The slight breeze penetrated the light cotton chemise. With two thin straps holding it up on her shoulders, the thin fabric flowed down to her knees. Her breasts pressed against the front and the outline of her dark nipples could easily be seen.

While she'd been enjoying the slight reprieve from the heat, Garrik had slipped the pack off his shoulder and set it aside. Her dress had been folded and placed atop it. Next he unbuckled his sword, which he placed on the ground next to the pack. She watched him out of the corner of her eye, not wanting to face him just yet. The mother and baby deer had disappeared, slipping into the forest when she and Garrik had moved.

Suddenly restless, she meandered further out into the meadow. It truly was beautiful. Wildflowers in a variety of colors poked out from the thick bed of grass. Spreading her arms wide, Genny twirled around in the center until she was giddy. She felt free and alive. The sensation was intoxicating.

When she finally came to a staggering halt, she glanced down at the ground, which seemed to still be shifting beneath her. A patch of lovely purple violets caught her eyes. "Oh, aren't they beautiful!"

"Beautiful." Her head jerked up as he spoke. His pale blue eyes seemed to glow as he stared at her and not the flowers. There was a large bulge in the front of his pants and his broad shoulders gleamed with a fine sheen of sweat.

As he slowly stalked toward her, she found herself unable to move. He circled her slowly, his body brushing hers. The air around them seemed to thicken and she was finding it harder to breathe. He stopped behind her and she flinched when his finger traced one of the scars near the top of her back.

"Shh," he crooned. "I would never hurt you." Strong fingers slipped beneath the thin straps on her shoulders, slowly lowering them down her arms until they caught at her elbows. The fabric slipped down behind her, exposing her back to his view. "So much pain." His lips started at her nape and descended toward the small of her back. Slowly, tenderly, he kissed every scar, every welt. "Who did this to you?"

Genny bit her lip to keep from crying. Her eyes were filled with unshed tears and she blinked to hold them back. Crying never solved anything. She shook her head. She didn't want to talk about that part of her life and she couldn't even if she did. Garrik and Jarmon could never know about her brothers.

"No matter. They will not hurt you again. You will stay with us. Won't you, Genny?" His hands slipped around her waist as he spoke and, before she could muster a coherent reply, they slid upward and cupped her breasts. "Look at yourself, Genny. Watch me as I pleasure your breasts."

All thoughts of a reply of any kind disappeared in a haze of sensual delight. Looking down, she was enthralled with the sight of his large, dark hands wrapped around the much paler swells of her breasts. His fingers kneaded and caressed as his thumbs began to trace the outline of her nipples. They puckered tight, the nubs pressing into the pads of his thumbs.

"Let me love you, Genny." His low voice, filled with need, was as seductive as the slow movements of his hands.

"Yes," she all but moaned. Her knees buckled and he lowered her gently to the ground, kneeling behind her. There was no thought of denial. She wanted Garrik as much as she'd wanted Jarmon. Wanted to feel her body tighten around his swollen shaft as he thrust deep into her warmth.

All her life, she'd hardly dared to dream about having a normal life, the kind of life most women of her world enjoyed. Only since she'd begun creating the tapestry, which had become her escape, her secret pleasure, had she even begun to entertain thoughts of having a husband of her own as well as a brother-in-law who would protect, care and pleasure her as well. Mostly it had been nothing but a fantasy, something that she'd never really believed would happen. Now she had the opportunity to live her dreams, if only for a few days. She openly embraced each experience, knowing she might never have the chance again.

The threat of her brothers and the Luthers almost overwhelmed her and she struggled to push the painful thoughts aside. She didn't think they'd just let her go. No, Leon would not want to lose the gold and the alliance her marriage would bring. They were probably searching for her even now. She shuddered and shoved the thought from her mind.

"Genny?" Garrik's hands stilled on her breasts. She knew he'd sensed the change in her, but he had misinterpreted the cause. He removed his hands and began to slide the straps of her chemise back up her arms. "It's all right if you're not ready," he soothed.

"No!" she all but yelled. She would not let her brothers taint this experience. "No," she said again, and this time the word was softer. "I want your hands on me." She swallowed hard, her throat suddenly dry as she spoke the words she knew he needed to hear. "I want you, Garrik."

He shifted behind her, pressing closer. His knees surrounded hers and he embraced her in his strong arms. His chest covered her back and she could feel his erection pressing against her lower spine. "You are sure?"

Rather than reply, she pulled away and scooted around so that she was facing him. His arms dropped back to his sides and he made no move to stop her. He watched her carefully, as if he was afraid to make any sudden move that might frighten her. But it

was the expression on his face that gave her the courage to continue. His blue eyes were soft with an emotion she didn't dare to put a name on, but she felt an answering yearning in her heart. How had he come to mean so much to her in such a short time?

Gripping the hem of her chemise in her hands, she tugged the fabric over her head and tossed it aside. She rested her hands on her thighs and waited. Her sex was aching to be filled in spite of the fact that she was still a bit sore from earlier. Cream seeped from her body, coating her sheath, preparing for his possession. The heat carried the scent of her arousal to her nostrils as she sucked in a deep breath.

Like some great statue carved from stone, Garrik watched her. His eyes skimmed slowly over her body, taking in every curve, every hollow. "Part your legs." His voice was hoarse with need and she sensed that his control was precarious at best. Rather than frightening her, it pleased her that he wanted her as badly as she wanted him.

She slid her legs apart. The ground was warm beneath her, the grass tickling her sensitive skin.

"Put your hands between your thighs and spread the lips of your pussy wide." Heat coursed through her, sending another shower of cream through her core. "Show yourself to me."

Slipping her hands between her legs, she did as he asked. It felt almost surreal to be sitting on the edge of a beautiful meadow in the hot summer sun, totally naked with her legs spread wide, exposing herself to a man. She looked down at herself. Her skin was glowing from the combination of sun and perspiration. Her nipples were diamond tips, begging for his touch. Damp curls clung to her mound. Her fingers were slick as they spread the folds of her sex wide, the pink flesh glistening with cream, slippery and wet.

Garrik reached out and his large hand covered her mound before he slid a long, thick finger straight into her. She moaned and squirmed as her inner muscles wrapped lovingly around him.

"You are so wet and hot." She could hear the mixture of awe and pleasure in his voice. "And it's all for me, isn't it?"

He pulled his finger almost out, circling it just inside her opening. "Yes," she cried out as he inserted another finger and pushed the two of them deep. His thumb lazily began to caress her clitoris and she cried out again, unable to stop herself. Her skin prickled and her breathing became more and more shallow as she began to undulate her hips toward him, working in rhythm with his fingers, pushing them deeper with every inward thrust.

"That's it," he crooned. "Come for me, Genny. Show me how much you want me to fuck your luscious body."

Cupping one of her breasts with his free hand, he captured her nipple and lightly pinched it. At the same time, he thrust his fingers deep and pressed his thumb over her clitoris. Hard contractions rocked her and her body jerked as she came. Liquid flowed from her core and onto his hand. He continued the rhythmic movements of both hands until she cried out, begging him to stop. It was too much.

Gasping for breath, she pulled her hands from between her legs and caught herself before she slumped over. The ground was warm beneath her hands and she curled them into the meadow floor for support.

She jerked and groaned when Garrik removed his hands from her. He caught her chin with one hand and licked her lips until she parted them. His tongue slid inside and he leisurely and thoroughly kissed her. Her head spun. She could barely breathe. But he tasted oh so fine. Hot and male and almost spicy as his tongue stroked against hers. When he finally pulled away, she sucked air into her starving lungs.

He brought his other hand to her mouth and skimmed his fingers over her lips. "Taste yourself." Bringing his own mouth close, he flicked his tongue over his fingers, licking off some of the evidence of her orgasm. "Taste."

Unable to resist, she closed her mouth over the tip of one of his fingers. The taste was unusual, but not unpleasant. Musky and warm, it mixed with the salt from his skin. She sucked his finger deeper. Garrik groaned and the grip on her chin tightened.

"I can't wait until that hot, lush mouth is wrapped around my cock, sucking it until I come." His raw words shot through her like a lightning bolt.

Where moments before she'd felt sated, now she felt an overwhelming need coursing thorough her body. She wanted his cock in her mouth. She wanted Jarmon's too. Would they taste similar or different? Pulling away from him, she released his fingers and stared down at the bulge of his pants. She reached out and unlaced the ties, pushing the confining fabric aside. His cock sprang free. Long and thick, it rose from its nest of dark curls. The bulbous head was red and fluid seeped from the tip. Her body thrummed with desire and she wondered how it would feel as he thrust in and out of her core.

Licking her lips, she began to lower her head. She'd barely touched the head with her tongue when he jerked her away. "Not this time, Genny," he gasped, his breathing harsh and heavy. "I'm too close. This time I want to be inside you when we both come."

She scooted closer, trying to climb into his lap, but again he stopped her. "I want to take you from behind." His chest was heaving with the effort it took to control himself. "I want you on your hands and knees as I cover you and fuck you from behind. I want to hear the wet smack of my stomach against your ass as I drive my cock deep. I want my balls to slap your pussy."

She stopped breathing totally as she pictured what he wanted. He came up on his knees and pushed his pants down around his thighs. His cock bobbed toward her and she felt an answering clench in her pussy. Turning, she went up on her hands and knees in front of him. She spread her thighs wide, knowing he could see her wet, pink flesh. Cream slipped down her inner thighs.

He grabbed her chemise and placed it on the ground in front of her. "Lower your head." She did and the motion caused her behind to arch higher.

His hands covered the mounds of her bottom, squeezing tight. "You have a gorgeous ass." He dipped one hand between her legs, coating two fingers with her

juices. Slowly, he dragged them up the dark cleft to her behind. She gasped when he massaged the puckered opening. "I want to fuck your bottom too." She whimpered. "But that won't happen today or tomorrow. This is all too new to you. If we were home, there is a salve I could rub on my fingers and cock and inside your ass that would make penetration easy. Not only that, the herbs would heighten your pleasure until you were begging me to fuck you."

Genny quivered as he pushed the tip of one finger past the tight ring of muscles. Oh gods, he had his finger in her ass. Rather than being appalled, she was aroused. Her mind was spinning with the possibilities. If she could indeed take him into her in that manner, then she could take both men at once. A deep yearning built in her chest—an ache so hard that she almost cried. It would never happen because she wouldn't be going back with them. Tears pricked her eyes and she swallowed a sob.

Garrik pushed his finger deep, stretching her. It was difficult, but not painful. His other hand began to stroke the folds of her sex, lightly caressing her swollen clitoris. She found herself automatically pushing her hips back toward him, wanting more. The action drove his finger deeper into her.

He eased his finger almost all the way out. She tensed when she sensed him pushing a second finger inside. "I can't," she panted, even as she pushed her bottom back against him.

"You can." He leaned down and nipped her bottom and then licked the sting away. "Just relax."

He had the tips of the two fingers just inside. It was uncomfortable, but she forced herself to try to relax. Garrik stroked a finger into her pussy and began to slowly drag it over the top wall of her sheath as he pulled it out. Her body clenched hard and then released. He shoved the two fingers in her ass deeper. Pleasure warred with pain as her body accepted this newest invasion.

She was on the edge of coming again, could feel the erotic tension gathering in her lower body. Her breath was coming in hard pants and she rested her forehead against her chemise, focusing on trying to breathe.

Garrik slowly removed his fingers from her behind. Instead of relief, she cried out at the loss. "That's enough for this time. But soon..."

She wanted to argue the point, but he was already scooting between her thighs, his hips spreading them wider as he made a place for himself. The head of his cock slid inside her opening. "Garrik," she moaned. She needed all of him. Now. She was wound tight, perched on the edge of orgasm.

He leaned over her, covering her back with his chest. His hands cupped her breasts as he suddenly shoved his cock deep. Her entire body clenched and she cried out. *Yes!* This was what she wanted. Needed.

"More," she urged. "Harder."

Garrik wasted no time in pulling back and thrusting again. His grip on her breasts kept her from sliding forward. True to his word, he fucked her hard, the smack of his

stomach against her ass loud and arousing. She felt his balls slap the sensitive folds of her pussy with every deep plunge.

Digging her fingers into the dirt, she hung on as he drove harder and deeper. Her inner muscles clenched and relaxed at an increasing pace. She gulped in air as Garrik pounded into her from behind. He jerked upward, his cock buried to the hilt as he pulled her back hard against him. She felt his hot cum flood into her and it set off her own orgasm.

Her hot, damp channel milked his cock as they both cried out. She would have been flat on the ground if it weren't for Garrik's hands holding her up. Her arms and legs trembled as her body spasmed with pleasure.

He grunted as he pulled out of her and collapsed on the ground beside her. As soon as his hands left her, she crumpled. She lay there, her face on her chemise, her body on the dirt and grass. When she finally caught her breath, she opened her eyes. Garrik was lying next to her, his eyes closed. He looked younger and more at peace than he had since she'd first met him. As if he sensed her watching him, he opened one eye. A slow smile spread on his face. "You look totally debauched."

She giggled. "You should see yourself." His pants were down around his knees and he still had his boots on. She was still wearing her own boots for that matter.

The blazing afternoon sun began to make her skin feel hot and prickly. Uncomfortable, she rolled over on her back and threw an arm over her eyes to protect them from the harsh rays. "I'm going to have a sunburn," she grumbled.

Garrik swore and surged to his feet instantly. She shifted her arm and squinted up at him in time to watch him yank his pants up and quickly lace them. Reaching down, he scooped her into his arms and moved her into the shade of a tree. When he was sure she was steady on her feet, he went back for her chemise. Shaking it out, he brought it to her and slipped the thin garment onto her body. He dropped a kiss on her shoulder. "I'm sorry. I should have thought that your skin hasn't been exposed to the sun the way mine has."

"It's okay." Her back and shoulders were beginning to feel tight and prickly. Her face didn't feel much better either.

He quickly buckled his sword around his waist, shoved her dress in the pack and slung it over his shoulder. "Are you okay to walk? We're not too far from camp."

"We're not?" She was surprised, considering how long they'd been walking today.

Garrik smiled, his blue eyes softening as he dropped a soft kiss on her lips. She sighed, wanting it to continue, but he'd already pulled away. "We've walked in a large circle for the most part. I didn't want to take you too far." His smile faded, his expression growing serious. "Thank you, Genny. What you gave me was an incredible gift."

Uncomfortable beneath his intense scrutiny, she looked down at her feet. "You're welcome. Thank you." The words were woefully inadequate to express what she felt, but it was the best she could come up with. She didn't want to closely examine her



feelings. Right now, she was hot, sticky and uncomfortable and wanted to soak in the cool water of the river.

She sensed that Garrik wanted to say more, but he held back. Heaving a sigh, he tucked a stray hair behind her ear, took her hand and began to lead her back toward camp.

"Take me to the river." She yearned to be by herself and she knew that the river was the one place they would let her go alone.

His fingers tightened on hers and then she could feel him force himself to relax his grip. "The river." There was a grim edge to his voice. She didn't know what he was thinking, but if his thoughts were as tumultuous as her own, then she certainly understood. Her world had changed so much in the past week. She needed some time alone to try to sort things out.

They journeyed through the woods in silence. This time, however, the silence was not a comfortable one, but charged with an emotion that Genny couldn't place. She felt restless and uneasy.

Garrik didn't speak as he led her to her spot in the river a short while later. He stood staring at her for the longest time before he jerked her into his arms, hugging her tight. "I won't let you leave us." His pledge thrilled her at the same time it made her heart pound with dread. As much as she wanted to stay, she knew she had to go. Soon. Tomorrow evening.

He didn't want or expect a reply. Releasing her, he spun around and stalked off toward camp. "Don't be long."

She watched the forest swallow him up. Sighing, she stripped off her chemise and boots and waded into the river. She knew that if she didn't hurry, either Garrik or Jarmon would come for her. Lying back in the cooling water, she allowed it to soothe her battered body and her ragged emotions.

## **Chapter Eight**

A soak in the cool river water had helped soothe some of Genny's aches. She was still sore between her thighs, which wasn't surprising considering all the sexual activity she'd indulged in today. Her back stung and she could only assume that it was as red as the tops of her shoulders. She pulled her chemise back on, knowing she wouldn't be able to bear the heavier fabric of her dress resting against her abused flesh. She'd definitely gotten too much sun on an area that had never been exposed before.

It would be easy for her to gather some leaves and make a poultice to help ease her sunburn, except that she was supposed to be a stranger here. She wasn't supposed to know anything about the various plants that grew here or their medicinal properties. Too bad, because she'd seen several kinds that could have relieved the worst of the heat and pain. There was no help for it—she'd just have to suck it up and live with the sting. It was going to be a long night.

Donning her boots, she strolled back to the campsite. She wanted to spend time with both men, but was embarrassed about facing them after today. Not all the redness on her face was due to the sun. She could feel the heat on her cheeks every time she thought about this morning at the river or this afternoon at the meadow. She'd waited a long time to give up her virginity and take a lover, but she'd certainly made up for lost time today.

Both men looked up when she stepped into the small clearing where they'd set up their bedrolls. The smell of cooking fish wafted on the air. Luckily for her, it seemed as if Jarmon had gone fishing today. If they'd had to depend on what she and Garrik had caught for their supper, they'd be going hungry tonight.

Garrik motioned her close to the fire. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine." She carefully lowered herself to the ground, trying not to wince.

"You are not fine." Jarmon scowled at his brother and strode over to crouch beside her. His frown deepened as he examined her nose and her shoulders. He laid his hand gently on the top of her back and she jerked away, unable to stop herself. "Your back is sunburnt." His tone was accusatory.

"So it is." She shifted so that her back was turned away from him. "I didn't do it on purpose and it's not your problem." She didn't know why he was so angry. It was her back that was stinging, not his.

"I know it is not your fault." He shot his brother a hard stare before rising and stalking into the woods.

"Genny." She turned away from Jarmon as he disappeared from sight and gave Garrik her attention. "He is angry with me, not you."

"I don't understand." Her head was beginning to throb and her stomach chose that moment to growl, announcing her hunger.

Garrik chuckled and checked the fish. "Not much longer. Jarmon also dug some wild yams." He motioned to a small, rock-covered pit. "They have been baking for some time now."

Her mouth began to water. She was hungry enough to eat anything, but the fish and yams smelled delicious. She might not feel well, but she'd certainly worked up an appetite today.

Garrik came over to her and stretched his large frame out beside her. "Jarmon is right to be annoyed with me. I did not take good care of you today, and because of that you are suffering now."

Genny was totally confused. "But it's not your fault that my back got burned. That was my own doing."

He shook his head. "You are under our protection. It is both our responsibilities to take care of you and see to your wellbeing."

Once again, she was reminded of just how different these men were from her brothers and the men she'd grown up around. If she was home and had been careless enough to allow her skin to be burned, she would be facing her brother's scorn and ridicule, and possibly worse if it kept her from performing her regular duties around Craddock Keep.

"I don't understand you and your brother. You confuse me." The last came out like some deep, dark confession. But truly, these men seemed too good to be true. Except they weren't. They were real and they were the best men she'd ever known. She hated the fact that she was lying to them. Despised herself for keeping her identity a secret. But she couldn't bear to tell them now, not after basking in the glow of their concern, not after sharing herself with them both. To watch that caring turn to anger would hurt her worse than any beating her brothers had ever meted out.

Garrik's eyes softened and he reached out and stroked his finger down her nose. "I know you don't. It matters not. All that matters is that you accept that we do care."

Jarmon stalked back into the clearing, his hands filled with leaves. Genny recognized them immediately as some of the ones that would help ease her sunburn. He laid them on the ground next to her while he went to his pack and rummaged around. Pulling out a small wooden bowl, he disappeared back into the woods, only to quickly return with a bowl of cool river water. Crouching beside her, he took the leaves one at a time, shredded them and dropped them into the water.

"Can I do anything to help?" Genny tentatively reached for one of the leaves only to find her fingers captured by his.

Jarmon brought her fingers to his lips and kissed them one at a time. "No. All you have to do is rest and get well." Totally bemused, she brought her hand back to her lap and curled her fingers inward.

Garrik heaved himself up and went to check on the fish as Jarmon continue to shred leaves into the bowl of water. "The food is ready." Garrik removed the fish and laid them across several large leaves.

"It will have to wait until I have seen to Genny's back." His hard tone left no room for disagreement. When he spoke to her, his voice changed, softening. "I need your other chemise."

"It's in my pack."

Reaching out, Jarmon snagged it and handed it to her. She'd half expected him to just dig through it himself, but once again he respected her privacy. Opening the bag just enough to reach inside, she grabbed the chemise and quickly closed it again. The tapestry was still safely wrapped in her spare dress at the bottom. She handed it to him and his hand brushed hers. Even that briefest of touches caused her fingers to tingle with pleasure. But that pleasure quickly turned to dismay when he ruthlessly ripped the thin fabric into large strips. "Stop! What are you doing?" That was her only other chemise.

"I need it." No more explanation than that.

"You could have asked first. That's the only other one I have."

He stopped, his hands looking ridiculously large and male against the delicate white fabric. "What does it matter? You are a tapestry bride. By tomorrow night, you will go back to where you came from or you will go home with us. Either way, you will have more clothing at your disposal."

Caught by her own lies. She couldn't fault his reasoning, nor could she protest. He was right and he was also staring at her with a strange expression on his face. "I forgot," she blurted out, trying to divert any suspicion. "Of course it doesn't matter."

Grunting, he went back to what he'd been doing. What exactly did that grunt mean? Did he believe her? Plucking fabric away from her skin, she decided not to worry. He was right about one thing. By tomorrow night she would be gone.

Jarmon picked up the bowl and scooted behind her. She could feel his hesitation as his fingers touched the thin straps that held up her chemise. "Your poor back, Genny." He traced the ridges of some of her older scars as well as her newer ones. "I don't want to hurt you." His voice was as mesmerizing as the motion of his fingers as they stroked gently over her skin. His words made her throat tighten, making it hard for her to swallow. "The poultice might sting a bit at first, but then it will ease the pain. It will also draw the heat from your flesh. By the morning, you should be fine."

"How did you know which leaves to use?" she forced herself to say as she blinked back the tears that welled in her eyes. Her brothers depended on her to take care of any wounds or ailments and she was sure they wouldn't have had a clue what to do about a sunburn.

"Our mother taught us." He eased the straps over her shoulders. Genny caught the fabric as it dipped down in the front. Holding it over her breasts. "She thought all her sons needed to know some basic medicines." He tried to ease the fabric lower, but

Genny held it tight in the front, not allowing it to slip any lower. "When we were boys, Zaren and Bador would take us out into the woods and show us plants we could use to eat and to heal ourselves, just as our father had shown them."

"Your father did not show you?" She knew their father was dead, but she didn't know for how long.

"He died when we were boys. Zaren was more father than brother to us when we were growing up." Garrik joined in the conversation, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth as he watched her play tug of war with Jarmon.

"Genny." She could hear amusement as well as exasperation in Jarmon's voice. "I cannot properly tend to your back unless you let me uncover it."

She knew she was being unreasonable. Both men had seen her breasts and every other part of her as well. It was just hard to break habits of a lifetime and she was suddenly feeling very shy. Just because they'd seen her didn't mean she was comfortable with it. Besides, it felt different under these circumstances.

As if sensing her concern, Garrik placed his hands over hers, where she had a death grip on the cloth. "Let go, Genny. Everything will be fine."

She wanted to let go, but her fingers wouldn't cooperate. Garrik pried her fingers away one by one until the cloth fell to her waist. She gave a small cry of distress, but Garrik wouldn't release her hands and allow her to cover herself.

Cold. She shivered as Jarmon began to place the wet leaf mixture on her back. Instead of trying to escape Garrik's hold, her fingers now clung to his. "I'm sorry," Jarmon murmured as he quickly covered her back. She could feel the rivulets of water rolling down her back as he carefully patted the leaves down on her skin. She clenched her teeth together to keep from crying out as the juice from the leaves seeped into her flesh, making it sting worse.

Jarmon continued to work swiftly and wrapped the long pieces of her torn chemise around her torso, trapping the leaves against her back. When he was finished, he tied it in several places with two thin strips that he'd torn. By the time he was finished, the pain was already receding, replaced by a cooling sensation.

Garrik helped her ease the straps of her chemise back up over the makeshift bandage while Jarmon cleared away the bowl and remaining leaves. When she was settled, they both leaned in and kissed her. First Garrik and then Jarmon. It wasn't a demanding or sexual kiss, but rather one of comfort.

It didn't take them long to serve up the baked fish and yams. In spite of her earlier hunger, Genny picked at her food. It was delicious, but her appetite had flown. Her head continued to throb, but at least her back and shoulders were beginning to ease.

They spoke little, each lost in their own thoughts, and by mutual agreement they cleaned up and turned in to bed early. The three blankets were laid out one beside each other and Genny eased herself down on the middle one, turning onto her stomach with her hands tucked under her head. She didn't think she'd get much sleep tonight, as this wasn't a very comfortable position.

Once the fire was extinguished and the camp secured for the night, both men joined her, one on either side. She was facing Jarmon and could see the concern in his eyes. "You didn't hurt me." She didn't know why it was important for her to tell him that, just that she sensed it was.

He stroked the side of her face with his fingers. "I would never want to hurt you."  
"I know."

He leaned in and placed a soft kiss on her forehead. Behind her, she felt Garrik gently kiss the back of her head. "Sleep now."

She closed her eyes but didn't think she'd be able to follow Jarmon's command. There were so many thoughts running through her head, but deep down she knew what was keeping her awake. It was time to be truthful with herself. Somewhere in the past two days, she'd opened her heart to the Bakra brothers. Simply put, she'd fallen in love with them.

It wasn't just the way that they treated her with respect and listened to her opinions. They might not always agree with her, but they at least acknowledged what she had to say. It wasn't the way that they put her welfare above their own or the way that they'd made love to her with such care to her pleasure before seeking their own. She could call it making love now, because in her heart she knew that was what she'd done. If she hadn't suspected she was growing to love them, then she would never have been able to give herself so freely. She trusted them.

But it was more than that. It was the little things that they did without thought that truly touched her. Like the way they made sure she had enough to eat and the way they worried about her safety. It came as natural to them as breathing and spoke well of their character. They were good men, with a high moral code that they lived by.

What had pushed her over the edge from caring to love was what had happened here this evening. Jarmon had tended to her back while Garrik had held her hands, offering silent comfort. Never in her life had she felt as cared for or as loved as she had in that moment when they had both pressed a kiss to her lips just to reassure her.

Her stomach clenched and she wanted to cry out at the pain that this admission caused her. She forced herself to keep her breathing calm, not wanting to alarm either man or have them ask questions. Tomorrow was her last day with them. This time tomorrow evening, she had to have a plan in place that would allow her to slip away from them. Her heart protested, but her head assured her that she had no choice. She was the sister of their worst enemy. She could not risk them discovering who she was. Not that she thought they'd hurt her. That thought had been long dispelled. They would never hurt a woman. What she couldn't bear to see was their concern and caring turn to anger and hatred.

She wanted to rub her chest it hurt so much. Instead she forced herself to keep breathing slowly. One breath in. One breath out. It didn't help the ache, but it did ease some of the strain.

She squirmed around, trying to get comfortable. Both men shifted and she felt Jarmon's hand on her bottom, rubbing it soothingly. Garrik's fingers stroked the back of her head and her neck. Beneath their ministrations, she slowly felt herself begin to drift toward sleep.

Tomorrow was her final day with them. What would happen? What would she do? How would she leave without hurting them?

## **Chapter Nine**

By the following afternoon, Genny still had no idea how she was going to slip away from them later in the evening. Both men watched her closely as if expecting her to disappear at any moment.

Thankfully she had been feeling fine again this morning. The first thing Jarmon had done upon awakening had been to check her back. The poultice had done its work and while her back and shoulders were still tinged a pale pink, they no longer stung. Genny had taken her time down by the river, washing and dressing. She longed to wash her chemise but knew that would have to wait for another day. She hated having to put the garment back on again, but she had no choice. There was no way she could wear her dress without it. The material would be too scratchy and rough against her back.

Strangely, she had wanted to linger, not wanting to leave. Leaving meant that this was the beginning of the end. By contrast, both men seemed eager, almost impatient, to get started. Genny knew they were headed toward Bakra Castle. She just had to delay them enough so that they wouldn't reach it until tomorrow. By then, she would be gone.

"Do you need to rest?" Garrik dropped back from where he had been leading them through the forest. Here was the chance she'd been waiting for.

"Yes." She glanced away, noting from the location of the sun that the afternoon was waning. They'd only stopped for a quick lunch. Both men seemed determined to press on until they reached home. "I'd like to stop. Just for a few minutes. If that's okay," she hurriedly added, not wanting to make him too suspicious.

Jarmon, who'd been bringing up the rear, came to stand behind her. She could feel the heat of his hand against the small of her back as he hovered protectively beside her. "You should have said something. We would have stopped earlier."

Great. Now she felt guilty. "I'm fine. Really." She nodded for emphasis. "I just want to rest for a bit." Removing her pack, she lowered it to the ground before seating herself beneath a tree. Shaded by its large branches, she sighed and allowed her body to relax. Truthfully, she was still a bit sore from yesterday. All the new sexual activity had left her with a few minor aches.

Both men had been aroused when she'd awakened this morning. With them snuggled tight on both sides, their erections had dug insistently into her hips. She'd lain there sleepily, wondering if either of them would make love to her. A fierce throbbing had begun low in her belly and her nipples had puckered against the fabric of her chemise. She'd licked her lips in anticipation. To her shock and dismay, both men had rolled out of their blankets, totally ignoring their heavy erections. They'd been more concerned about checking her back and getting on the trail toward their home.



Scooting lower, she laid her head on her pack and allowed her eyes to flutter closed. She hated deceiving them, but there was no way she could allow them to take her into Bakra Castle. She'd never be able to escape from their stronghold. Her breathing evened out, and in spite of her worries, she relaxed.

"We've pushed her too hard." She recognized the voice as Garrik's.

"Perhaps." Genny kept her breathing regulated, knowing Jarmon watched her. She could feel his eyes on her. He was the more suspicious of the two.

"We walked a lot in the heat yesterday, my brother. Add that to the two sexual encounters she had and her sunburn and it's no wonder she's tired. We've been walking since just after breakfast with only one break." She felt a blanket being laid across her. It took every ounce of discipline she possessed to keep from crying. Even as she was deceiving them, they were caring for her.

Jarmon heaved a sigh. "I supposed you are right. I will not rest easy until we have Genny secure behind the walls of Bakra Castle. I can't shake the feeling that something is going to happen. Something that won't be particularly pleasant."

"We'll let her sleep for a while. We've still got time to make it home before the sun sets this evening." Garrik's voice faded as she snuggled beneath the blanket. She heard Jarmon's deep, rumbling voice but could not make out his words. Frowning, she tried to concentrate.

Shivering, she sat up and glanced around. Totally disoriented, for a moment she couldn't remember where she was. The sun was low in the sky and the air had cooled slightly. She really had fallen asleep. And from the looks of things, it appeared that she'd slept for quite some time.

"How do you feel?"

She turned her head slowly, not surprised to find Garrik sitting near her, watching over her. Taking her time, she carefully stretched her arms and legs and sat up. "I feel good. Much better in fact." That was the truth. The nap had rejuvenated her and eased the worst of her aches and pains. She felt almost normal again.

"Good." Leaning down, he offered her his hand. "Come, we must go."

She slipped her hand into his and let him pull her to her feet. "Go where?" She blinked to clear the sleep from her eyes. "Where is Jarmon?"

"He's gone on ahead." Genny tensed. Were they that close to the Castle? "To set up our camp for the night."

Her gratitude was so profound, she couldn't hold back a shudder of relief. She knew Garrik saw it and hoped he'd just assume it was because she was just waking and was chilled. He frowned at her but said nothing as he gathered the blanket and her pack and led her down the trail.

"I've never taken a nap before." She was still surprised that she'd slept.

"Never?" She could hear the teasing note in Garrik's voice and smiled.

"No, never. There was always too much work to be done for me to waste time napping." She glanced over at him but couldn't read his expression. Chewing nervously on her bottom lip, she hoped he wouldn't ask her any questions. Her mind was still sleep-muddled or she'd never have mentioned anything about her life that could lead to further questions. She'd have to be more careful.

She could see the questions in his eyes, but he didn't voice them. Before long, he guided her off the main path, holding thick branches out of her way as they walked deeper into the forest. She didn't question, but walked where he led. If it was one thing she'd learned these past two days, it was that both brothers knew this land. She had no doubt that Garrik knew exactly where he was going.

She stepped into a small clearing, totally surrounded by tall, majestic trees. Even in the dying twilight, it looked beautiful. A fire was burning cheerfully in the center, surrounded by a ring of rocks. Something was roasting over the blaze and it smelled delicious. Genny was suddenly starving.

Jarmon was standing, waiting for them. He walked toward her, leaned down and kissed her. Totally caught off guard, all Genny could do was stand there and absorb the desire pulsing from his large body. His hands covered her bottom and he pulled her closer. She could feel the throbbing of his cock against her mound as her body began to respond to him. There was no thought of resisting or denying the need that flowed between them.

Her arms crept up to lock around his neck as her tongue began to tangle with his. She wanted to absorb every sensation, to touch and taste every inch of his body. His tongue thrust boldly into her mouth and quickly retreated before thrusting deep again. Her fingers dug into his skull, tugging him close as his lips slanted across hers and his tongue mimicked the mating act.

He released her so suddenly she stumbled. Swearing, he caught her, burying his face in her hair. She could feel his heart pounding against his chest, hear him gasping for breath. His entire body was as hard as stone, tense, waiting, wanting.

She was no better, her body swamped with longing, heavy with need. Garrik broke the intimate spell that Jarmon had woven around them. "Come and eat first."

His words penetrated the desire-filled haze that surrounded her, but it didn't surprise or shock her. She'd known she was going to spend tonight with both men. A fierce yearning filled her, pushing aside all nervousness or misgivings. These were the men of her heart, the men she loved. Under different circumstances, she would have married one of them and had a lifetime with them both. She would not have a lifetime with them, but she did have tonight.

Jarmon shook his head as he rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip. "You make me forget myself."

His words made her smile. They also filled her with pride. She knew it wasn't very often that this warrior lowered his guard enough to forget his surroundings. "I'm glad."

He gave a bark of laughter, grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the fire. "Nymph." His voice was so low that only she could hear. Her body felt warm, flushed with pleasure at his reminder of yesterday at the river. It pleased her that he considered her a nymph, a mythical seductress that rose from the water to tempt and enchant any man who saw her.

Desire was thick and potent, filling the very air around them. None of them spoke as they ate and then cleared away the remains of the meal. While Jarmon and Garrik were both distracted with other things, she quickly shifted her pack away from the center of the camp, tucking it behind a tree.

Unlike other nights, the fire wasn't extinguished, but kept burning. When she raised a questioning eyebrow to Garrik, he sent her a smile that was so sensual and potently male that she almost forgot what she'd asked him. "We want to be able to see you, Genny."

The low tone of his voice brushed her like a caress. Her blood thickened, her body felt heavy. She wanted to see them too. Wanted to touch every part of them and commit it all to memory.

When the blankets were spread, Jarmon knelt on them and held out his hand to her. His vest and boots were gone and he was clad only in his leather pants, which outlined the hard length of his swollen shaft. "Come. It is time."

In spite of her resolve, she felt a twinge of nerves. Her hand went to her stomach and she sucked in a large breath, desperately trying to calm herself. Jarmon's hand engulfed hers, the warmth flowing up her arm as he tugged her toward him. "There is no need to be frightened, Genny." Kneeling in front of her, he buried his face against her stomach. "We know we cannot both take you at the same time. Not tonight. That will come later." He pulled away and shot her a roguish grin.

Her heart ached. There would be no other chance. All she had was now. Tonight.

Even with his scarred face and ruined hand, she thought him incredibly handsome. Strength radiated from him. His long blond-and-white hair flowed down his back and his wide shoulders and chest gleamed like gold in the glow of the firelight. Although he knelt at her feet, she was not under any misconception that he was a suppliant. No, he was the conqueror. He would have her tonight and nothing would stop him.

No, that wasn't quite true. There was one thing that would stop him, but only one.

Her.

She knew if she opened her mouth and said no, he would stop immediately. Love for this man flowed through her. She reached out and traced her fingers over his beloved face, absurdly pleased when he didn't flinch away as she touched his left cheek. Raising her hands to her laces, she quickly undid them. Then she grabbed the tail of her dress and tugged it over her head.

"Let me help you." Garrik moved in behind her, his hands fisting in the cloth as he dragged her dress over her head and tossed it aside. His hands went to her shoulders,

nudging beneath the straps of her chemise. It was suddenly tight and confining and she wanted it gone.

Garrik's fingers stroked the sensitive flesh of her underarms as he tugged the thin strap toward her hands. The moment her breasts were exposed, Jarmon reached out and cupped them, his fingers kneading the pliant flesh.

The material bunched at her waist. Garrik smoothed his hands down her sides, her waist and her hips, pushing the material lower as he went. It dropped to the ground, pooling around her feet. His hands wrapped around her hips, pulling them back against him. She sucked in a breath when she felt the hard ridge of his erection slide into the crease of her behind. Garrik had obviously removed his clothing when she'd been distracted by Jarmon.

"I love your sweet ass, Genny." He bent his knees slightly and stood again, sliding his cock up and down. The muscles in her bottom clenched, holding him tight and he groaned. "So damn sweet," he muttered.

Jarmon's fingers plucked at her swollen nipples, pinching lightly and then soothing it with his thumb. He caught the end of her braid, which had fallen over her shoulder and brushed one hard peak with the end. The soft stroke of hair against her puckered tip was maddening. She licked her lips and swallowed a moan. "More."

Jarmon's pale blue eyes seemed to glow with some inner fire and she cried out when he pulled his hands away. She cried out again, this time in pleasure as Garrik's hands slipped around her from behind and began to tease and torment her sensitive breasts.

Jarmon nuzzled her stomach and her hipbones before moving even lower. Her thighs quivered as he stroked his hands down the backs of her thighs. "Spread your legs. I want to taste how much you want us. How much you need us."

Careful to step out of the chemise still around her ankles, she spread her legs. "Perfect," Garrik whispered as his tongue stroked over the whorls of her ear. "I want to taste you later. I bet you're already wet for us. Aren't you?"

Her feminine muscles contracted hard. Yes, she was wet. Her cream coated the lips of her sex and was beginning to drip down her inner thigh.

"Her pussy is hot and wet, isn't it, Jarmon?" Garrik continued to stroke her nipples, occasionally pinching the hard tips. Genny whimpered.

Jarmon's hands slid around to the inside of her knees and slowly began to stroke upward. He stopped just at the tops of her thighs. She tried to bend her legs to bring his hands closer. She'd go mad if he didn't touch her. But Garrik held her upward, not allowing her to lower her body.

"Are you hot for us, Genny?" Jarmon's voice was harsh, his eyes blazing. Yet his hands were gentle as they stroked circles around the insides of her upper thighs, coming close to touching her but never quite giving her what she craved. "Is your pussy wet for us? Only for us."

"Yes," she cried. Every inch of her body was tight with need. Her toes curled into the blankets, her belly quivered and her skin felt hot and tight. She was so close to coming.

"I can smell her arousal," Jarmon continued as if she hadn't spoken. "Sweet, like nectar from the rarest flower." Garrik plied her nipples with his fingers as he nipped at the sensitive skin of her neck.

"Jarmon," she pleaded. Reaching out, she grabbed a hank of his hair and tugged his face toward her sex.

His low, sensual laughter washed over her. "Do you want us, Genny? Both of us?"

"Gods, yes! I want you both."

Jarmon nodded as he slowly began to part her slick folds with his thumbs. "I'm glad," he said simply as he lowered his head. "Stay with us. Marry one of us. Be our bride." A hot puff of his breath brushed her skin. His tongue traced up one side and down the other as he slid two fingers inside her pulsing sheath.

Perched on the edge for too long, she came immediately, convulsing in a rush. She would have fallen but for Garrik holding her up. Jarmon continued to thrust his fingers in and out of her body until she was crying, overcome by the sheer power and intensity of her orgasm and by the sincerity of his whispered pleas.

Jarmon eased his fingers from her and sat back on his heels as Garrik slowly lowered her to the blankets. She felt as if she were melting, but she didn't care. Garrik didn't let her lie down, but adjusted her body until she was kneeling with her legs slightly spread. He dipped his fingers into her pussy, making her jerk. Her internal muscles protested slightly, clamping down hard. She felt too weak to hold her head up and allowed it to drop back onto his shoulder. When she gazed up at him, he gave a low chuckle of pleasure as he pulled his fingers out and brought them to his mouth. While she watched, he licked her cream from his fingers. "You were right, Jarmon. She does taste as sweet as nectar."

Jarmon caught her hand in his and urged it between her thighs. "Touch yourself, Genny. I want you to feed me your cream." Almost in a daze, she rubbed her fingers over her swollen pussy, coating them with her arousal. The movements became firmer and she could feel desire stirring deep inside her once again.

Jarmon eased her hand out and brought it to his lips. One by one, he covered her fingers with his mouth, sucking the cream from them. A sharp shot of pleasure went through her when he nipped at the webbing at the base of her thumb. Her breasts were swaying with each deep breath she took. When he was finished, he kissed each knuckle before releasing her hand. "Sweet."

Pushing himself to his feet, he tugged at the laces of his pants. When they were open, he shoved them down and stepped out of them. His cock was hard, throbbing with need. Genny licked her lips in anticipation as he knelt back down in front of her.

Garrik moved from behind her and, without his support, she swayed for a moment before righting herself. He scooted around to kneel beside Jarmon. He was just as

aroused as his brother. The long blue vein running up the front of his cock was pulsing with need. As she watched, a pearly bead of liquid seeped from its tip.

"Taste me," he urged. "Taste us."

Garrik watched Genny, barely stifling a groan when she licked her lips again. Her bottom lip glistened with moisture and her huge brown eyes were soft, glazed with a potent combination of desire and pleasure. Her hair was tied back in its familiar braid, but some of it had escaped. Tendrils of brown hair framed her oval face, accentuating her strong yet feminine features.

She really was quite lovely. But what drew him was the woman herself. Beneath the calm exterior she presented to the world existed a deep well of untapped emotion. He'd seen glimpses of it when he'd taken her. There was such passion in Genny. That and a backbone of steel. She was stubborn and he knew that she was still planning to leave them, but he and Jarmon would deal with that later.

At the moment, all he wanted was to have Genny again.

She glanced from him to Jarmon and back again. Garrik fisted his hands on his thighs to keep from reaching out and dragging her mouth to where he wanted it. This had to be her decision. He only hoped she made it soon. His balls were so tight he had to grit his teeth against the ache. The pulsing in his cock matched the pounding in his skull. Every muscle was poised for action. Waiting. Waiting.

Genny scooted forward slightly and slowly lowered her head. Her tongue darted out to lap at the tip of his erection. This time he could not contain his harsh groan of pleasure as she licked at the liquid seeping from the head.

"You taste warm and salty." Her innocent words almost sent him over the edge. He dug his fingers into his thighs, not wanting to come. Not yet. Not until she'd stroked him and sucked him.

He thought the top might blow off his skull when she blew softly over the bulbous head and cupped the heavy sac between his legs, massaging his balls. He sucked air into his lungs but still could hardly breathe.

Garrik felt both relief and agony when she turned away and did the same thing to Jarmon. His brother's hands were fisted at his sides, opening and closing reflexively as Genny worked her magic on him.

He almost howled with pleasure when she shifted her attention back to him. This time she curled her tongue all around the thick head before trailing from the tip to the base of his erection. She nuzzled his testicles with her nose before gently sucking one of his balls into her mouth. His fingers tangled in her hair. He wasn't sure if he was trying to pull her closer or to push her away. "You belong with us, Genny. You belong to us," he gritted out between clenched teeth. Nothing had ever felt as right and as good as she did.

She released him and licked her way back up his cock from the base to the tip. She turned to Jarmon, smiled almost shyly and began to do the same thing to him. It was

arousing to watch Genny's mouth as she licked down the length of his brother's cock. The heavy sac between his legs pulled tighter. A sheen of sweat covered all their bodies, making them gleam in the firelight.

The sounds of the night seemed to fade into the background, replaced by harsh grunts and groans of pleasure. The air was cool, but did nothing to lower the heat consuming his body, pounding through his veins.

This time when she turned back to him, he gripped her head in his hands and guided her mouth straight to his cock. "Take me inside your mouth." He gulped in a huge breath and groaned when her lips parted and lowered over the head. Moist heat surrounded him. "Suck me, Genny."

His hips jerked forward, driving him deeper into her eager mouth. She sucked hard as she stroked her tongue over him. Garrik watched her as she wrapped her hand around the base of his shaft and slowly pumped it up and down as she continued to suckle the head.

Garrik glanced over at Jarmon, who was stroking his cock with his hand. The scar on his brother's face was prominent, his face flushed with need, his eyes filled with lust as he watched Genny's every move. Jarmon raised his head and gave a jerky nod. The time had come for them to claim her.

Jarmon could barely keep from coming as he watched Genny suck on his brother's cock. He'd felt her sweet mouth on his shaft as well, knew what pleasure she was bringing Garrik. Some day soon, he would drive his cock into her mouth, fucking it until he came, but today was Garrik's turn.

He waited, his driving lust making him impatient as Garrik gently pulled her mouth away from him. She looked up, a questioning expression on her face. Her cheeks were flushed a rosy pink, her lips were moist. Her breasts swayed as she sat back, displaying her tight nipples to perfection. Her skin appeared even creamier, softer in the glow of the firelight, and her breathing was uneven.

Jarmon motioned to the blankets as he held out his hand. "Come." His heart squeezed as she stretched out on the ground between them, her thighs relaxed and open. Unable to resist, Jarmon guided the head of his cock to her slit, stroking it over the slick warmth before he began to push inside.

He tried to go slow but was unable to take the sweet torture of her body as it gripped him in a silken vise. Grasping her hips, he thrust. Her inner muscles contracted and relaxed, accepting him, pulling him deeper. She cried out as he seated himself to the hilt.

Garrik shifted closer to Genny's head. Tangling his fingers in her hair, he held her steady as he kissed her. Her hands wrapped around his wrists, her short nails digging into his brother's flesh. He finally pulled away from the kiss, but he did not release her. Using his grip on her hair, he turned her head and guided her mouth toward his cock. Genny opened her mouth and the tip of Garrik's cock disappeared inside.

Jarmon gripped her hips and pulled back until he was almost all the way out. Her legs wrapped around his hips, her ankles crossing behind his back as she tried to keep him from leaving her. He drove back in and she cried out.

It wasn't how he'd imagined it, but Genny was taking them both at once. Jarmon slid one of his hands beneath her, caressing the dark cleft of her behind. It was wet from her juices and he rubbed his fingers through it, coating them before he began to carefully insert one finger past the opening of her ass. The tight band of muscles was resistant at first, but eventually gave way to the pressure. Genny tipped her head back, gasping for air.

Garrik groaned at the loss of her sweet mouth. "Don't stop, Genny."

"Take both of us," Jarmon urged. "Take everything we want to give you." He eased his finger deeper as he pulled his hips back and shoved them forward again, driving his cock deep into her pussy.

Genny didn't think she could take much more. Yet again, she was close to coming. Jarmon had one arm banded around her back as he leaned over her, his cock buried deep. His other hand was on her bottom, a long, thick finger inserted into her behind. She knew Garrik wanted her to take his shaft back into her mouth, sucking him until he came. They overwhelmed her, filled her to bursting. Could she do as they asked?

Her breasts ached, her pussy throbbed and her mouth felt empty. Opening it, she turned back toward Garrik. His harsh grunt filled her ears as she sucked him deep. He supported her head easily and she found that she could pleasure them both at once.

Jarmon began to pump his hips, gaining speed with every thrust. He felt larger than he had yesterday. But perhaps that was an illusion brought on by the fact that he had a thick finger inside her behind.

Genny moaned as Jarmon stopped thrusting and began to insert a second finger. She knew that he was trying to prepare her body so that someday she could take both men at the same time. Tears filled her eyes as her ass began to burn with the pain of his intrusion. That day would never come. Tonight was all they had. As if sensing her discomfort, Jarmon removed his second finger and began to pump his hips again.

Garrik slid one of his hands over her breast, tweaking the nipple. Genny concentrated on taking him as deep as she was able. Her entire body was tight, but she knew she wouldn't come until Garrik had. It took a lot of concentration to keep sucking him while Jarmon was pounding into her.

Focusing her efforts, she sucked hard on Garrik's shaft as he drove it in and out of her mouth in short thrusts. His actions became more erratic and she moaned. That one small sound vibrated through him. His fingers tightened in her hair, holding her to him as he came. Hot cum spurted into her mouth and down her throat. She swallowed convulsively, fierce pride and pleasure filling her that she was able to do this for him.

Finally he sat back, his cock popping out of her mouth. He eased her head gently back down to the blankets as his hand continued to tease and stroke her nipples.



As if that was the sign that Jarmon had been waiting for, he eased his finger out of her behind, seized her hips and began to pound into her. She welcomed each hard plunge of his cock. Wanting more. "Harder," she cried as she stared up him. The scar was more visible against his flushed cheeks and his skin looked stretched over the planes of his face. His pale blue eyes seemed to glow with an inner fire. Growling, he drove even deeper.

Garrik surprised her when he leaned down and covered the crest of her breast with his mouth. His tongue flicked over the puckered nub, sending shivers of pleasure streaking through her body.

Her body jerked and heaved as her inner muscles began to contract. Jarmon gave a harsh yell and flooded her body with his hot cum. She dug her heels into his back, arching up against him. He ground his pelvis against hers as she continued to shiver and shake. She didn't know how long her orgasm rushed through her body, but finally it was over. She unhooked her legs from Jarmon's flanks and they flopped down onto the blankets. Tremors and aftershocks continued to pulse through her as she lay there.

Jarmon's face was buried against her breasts. She could feel the pounding of his heart against her stomach. Garrik had flopped to the side, his arm over his face. When Jarmon lifted his head, smiled at her and leaned down to place a soft kiss on her lips, his body shifted, driving him deeper into her sensitive core. She cried out as tiny shocks of pleasure shot through her. Jarmon groaned and pulled out of her, sitting back on his heels.

"Thank you, Genny." Jarmon stretched out next to her, gathering her close in his arms.

Garrik banked the fire, which had all but died out, making sure it was safe for the night. Spreading the blankets over them, he crawled in next to her, snuggling as close as he could get. "Stay," he whispered against her ear. "Stay."

Genny's heart ached even as her body still shuddered with the most amazing orgasm. She blinked back the tears that filled her eyes. Both men would be watching her closely tonight. She only hoped that the intense sexual activity would make them sleep heavily, if only for a while. She would rest for a while and regain her strength. When both men were asleep, she knew she had to leave. It was time.

## Chapter Ten

Genny eased out from between the two men one slow inch at a time. It wasn't easy with them plastered to her sides. She bit her lip and concentrated, but it was taking longer than she'd imagined it would and the night was waning quickly. They had taken forever to fall asleep and she'd dozed off while she was waiting. But she was awake now and that was all that mattered.

She froze when Jarmon grunted and rolled over onto his side. His unexpected movement gave her some space. Quickly but silently, she stood. The night was quiet except for the occasional hoot of an owl and the deep breathing of both men. She half expected a large hand to wrap around her ankle and demand to know where she was going. Part of her even hoped it would happen, that they would take the decision out of her hands. But that was cowardly.

Straightening her shoulders, she took her first step off the blankets, away from the Bakra brothers, away from the most joy and contentment she'd ever known. She bit her lip to keep from crying out. There was no time for tears. She had to be strong.

She glanced over her shoulder one final time and blinked to clear her blurred vision. In only three short days, Jarmon and Garrik had found their way into her heart. She loved them and that was why she had to leave. Ignoring the soft, inviting cocoon of blankets, she turned away. Working her way silently across the clearing, she snagged her clothing and her pack and kept moving.

She never looked back.

Jarmon came awake with a start. Something was wrong. Not questioning his instincts, he rolled out of bed, reaching for his sword as he did so. Within seconds of opening his eyes, he was standing naked in the early morning light, sword in hand as he searched for the danger he sensed. He glanced down at the blankets to find Garrik staring up at him. "She's gone."

His brother patted the blankets beside him. "It's cool. She's been gone for a while. How did she manage to get away from us without us waking?"

Jarmon snorted as he tossed down his sword and grabbed his pants. "We were too damn sated with sex. An entire battalion of warriors could have come through the clearing and we wouldn't have heard them."

"I don't think so." Garrik was already on his feet, his pants half on. "I think it's because we don't see her as a threat. We trust her." He paused. "Do you think perhaps she was telling the truth about the tapestry? Maybe it reappeared and she just went

home. From what Zaren and Bador said, the tapestry will keep the men unaware that the woman is leaving so that the choice is truly hers."

Strapping his sword belt around his waist, Jarmon's hands stilled for the briefest of moments before he continued. "No. I don't believe that Genny is a true tapestry bride." He had to believe that. Otherwise it meant that she was really gone.

The two men worked quickly, rolling blankets and assembling their packs. Within minutes of waking, they were ready to leave. "We could have done more to convince her to stay." Garrik's thoughts mirrored his. "Just in case the tapestry did bring her to us."

Ignoring his brother, Jarmon began to circle the clearing. If there was one thing he was confident about, it was his skills as a tracker of animals and man. If she was out there in the forest, there was nowhere she could go where he would not find her. Crouching down, he placed his fingers on a deep indentation in the grass. "She must have placed her pack here last night." Adrenaline surged through his veins. "Why would she do that if she wasn't planning on running away?"

"Perhaps she thought it would make it easier for her to reach when the tapestry arrived to take her home." Garrik paused behind him. "We cannot forget that even if the tapestry did not bring her, Genny ran from us."

Jarmon was trying hard to forget that fact. It cut deep into his heart and soul, a betrayal of their trust. "She felt she had to because of the lie." At least he hoped that was why she'd done it. There was only one way to find out.

Standing, he adjusted his pack onto his back and took several steps forward, his eyes scanning the forest floor and the trees. *There!* Just off to the left, a plant was bent forward. At first, he moved carefully through the trees, in case she was trying to throw them off with a false trail. It soon became apparent that her only goal was speed.

Loping off after her, they followed her trail. He lost her twice, but refused to even entertain the idea that she might have vanished with the help of the magical tapestry. Each time he found her track again. And each time he sent a prayer of thanks to the gods. It had been a long time since he'd prayed for anything.

Garrik kept pace with him, neither one of them needing to talk. They were united in their single goal of finding Genny and taking her home. A low noise reached his ears and Jarmon held up his hand as he slowed. *There!* He heard it again in the distance. Creeping slowly forward, he drew his sword, ready to face whatever waited.

The noise became clearer. A soft, feminine sob filled with such anguish, he felt his own heart begin to ache. *Genny!* Keeping his sword at the ready just in case, he moved more quickly, cursing the limp that hampered him slightly. Garrik was at his back, keeping a watch behind them. It didn't pay to get careless.

He drew up, coming to a sudden stop, his feet glued to the ground. Genny knelt on the dew-laden grass, her face wet with tears. But what made it almost impossible for Jarmon to breathe was the tapestry clutched tight in her arms.

Genny had stumbled through the dark for what felt like hours, tripping over unseen branches and roots. Her feet hurt, her legs were sore and her hands and arms were scraped, but it was her heart that ached the most.

Had Jarmon and Garrik awoken yet? Did they now believe the tapestry had taken her away? She'd hated to sneak away like a thief in the night but hadn't seen any other alternative. Had her actions hurt them? Would they try to find her? Should she go back and explain everything to them? Maybe they would understand. Maybe they wouldn't.

So many questions, but no easy answers.

She'd managed to hold off the tears for a while, but with each step she took away from the Bakra brothers, the harder it became. One tear became two. She swiped at them with her hand and kept walking. But two became three and three became four. Before she knew it, she was crying too hard to see. Falling to her knees, she'd tried to hold in the pain, but it overwhelmed her.

Needing comfort, she opened her pack of meager belongings and dug out the tapestry. The small piece of fabric meant so much to her. It had given her hope and courage. It was also all she had left of the two men she loved. Clutching it in her arms, she gave in to the tears, allowing them to flow unchecked.

A sound penetrated her haze of pain and she jerked her head up. She couldn't forget that there were wild animals in these woods, not to mention that there might be other men, perhaps even her brothers. That thought brought her to her feet, holding the tapestry in front of her like a talisman against all evil.

Jarmon and Garrik stood like two stone statues about ten feet away from her. How had they found her so quickly? She swallowed hard, her throat swollen by her tears. What should she say? She opened her mouth to speak, but closed it when Jarmon took a step toward her.

She took a step backward, stumbling slightly, but stopped. There was nowhere she could run. Lowering her gaze, she stared blindly at the ground. She would have to tell them the truth and hope that they wouldn't hate her for her deception.

"Genny?" Two pairs of boots came into her line of vision, but she knew it was Jarmon who'd spoken. His rough voice sent shivers down her spine. She longed to throw herself into his arms and seek comfort.

Taking a deep breath, she gathered her courage, plastered a serene expression on her face and raised her head to face them. They both looked tired and hurt. She had done that to them. She swallowed again, blinking back tears. She'd cried enough and all it had gotten her was a sore throat, puffy eyes, a stuffy nose and a growing headache.

"Genny?" This time it was Garrik who spoke. His voice was softer, more cajoling. He reached out and for a moment she thought he was going to touch her, but his fingers grazed the fabric that she still grasped tight in her arms. She'd forgotten she was holding it.

Sighing, she slowly shook out the fabric, holding it so they both could see. Their eyes widened as they studied the two warriors on the tapestry. It was obvious who they were.

Jarmon reached out and traced the white threads in the hair of one of the warriors. His fingers automatically went to the white locks framing the image's face. "I don't understand."

"I made it." She almost choked on those three simple words, but once she'd said them the rest tumbled out more easily. "It took me three years of hoarding threads and working in secret, but I made it stitch by stitch."

"But how? Why?" Garrik couldn't take his eyes from the scene that depicted himself and his brother, but Genny knew what he was asking her.

"It was unconscious on my part at first. I'd done the landscape and the castle first. You can blame my brothers for it. I heard your names cursed so many times, heard of your exploits and your injuries." Jarmon curled his ruined fingers inward, making Genny's heart hurt. She wanted to reach out and comfort him, assure him that his injuries only made her love him more. She did neither of those things. She'd given up all rights to both men by lying to them.

"Your brothers?"

Genny ignored Garrik's question. She had to finish her story before her courage left her. "The fact that you recovered from adversity. The fact that there seemed to be good men out in the world, men of courage and honor, gave me hope." Unconsciously, her hand moved to her shoulder, echoes of past beatings rippling over her flesh like a phantom pain. She saw Jarmon's eyes narrow and quickly dropped her hand when she realized what she was doing.

"So you see, the tapestry did bring me to you in a roundabout way. It isn't *the* magical tapestry, but it did give me courage and strength enough to leave my own home. If I hadn't left, you would never have stumbled across me in the woods."

"Who are your brothers, Genny?" Jarmon's voice was as hard as steel, his eyes a blaze of anger.

There was no thought of denial now. She owed them the truth no matter what happened. "My name is Genita Craddock."

Garrik swore long and fluently. Jarmon took a step toward her and she flinched away. Steadying herself, she sucked in a deep breath. "You can understand why I didn't tell you that I was the sister of your greatest enemy."

"Why? Why didn't you tell us once you'd been with us a while? You knew we would not hurt you." Hurt and anger were both mixed in Garrik's voice.

"That is why." She held her hands out in front of her in mute appeal, the tapestry falling from her nerveless fingers. "You are the finest men I have ever met. You treated me in a way that I had never been treated in my life, with care and respect. You taught me that there are good men in the world, to whom honor is more than just a word, but a way of life. I learned that sexual relations don't have to be something to be afraid of, but

can be something of profound beauty. You gave me so much." She couldn't keep the plea for understanding out of her voice. "How could I repay you by telling you something that would hurt you so?"

"And you think that your slinking off into the night doesn't hurt us?" No more than a tight, angry whisper, she felt as if Jarmon's words flayed her skin wide open, drawing blood. She had indeed hurt them and that was the last thing she'd wanted to do.

"I'm so sorry." They were only words, but they were heartfelt and all she had to offer. "You have no idea how sorry."

When Jarmon turned away, as if disgusted by the very sight of her, she felt her heart break. She hadn't admitted to herself that she'd still had hope. Hope that they might still care for her regardless of her family connections. There was nothing left for her to say or do. They would do what they would and she would accept whatever punishment they meted out. A lack of feeling crept over her limbs, gradually engulfing her body, and she was glad for its comfort. In her mind, she drew away from the pain surrounding her, the pain that she and her family had created by their actions, and sought blessed numbness.

Jarmon's hands were shaking he was so angry. Never had he felt the kind of rage that he felt at this moment. He could feel the same waves of fury flowing from his brother and knew that their thoughts were of a similar bent.

There was much the Craddock brothers had to answer for. His fingers itched to wrap around her older brother's neck and choke the life's breath from his body. Turning away from Genny, he took several deep breaths to gain back his control. He had even more reason to hate them now. He'd seen Genny's back and knew that Leon Craddock had inflicted many of those scars.

Like him, she knew what it was like to be scarred and maimed. At least his had come from an enemy and not a family member. The thought of either of his older brothers beating him bloody was obscene. Considering the kind of family she'd grown up with, it was no wonder she hadn't trusted them with the truth. He was amazed that she'd given herself to him and to Garrik, taking them both into her body. She was so sensual and open, giving all that they'd asked for and more.

It still hurt that she hadn't trusted him, but he swallowed back the hurt and disappointment. He would have to live with it. Right now, the important thing was Genny. There were questions that he needed answered.

"Why did you leave? How long have you been gone?" He turned back to her as he fired off his questions. "Genny?" Her pallor shocked him. She seemed to be swaying on her feet and her eyes looked unfocused. Worry replaced hurt and anger as he reached out and caught her in his arms, pulling her close. She was stiff and unyielding in his embrace and oh so cold.

He rubbed his arms over her back. Before he could ask, Garrik was there with a blanket, tucking it gently around her shoulders. "What's wrong with her?"

"Shock, I think." He lowered them both to the ground, cradling her against his chest. Her head lolled back against his arm. "Genny." He stroked the side of her face with his hand.

Garrik settled himself next to them and added another blanket to Genny's chilled form. He picked up her hand and began to stroke it, all the while talking softly to her. It took a while, but eventually she began to stir.

Jarmon heaved a sigh of relief when her eyes became focused once again. She stiffened in his arms, but he continued to rub her face and neck, soothing her with his touch rather than with words.

He wanted to spend the next few days doing nothing but loving her and reassuring her, but that would have to wait. If there was the possibility that her brothers were searching for her, then they had to head straight for Bakra Castle. Genny's safety took precedence over everything else. He hated to have to question her. Knew the anguish it would cause her. But he didn't really have a choice. "Genny, why did you leave home and how long have you been gone?"

She swallowed. Her soft brown eyes appeared huge with fear as they darted from him to Garrik and back again. He hated the fact that she now seemed afraid of them, and he barely bit back a growl of displeasure. That would do nothing to calm her.

"I've been gone over a week. This is the tenth day." She lowered her eyes and plucked at the blankets with her free hand.

"Why did you leave?" Garrik leaned forward as he spoke and Genny shrank closer to Jarmon. He could see the same frustration in Garrik's eyes as he sat back, giving her some space.

"For years, they've used me to form alliances, dangling the possibility of marriage in front of their friends and potential allies. That all changed after the fighting started with your family." Genny shifted and sighed, still not meeting their gazes. "My brothers hate your family, not only for the deaths of our two brothers, but for the fact that you defeated them and emerged triumphant. Leon expected Jarmon to die or at least be an invalid, a broken man." A tiny smile played at the corners of her mouth. "Then word reached him that not only were you recovered, you were actually stronger than before in spite of your injuries."

"That still doesn't tell us why you left." Garrik brought her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. She froze and then her entire body jerked as she watched him, an unreadable expression on her face.

She swallowed several times before continuing. Jarmon was pleased to note that the color was starting to come back to her face. "Because of their defeat, some of their allies abandoned them, not wanting to take on the combined wrath of the Bakra and Garen families. That left them in a weakened state. To form a new alliance, they promised me in marriage."

"To whom?" It made his blood curdle just imagining what kind of monsters her brother would choose.

"The Luther brothers." She raised her head and met his gaze unflinchingly. "I refused and Leon...well, Leon did what he does best. He reacted in anger."

"He beat you." Jarmon saw no reason to temper his blunt words. If there was ever a man that needed killing, it was Leon Craddock. What man would hand over his only sister to animals like the Luther brothers? Rumor had it that they'd already killed one wife. Most people wouldn't have anything to do with them.

"Yes, he did." The matter-of-fact way she spoke of it told him that it was a common occurrence. "I had already planned to escape, but I had some help."

"Who?"

"My youngest brother, Radnor. He surprised me actually."

"How so?" Now that he had her talking, Jarmon wanting to hear the entire tale, as distasteful as it was.

"I always thought he'd hated me like the rest of my brothers. Actually, he's ignored me my entire life. It was a shock to find out that he'd done it for my own protection. Any hint of sympathy from him toward me always brought out Leon's anger. By ignoring me, he was protecting me in his way."

"He should have killed Leon to protect you." These harsh words came from Garrik, who had been quietly listening up until now.

"Leon was much older and stronger. Besides, it wasn't just Leon. Radnor would have had to kill the other five. Maybe just four – my brother Sednar mostly ignores me as well." She shrugged and continued. "I was suspicious at first, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized that Radnor had deflected Leon's anger from me many times, sometimes taking beatings himself, especially when we were younger."

Jarmon grunted. Perhaps he wouldn't kill this younger brother when he met him on the field of battle. Maybe. There was no doubt in his mind that a day of reckoning was coming for the Craddock brothers. And soon.

That thought spurred him to action. He stood, Genny still cradled in his arms. "Your brothers will be searching for you. We must get you back to the safety of the castle."

"No!" Genny struggled in his arms and he reluctantly released her. As soon as her feet touched the ground, she whirled to face them. "Are you mad? I will not bring my problems to your doorstep. I will not allow my brothers to hurt your family any more than they already have." With each word she spoke, she came closer until she was poking both of them in the chests with her fingers to emphasize her point.

In spite of her angry tirade, Jarmon met his brother's gaze and grinned. Garrik looked just as pleased by her outburst. It was good to see the feisty woman they'd come to know and love. And love her he did. He would do whatever it took to protect her. If that meant killing every one of her brothers, then so be it. If he had to sacrifice his own life to protect hers, then it was well worth it.



"Genny," he began, only to be cut off as she backed away from them, her arms crossed and a look of pure disgust on her face.

"What are you thinking to even suggest such a thing? What would your family say if you brought me home with you and my brothers retaliated by burning out your farms or trying to steal your women? They would hate me and rightfully so. It could damage your relationship with your brothers and your mother. I cannot and will not allow that to happen." Turning her back on them, she strode away from them, stopping long enough to grab the tapestry and her pack and sling them over her shoulder.

Both brothers loped after her, flanking her on either side. She stopped and huffed. "You have to let me go."

"No." Leaning down, Jarmon finally did what he'd wanted to since he found her again. He kissed her. She whimpered as his tongue swept inside her mouth, reclaiming it, reassuring himself that she was safe and back in his arms where she belonged. Her pack slid from her shoulder and hit the ground with a thump, but he ignored it, wrapping his arms around her waist and lifting her right off her feet.

She slanted her head, her hands cupping his face as she kissed him back. A knot in his belly released as she opened herself up to him, giving as eagerly and as openly as she always had. She still wanted him. A small part of him had wondered if she'd left simply because she hadn't really wanted either of them for a husband. They were both gasping for breath when they finally broke away from the kiss.

He lowered her back to the ground only to have her swept from his hands as Garrik hauled her into his arms and kissed her. He couldn't blame his brother for needing to strengthen the bonds between them, to remind her that they were there, as strong as ever, and weren't going away any time in the future.

Garrik crushed his lips against Genny's, his hands cupping her behind as he ground her pelvis against his. Jarmon's leather pants grew tight as he watched the passionate embrace between his brother and their woman. The need to take her right here, right now, and claim her pounded through his body, thickening his blood. His cock ached to thrust into her warmth over and over again until she screamed with pleasure.

He was so distracted, he almost missed the small, unnatural noise. He clamped his hand down on Garrik's arm, ignoring the annoyance radiating from his brother's eyes as they snapped open. He motioned with his hand and Garrik froze. Ever so slowly, he released Genny, placing his hand lightly over her mouth when she began to protest. Her eyes widened above Garrik's hand as their tension began to seep into her awareness.

One slow inch at a time, Jarmon drew his sword as he strained to identify what sound his ears had caught. The slight scrape of metal announced that Garrik had drawn his weapon. They all grabbed their packs and, keeping Genny safely between them, Jarmon led them into the thick underbrush. His mind worked furiously as he pinpointed exactly where they were and what was around them. Satisfied he knew where he was going, he kept moving in a southerly direction.

The sounds got closer and became easily identifiable as men on horseback. Who was it? It could easily be Zaren and Bador or some of the men-at-arms from the castle, but instinct warned him differently. Picking up the pace, he moved quickly and cautiously, knowing Garrik would help Genny if she needed it. All his concentration was focused on protecting her from whatever threat lurked.

The small cave he was leading them to was just ahead in the distance. The sounds of the men were getting louder. It would be close. They could just crouch down in the woods and take their chances, but they had a better chance of going undetected up in the cave. It was a gamble, but Jarmon decided it was worth the risk.

A quick glance assured him that Garrik and Genny were right behind him. Genny looked pale but composed. Garrik's expression was one of determination. Time was against them as they hurried forward. Climbing up the steep incline, Jarmon heaved himself up into the cave. Garrik gave Genny a boost and he caught her hands, pulling him into the dark opening. He hissed out a warning and Garrik practically flew up the slope. The cave was only about six feet deep and eight feet wide. It was a tight fit, but they all squeezed against the back wall just as the horses broke through the trees below them.

"I didn't expect that stupid bitch to be so hard to find. She must have had help. And when I find out who it was, I'll make them sorry they were ever born." There was no mistaking the pleasant tones of Leon Craddock, Jarmon thought sarcastically. His fingers tightened on his sword hilt. The urge to just leap from the cave and impale Leon with his sword made his body twitch. But there was a time to fight and a time to retreat. With Genny's safety at risk, this was definitely a time to retreat.

"Maybe she didn't go in this direction at all." The calm voice of reason was shouted down immediately.

"Of course she's gone this way. Every time someone mentions the damned Bakra brothers, her ears perk up. She thinks nobody notices. Stupid bitch is half in love with them. Like attracts like and dogs will sniff out other dogs."

Beside him, Jarmon felt Genny flinch at her brother's hateful words. He caught her hand in his and squeezed it tight. Her fingers slowly wrapped around his, returning the gesture. He risked a short glance in her direction and was glad to see that her head was resting against Garrik's shoulder.

"Besides which," Leon continued. "It's the furthest direction away from us." His cruel laughter echoed in the small cave, surrounding them. "She's smarter than I gave her credit for, though. She was gone for two days before I even noticed. The dogs lost her scent in the river just beyond the Keep—otherwise we might have found her before she got too far. Then we wasted even more time dragging the useless animals back home again before searching for her trail. I'll teach the little bitch to run away. If she's lame, she won't be able to run, now will she? The Luthers won't care as long as she can lie flat on her back and spread her legs."

Genny drew her legs up to her chest, burying her face against them. Yanking her hand from his, she covered her head, trying to drown out her brother's words. Jarmon's heart ached and the vein in his temple throbbed. How in the name of the gods had she grown up in such a vile household and turned out so good and kind? His estimation of Genny's character grew even larger than it had been. He couldn't imagine how someone as gentle as she had survived.

"Maybe we'll get lucky and run into that Bakra bastard before we find her. This time I'll make sure he stays dead." The laughter faded as the horses moved off. No one in the cave moved for a long time.

When Jarmon figured enough time had passed, he turned his attention to the woman huddled in a tight ball beside him. He smoothed his hand over her hair before letting it slide down her back. "We have to leave." He kept his voice pitched low as a precaution. No need to take unnecessary chances. He cursed inwardly at his inability to erase her brother's words from her memory. She hadn't needed to hear his vile promises.

She raised her head slowly. Her eyes had that faraway look they'd had earlier when he and Garrik had found her. He recognized it now as a survival mechanism, a way of removing herself from the reality of circumstances she couldn't change. But now that the situation was past, her eyes cleared and she squared her shoulders. Nodding her acceptance, she scooted toward the edge of the cave and waited.

Jarmon met his brother's determined gaze. As always, they were of an accord. They would protect Genny with their lives, and once they had her safely behind the walls of Bakra Castle, they would love her long and well until she couldn't even think of ever leaving them again.

## **Chapter Eleven**

Bakra Castle was huge. Genny stood between Jarmon and Garrik, feeling dwarfed by the high walls of the main hall. Rich tapestries adorned the entire area and in spite of her fear, Genny wished she could take a closer look. Several long tables filled the space, including an ornate one that sat on a raised dais at the head of the room. It was an imposing room, yet for all that it retained an air of almost hominess.

It wasn't anything like Craddock Keep, which was smaller and more rustic. Her brothers were as likely to smash the furniture in a fight or toss their leftovers onto the floor for their hunting dogs. It had been a full-time job for Genny to keep it relatively clean. But here, everything sparkled, yet it was obviously well lived in.

She hadn't had a chance to see much of the outside of the Castle as she'd been quickly hustled inside. What she had seen had been very impressive. The people had watched them with curiosity in their eyes. They'd all looked healthy, clean and well cared for, as did their homes.

Again the contrast was astounding. The people of Craddock Keep were a sullen, dirty bunch who did their best to ignore anything that did not directly pertain to them. No one wanted to attract the attention of any of her brothers. Here, they called out to Jarmon and Garrik, greeting them by name. Not only that, but both men responded in kind. They even knew the names of the laughing, barefoot children who'd run alongside them as they made their way through the large metal gate, past the stone walls and up to the huge front door of the castle.

An air of prosperity clung to their home and Genny found herself wishing that it were hers as well. However, she knew that wasn't likely. Jarmon and Garrik might want her here, but she couldn't imagine that their older brothers would allow it.

"Genny." Garrik nudged her gently. While she'd been busy gawking at the room, several people had assembled by the gigantic fireplace that flanked one wall. Comfortable-looking chairs were scattered around it, but no one was sitting. Everyone was staring. At her.

A tall, hard-looking man stood slightly in front, his arms folded across his massive chest. There was no doubting that this was the eldest Bakra brother. There was an air of power that clung to the man, but if that wasn't enough, he bore the thin braids that fell from either temple, proclaiming him the eldest son. His pale blue eyes were so familiar, yet there was no warmth in their depths. His face could have been sculpted from stone, it appeared so harsh and forbidding.

Genny swallowed hard and prayed he wouldn't slay her where she stood. She trusted Jarmon and Garrik, but she didn't know what to expect from their family. There was another man and a woman standing just behind him. The man looked enough like

the rest of them that she knew he must be the other brother. The woman was slender with black hair and dark eyes. She couldn't quite tell the color from this distance, but they appeared kind, which gave Genny some hope.

"I knew you were going hunting, but I admit that I didn't know you'd be hunting such spectacular game." The deep, rumbling voice seemed to fill the entire room. The man's expression seemed to lighten for a moment, but she couldn't be sure it wasn't just a trick of the afternoon light streaming in through the high windows.

Garrik laughed as he stepped forward. "This is Genny. We discovered her by a river two day's walk from here." He turned back toward her and held out his hand. She hesitated, not wanting to get any closer than she was. The man was downright intimidating the way he stared at her.

Jarmon placed his hand on her lower back, urging her forward. He leaned down and whispered so that no one else could hear him. "I will not let anyone harm you. Trust me." She'd already hurt him enough with her actions—she would not disgrace him in front of his family. Bravely she took a step forward, bracing for the worst.

"Genny," Garrik continued, as if she hadn't hesitated at all. "This is our eldest brother, Zaren."

She nodded at him.

He cocked his eyebrow as he continued to study her. She stifled the urge to squirm. "Welcome to Bakra Castle, Genny. May I present my wife, Jane." The woman smiled and stepped forward to stand at her husband's side. "And our other brother, Bador." The other man stepped forward. It was amazing how much they all resembled each other with their long blond hair, their strong facial features and their massive bodies.

"Welcome, Genny." Jane took another step forward as if to greet her, but Genny stepped back. The other woman faltered and glanced at Garrik with an inquisitive expression on her face.

Genny could not accept the hospitality of these fine people. Not until they knew who she really was. "I'm sorry," she began. Zaren was glaring at her again, his arm wrapped protectively around Jane's shoulders. She hadn't meant to hurt Jane's feelings, but they had to know the truth. She felt small and unworthy standing here in front of them, knowing how much pain and sorrow her brothers had visited upon this family. Yes, Zaren had killed two of her brothers, but only because they'd ambushed him on his own land.

She turned toward Jarmon, silently beseeching him. He sighed, but he nodded. "Are you sure?" He stroked his hand down the side of her face and she took comfort from his touch.

"Yes." She realized that the three people across from them were staring. At first, she thought it was her they were looking at, but their expressions were more of shock than anything. They were staring at Jarmon's left hand where it rested against the side of her face. Genny scowled at them. Why would they stare at his hand? Did they think less of him because of his injury? Glaring at them all, she covered his hand with hers, wrapped

her fingers around it and brought it back by her side. They could think what they liked of her, but they'd better not say anything against Jarmon.

Zaren cocked his eyebrow at her again, but a smile played around the corners of his mouth. "Sheathe your claws, my lady. We meant no offense."

Bador and Jane made no pretense of hiding their amusement. Both of them had huge smiles on their faces. Genny felt like a fool and tried to release Jarmon's hand, but he tangled his fingers with hers, refusing to release her.

Sighing, she stared up at him again. "Tell them everything."

Jarmon started from the moment they'd found her seated by the edge of the river. Garrik chimed in occasionally, adding details to the tale. She felt their shock when Jarmon told them she'd claimed to be a tapestry bride. Thankfully both men left out the intimate details of their sexual encounters, but they made no effort to hide the fact that they had done all in their power to convince her to choose one of them as a husband. Genny's face burned at the knowing expressions on the older brothers' faces as they glanced at Jane. It helped Genny to relax slightly when she saw the blush on the other woman's face as well.

That didn't last long. Within moments, she was so tense that she felt as if her body might crack with the strain. They'd reached the part in the story about how she'd lied about being a tapestry bride and had run away in the middle of the night. She stared down at the floor, not able to face them as the rest of the story unfolded. The rough stone had been worn smooth over years of people walking on it. Genny concentrated on the veins of color running through some of the stones. She tried to block out the words being spoken, but it was impossible. When Garrik told them about her brothers almost finding them on the trail, she wished the floor would open up and swallow her.

The silence that greeted the end of the story seemed to grow until it filled the entire room. "So," Zaren finally broke the quiet, his voice low and angry. "You are Genita Craddock."

Slowly she raised her head, tilting her chin upward to meet his furious gaze. "Yes." There was really nothing else to add. She could not change who her family was.

Jarmon released his hold on her hand and caught her chin with his fingers, turning it toward him. "Will you trust me and do as I ask?"

Considering she had brought this discord to their family, she couldn't refuse. "Yes."

His blue eyes softened as he stroked his thumb over her cheek. He dropped his hand back down by his side and took a step away. "Then turn around." She wasn't sure what he was going to do, but she spun around until her back was to everyone but Jarmon. He stood in front of her, his hands on the laces of her dress. Oh gods, what was he going to do?

Then she knew. He was going to show her back to them. She whimpered and his hands stilled. She could sense the growing curiosity of his family.

Garrik reached out and caught her hand, bringing it to his lips. "It's the only way."

She hung her head and waited, giving her silent permission. Jarmon made quick work of her dress, pulling it down to her waist. In spite of her resolve, her shoulders stiffened when he began to tug at the straps of her chemise.

"Is this necessary?" Jane said. Genny could hear the strain in the other woman's voice.

"I think it is," Jarmon countered as he lowered the thin fabric to her waist, exposing her back to view.

"Merciful God," Jane gasped.

Genny felt totally exposed. She'd never felt this vulnerable in her entire life. Still, she stood tall. She would not be ashamed of the marks of her brothers' brutality. They were not her fault.

"What is this?" Zaren demanded.

"This is Genny's life at Craddock Keep. This is the love and care her brothers have shown her." Jarmon's fingers trailed lightly over the scars, both old and new. Goose bumps raced over her flesh. "She was running because they'd promised her to the Luther brothers."

He let that statement hang in the air as he carefully tugged her chemise and then pulled her dress back up. Tenderly, he tied her laces and turned her back to meet his family's gaze. Garrik stood on her other side, taking her hand in his. She was glad for both their silent encouragement. Without it, she wasn't sure her legs would support her.

"All of us have been abused by the Craddock brothers, but none so much as Genny. If she would have one of us as husband, we would be honored to have her as wife." His voice hardened, his tone implacable. "Is our future wife welcome here? Or should we go?"

"No." Genny pulled away from both men, taking a quick step backward when they reached out to her. "You cannot do this. I will not let you."

"Come here, Genny." Garrik took a step toward her, stopping when she continued to back away.

"I will not accept either of you, so you must let me go." It broke her heart to say those words, but she would not allow them to forsake their home for her. She appealed to Zaren, certain he would have no problem fulfilling her wishes. "Let me go. Just let me go and I will leave here. My brothers will follow me and will not trouble your family any longer." Tears pricked her eyes, but she willed them back. Now was the time to stand strong. There would be time for tears later.

For the longest moment no one spoke. Tears were rolling down Jane's face, but Genny focused on Zaren. His word was law here. Except she couldn't read his expression as he walked toward her. She took a step away and then forced herself to stand her ground. The only way she could get out of here was with his permission. To protect Jarmon and Garrik, she could face down anyone, including the fierce Zaren Bakra.

He towered over her, blocking the others from her view. Breathing was almost impossible, as his mere presence seemed to suck away all the air. She felt lightheaded and swayed slightly, but she determinedly locked her knees and stared at his broad chest, which was directly in front of her. She saw a slight movement off to her left and flinched, sure he was about to land a blow.

He sucked in a breath, but the blow never came. Instead fingers lightly cupped the back of her head, tipping it upward. Genny blanked her face as best she could, hiding all emotion as she met his fearsome stare. It was his eyes that mesmerized her. They swirled with something that she thought might be sympathy or caring, but she couldn't be sure. The only thing she was certain of was that he no longer appeared angry.

"Little sister," he began. Stopping, he swallowed hard as he stroked his hand over her hair once again. Clearing his throat, he continued. "I could think of no better wife for my brothers. The fact that you would give them up and face your brothers' fury alone just so my brothers are not at odds with their family speaks well of your character. The fact that you bear the scars of your brothers' mistreatment makes it all the more incredible. I could never allow any woman to return to the clutches of men who have abused her in such a way. Not if I still wanted to call myself a man."

Genny was stunned, not quite able to believe what Zaren was saying. Her head was spinning and her body felt as if it didn't quite belong to her, like she was outside staring at what was happening, slightly removed from it all. Perhaps she'd fainted and this was just a dream. Zaren started to speak again, so she forced herself to listen. "It is obvious that you love them."

It wasn't a question, yet she answered. After all the lies she'd told, she would not hold back this truth. "Yes."

Zaren smiled. "Yes." Then he laughed. "You are a woman of few words, Genita. Or should I call you Genny?" When she nodded, he continued. "Welcome to the family, Genny."

The rest of them surged forward as if that had been the sign they'd been waiting for. Jarmon snatched her into his arms, almost crushing her in his embrace. She clung just as tightly to him. He anchored her, made her feel real. "I would never have let you go. I told you once, there is nowhere you could go that I could not find you."

His broken words were muffled against the curve of her neck. "Thank the gods for that," she whispered as she pulled away to place a tender kiss on his ruined cheek. "Thank the gods for you."

Garrik plucked her from his brother's arms and squeezed her tight. "Stay with us, Genny. Marry one of us."

These men were offering her the kind of life she'd only dreamed about. The kind of life she'd imagined as she'd stitched the tapestry. The tapestry had ultimately led her to them. Who was to say it didn't have a magic all its own, even though it wasn't *the* tapestry.

It was time to take another risk. To grab the chance being offered her.



She was in the center of the Bakra family, surrounded by them all, and they were offering her a place among them. Garrik set her back on her feet, but he didn't release her, keeping her tucked under his arm. She held her hand out to Jarmon, tugging him closer when he took it. Everyone seemed to be waiting for her decision.

"Yes." She stood on her toes and kissed Garrik and then Jarmon lightly on the lips. "Yes I'll stay. Yes I'll marry one of you."

"Don't decide now." Garrik's eyes twinkled. "Not until we have a proper night together. You can choose in the morning."

The men laughed and Jane came forward and pulled her away from them. "You poor thing, out tromping around the woods for over a week. You need a hot bath and a hearty meal if you're going to deal with those two." She could hear the affection in Jane's voice and it warmed Genny. She decided then and there that she liked Jane. The woman had a no-nonsense style, softened by a good heart.

"I would dearly love a bath if it's no trouble." She'd had enough of bathing in rivers and streams to last a lifetime.

"It's no trouble at all. We'll have you settled away in no time. You'll meet Olena, their mother, soon enough. She's visiting Christina at Castle Garen at the moment or she would have been here to greet you. You'll love her. She's a wonderful mother-in-law." Jane kept up a steady chatter as she led her up the wide stone steps.

Genny realized the other woman was chattering to help her relax. She appreciated the other woman's kindness. Now that she wasn't so distracted, she also noticed the clothing that Jane was wearing. Her eyes widened as she realized the woman was wearing pants and a long tunic rather than a dress. It looked comfortable and was certainly much more versatile. Jane noted her stare and laughed. "I'm starting a new fashion. But really, how can they expect you to work in a cumbersome dress? I'll make sure you get some pants and a tunic to try. You'll love them."

Glancing over her shoulder, Genny caught a last glimpse of Garrik and Jarmon. They were both talking with their older brothers, but their gazes were locked on her. She read the sensual promise in their eyes and a shiver ran down her spine. But she certainly wasn't cold. Heat suffused her body, making her skin flush.

"Let me tell you about blue jeans," Jane was saying as Genny hurried to catch up.

## Chapter Twelve

Genny watched the door close behind Jane. The hot bath had revived her and now she was clean and smelled of violets, thanks to the soap that Jane had graciously provided. The ankle-length robe she wore was light blue in color and reminded her of Jarmon's and Garrik's eyes. Jane had whisked away her dirty clothing, promising her some new ones in the morning. She'd also offered a meal of fresh bread, cheese, fruit and a selection of cold meats that Genny had gratefully accepted. It had been delicious.

Her stomach tightened as butterflies began to dance around inside her. It was ridiculous to feel nervous. She'd been with both of them before, separately and together, but it felt different here. This was their home and she'd made a commitment to them in front of their family. Getting up from the sturdy wooden table that sat in front of the large stone fireplace, she began to pace around the room.

It was a fair-sized bedroom, dominated by a huge four-poster bed. Long, dark blue bed curtains had been pulled back to expose the cozy nest of pillows and blankets. Several fur throws were tossed across the bottom. They wouldn't be necessary this time of year, but when it turned cold outside, their warmth and comfort would be welcome. She'd never seen such luxury up close. It was such a contrast to her own stark room that she'd slept in for years.

A window allowed light into the room and from what Genny could tell, the afternoon had waned and evening had arrived. The last dying rays of the sun shone through the stained-glass window, spreading its color on the floor. She stepped into the soft light, letting the reds, blues and greens of the glass reflect on her bare toes. A bench beneath the window was piled with pillows, inviting one to sit and enjoy the view beyond, or perhaps work on some needlepoint project.

What had really amazed Genny, though, had been the small bathing room off the bedroom. Only her two eldest brothers had a private bath. She'd always had to drag a tub to her own room and then haul buckets of water up the winding stairs herself. It had made taking a bath hard work, but she'd done it. She might not have had much, but at least she'd been clean.

Jane had been a font of information as she'd bustled around taking care of getting the bathtub filled with steaming hot water, fetching one of her own robes for Genny to wear and seeing to the food. From what little she had observed, all the servants in the castle adored Jane, smiling and laughing with her. And Jane knew them all by name, inquiring about health problems or family.

It was a revelation to Genny as the servants at Craddock Keep were a frightened, beaten-down lot. Much like herself, she ruefully admitted. *No!* She at least had gotten

away. She paced over to the side of the bed and ran her fingers through the thick fur of one of the throws at the end. It tickled her fingers, making her smile.

The door opened at that moment, freezing the smile on her face. Grabbing one of the wooden posts for support, she held on as Garrik strode in, followed by Jarmon. Both men wore only their pants, having left off their vests, boots and armbands. Their bronze skin seemed to glow in the fading light. Muscles rippled as they entered, but they both stopped suddenly.

Their eyes flickered around the room. Garrik was frowning, but Jarmon's expression was one of concern. She realized that standing on the far side of the bed, one of the bed curtains partially blocked her from view. The long evening shadows extended to this part of the room so that they couldn't see her.

She pushed away from the bed, letting the smooth, dark wood slide from beneath her fingers as she released the post. Their heads jerked toward her. She tried to offer a smile, but she feared it fell short when their expressions didn't change.

Jarmon closed and bolted the door before moving further into the room. "You have bathed and eaten? Jane has seen to all your needs?"

"Yes." It came out as a croak, so she cleared her throat and tried again. "Yes. Jane is quite wonderful actually."

Garrik's shoulders relaxed and a slow smile spread across his face. "Jane is quite a treasure."

Once again, she was reminded of just what a handsome man he was. His long blond hair was still damp and the dark shadow of stubble on his chin was gone, suggesting that while she'd been busy bathing, they'd taken the opportunity to do the same.

Jarmon sauntered across the floor to where she stood. His fingers played along the edge of the soft robe that she wore, moving lower to where it formed a V between her breasts. The edge of his hand barely grazed her skin, but that slight brush made her blood thicken as her body immediately responded to his touch.

"This robe is Jane's, I think."

She could barely answer as he began to stroke his finger up the other side of the lapel to cup the side of her neck. "It is," she began breathlessly. "She was kind enough to let me borrow it."

"You shall have your own by tomorrow night," he promised as he leaned closer. His mouth grazed hers, moving slowly back and forth. Her lips parted and her tongue darted out to taste his. He tasted of warm, yeasty ale and hot male. Genny could have stood there and kissed him all night.

Hands slid from behind her, encircling her waist. Garrik's warmth seeped through the thin fabric of the robe, heating her already flushed skin. He pushed her hair aside and placed a soft kiss on her nape.

Her nervousness had vanished the instant they'd touched her. This felt right and natural. She loved them both and wanted to take them both into her body, to feel them pleasuring her hard and deep, to hear them as they shouted their release. She trusted them completely. But most of all, she loved them.

"I love you both." The whispered words escaped as Jarmon released her lips.

Garrik's hands froze on the ties of her robe. "Genny." He didn't say anything but her name, but it was enough. She could hear the unspoken emotion in his voice.

Jarmon didn't utter a word, but the expression of sheer adoration on his face almost made her weep. Fate had sent her into the path of these two wonderful men and she would never take them or the caring and acceptance they gave so freely for granted.

Garrik's hands began to move again and the robe loosened and opened. She was naked beneath and Jarmon's breath caught as he cupped her breasts in his hands. "You are so beautiful. I adore the way your breasts fit perfectly in my hands, the way your nipples pucker when I do this." He rubbed his thumbs over the tips, making them tighten even harder.

She felt the robe being slid down her arms and the fabric pooled around her feet. Garrik slipped his hands around her again, his large palms skimming her sides before coming to rest on her belly. "I love your curves. All the hills and valleys that hide such marvelous delights."

One of his hands moved lower, caressing her belly as it continued its downward descent. His fingers skimmed through her pubic hair, the tip of his index finger brushing the swollen bundle of nerves at the apex of her sex. She moaned and parted her legs of her own accord. "That's it," he praised. "Let me in. I want to feel your cream coat my fingers as I slip them inside you." He suited his actions to his words and Genny gave him what he'd asked for. She could feel the moisture seeping from her core as he inserted one long finger inside her.

Jarmon nuzzled the sensitive curve of her ear, raising goose bumps on her skin. Working his way downward, he placed hot, openmouthed kisses against her neck. Her hands tangled in his long hair, clutching his head, tugging him closer. She sensed his pleasure just before he nipped her flesh where her shoulder and neck met. More liquid flowed from her core as he licked away the small sting.

As Garrik continued to stroke his finger slowly in and out, coaxing more and more cream from her sex, Jarmon continued his own brand of sensual torture. His tongue stroked along the curve of her clavicle and then lower. Her breasts swelled in anticipation. His breath heated her skin as his tongue traced around first one nipple and then over to the other.

Using her grip on his head, she tugged him closer. He laughed and the low, pleased sound warmed her heart even as it pushed her desire higher. Her body was tightening in a way that had become very familiar the past few days. Giving in to her unspoken demand, he rasped her nipple with his tongue. Genny's entire body jerked as she cried out.

Jarmon opened his mouth over her tight, aching nipple, covering it and suckling. Garrik held her slick sex open with one hand, teasing her clitoris with soft and then harder strokes as he continued to plunge his finger in and out.

Her thighs trembled. She gasped for breath, her lungs working furiously. Her skin felt stretched tight. All sensation was centered at her breast and her sex.

"Come for us." Garrik pressed hard on her clit, shoving his finger deep. Jarmon chose that moment to capture the tip of her nipple between his teeth and gently tug.

Genny came apart in their arms. Her hips jerked as she cried out, her words incoherent. She came in a long, liquid gush that flowed from her core, spilling over Garrik's hand.

Jarmon abandoned her breasts and surged upward, capturing her mouth with his. Thrusting his tongue deep, he stole her breath away. The room seemed to spin when he released her lips. He caught her when she started to crumple, sweeping her up into his arms and depositing her in the middle of the bed.

She sprawled naked against the pillows, but she didn't care. She felt too good to care that her legs were wide open. She wanted them to feel welcome. Opening her arms, she beckoned them. "Come." She wanted to say something more eloquent, but speech was beyond her as her lungs struggled for breath. Her heart pounded, not only because of the intense orgasm she'd just experienced, but also because of what she knew would come.

It was time for both of them to claim her.

Both men appeared huge as they loomed over her. Garrik was on the right side of the bed and Jarmon on the other. Garrik leaned over to the small table that flanked the bed and took the time to light a candle. Its dim glow flickered, driving back some of the shadows as night swallowed the remains of the day.

Garrik's hands went to the ties of his pants and he quickly unlaced them and shoved them down, kicking them away. His cock, long and thick, sprang forward. Kneeling up onto the bed beside her, he picked up her hand and wrapped it around his shaft. Her fingers tightened, drawing a groan.

The mattress on her left side depressed and she turned to find Jarmon kneeling next to her, his erection also proudly displayed. She reached out and grasped him as well, stroking her hand over him.

She was suddenly overcome with the need to touch them, to pleasure them as they did her. Releasing them, she scooted up until she was kneeling between them. She turned toward Garrik and placed her hand on his chest. It was warm and hard beneath her fingers. She ran her fingers through the dark blond hair that was sprinkled between his nipples. Taking her time, she circled one, then the other before leaning down to lap at it with her tongue. Garrik groaned as she nipped it carefully. Reaching down between his spread thighs, she cupped the heavy sac, massaging his balls. When he groaned again, she sat back. Satisfaction surged through her.

Turning, she faced Jarmon. The candlelight illuminated his face. His features were tight, his lips parted as he breathed deeply and heavily, and his scar stood out in relief. Smiling wickedly, she ran her fingers through his chest hair, allowing her nails to scrape gently over his skin and his nipples. Pleased, she continued on much as she had with Garrik, teasing the flat brown discs with her tongue and teeth while she caressed his balls with her hand. A low growl of pleasure came from deep inside his chest and she smiled.

There was such pleasure for her in pleasing them. She felt powerful and sensual and wanton as she touched these two brawny warriors and made them groan.

"Enough." Jarmon moved just beyond her reach, his pale eyes burning with lust as well as humor. "You are learning quickly, Genny. I think you enjoy teasing us."

She giggled and nodded, unable to hold in her satisfaction any longer.

Garrik's hands wrapped around her and tumbled her against his chest. "You'd best remember that teasing works both ways." Capturing her breast in his hand, he held it as he lowered his head. His tongue twirled around her nipple, not quite touching it. This time it was she who groaned and he who laughed.

Jarmon stretched out on the mattress, his head and upper back supported by the small mound of pillows, and held out his arms. "Come to me. Take me inside your body."

Garrik helped her straddle Jarmon. Her knees barely touched the mattress, throwing her off balance. Jarmon caught her waist and lifted her until her slit was positioned right over his cock as it strained upward, reaching for her. He inserted the tip and held her suspended. She squirmed, trying to take him deeper. Needing him.

"Do you want me?" Jarmon demanded.

"Yes," she cried.

"Then have me." He thrust hard, pulling her down to meet his hips. She threw back her head and hissed out a breath as he filled her, stretching the sensitized muscles. She could feel her body quiver around his hard length as it struggled to accept him.

She placed her hands on his chest, her fingers digging into the hard, rippling muscles. Garrik steadied her from behind, his hands low on her hips as Jarmon shifted his grasp on her. His fingers cupped her breasts, shaping them as he teased her already swollen nipples.

"Bend down." He plucked at her puckered nipples. "Give me your breast." As she leaned forward, his cock pushed even further inside her. She'd thought he was as deep as he could go, but she'd been mistaken. Because he wasn't flat on his back, he didn't have far to reach to capture her breast in his mouth.

Garrik's hands disappeared from her body and she could hear the bedclothes shuffling as he moved across the bed. His long arm came into view as he snatched a container from the bedside table. She didn't know what it was and didn't care. What Jarmon was doing to her was absolutely delicious.

She jumped when something cold and slick stoked over the tight opening of her ass. Jarmon lay back and steadied her with his large hands.

"Relax, Genny. This will help," Garrik crooned as he slipped the tip of his finger past the knot of muscles. She was surprised at how easily it slid inward. It still stung slightly, but that began to fade, replaced by a sensation of pleasure.

"Oh," she moaned as she pushed her ass back against his hand. "That feels..." She wasn't quite sure how it felt. Cool and slick, yet it made her ass feel warmer and that sensation was quickly spreading to her pussy.

"It's an herbal mixture that will relax your muscles and make it easier for Garrik to take you from behind," Jarmon explained. "It will also add to your pleasure." Reaching his hand down, he cupped her behind. When Garrik slid his finger from her, Jarmon rubbed his finger along the puckered opening. Withdrawing, he brought his hand back to the front. One of his fingers glistened slightly and she realized he had some of the jellylike substance on it. He stroked his finger over her clit. Within seconds it began to heat up and she undulated her hips, trying to appease the growing ache.

"That's it, Genny. You're ready to take Garrik now, aren't you?"

"Gods, yes!" she cried.

Jarmon reached behind her again, this time spreading her ass cheeks wide as Garrik pushed the tip of his cock past the snug ring of muscles. They tightened and then relaxed, drawing him a tiny bit deeper. His shaft felt huge as he pushed slowly forward. With Jarmon's cock already filling her pussy, she felt stretched to the limit.

It burned slightly and when she cried out, Garrik froze. She forced herself to breathe deeply and relax. When she felt ready, she pushed her behind back toward him. "Do it, Garrik." She clenched her teeth and dug her fingers into Jarmon as Garrik continued to stretch her ass with his cock.

Jarmon eased her down further on his chest and she grabbed the blankets covering the bed. He slipped his hand between their joined bodies and stroked her clit. Pleasure shot through her core, making it spasm. When she relaxed, Garrik eased deeper.

Sweat rolled down her body. She could see that Jarmon was perspiring as well as he held himself steady. Garrik's breath was hot on her back and she could hear him panting as he worked to control the depth of his thrust. They stayed like that for quite some time, all of them just concentrating on breathing. The burning in her ass eased and pleasure began to take its place.

Releasing one of her hands from its death grip on the blankets, she cupped Jarmon's cheek. Raw need was etched on his face. His mouth was open slightly as he gritted his teeth to keep from moving. "It's okay now," she promised. "It's time." Pulling herself slightly upward, she then pushed back. Both of their erections slid partially out before being pushed deep again.

That was all the permission either man needed. Jarmon held her waist and Garrik gripped her hips as they began to rock her gently. Easing her forward before pulling her

back. They were all so on the edge it only took a few easy strokes before Genny felt herself start to come.

She felt filled to overflowing with them. Even though it was happening to her, she wasn't quite sure how she was accommodating them both. They felt massive inside her, her body stretched to capacity. Heat flowed around her sex and her ass, helped by the herbal cream they'd used to ease their passage.

One more gentle thrust and she came. Her entire body jerked, beyond her control. Garrik's fingers dug into her hips and then she felt the hot jet of his semen release. Before he was finished, Jarmon yelled and flooded her sheath with his seed. The heat from their releases sent more spasms rocking through her. When it was over, she slumped down onto Jarmon's chest, unable to hold herself up any longer.

Her cheek was dampened by the perspiration coating his chest. She moved up and down with each breath he sucked into his lungs. Garrik had slumped heavily against her. She could feel the pounding of his heart against her back. Eventually, he pulled away from her, slipping his semi-erect cock from her behind. Her muscles protested slightly, causing her to flinch, but it was over quickly.

When Garrik moved from behind her, Jarmon rolled her over to her side and slid from her body. Genny allowed herself to fall over onto her back, her eyes closing. She raised her hand to swipe at the sweat beading down her temple, but dropped it again. It was too much trouble. She just didn't have the strength.

Her eyes snapped open when hands pushed beneath her, lifting her. Garrik smiled down at her as he carried her across the bedroom to the bathing chamber beyond. She could hear Jarmon padding behind them.

The water was cool as he lowered her into it, but she sighed, welcoming it against her hot and damp body. Both men crouched down beside the tub and leisurely washed the sweat and cum from her. It was a good thing they had energy, because all she could do was loll in the water and enjoy it. When they finished washing her, they grabbed washcloths and began to bathe themselves. She thought about offering to get out of the tub. Instead, she relaxed and enjoyed watching them run the cloths over their muscular bodies.

When they were done, Jarmon lifted her from the tub, holding her while Garrik dried her with a towel. When he was satisfied, he tossed the towel away and Jarmon carried her back to bed.

She snuggled into the pillows, yawning as they flanked her. Her eyes fluttered shut as Garrik rolled over long enough to blow out the candle before turning back to her. She felt utterly sated and, although they hadn't said the words, she felt entirely loved.



## **Chapter Thirteen**

Shouting woke her from a sound sleep. She stretched as she rolled over, her stiff muscles protesting. The sheets beside her were cool. Jarmon and Garrik had managed to slip out of bed without her waking. And no wonder. A secret smile played at her lips as memories of last night replayed in her mind. Both men had awakened her more than once last night. Hugging her pillow to her chest, she sighed contentedly.

The shouting came again, this time louder and more angry-sounding. Rolling out of bed, she headed toward the window. Her blue robe was draped across the end of the bed, so she grabbed it and yanked it on, wrapping the belt tight around her waist. Kneeling up onto the bench below the window, she peered between the panes of stained glass. Frustrated that she couldn't see much, she found the latch and pushed the window open.

"It is my right to issue a challenge!" All the blood drained from her face as she recognized Leon's bellow. "If you have taken Genita's virginity, then she is no longer of much value."

Hurt and anger flowed through her, making her feel slightly numb. She hated the fact that he was saying such hateful things about her in front of Jarmon and Garrik and indeed the entire castle.

"I accept the challenge." The voice was so low and controlled she almost didn't hear it. Her heart stopped and then began to pound furiously. He couldn't. She wouldn't allow it.

Forgetting that she was only wearing a thin robe, she raced from the room. The cold from the stone steps seeped into her feet, but she barely felt it. Her hair fluttered like a banner behind her as she practically flew down the staircase and across the great hall toward the huge front door. Grabbing the large metal handle, she pulled. The heavy door slowly opened enough for her to slip through. Holding the robe together with one hand, she hurried outside.

Her feet had barely touched the outside steps when a strong arm captured her from behind. Before she could cry out, a large hand covered her mouth. "Don't say anything, Genny." She didn't know what was happening, but she did recognize Bador's voice. She nodded frantically and he slowly removed his hand from her mouth but kept his arm banded around her waist.

"What's going on? I heard Leon issue a challenge." It was hard to catch her breath from her mad dash down the stairs. She tried to see around the crowd that had gathered, but it was difficult.

"Your brother certainly does like to bellow." As if on cue, Leon's roar could be heard once again over the muttering of the crowd. Genny couldn't quite make out the words, but there was no misinterpreting the anger.

There was a gleam of humor in Bador's eye that made Genny furious. This was no laughing matter. Gripping the edges of his vest in her hands, she shook him. Or at least she tried to. It was like trying to move a large oak tree. "This isn't funny. Leon has challenged and Jarmon has accepted."

"Aye. Leon has issued a challenge, as is his right. Garrik and Jarmon claimed you without your family's permission. They either had to accept the challenge or give you back."

Maybe there was a way to avert this fight. She just couldn't allow Jarmon to face Leon again. Her brother had almost killed him the last time they'd met. Although Jarmon had recovered, he was still at a disadvantage because of the injuries to his left arm and leg. She swallowed the bile that pushed up her throat from her churning stomach. "I could go with them." The words were barely a whisper, but Bador heard them and froze. "Jarmon doesn't have to fight."

Bador shook his head slowly as he pushed a lock of hair out of her face. "No, little one. If you left with your brothers, you might as well shove a sword through Jarmon's heart. It would kill him." She started to protest, but he ignored it. "I know what you are trying to do. It is a noble thing, but misguided. Have faith in both Jarmon and Garrik to see this through."

"They are your brothers. How can you risk them like this? Especially Jarmon."

"How can I not support them?" he countered. "They are my brothers and they are fighting for the woman they love."

The negotiations had obviously finished as the people began to disperse. Genny whipped her head around, searching the crowd for her men. And they were hers. She loved them both more than she'd thought it possible to ever love any man. When she saw them striding toward her, she broke away from Bador's hold and ran to meet them. Their older brother Zaren was beside them, but she only had eyes for Garrik and Jarmon.

She hesitated for the briefest of seconds before throwing herself into Jarmon's arms. He caught her easily, lifting her high into his arms without breaking his stride. Continuing inside, he carried her over to the sitting area and lowered her into one of the chairs. She popped right back up again, her fingers twisting in the fabric of his vest. "What has happened? Why have you accepted Leon's challenge?"

Jarmon's face hardened, the scar pulling his lip up into a sneer. "Of course I accepted the challenge. How could you expect otherwise?"

Genny prayed for patience. Were all men this dense? She gentled her voice, not wanting to insult him. "After what happened last time..." She trailed off, not quite sure how to continue.

His entire body jerked as if she'd struck him. "You think that I cannot defeat him. You think he will beat me."

"Yes. No. I don't know!" she wailed. "I don't want anything to happen to you."

Every muscle on his body was tight and the vein in his temple pounding. "I see."

"No, you don't see." She whirled around to look for Garrik. The entire family and some of the servants were watching them. Some of the men looked insulted, others amused. Jane's face was pale but composed. Several older women shot her a sympathetic glance but said nothing. "Why do you have to fight? Why does he have to fight?"

A part of her knew she was acting irrationally. She knew the laws of the land as well as any of them did. It was her brothers' right to challenge and as the oldest, it was Leon's choice of who issued the challenge. The only reason he was doing it himself was because of his hatred for Jarmon. "He's going to try to kill him," she whispered. Why didn't anyone else understand?

Jarmon caught her chin in his hand and turned her face back to him. His scar was white against his slightly flushed cheek. His pale eyes bore into her, calm and cold. "I will not lose. You will be free." He dropped his hand, turned and walked away without a backward glance. And what did he mean by that? She would be free?

She started after him, but Garrik stopped her. "Let him go, Genny. You have hurt his pride and gravely insulted his honor."

She bit her bottom lip so hard that it began to bleed. She'd never meant to insult him. Tears pricked her eyes. What was she supposed to do? Let him face her brother who'd already maimed him in battle?

"Genny." Garrik's soft voice, filled with understanding, almost made her lose her composure totally. She swallowed convulsively. She would not cry in front of all these people.

Pulling away from his grasp, she raced back toward the stairs, her bare feet slapping against the stone. She held it together as she dashed back up the steps and into the bedroom where she'd known such joy only hours before. Throwing herself onto the bed, she buried her face in the pillows and sobbed.

Her head pounded and her stomach hurt. Her actions had started something she couldn't stop. How would she be able to live with herself if something happened to Jarmon? She knew that Garrik would act as his second, but it was Jarmon who would have to face Leon.

She cried so long and hard that she began to gag. Slapping her hand over her mouth, she raced to the small bathing chamber where she knew there was a bucket. She knelt on the stone floor, supporting herself on shaking arms as she heaved. When it was over, she lowered herself to the floor, letting the coolness seep into her perspiring body.

Calmness descended upon her. There was really nothing she could do. These events were unfolding and all she could do was watch them and pray. No, that wasn't quite

true. The one thing she *could* do was to show Jarmon and Garrik that she supported them.

Jarmon was laying down his life for her. For that alone she owed him her respect and her loyalty. Because she loved him, she needed to be with him, needed him to know that she believed in him. She didn't want him facing Leon thinking that she didn't have faith in him or his abilities.

Pushing herself to her feet, she stumbled over to the washstand where there was a pitcher of fresh water. It was cold, but that didn't matter. Pouring it into the bowl, she grabbed a washcloth and cleaned away the evidence of her tears. Quickly, she combed her hair and braided it, fastening it with the leather thong that she'd removed yesterday during her bath. She took another moment to rinse her mouth before heading back into the bedroom.

Her satchel lay near the table and she scooped it up and laid it on the table. Her other clothing was gone, but she still had her older dress. Her fingers closed around a familiar piece of cloth. Unable to resist its lure, she pulled the tapestry from the cloth bag. Unrolling it, she laid it on the table. The vibrant colors seemed to dance in front of her and she traced her finger over the faces of the warriors. Her warriors.

A knock came on the door, but before Genny could answer it, the door opened. Jane peeked inside. "I thought you might need some clothing."

"Come in." She could see the other woman staring at her red eyes, but thankfully she made no comment on them. Genny was extremely grateful to her for that. She was also glad she wouldn't have to wear her old, threadbare dress in front of everyone.

"The men will be assembling in the yard in a few moments." Jane hurried forward, holding out the clean clothes. She stumbled to a halt when she saw the tapestry. "Oh my God." Her eyes flew to Genny's. "Did you make this?"

"Yes." Genny stepped back as Jane moved forward like someone in a trance, the tapestry luring her toward it. The other woman reached out a trembling hand and traced her fingers over the fabric.

"You said you made this?"

"Yes. It took me three years, but I made it."

Jane shook her head, as if in disbelief. "I have seen the magical tapestry." She turned to stare at Genny, speculation in her eyes. "It is almost identical to this one."

It was Genny's turned to stare in disbelief. "I don't understand."

"Neither do I," Jane countered. "Maybe you are more of a tapestry bride than you think." A roar reached them through the open window, reminding them of the fight to come.

"Then I'd better hurry." Genny grabbed the garments and hurried back into the bathing area. When she emerged a minute later, the robe was gone and she was decently dressed again.

However, the clothing was unlike any she'd ever worn before. As promised, Jane had provided her with a pair of leather pants that were a bit baggy on her, but she laced them tight. The tunic laced up the front and covered her to her knees. Its long sleeves fell over her hands, but she rolled them back until they were about two-thirds of the way down her arms. They didn't fit properly, but they were extremely comfortable. At this point, Genny didn't care what they looked like. They covered her. That was all that mattered.

Jane was still waiting when she went back into the bedroom. Genny found her short boots and yanked them on. "I'm ready," she announced.

Jane stared at her for the longest time, then toward the tapestry again before nodding decisively. "I think you are. Follow me." The two of them hurried back down the stairs and outside the castle.

The noise and the crowd gathered in a lower area of the grounds, near the outer wall, left no doubt as to where the fight would be. Genny began to scan the large group of people, searching for Jarmon and Garrik. With Jane in the lead, the crowd parted easily, letting them pass. Her feet quickened as they ate up the distance. She had to talk to Jarmon before the fight began.

Suddenly, he was before her, but it was a Jarmon she'd never truly seen before. This was the warrior. The one who'd not only survived a near-fatal injury, but had risen above it, becoming stronger and more powerful than ever.

His hair, locks of white and blond, practically glowed in the sunshine. Pale blue eyes were grim and steady. His chest was bare, muscles gleaming with a fine sheen of perspiration. Heavy metal bands wrapped around his upper arms and wrists. Leather pants hugged his strong calves and thighs. A sword belt was clasped around his thick waist, holding his huge sword at the ready. Leather boots covered his feet and she expected that he had a knife tucked into one of them.

But it was the expression on his face that proclaimed him a warrior. He was confident in his abilities, ready to meet his opponent. He wasn't cocky as several of her brothers were, but self-assured. This was a man who knew his capabilities and knew them well. She only hoped that they were enough to defeat her eldest brother.

Garrik was similarly attired and standing just beside and slightly behind his brother. But she only had eyes for Jarmon. It was him that she had hurt. Shoving her doubts aside, she slowly walked toward him. His expression gave no hint as to what he was thinking. She was used to seeing warmth in his eyes. Now she saw nothing.

"I'm sorry." She had to glance away from his penetrating gaze. Scuffing the toe of her boot in the dirt, she gathered her courage and forced herself to continue. "I didn't mean to imply that you couldn't win. I'm just worried. Leon won't fight fairly. I know he won't." Now that she'd started, the words kept tumbling out.

She turned toward Garrik. "Don't trust Harmid. I assume he's Leon's second." Garrik nodded, confirming her assumption. "He may try something, so don't take your eyes off him."

"Genny." Jarmon's voice was low, but she ignored it.

"I'm not sure if my two youngest brothers will do anything, but you should have Zaren and Bador watch them. Did they bring any of their men-at-arms with them? They will need watching as well."

"Genny." This time a massive, muscled arm wrapped around her, pulling her back against a hard chest. "Everything will be fine."

She nodded. "I know." And if she kept telling herself that often enough, she might actually believe it.

Jarmon's sigh was so deep it ruffled the hair on the top of her head. "What am I going to do with you?"

Affection and something else tinged his words and she tipped her head back to look up at him. "I don't know. What are you going to do with me?"

Heat flared in his eyes as something hard poked into her lower back. Jarmon was aroused. "I can think of many, many things I would like to do, sweet Genny."

She felt hot and flustered. How could she be so aroused in a crowd of people and at a time like this? Her confusion must have shown on her face because he eased away from her. She grabbed his arm before he pulled all the way back. "Be careful. Promise me you'll be careful."

"I'll be careful. After all, you haven't given us our answer yet." Bending down, he dropped a quick kiss on her lips. "We want to know which of us you're going to marry." In the blink of an eye, the indulgent lover was gone, replaced once again by the implacable warrior as he stepped away.

"Don't worry, Genny. No matter what happens, you'll be safe." Garrik dropped a hard kiss on her lips before following his brother. Like Jarmon, his expression changed from one moment to the next and his warrior side emerged.

"But I don't want my safety at the cost of yours." Her whispered words were lost on the breeze.

Zaren stepped up beside her. "Come and stand over here." He led her to the far side of the ring of people.

She could see Leon and her other three brothers at the far end. All of them ignored her, except Radnor. He gave her a quick nod before turning away. Situating herself firmly beside Jane and the rest of the Bakra family, Genny left no doubt as to where her allegiance lay.

Leon stepped forward, his sword drawn and bloodlust in his eyes. He was a massive man, who in spite of being a bit past his prime was a fierce warrior whose fighting prowess was legendary. He was also as vicious as a cornered animal and would do whatever it took to win. He glanced at her and sneered. Her blood ran cold, but she did not flinch away from him. Tipping her chin up, she squared her shoulders and faced him as he sauntered toward her.

"So proud," he taunted. "That won't last long once I get you home. The Luther brothers still want you, hard as that is to believe." The crowd behind her murmured restlessly.

A cold sweat broke out on her brow, but she met her brother's gaze, refusing to back down. Quick as a snake, he struck, backhanding her. Her head snapped to the side and she could taste blood in her mouth.

"Craddock!" The bellow silenced everyone. Jarmon stepped into the center of the ring of people. "Do you always fight those who are weaker than yourself? Those you know you can beat?" he goaded.

Leon whirled away from her and stalked toward his younger opponent. "It is good to win. And I will win, boy." He threw out the insult. "I beat you once. Thought I'd killed you. This time I'll finish the job."

Genny swallowed hard and felt Jane place a comforting hand on her shoulder. A movement caught her eye and she could see Garrik slowly easing over to stand near her brother, Harmid. She gave a quick glance around the open field and found Zaren and Bador were already in position next to her two youngest brothers. Several other Bakra men were stationed near the half-dozen Craddock Keep men-at-arms who'd come with her brothers.

Jarmon laughed at Leon's insult. "You fought a boy last time, Craddock. Let's see how you fare against a man."

Leon lunged quickly, his blade sweeping upward. The move was deadly, designed to gut his opponent. Jarmon countered it easily, swiping the blade aside at the last second. Leon grinned. "At least this time you'll give me a bit of a challenge. It was so boring last time we met."

"Glad you're enjoying yourself," Jarmon replied casually before he brought his long blade arching downward toward Leon.

Genny's breath caught in her throat as the fighting began in earnest. Sparks flew as their blades skated over one another. Metal flashed in the sun and the sound of the fight echoed around them. Dust filled the air while they circled around each other, Leon moving quickly with Jarmon following with his distinctive loping gait. They grunted with the strain of their blows. Over and over they struck at one another, each able to counter just in time to avoid being injured or maimed.

Jarmon stumbled slightly on his bad leg before righting himself. The crowd gasped. Genny slapped her hand over her mouth to stifle a scream. The last thing she wanted to do was to distract him. Sweat trickled into her eyes and she blinked to clear her vision. Every muscle in her body was pulled tight and she flinched with every blow that was struck.

The crowd faded into the background. All Genny could see was Leon and Jarmon. One man she despised, the other she loved and only one of them would survive the afternoon. The heat became oppressive as the fight continued. The world took on a

surreal feeling. Two men were fighting to the death over her. How could such a thing happen? And when would it end?

Her stomach churned. What if the unthinkable happened and Leon won? She curled her fingers inward, digging them into her palms as she forced that thought away. She'd rather die than be given in marriage to the Luther brothers.

The long minutes dragged on and Leon, sensing his opponent's weakness, began to mercilessly hammer him with blow after blow. Jarmon blocked them all but seemed unable to return them. Leon laughed as he struck again. She could sense her brother's growing triumph as he continued to beat at his younger opponent.

"I suppose I could spare you," Leon gasped as he lashed his sword out again. Jarmon's blade deflected the blow, barely. "But I won't." Genny knew Leon could taste victory and was already gloating over his win. "Your family will have to bury you this time."

Leon was panting heavily now. The heavy fighting had taken its toll on both men. Sweat poured down their bodies and their actions were slower now than when they'd first started. Genny prayed over and over, willing her strength into Jarmon. He wasn't managing to get in any blows as he was strictly on the defensive. Her fingers were clenched so hard that they began to hurt. She ignored the pain, unable to take her eyes from the scene unfolding in front of her.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Jarmon's sword flicked under Leon's guard. Blood seeped down the front of Leon's pants where Jarmon's blade had struck him. Hope surged within her as Jarmon began to fight back.

Jarmon blinked the sweat from his eyes. He longed to swipe it away but didn't dare. It had taken him quite a while to lull his opponent into a false sense of security. Leon had wasted precious strength pounding away on him without actually hurting him. He was amazed that the older man didn't realize he was being toyed with. But then, Leon had always been overconfident and thought he knew his opponent. He saw only Jarmon's handicaps. He had no idea of just how much he'd changed since the last time they'd met on the battlefield.

Sensing that his opponent had expended most of his energy, Jarmon let loose his pent-up power and began to fight in earnest. He struck low first, opening a wound on Leon's leg. The other man bellowed like a wounded boar and attacked, his movements slow and sloppy.

Jarmon struck again. This time, blood began to flow down Leon's sword arm. Dancing out of the way in time to avoid Leon's blade, Jarmon drove his sword forward and up, opening a wound on the older man's chest. Keeping his feet moving and his body balanced, Jarmon fought with skill and determination.

He blocked out all else but his opponent in front of him. He trusted his brothers to keep the fight fair. Control was his biggest problem. The urge to just attack Leon was overwhelming. The casual way that he'd backhanded Genny was a chilling reminder of



what her everyday life must have been like. Strategy was the key. Strategy and control. It had been difficult, but he'd allowed Leon to wear himself down and think he was winning. Now it was time to finish this.

Drawing on all the hard hours of training that it had taken to recover from his injuries, Jarmon found the strength to fight even harder. Letting out a roar, he raised his sword and struck hard and swift. The blade slipped beneath Leon's guard, which was weakening with each blow. The deadly edge of the sword caught two of his fingers, severing them.

Leon howled, his sword dropping from his bloody hand. He fell to his knees, staring in horror at his fingers that rolled in the dirt in front of him. Jarmon held the tip of his sword to his neck, but he didn't even seem to notice. "It is done," he proclaimed.

The crowd cheered. Jarmon looked toward Harmid, Leon's second. His face was pale, his lips curled up in a sneer, but he nodded.

Satisfied, Jarmon began to walk away. Genny's eyes landed on him and she began to smile. He could see the tears in her eyes and couldn't wait to hold her in his arms and comfort her.

In a split second, happiness turned to horror.

Acting purely on instinct, Jarmon whirled around and struck out, impaling Leon on his sword a second before the other man would have driven his weapon into Jarmon's back.

His eyes widened, his lips moved. "This can't be happening," Leon moaned.

The only thing holding Leon upright was the strength of Jarmon's sword arm. He jerked the blade upward. Leon gasped, blood bubbling from his lips. "Genny is free. You shall never hurt her again." Yanking back his blade, he watched Leon sway before pitching facedown in the dirt.

A woman screamed and several men shouted. Jarmon clutched his sword, ready to face the new threat. He was just in time to see Garrik's blade sever Harmid's hand from his arm. The hand dropped to the ground, a dagger still in its grasp. Harmid screamed as he fell to his knees, clutching the end of his arm. More blood poured from a shoulder wound.

All eyes turned to the two remaining Craddock brothers. The youngest raised his hands and stepped forward. "Peace." He glanced over at Sednar, who nodded. "The challenge has been fairly met. At least by the Bakra family." Radnor paused and then continued. "However, it has not been met fairly by the Craddock family. We ask if you are satisfied by what has occurred or do you require more?"

Jarmon knew that this was the brother who had helped Genny escape. He stared at the man who was only a year or so younger than himself. There was a quiet strength about him and Jarmon knew that he hadn't had an easy life. It didn't excuse what had been done to Genny, but Radnor and his brother, Sednar, would have their hands full in the near future with Leon dead. If Harmid died—and he probably would, as neither

brother seemed to be in a hurry to offer him aid—then Sednar was the new Lord of Craddock Keep.

He strode toward the two men, wanting this settled once and for all. Both of them tensed but made no move to draw their weapons. Good. They weren't as hotheaded or stupid as their brothers. He sensed Garrik moving up on his right side, coming to stand beside him so they could confront the two remaining brothers together. That was how it should be.

Jarmon stopped a few feet away from them and addressed Sednar. "As the eldest remaining brother, you are now the Lord of Craddock Keep."

Sednar glanced at the still body of Leon and then at his brother Harmid, who was still moaning. "I am not yet, but it seems likely." There was no sorrow in his eyes, only weariness.

"We will have Genny as ours." Garrik laid their claim, stating it in clear, unmistakable terms.

Sednar shot his brother a quick look and then nodded. "I believe she will be in good hands. We consider this matter done and want no more trouble with the Bakra family."

"What about the Luther brothers?" Jarmon didn't want them showing up any time in the future pressing a prior claim.

"In spite of what Leon asserted, nothing has been officially decided or agreed upon." Sednar's gaze was steady. "I will deal with the Luther brothers."

"Jarmon?" Zaren and Bador had moved up to flank them. "Do you consider this finished?" Zaren ignored everyone else but Jarmon.

Jarmon faced his eldest brother. "If Genny is ours, then it is done. I am satisfied."

Nodding, Zaren faced Sednar. "The Bakra family considers this matter finished."

Relief flashed across the younger man's face before disappearing behind an impassive mask. "We will take our dead and wounded home." Turning away, he called for the men-at-arms. They quickly bound Harmid's wounds and threw him over the back of one of the waiting horses.

Radnor hadn't moved, his eyes still locked on Jarmon. "You will be good to her. Take care of her."

They were statements, not questions, but underneath, Jarmon heard the plea for reassurance. "Genny's happiness and wellbeing is my first concern. Always."

Radnor nodded abruptly and whirled away to join what remained of his family. He shot a longing gaze over his shoulder, his eyes connecting with Genny's for the briefest of moments before he looked away again. Jarmon watched the connection between brother and sister. Perhaps, in time, that was a breach that could be mended.

When all the men were mounted, they turned their horses toward home, urging them forward. The hooves pounded on the packed dirt as they picked up speed. It would be a long, miserable trek home, dragging a dead man with them. Probably two

by the time they reached Craddock Keep again. If his wounds didn't kill him, then infection probably would. Jarmon didn't envy them the trip.

He turned to face Genny. Jane stood just behind her, but she seemed so alone as she watched what remained of her family ride out of the courtyard. His arms ached to hold her, to comfort her. What would she think of him now that he'd killed one of her brothers? Would she still even want to look at him? Or would she always just see the blood on his hands?

Jarmon knew that was the main reason he'd wanted to be the one to challenge Leon. Yes, he'd wanted a chance at revenge for what the other man had done to him. He was only human, after all. But deep down, he believed that Garrik had a better chance at being accepted by Genny as a husband.

As badly as he wanted her for himself, he was willing to do whatever it took to keep her with them, even if that meant he would only have her for himself once a week. And that wasn't a sure thing even if she accepted Garrik. Not now. Not after what had just occurred on this bloody field. She might never open her arms to him again and he'd cut off what remained of his left hand before he'd force her to accept him.

The crowd was quiet and many of them had retreated a slight ways to give them some semblance of privacy. Both Zaren and Bador had squeezed his shoulder, murmuring how proud they were of him. Then they too were gone, taking Jane from Genny's side and withdrawing a fair distance away.

Garrik walked toward Genny, determination on his face. Jarmon watched as his brother swept her into his arms and buried his face in the curve of her shoulder. Her arms came around him, holding him tight. He could see her whispering in his ear but couldn't hear what was being said as Garrik answered her back.

His hand throbbed and he glanced down, wondering if he'd been injured. His sword was still clutched tight in his hand. So tight in fact, his knuckles were white. Cursing roundly, he shoved the blade into the dirt to clean the worst of the blood from it before sheathing it.

Garrik and Genny were still talking earnestly. He was happy for his brother. He only hoped that one day she would open her arms to him once again. His eyes burned and he blinked hard. Scrubbing his hand over his face, he squared his shoulders and turned his back on the tender scene behind him.

He'd done what he'd set out to do and he had no regrets. He'd told Genny that she would be free, no matter what the cost, and he had kept his vow.

Putting one foot in front of the other, he began to slowly walk away.

Genny hugged Garrik tight, loving him more in this moment than she ever had. He was such an amazing man, so generous and giving. "You understand?"

His smile was tender as he leaned down and grazed his lips against hers. "I've always known." He stroked his thumb over her cheek, wiping away a tear that seeped from the corner of her eye. "Don't cry, Genny. You are both wounded souls that call to

each other. You understand one another better than any other can. But more than that, I believe you can heal each other, become stronger. How can I not want that for the both of you?"

"You are the best of men, Garrik." Emotion overflowed her heart and she went up on her toes to plant a hard kiss on his lips. He caught her head with his hand, holding her to him as he thrust his tongue into her mouth for a leisurely kiss.

They were both slightly breathless when he pulled back. "I'm not that good," he countered. "Jarmon once promised me more than the normal one night a week with you. If you have no objection, I plan to take advantage of that."

"You are always welcome, Garrik. That is, if Jarmon will have me." She pushed away from Garrik and looked for Jarmon. He was walking away from them. From her.

"Go." Garrik gave her a small push. "He probably thinks you do not want him now after what he has done."

"Not want him?" She could hear the incredulous tone in her voice.

"Genny," Garrik explained softly. "He just killed one of your brothers. Harmid may die as well from the wound I gave him, but that is not a given yet."

"He laid his life on the line for me. How could he think I would condemn him for that?"

She didn't wait for Garrik's reply, but began to follow Jarmon. He was moving further away from her with every step and she began to hurry. Within seconds she was running. She called out his name. He hesitated but didn't stop. "Jarmon!" she yelled again. This time he stopped, but he still didn't turn around.

Genny continued until she was in front of him. His face was inscrutable, but his eyes were bleak and so filled with pain and sorrow that she swayed. His hands quickly came out to steady her, but just as quickly dropped back to his side. He wiped his hand against the leg of his pants. It was still stained with blood.

She swallowed hard. This man would have died for her. It was time for him to know the truth. "You said you wanted the answer to your question when the challenge was over."

Jarmon flinched slightly before he recovered himself. "The answer is obvious. I wish you happiness." He tried to move around her, but she shifted her body, keeping it in front of him. Short of physically lifting her out of the way, she wasn't letting him get around her.

"You still haven't asked," she prompted.

"I don't need to ask," he gritted out from between clenched teeth.

Genny crossed her arms over her chest. "That sure of yourself, are you?"

His hands closed over her shoulders and he tugged her up until their noses were almost touching. She could see the pain and the fury in his eyes, but she wasn't the least bit afraid of him. "Don't toy with me, Genny. Not about this."

Cupping his familiar, scarred cheek in her hand, she shook her head. "I would never tease you about something this important, Jarmon." The words that she'd thought would be so hard to say flowed effortlessly from her. "I love you, Jarmon Bakra. And if you would have me as wife, I will openly and gladly have you as my husband."

He stared at her for so long she began to get nervous. "You're supposed to answer me."

He gave a great cry and dropped to his knees in front of her. "You are the heart that beats in this chest and in this home, and if you would take me for husband I will give you my love, loyalty and devotion for as long as I live. With me, you gain the love, loyalty and devotion of my brother as well, who will be lover to you, and would also be your husband should I die before you. In return, I ask for your love, loyalty and devotion and any children that the gods see fit to gift us with."

She'd never thought that a man would want her enough, love her enough to pledge himself to her in this manner. She slid to the ground, wrapped her arms around his shaking shoulders and held him with all her strength. Tears flowed unchecked down her face as his arms tightened around her. He jerked back to look at her and she could still see the uncertainty as well as the tears in his eyes. She nodded and found herself engulfed in his embrace again.

"I didn't think you could truly love a man as scarred as me. A man who had slain one of your brothers." His whisper was low but clear.

She ran her hands over his head and back, as much to soothe herself as him. "I think you are a very handsome man. I do not see your scars." It was true, she realized. His scars were a part of him, as her scars were of her. To her, they were just part of what made him Jarmon. "You did not slay my brother. You protected me. How could I not love you for that?" She continued on, trying to make him understand. "You are my family now. You and Garrik and your brothers and Jane."

"Genny," his voice broke as he continued to hold her, rocking her in his arms.

They sat there for so long that her leg began to cramp. Finally, she had to shift and pull back. Groaning, she rubbed her leg. "I'm going to be stiff."

Jarmon laughed as he ran his hand over his face to wipe away any remains of his tears. He got to his feet, grasped her hands and tugged her up. She wobbled and he scooped her into his arms. "You will truly marry me, Genny?"

"Truly."

"And you will accept Garrik?" He hesitated before hurrying on. "I might have promised him more than one night. That was back before I thought I had a chance of ever marrying you. But I meant it. I want our marriage to be like Zaren's and Bador's is with Jane. I don't want Garrik to feel left out." He laughed ruefully. "At the time I promised him, I thought I would be the one left out."

Genny tugged on a lock of his hair. "No one is being left out, and Garrik and I have already discussed that promise you made him."

"Already in trouble, brother?" Garrik stood not far from them, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"I fear I will always be in trouble," he replied. "But I meant my promise then and I mean it now. I will only marry if Genny will accept you as easily as she accepts me. I will not have you feel less than welcome at any time."

"I accept you both," she assured them. She wiggled in his grasp until Jarmon put her down. Standing between the two of them, she struggled to try to explain. "I think I've been waiting for you both since the moment I finished the tapestry. I wove my own dreams around it, even if I didn't realize that's what I was doing at the time. Thoughts of you gave me the courage to save myself from the fate that awaited me. It brought me to you and I found even more than I'd ever dreamed. I found love." She placed a hand on the center of both their chests, over their beating hearts. "I love you both. I accept you both."

Garrik and Jarmon wrapped their arms around her, sheltering her in the warm embrace of their love.

"I love you, Genny." Garrik kissed her softly on the lips.

"Genny," Jarmon began. "You are a miracle to me. A gift I will never take for granted." He brushed his finger over the planes of her face. "I love you with all my heart. I'm glad you wove your dreams and made us a part of them."

"So am I." She smiled softly at them. Her heart swelled at the sight of these two wonderful men watching her with such love in their eyes, and she had to blink back the tears of joy that threatened.

"The family is waiting." Garrik jerked his head to the side. Sure enough, the crowd was still there watching them. Many of the women were dabbing at the corners of their eyes and the men were grinning.

With a man on either side of her, holding her hands, Genny stepped forward, more than ready to begin her new life. "Let's go tell them we need to plan a wedding."

Jarmon's fingers tightened around hers as they all strode forward.

## About the Author

N.J. Walters worked at a bookstore for several years and one day had the idea that she would like to quit her job, sell everything she owned, leave her hometown and write romance novels in a place where no one knew her. And she did. Two years later, she went back to the same bookstore and settled in for another seven years.

Although she was still fairly young, that was when the mid-life crisis set in. Happily married to the love of her life, with his encouragement (more like, "For God's sake, quit the job and just write!") she gave notice at her job on a Friday morning. On Sunday afternoon, she received a tentative acceptance for her first erotic romance novel, *Annabelle Lee*, and life would never be the same.

N.J. has always been a voracious reader of romance novels, and now she spends her days writing novels of her own. Vampires, dragons, time-travelers, seductive handymen and next-door neighbors with smoldering good looks all vie for her attention. And she doesn't mind a bit. It's a tough life, but someone's got to live it.

N.J. welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

### *Tell Us What You Think*

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at [Comments@EllorasCave.com](mailto:Comments@EllorasCave.com).

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