

# **The Northlanders 2: Song of the Bear**

## **Shelby Morgen**

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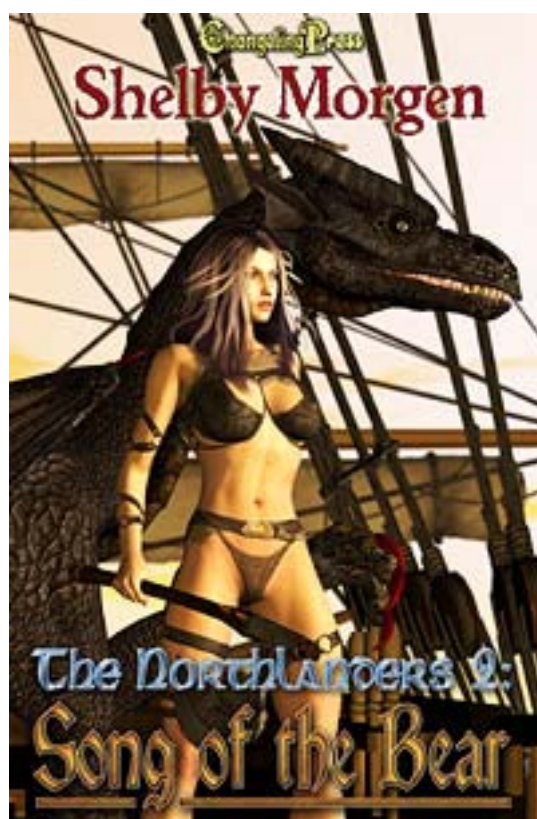
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## **The Northlanders 2: Song of the Bear**

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On the Island of Tir na nÓg, Tranorva comes face to face with her destiny.  
Her mission: free Clan Bear from slavery deep in the mines of Élahandara.  
Her party: a dead man, a thief, a madman, and a prophet.  
Together they share a vision for freedom that will not be held captive.  
They have nothing to lose... but their lives.

In a land ruled by Magic, Prophecy has come full circle.  
*Take no prisoners. Leave no one behind. Élahandara must fall.*

Author's Note:

The Northlanders 2 continues the saga of Tranorva and Élandine begun in *Northlanders 1: Way of the Wolf*, and encompasses the four single title novellas previously released as *Song of the Bear: A Mercenary's Prize*, *A Prisoner's Desire*, *A Sentinel's Secret*, and *A Bard's Prophecy*. Characters from the novellas *Too Hot To Handle*, *A Northlanders Tale*, and *The Summoning in Desire Island* also appear in this story.

Ye would be well advised to read *Way of the Wolf* before ye read *Song of the Bear*.

**Song of the Bear: A Mercenary's Prize  
A Northlanders Tale**

**Shelby Morgen**

## Prologue

He had the strangest feeling that he was floating, watching himself from a long way off. Surely that thing, that shell, couldn't really be him. His present form was so much lighter, so much less tied to the earth.

He would have drifted away, but for the woman.

Her name came unbidden to his lips.

*Tranorva.*

He knew her, knew her in ways he could not precisely remember, knew the feel of her skin under his hand, the warmth of her breath on his ear, knew the sound of her voice calling to him.

She stood far forward on the ship's upper deck, looking out across the moonlit ocean toward the land he had once called home. She looked right at him, as if somehow she sensed his presence lingering near, although he knew by now that no one alive could actually see him.

Her words haunted him, stole a piece of his soul and bound it to her.

"I know Mother says ye are gone in spirit, and this thing is but an empty shell, yet I fear ye are instead trapped within, aware of all around ye and unable to tell me what ye would have me do."

'Twas not so far from the truth.

She reached back, pulling the corpse-like thing's arms about her, tears drenching her thick, dark lashes, making her eyes glisten like wet emeralds in the moonlight. "I miss ye so. Always ye have been here for me, guiding me, protecting me from myself. I do no' understand why ye chose as ye did, to sacrifice thyself rather than trust in my strength, but perhaps I do no' need to understand. I wish I was sure ye would wish to attempt this thing, to bring thy spirit back to the body it has deserted. If I have chosen

wrong, and ye want no' the gift of the King should he decide to grant it, my spirit shall surely fly away with yours."

Sacrifice...

It was so hard to remember life in his mortal body. What had he done to cause this one so much pain? The only thing that felt real was the taste of her skin on his lips as he tried to comfort her. But she could not see him, could not feel his touch.

"I need ye, Élandine. I need ye now more than ever. My heart dies a thousand deaths a day without ye."

*Élandine.* He had been Élandine.

He had loved her.

That love was the one thing that could not die.

He slid slowly back into the thing that had once been his body, trying it on for size. An uncomfortable fit. Body and soul were not truly united, and it was all he could do to make her feel his presence.

"I love ye," Tranorva whispered, holding him tightly there in the darkness. "Forever and always, my heart."

And because she willed it, he began to remember...

\* \* \*

The air in the passenger's compartment was sweltering with the heat of too many bodies and too many arguments. Or perhaps it was the endless talk of the dungeons at Élahandara that had him feeling so hot and uncomfortable. Balthain slipped from the crowded cabin, certain he wouldn't be missed. No one had asked his opinion of their plans anyway, and no one would. When the time came, they might hire a Mercenary's services. But they would not consult with him beforehand.

He would not go if they asked him. Not into Élahandara. Not again. Not unless he was chained and dragged. No amount of money would take him there, of that he was certain.

He drew the ocean breeze into his lungs gratefully, feeling the sweat already drying on his skin. He needed a bath. He needed a good night's sleep in a bed that didn't move unless he and his companion encouraged it to do so. He needed...

A flash of movement caught his eye. Blue silk in the moonlight. A woman's tender voice. Balthain paused, his hand on the ship's rail, afraid to move lest a floorboard creak and give him away. With skills he'd spent most of his lifetime perfecting he faded into the background. A deep flush crept up his neck. He shouldn't be witnessing this. The moment was too private, too personal to intrude upon.

Damn it, he hadn't set out to intrude upon anything. He'd only wanted a little privacy himself. Decades had passed since he'd had to endure being jammed into such small quarters with so many strangers. He'd spent his life making sure he'd never be cramped into small, dark, crowded places again.

He didn't belong here. Not on the deck here now. Not on the ship. Not in this party. It had been a mistake to invite himself to join them. True, they'd welcomed his sword arm back at the pass, but he wasn't one of them. Not really. He knew no one but Lord Mâkakao, and his old mentor Seanen. When Lady Tranorva had spoken of reuniting Clan of the Bear he'd been naïve enough to think he might be welcome, even needed. Not that they'd made him feel unwelcome. But he wasn't part of anything. He was just there -- in the way most of the time -- too big to ignore and too invisible to include.

The last thing he'd expected when he went looking for some air was to catch General Tranorva -- a Warrior so feared throughout the Northland that men fled the battlefield at the mere mention of her name -- crying.

He fought the urge to go to her, to take her in his arms and comfort her. It wasn't his place. And there were already arms around her, anyway, even if they were dead arms. She was the one who'd put them there. Perhaps she'd found her own comfort.

By the gods, he was a fool. Had he actually contemplated offering comfort to General Tranorva? As if she would accept such a thing as comfort from him. She was a General, and nobility on top of that -- High Matriarch of the Bear Clan and Mistress of

House VinDall. Bad enough for the General to so lose her composure as to shed tears in the first place. Worse yet for a Mercenary who'd invited himself to join her little party to witness her tears.

He was getting soft. The strain was getting to him. He liked things settled, damn it. His world had come unhinged those months ago when the Orc army swept down on them, catching his men unprepared. The battle had left most of Balthain's handpicked men dead and Lord Mâkakao and the few surviving members of the Royal Guard prisoners, forced to fight in the arena for the sadistic entertainment of those members of the Royal Houses who had the time and money to gamble on such sport.

The Orcs were mostly dead, now, thanks to General Tranorva and her army, and to his old friend Seanen -- who was, praise to the gods, a Lord himself now -- and to Seanen's new companion, Ambassador Yarwyn of Talismar.

Rumor had it they were to be married.

At this rate his kind would soon be obsolete, Balthain brooded morosely. No one needed a Mercenary when there were no wars to fight. Mâk himself had married General Tranorva's younger sister, Lady Cassadara -- a powerful Shaman whose skills Balthain had some small reason to appreciate. The world really was coming unhinged. Mighty Warriors who had stared death in the face and laughed now found themselves trading their battle gear for the yoke of matrimony. Generals shed tears over the death of one who should have been an enemy.

Balthain shook himself, mentally at least. He had an image to uphold. He was a Rogue. A cold, heartless Mercenary. At what point had he actually so lost his objectivity as to take personal interest in any woman's tears?

Women came in two varieties -- those for whom their gender was not an issue, except at such embarrassing times as this, and those for whom their gender was the only issue.

He could use one of the second sort right now. His cock swelled uncomfortably at the thought. A soft body with knowing arms to sink himself into. A woman who



would use her talents to help him forget the changes the last few months had brought to his life.

He didn't like change. Fear clawed at him, as it always had, reminding him that all he had surrounded himself with was temporary. The fear knew him for who he was. The fear knew that underneath the façade he was still Rat. He was still an outcast no one had needed for more than the strength of his back and the skill in his sword arm. The fear whispered that if he wasn't careful he'd be back where he'd been all those years ago... just another orphan fighting for survival in the underbelly of the cities.

He closed his eyes, willing the memories away, but they came anyway...

\* \* \*

It was raining. Had been raining for days. Sleet now mixed with the rain. The night air took on a bitter chill. Soon the boardwalks would be slick with ice, and all those who had homes would be safe within them.

Rat stood in the shadows, staring at the huge building that took up the entire city block between the wharf and the promenade where the fine ladies would walk in the sunshine.

The sign above the front door facing the docks proclaimed the place "The Golden Eagle Gentleman's Club." Locals called it Maribeth's Whorehouse.

'Twas said Maribeth sold a little of everything in the Gentlemen's Club. A man could buy drink by the glass or the bottle or the case. He might win a few gold pieces at blackjack only to lose them again at craps. Or he might trade his winnings for a night in the arms of a comely lass. However, 'twas not the girls at Maribeth's who had Rat standing in the shadows studying the place. Nor was he casing a potential mark.

The few coins that could be filched from a gambler's pockets would not get Rat where he wanted to be.

A widowed Lady might send to Maribeth to procure the services of a personal companion. Many a young man found his way off the streets through Maribeth's back door.

That wasn't what Rat had on his mind, either. He wanted more.

He should wait. He wasn't ready to make his move yet.

Hunger weakened Rat's resolve, making his stomach rumble. He couldn't remember when he'd eaten last... before the rains started, of that he was sure. The tunnels beneath the city were flooded now. There were few safe places to escape the rain. The smell of boar roasting on a spit in the huge kitchens spilled out into the night air.

The sounds of the whores' laughter spilled out as well, making him ache with another kind of hunger. He was young, but not too young to know what went on in Maribeth's. He'd never yet filched enough coin to sample any of Maribeth's whores, but just the thought of them made his dick so hard he slipped a hand into his tattered leggings to ease himself as he stared at the doors. 'Twas no use. Merely adjusting his fit inside the restrictive clothing would not answer the call. He needed a woman's tight sheath to empty himself into. But first he would savor her, feasting as only a hungry young man could, with an insatiable appetite...

Maribeth offered free meals to those who applied for positions within her establishment, and a warm, dry place to sleep. Still, Rat wanted more. Had wanted more since the first time he'd seen her, when he was just a boy, new to the fetid smells of the wharf... new to hungers of the body and of the mind...

The storm drains ran too high to be safe, now, and tonight ice crystals mixed with the rain, making the streets treacherous to walk.

The constables were on the lookout for his kind, rounding up all they could find, offering free shelter -- behind bars for the night -- with an escort out of town in the morning. Though they might easily decide not to let him go come the morning, once they got a better look at him and checked their files. He'd rarely been seen by his marks, but there were few young men in this Human city of his size...

And he was so hungry...

He'd known what he wanted from the first time he saw her breasts, so smooth and creamy white as they spilled over the top of her tightly laced corset. She'd raised a hunger in him that would not be easily satisfied. With a restless push, he shoved away

from the wall. He knew what he wanted, and it would not be found here in the shadows...

\* \* \*

Balthain shook off the memories of the child he had been along with the childhood nickname. The boy named Rat who had taken refuge from hunger in Maribeth's whorehouse was long gone. Maribeth's was gone long ago. Yet still Balthain survived. He had built a new life for himself, far from the sewers of Élahandara. He would never be Rat again.

## Chapter One

It was as if the island rose up out of the ocean. One minute he was staring at the endless horizon, attempting to ignore the discussions going on around him, and in the next the Childling was tugging at his hand and the arguments within the party faded away as if they had never been.

"There it is," Dahlai whispered reverently. "Tir na nÓg."

Tir na nÓg. The island of Faerie. Balthain blinked slowly, thinking it would disappear as quickly as it had appeared. The ship's crew was already lowering her sails, preparing to dock. Balthain wondered uneasily if he'd fallen asleep and was dreaming of children's bedtime stories.

Much as he wanted off this ship, he hesitated. He placed a hand on the Childling's shoulder, trying to convey his wariness to her. There was something wrong about this place. Very wrong. Islands didn't simply appear out of nowhere in the middle of the ocean.

Dahlai shook off his restraint and ran ahead as the crew lowered the gangplank, laughing as her bare feet hit the sand at the end of the dock, twirling like a dancer on her toes. "'Tis as beautiful as Mother said it would be!" She tilted back her head and called out to the island. "Hear me, Tir na nÓg! At last I have come home!"

The island didn't bother to answer.

Balthain noticed that none of the ship's crew made any move to depart, though beyond the broad white sand beach most of the shoreline appeared populated with wondrous trees bearing fruits of all kinds. The only breaks in the broad expanse of dark green and bright colors came from the few places where the distant mountains dipped toward the ocean. There, sculpted cliffs sprayed fresh water over their crystalline bluffs in sparkling waterfalls that caught the sun with dozens of rainbows.

After four days packed into this tiny ship trying not to listen to these people argue, the island looked like a paradise. Yet even the most beautiful things could be deadly.

General Tranorva looked no more pleased than Balthain felt. She surveyed the shoreline anxiously as she led Élandine down the gangplank. "Where is everyone? Where are the people?"

Dahlai ran back to grab Tranorva's hand and tug her forward. "Mother said there is a beautiful city, protected from the sea's storms by a great wall. We must go inland. Come." Scampering with the spirit of her youth, the girl led them, her lightheartedness nearly contagious as they moved among the swaying fruit trees and beautiful wild orchids toward the center of the island. Indeed, tall spires of stone towers soon rose above the tops of the trees, directing them to a high stone wall.

Balthain hung back, liking little the looks of the ancient stone wall. The carved stone blocks reached nearly twenty feet into the air, and the angle of the base suggested a breadth of at least half its height. With the practiced skills of a Mercenary, he immediately assessed the fortification not as a barrier to keep out the sea, but as a prison one might never escape.

Guilty of none of his inherent pessimism, Dahlai ran forward to shout with laughter as she rattled the knocker on the ancient gates. "I am Dahlai, Daughter of Tākuri! I have come home!"

Black clouds rolled out of the west, gathering at an unnatural speed from a sky that had been peaceful moments ago. Energy like lightning about to strike crackled through the air. The small group stepped back from the city walls, the laughter dying on their lips as the gates flung themselves open. Blocking their path stood one old man, yet none of the Warriors moved to confront the specter before them.

He appeared an ancient scholar, a Mage, dressed in flowing black robes that whipped around him in the wind. Long silver hair streamed back from his face, revealing a cragged visage marred by an angry scowl. The static in the air about them seemed either to come from the old man, or to be attracted to him, for a ball of pure

energy pooled on the tip of his staff as he raised the gnarled stick to point in their direction. His voice boomed out above the fury of the approaching storm. "Abomination!"

In the back of his mind, Balthain knew stepping between a Faerie Mage and the object of his scorn was one of the stupidest things he'd done in his lifetime. He was one to avoid arguments. Had he not managed to keep himself out of the shipboard battles across the vast expanse of the oceans? Yet today his feet seemed to have a mind of their own. Years of training argued that this dispute was no Mercenary's business. If the Mage released the energy bolt he had gathered, Balthain would die. No way around it. And for what? The small child-sprite had nothing of value to offer in payment for his life. 'Twas, in fact, counter to every one of his tenets...

Dahlai clung to his waist, her head poking out just under his left arm as she wound a strand of hair around her finger in an innocently childish gesture. Balthain dropped his hand to rest it in the fine soft curls that cascaded down over her shoulders. "Ye shall not harm the child," he heard his voice order.

The Mage turned his full attention to Balthain, his expression a clear warning not to interfere. "What concern is this of yours, Human? Why do you come between me and this daughter of Chaos?"

Balthain could feel the frightened intake of her breath shake her thin collarbone. "I am the child's protector." Oh, great. *Idiot.*

"Why do you pollute my kingdom with this atrocity?"

Pulling her more tightly against his side, Balthain fought the rage that threatened to wash away every vestige of common sense he had ever possessed. 'Twas no use. He could bear insults, personally, had had a lifetime to learn to ignore ridicule, but the child stood beside him now with all the bright shining hope washed from her eyes with her tears.

"Who are you to so judge this child, of whom you know nothing but for the color of her skin? She has done you no harm. She is not responsible for the accident of her

birth. She asks nothing of you, save entrance at your gates, the simplest act of courtesy to a stranger."

"The abomination shall not pass these gates. Be gone, all of you. Your presence has fouled the purity of my sanctuary."

The rage shook through Balthain's sword arm, fighting to escape. "You stand before us, the representative of a people said to be the oldest and wisest of the races, and show no room for the smallest of kindness to a child? Where is your heart? Where is your humanity? 'Tis you who are the abomination, old one. Your intolerance and injustice bring disgrace upon your race. You have not learned wisdom with your years, but only bitterness and hatred. The thought that I and my people once held your kind in reverence shames me."

White light blazed about the old man, and he shone for an instant in another form, tall as a Giant and regal and mighty in his wrath. The flame that was his own light leaped high about him, then slowly subsided until only the vestiges of what they had seen remained burned into their brains, and the image before them cleared once again to reveal no more than the figure of a man, a Mage not unlike the one they had known as Shammall, dressed now in fine brightly colored silks and armed with no more than a simple staff of office.

The voice retained the power they had seen, arrogant and self-assured, demanding, not requesting. "Who are you, Human?"

'Twas not simply a Mage who stood before them, Balthain guessed. 'Twas the King of Tir na nÓg himself. And he, Balthain-the-incredibly-stupid, had just placed himself in the path of the King's ire. Shaken, Balthain gathered his scattered wits about him, striving as he answered the question to remind himself of the facts he stated. "I am Balthain, Captain of the Guard of House Yarishet, a Mercenary for hire, Your Highness."

A slow smile crept over the ancient one's lips. "Well spoken, Mercenary. You are either very brave or very foolish to have challenged me so."

The King looked down thoughtfully at the creature Balthain had unexpectedly decided to champion. His voice softened, losing its threatening edge. The clouds dispersed from the sky as if they had never been. "Why come you to my gates, Childling? Who are you and what do you want of me? Why do you cloak yourself in such an ill-fitting disguise?"

Dahlai shifted smoothly to the form Balthain had seen only once before, the beautiful young maiden of light. His hand dropped to his side as she stepped forward. He took a deep, shaky breath. His gaze swept over the golden brown skin, the long waves of ebony hair, the small, heaving bosom. Praise be to the gods. Had he called himself the child's protector? And who would protect the child from him, should she not go about cloaked in her Childling's disguise?

Anger shot back at the ancient one, as cutting and intolerant as the King's own temper had been. "I am Dahlai, daughter of Tâkuri, who even now remains a slave, held in the dungeons of Élahandara. I come only as a guide to my mistress, on an errand of the gods. My mother has spoken often of the glory and beauty that is Tir na nÓg, yet I find her words amiss. 'Tis glad I am she cannot see the depths of depravity to which her homeland has fallen. I would not step foot on the lands of the King who abandoned my mother to her fate were it not for the needs of the one I serve. 'Tis indeed a pity, great King, that the years have brought no light to your soul, that you might see your own heartlessness for what it is. I fear my mistress wastes her time, looking for resurrection in a dying land."

The King threw back his head and laughed. "You have Tâkuri's fierce temper, little one, and someday your tongue shall be as fierce as her own. Come. All of you. We will adjourn to the palace, that you might further correct me on the error of my ways. I am old, older than the moons, and I find few who challenge me any more. Your youth inspires me. Mayhap I shall find the lot of you entertaining after all."

"Mayhap," Balthain repeated dryly under his breath. Still, his right hand did not leave the pommel of his sword. Then the woman-child shifted back to her familiar



guise, slipping her hand through the loop of his left arm, and he forgot to be mortified by the old man's sudden change of mood.

\* \* \*

'Twas a place of myths, of children's tales and legends, a Faerie castle adorned with gleaming towers turreted in gold, and marble halls with crystal domes. Tir na nÓg had to be the cleanest place Balthain had ever seen. There was no litter. No garbage. No sign that anyone at all lived here or passed down these streets. Everywhere there were small carved marble Faeries, adorning the columns and pillars like jewels reflecting the sun. It might have been a child's toy city plucked from the nursery, or perhaps it was only that they had been made to fit and dropped in for the amusement of some noble's daughter.

Balthain fought the urge to gawk as if he were no more than a child himself, and tried instead to focus on the layout, should he need to find his way back to those massive gates again, but the place was laid out like a maze. They walked for perhaps half a mile to the doors of the palace itself and yet he sensed they had come no more than half that distance had they traveled in a straight line.

Not that such a thing as traveling in a straight line might be possible. The city's designers had had no such goals in mind...

Some of the others seemed uneasy with the winding paths that climbed ever upward, but they were paths in the open. He welcomed the fresh air and the clear view of the city. Heights had never bothered him. Only tunnels. Thank the gods there were no tunnels here. Nothing was dark or closed in...

After the sheer ostentation of the exterior architecture, the second floor chamber to which the King led them appeared almost simplistic in design. The room was large enough for Balthain not to feel crowded, perhaps ten meters square, with one main door in, through which they entered, and one set of double glass doors that apparently led to a balcony overlooking the city. The lot of them fit easily around the King's table, and Balthain felt none of his usual reaction to being pressed into such a crowd. The

room appeared open and filled with light. He would be all right here. He could handle being closed in as long as he could see a way out.

He wondered absently if he told himself such just to calm his nerves...

Due to the sculpted twist of the path they had followed, Balthain judged their height above the city proper to be a great deal more than that of the wide staircase they had climbed to reach the second story. A quick glance out the windows as he moved to take his position at the huge round wooden table proved his assumption correct. They were at least a hundred feet above the paved cobblestones in the lower courtyard.

The King of Tir na nÓg settled himself comfortably in one of the huge red-oak armchairs before he directed his attention toward Dahlai, who was busy staring about in wonder, one hand tangled in her hair again. "Tell me about your mother."

The King appeared ready to let them entertain him throughout the many long hours of the day. Balthain took the hand that sought his under the table.

Evalayna interrupted before Dahlai could speak. "If ye be the one we sought, if ye indeed be the King of Tir na nÓg, then where is thy court? Where be thy nobles? Thy pages? Thy squires? How can thy court stand deserted? Indeed, we have seen no one in thy entire city! Since when does a King stand to answer his own gate?"

The King threw back his head and laughed. "Have you read not your own children's tales? The *Tuatha Dé Danann* are creatures of the moonlight. Yester eve the moons were both full. 'Tis but a once a century event. The revelry of my Court was unsurpassed in our own history. I stand guard now while all about me sleep the sleep of exhaustion. The gods be praised I did so, else the enchantment would not have allowed you to set foot on Tir na nÓg. The island is protected. No mariner can find us without a guide. No mortal can touch these sands without permission. Had not the little one issued her challenge, you would all be ashes."

Balthain shook his head. Revelry indeed. This one was more than whimsical. Unless he missed his bet, the entire populace of the island was more passed out than asleep. And this one was not so much better off. They were dealing with a childlike mentality beset with a hangover.

Balthain looked to Seanen briefly, trying to capture his old mentor's attitude. Calm, level-headed, detached, always in control. Seanen was the epitome of their order -- Seanen was everything Balthain wanted to be, but was not.

Balthain fought to bury his anger. "Should not there be a warning posted to protect unwary travelers?"

The King shrugged, and as he did so his form shifted again, so that he shrunk to less than a quarter his original size, appearing as a large, translucent butterfly wearing a man's head and a crown, still carrying his staff. "Shall I appear thus, and paint my likeness on a bulletin board? 'Warning! You trespass on Tir na nÓg, the Isle of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*. Go away!' That seems a bit rude."

Tranorva's hand reached out with lightning speed to snatch the small fluttery creature out of the air. "What is rude, little man, is playing these games with people's lives on the line. We were sent here by the gods, who I now fear are as capricious as ye. 'Tis wrong to give a wounded heart false hope, by sending her to treat with a butterfly."

Behind his calm façade, Balthain urged her to close her fist.

The King shifted once again, hovering before her over the table in the form of a shimmering black Dragon. His voice bellowed over them in waves, shaking the walls as it took on the tones of an angry deity once again. "My form displeases you? Then treat with this one. Take care, Mortal, that you do not anger me further. You have awakened me from a much needed rest, and I have little patience with Humans to begin with. What do you want of me?"

Tranorva's face wrinkled as the unwelcome title slammed against her, but she did not bother to deny her humanity. Instead she stood to face the King of Tir na nÓg, her shoulders back, her hand on her axe's hilt. "Very well. Let us be brief so that we can all be on our way. The gods have sent us here, though the quest be my own. One of thy kind, Élandine, who stands beside me, was killed defending my life. I want him back."

That seemed reasonably direct and to the point. Trust General Tranorva to get right to the heart of matters.

The King shifted back to Human form, though this did nothing to placate Balthain's urge to shove the entire party toward the nearest exit.

"Élandine, is it now?" The old Mage raised one eyebrow as he studied the animated corpse at Tranorva's side. "The lot of you have risked your lives to bring this - this shell to me?"

Tranorva merely inclined her head.

"If I live another three millennia I will never understand mortals..." The King flicked his fingers in a brief salute. Sparks like lightning slammed into the chest of the dead man who stood at Tranorva's side. "Remember."

\* \* \*

*"He doesn't understand you," Yarwyn commented blandly. "He doesn't speak our language."*

*The force of the borrowed magic slammed into him, nearly overwhelming him. Strong. So strong. She could see into others' minds.*

*At first the noise was overwhelming. But as he gained focus the chaos began to sort itself out. Not thoughts. She did not actually read minds. She was an Empath. She could feel what others felt. Raw emotions flew about the room, bombarding his defenseless soul. Anger. Hatred. Lust. Fear. These he understood. But the other... he reached for it, trying to understand, wanting it so badly that the lack was like a pain inside him.*

*No. He was Élandine. He had a role to play. He focused on the lust as he turned to her. He was Élandine...*

*"Too bad. Perhaps if he understood me he might fight me even harder."*

*Yarwyn moved toward him, running her hands over his chest. "I won't fight you at all." Warning alarms went off in his head, but the strength of her emotions had him too off balance to think of self-preservation. She lowered her lips to his chest, circling his areola with the tip of her tongue. His body shook with the effort of controlling himself, of not reaching out to take her then and there, no matter what the cost. He wanted... he needed. She had everything his life was missing. She held the key...*

*So much to sort out. Still, he wasn't fool enough to believe that what Yarwyn felt was lust for him, although his body responded to her touch. He recognized her well schooled deception even as she bit down hard on his nipple.*

*Jolted by the sudden pain, he pulled away, only to place himself within Seanen's reach. No. No, he was too good at this. He didn't make such mistakes. No...*

*Hugely muscled legs clamped around his head, immobilizing him long enough for Yarwyn to plunge her knife between his ribs.*

*Wiping her knife on his ruined robes, Yarwyn stepped across his body as if he were a discarded pillow from her richly furnished bed. The thing that he'd felt before came through stronger now, nearly blocking out the pain as he lay bleeding on the cold stone floor.*

*No. What she felt was not for him, nor would it ever be. He meant nothing to her.*

*Yarwyn, too, was caught by surprise by the depth of Seanen's emotions. Élandine felt the thing that had no name slam into her, felt her taste it, trying to find a place for this new emotion to fit. She was afraid.*

*"Yarwyn." Seanen's voice was rich with the depth of the feelings Élandine could not quite grasp.*

*"Seanen." Élandine could tell she was trying hard not to cry, though he wasn't sure why. "You see, I still remember your name."*

*"I know the timing isn't good, but I need to tell you something."*

*"What?" She was frightened. More frightened than she'd been when Élandine had pulled her from the water.*

*"I'm falling in love with you."*

*Love.*

*Élandine rolled into a tight ball, his hand over the gaping wound in his chest. No. He felt as if his heart might explode, but not from the wound Yarwyn's dirk had made. Love. No. That could not be. He could not -- he was Fey -- Sidhe, in the language of his own people. His kind did not fall in love... when an eternity spread out before you, love was an expense a Sidhe heart could never bear the burden of. Yet it seemed eternity had been shortened by the length of a dirk's short blade...*

*\* \* \**

“Élandine!” The dead thing seemed at war with itself, its limbs shaking so violently that Tranorva grasped his hands to protect him from harming himself. “What’s happening?” she demanded, turning to face the King once again, her voice dangerously close to panic.

The King shrugged. “Death robs us of all but the strongest of memories. Passion. Violence. Revenge. These are the energies that last the longest. Some things one would rather not remember. Death offers us the blessed sleep of forgetfulness. With the memories come regrets. A lifetime such as ours has room for many regrets. The pain may be too much for your friend to withstand.”

Yet despite the old one’s apparent indifference, his expression softened as he brushed his hand across Élandine’s eyes. “Sleep quietly now, that you might dream the dreams of the living.” Tranorva caught Élandine up as he went limp in her arms. The old one turned away, clearly expecting them to follow. “Come. I will show you to your quarters. The hour grows late. We must all rest yet a while. We gather here again at moonrise.”

## Chapter Two

The others were crowded together in the common room, already poring over their maps. They would undoubtedly spend hours devising plans that would never work. Balthain wandered off to his room, knowing they would not miss him.

No one ever did.

Still, he fought the sleep, fought the memories that their endless arguments had awakened, fought the pain that would come with the memories, but at last he could hold himself at the edge of alertness no longer, and the memories won.

He was a boy again, a boy alone on the streets. At last he embraced the dream, burrowing in like a child burrows under the blankets. They were safe memories now, too far in the past to hurt him.

Even in his dream, he had escaped the tunnels. He would never go back...

\* \* \*

The boy woke in the dark, startled and disoriented. Someone was touching him. At first he thought it might be the serving wench, come back to take him up on his offer. Perhaps he should protest, tell her he wouldn't play her games. But then he'd be back out on the streets again, and 'twas a wicked night.

And he was so hungry...

The wench had fed him earlier. Hot food -- that roast boar he'd been smelling -- followed by a long soak in a deep tub and a thorough scrubbing. She'd taken her duties seriously. He could have told her all the bugs had died of the cold some time ago, but he rather enjoyed the feel of the wench's hands working through his thick mop of hair. 'Twas the first bath he'd had in a very long time.

When her hands moved lower, scrubbing him thoroughly below the water line, he thought at first she meant only to make sure he was clean. But then her small hands

fisted over him, and his half-closed eyes opened wide as she worked his cock beneath the water, squeezing and pumping and stroking until more of the water was outside of the tub than in. He had tried to drag her into the water with him, but she had threatened to scream if he did.

"Mistress instructed me to make sure you are not too ready when she comes to you later," she explained.

The thought of what Maribeth might have in mind for him broke him. He spurted helplessly into her hands as the water churned around him.

Afterwards the wench had burned his clothes. The ones she had him put on were freshly laundered, and of a better cut than anything he'd managed to steal. A warm bed followed. The serving wench giggled when he offered to share his bed with her, to take off more of his edge for their mistress, and for a moment he thought she might say yes, especially when he'd whispered what he'd do to her, how he'd lick her clit for hours like a melt-away fresh from the bakers. But all he got from her was a chaste kiss before she disappeared down the corridor.

He'd gone to sleep alone, the noise of the roulette wheels below and the low moans of passion from other rooms on other corridors a dim comfort after the quiet of the stormy night. Perhaps in the morning he might regret his choices.

Perhaps.

'Twas not morning.

A woman's hands cupped his balls, and his cock was so hard it was ready to burst. He rolled to his feet, dirk already in hand. It took him a moment to remember where he was, and why.

Maribeth sat on the edge of his bed. He knew it was her from the sheer expanse of creamy white breast that glistened below him in the moonlight. She grinned up at him as her hands resumed their exploration. Rat sucked in his breath as she slid her fingers down the crack of his ass.

He was still hungry...



His cock jumped to attention, jutting high against his hollow gut. The roast boar was long gone, but there was a new hunger there, a hunger only the woman could fill.

"You need not fear me, Rat. I won't take anything you don't want to give me." She steadied herself, her hands gripping his ass, as she bent her head to take the tie that held his breeches shut in her teeth.

"You might be a Succubus, come to steal my soul," he countered, though he knew she was not. The Succubus who had come to him in his dreams was tall, and fair, a nymph, a sprite who reached out to him in his sleep, but whom he could never quite touch. She whispered to him of far away places and exotic creatures, filling his head with dreams that would never be. She was a myth, a legend, a promise that would never be fulfilled.

This woman was real. Maribeth was flesh and blood and close enough to touch. His cock swelled to painful proportions as she tugged on the tie, even the most minute movement of the linen cord vibrating through every fiber of his being. He closed his eyes, counting slowly backwards from one hundred, naming imaginary pebbles as they fell down a mountainside. It didn't work. There was no way to take his mind off her mouth, so close to his cock that he could feel her breath, hot and moist, through the thin fabric. He was going to make a fool of himself, erupting like a fountain all over her face any moment now.

He should have waited, made sure he was ready. He'd only have one chance to convince Maribeth he was something different from the average young punk she'd taken under her wing. He felt awkward and clumsy. And now he had this damn dirk to deal with as well as his raging lust. He couldn't just stick the blade back under his pillow. Someone might get hurt. There was just no convenient place to put the thing that it might not be in the way. Except... with a stretch, he thrust the sharp-bladed dirk into the ceiling beam. He was the only one who'd be able to reach it there without standing on a chair.

Reaching for the ceiling beam sent his cock bobbing over Maribeth's face. She grabbed the tip of his penis with her teeth for a moment and he choked back a cry of frustration as she let him go, laughing as she reached for the cord again.

"I am a Succubus," Maribeth purred as she finally freed the knot at his waist. "But it's not your soul I'm after." His leggings dropped slowly over his hips. Her hands slid forward, stroking over the bulge of his cock, and down, until she held his balls in her hands. "This is all about sex, Rat. Nothing more or less. Sex. But you knew that before you came here. You knew what I'd ask of you, didn't you? And you came, anyway. So I can guess what you want. What does any young man want? Good food and a safe place to sleep and a willing woman. I'm here to teach you what to do with that woman once you're in her bed. It wouldn't do to send you out uninstructed and let you make a fool of yourself now would it? That wouldn't be good for my reputation either."

He couldn't answer her. Didn't trust himself to speak with her hand on his balls. She was here to give him basic instructions? All he could think about was getting her into his bed, hammering his cock into her until she screamed as she came around him, shattering like a mug dropped on the old stone floor.

He studied the way the hem of her shirt collar showed nearly transparent in the early moonlight, trying not to think of her mouth so close to his cock, or of fucking her till he collapsed atop those legendary breasts in a sated pile. He tried hard to pay attention to what she was saying. At the same time his analytical side told him she'd worn something old, lest he, in his youth and clumsiness, destroy it. That wasn't helping. Even the hem of her collar made him think of sex, of thrusting urgently into her until he came like a rutting bull. Finesse. He needed finesse. He needed patience. He needed --

Maribeth squeezed his balls, then lifted them, kneading them gently like the woman in the bakery shaping the pies. "Take a deep breath," Maribeth instructed. "Then out. You can't forget to breathe. You're a nice big handsome young lad. The ladies will want to touch you."

His cock jerked before her of its own accord, so stiff now it bobbed against his hollow gut. Maribeth chuckled as she bent to taste him. He had to resist the urge to tangle his fingers in her hair and shove himself into her mouth as she teased the swollen head of his cock with her tongue. He did forget to breathe. When he finally remembered he sucked in air like a drowning man breaking to the surface.

Forget finesse. It was all he could do not to spurt all over her like some schoolboy alone with a whore for his first time. Did she think him some innocent, too young to know how to handle a woman? Or did she treat all the young men who came to her thus?

She stood up slowly, stretching to kiss him, her lips wet with his own pre-ejaculation. By the gods. He tasted like that? Sweet and salty and bitter all at once? He kissed her again, devouring her mouth.

“Are you afraid of me, Rat?”

“Afraid? No.” He returned her kiss, plundering the depths of her mouth with his tongue. He wasn’t afraid. He was starving, and she was a feast there for the taking. She was a young man’s fantasy. She was beautiful, she was rich, and she was old enough to know exactly what she wanted. But she did not think of him as a man. She thought him an untried youth. Certainly she would not consider him her equal. Not in the bedroom. Not anywhere else. He’d have to change that. He’d have sold his soul for the price of the roasted boar alone. But the woman, she was something entirely different.

Rat wrapped his arms, already thickening with the musculature of his Clan, around Maribeth’s voluptuous body, molding her soft curves to him as he tumbled back onto the bed. “I know what you expect from me,” he promised. “I am no fool of a schoolboy, seeking to lose his virginity behind your doors.” His voice turned amazingly deep, surprising him with its sudden change. He prayed it would not change back again just as suddenly, letting him squeak like a young boy at just the wrong moment. “There are still things you can teach me, Maribeth. I’m hungry. Feed me. Show me all the ways to please you.”

She laughed, though her tone was pleased, not mocking. "All the ways? In one night? Have you that much stamina, my young stud?"

There were that many ways? He blushed, but perhaps in the darkness she might not notice. Better to keep his mouth shut. His ignorance was more of a threat than his voice cracking. He slid his hands under her tunic, reaching for the breasts that were something of a legend among the young men of the town. 'Twas said they were so large that a man might clamp them around his dick while she licked him clean for the fuck of a lifetime.

Maribeth stiffened a little at his touch, and he paused, considering his tactic. Too direct? He settled his fingers on the knot of her corset instead, taking his time as he slowly undid the laces. Once the corset fell away, he skimmed the tunic over her head, instead, wishing the moons were out, that he might have a better view of her naked body. He tangled his hands in her rich auburn curls, pulling her head down so that he could taste her lips as if they were some expensive confection in the window of the bakery. He'd stolen one once. He remembered the name. An Amaretto Amore Torte. Rich. So rich, sweet with the taste of an expensive liquor.

Intoxicating...

His hands explored as well, loosing the bands that held her skirts, lifting her up now, that the skirts might slide to the floor. He caressed her hips, pressing her body against the length of his as he kissed her, feeling her heat so close to his as to threaten his control once again.

He had to prove himself as good as the bravado of his words. If he rushed this, if he was bad at it, he'd be back where he'd been come this time tomorrow night. He wanted more than just to be accepted into Maribeth's training. More than a future as a gigolo to be sold to the highest bidder or even an introduction to some highborn lady who would make him her pet. He'd set his sights high. He had to prove to Maribeth that he had the potential to be of more use to her than the coin he might bring her. But if there was anything he'd learned on the streets, it was patience. He knew what he wanted.

He wanted Maribeth.

For a future that offered more than cramped tunnels and what he could steal to eat, he could be patient. He could be very patient.

Her hands were busy separating him from his few remaining articles of clothing, caressing his back, outlining his waist, pulling his hips tighter against her. It would have been easy to simply thrust into the mound of springy curls that brushed against him now -- too easy. He sensed she was teasing him, testing him. Did she expect him to pounce on her like some ignorant schoolboy? A meal like this was worth savoring. The more he tasted, the more he wanted. He slipped his hand between their bodies to comb through her lower curls, surprised when she moaned against his lips. He hadn't expected to feel like this, so alive, so safe, so empowered.

*So hungry.*

All the things he'd heard on the streets began to make sense as he explored her body. He'd tried to prepare himself, had picked up whatever he could, wherever he could. He ran his fingers through her curls again, exploring deeper. Her answering moan made his cock jump with delight. Crude terms for fast fucks took on new meaning. He slid his fingers between her folds, learning the shape of her, the feel of her, finding the opening his cock sought. But his cock could wait. There was too much at stake here. He slipped a finger, then two, deep inside her.

His fingers were limber and sensitive -- a pickpocket's skills required a delicate touch. He moved them slowly within her, sampling before he tasted, enjoying the feelings of textures and responses. Maribeth's hands had ceased to attempt to guide and instruct him. She lay beside him now, apparently not caring that she'd lost control. He studied her body as he would have cased a mark, learning what she liked by her responses. A moan was a good thing, but a moan between little gasps of breath was even better.

"Am I doing this right?" He stopped with his fingers buried deep within her to ask the question, though her body had already told him the answer.

"Yes!" she hissed, clearly displeased that he'd stopped.

She arched against him now, raising half off the narrow cot to thrust her breasts at him. But he didn't have a hand free. He licked experimentally at the tip of the offered breast, as he might have licked the icing from one of those small cakes in the bakery window, nibbling, prolonging the pleasure. He thought she might object again. Instead he could feel her channel tighten around his fingers. Interesting. He tried it again, then pulled the whole nipple into his mouth the way he always did when he'd scrounged enough money for one of his favorite treats.

"Rat!" she fairly screamed.

"I have a name. I'm Balthain." He breathed the words across her dampened nipple. He replaced his fingers with his engorged cock. He slid deep within her, then stopped. "I'm going to be here a while. You might as well use it."

Her laugh was almost defiant. "You're a cocky one, Rat."

Her muscles tightened around him as he withdrew his length from her, hovering at her entrance. "Balthain." She tried to thrust herself against him, but he held her hips captive. He flicked his tongue over her nipple again. "My name is Balthain."

"Balthain," she gasped, tangling her fingers in his hair to drag his head back against her breast.

He rewarded her with one long, slow stroke of his engorged cock, burying himself deep within her, trusting neither of them with more at the moment. Her muscles tightened around him like a fist. "Say it again," he ordered.

"Balthain!" she screamed.

He feared for a moment that he had pushed her too far, but then he understood as the waves of contractions enveloped him. So. The woman who chose biddable young men off the streets to please her clients liked something different for herself. Balthain grasped her wrists, pushing her hands against the bed, using the strength inherent to his race to hold her pinned flat, completely under his control. "That's better. Now tell me you want me to stay," he ordered, though his heart felt like pleading.

"At least for tonight," she gasped as she writhed against him.

"That isn't good enough." Rat pulled himself out of her as he reached for the cord that had held her skirts up. With the speed his fingers had acquired on the streets he knotted the cord into a short noose.

If he'd misread her...

There wasn't time to think. If he didn't impress this woman right now, didn't show her he was something different than the other street urchins who passed through her doors, he'd never have another chance. He slipped the cord over her hands as he lifted her to her feet. A quick stretch hooked the end of the cord over the handle of his knife where it lodged in the ceiling beam.

"What in the name of the nine hells do you think you're doing?" Maribeth shrieked. "Do you know who I am, you fool? Do you --"

Her voice quieted as he flicked his tongue over her right nipple, once, twice, then again, savoring the taste of her the way he'd have savored the baker's tarts. "You don't remember me, do you?"

"You're the boy they call Rat."

"We met before. Three years ago."

He worked his way down her body, licking, nibbling, tasting.

"I don't remember," she gasped as he circled the rim of her navel with the very tip of his tongue.

"It was raining, like it was tonight. Your tunic was soaked. Yet you stopped to buy a pastry from the baker's display window for a young boy."

"I don't remember," she fairly screeched as he knelt to taste the places he'd already touched with his cock. She lunged at him, not trying to get away, but hooking her ankle around his shoulder to pull him tighter.

Her move spread her open to him. He took his time, enjoying her small moans of pleasure as he learned the difference in her flavors. Sweet. Tangy. Salty. Which flavors were her own, and which were his? He slid his tongue deep inside her, trying to tell the difference. When her breath choked out in a sob he stopped, breathing his words in gentle puffs over her quivering flesh. "I tried to pick your pocket. You caught me,

because I was timid. You told me to learn to be bold. To learn to take what I wanted as if the world owed it to me. And then you bought me dessert." He ran his tongue directly over her clit as he stood to face her. "I'm still hungry."

Her smile rewarded his efforts. "I remember you now. A handsome young devil even then."

His voice turned deceptively sweet against her skin. "Tell me you want me to stay."

If she stretched she could keep the weight of her body off of the rope. But if she did that she couldn't thrust her breasts at him. Balthain grasped his penis in his hand and ran the tip gently over her belly. "Tell me you want me to stay," he repeated, his tone rougher this time as she let the cord take the full weight of her body so that she might press herself harder against him.

He inched his path slowly downward, the tip of his penis flowing now with excess fluid, leaving a damp path where he worked it against her skin. Finally he reached the folds of her labia, touching, teasing, outlining her clit but never actually stroking over its tiny engorged head.

Maribeth whimpered and moaned as he tickled and tasted, but no coherent words came out of her mouth. Shifting his grip, he lifted her by the hips, settled her slowly over the length of his cock. Her legs wrapped tightly around his waist, pulling him farther into her. Pulsing muscles grasped at him, closing like fingers over his greedy cock. More. Now. He was a starving man, standing before a banquet, his for the taking. But she hadn't said he could stay. "Say it," he demanded.

She cried out as he thrust up into her. "I want you to stay. Balthain."

He withdrew slowly from her, judging her reactions as he rammed himself home again. Only desperation and strength of will kept him from thrusting himself into her with wild abandon. "You won't be selling me off to one of your rich clients."

Her body surged against him as he rasped her nipples with the fine stubble of his freshly shaven cheeks. "No," she promised as she shattered around him. "I'll keep you for myself. I'll not share you with anyone."



Enough with caution. Holding her hips against the wall, he pulled back as far as he could and rammed his length hard into her. It was like fanning a fire. The sensations assaulting his senses threatened to break him. So hot. So tight against him. So wet. Liquid fire wrapped around him, stinging, abrading, shaking him with a need so overpowering he thought he might lose consciousness. Their flesh made sucking sounds as he pulled back. The woman made other sounds, uncontrollable moans of passion as he sucked her nipples in time to their mating. He felt his body tighten, felt his balls draw up, as his control snapped completely. He pounded into her mercilessly, her hands still stretched above her, riding her as hard as he could as the climax swept over him.

Swept over them. For with his final thrust she broke beneath him, calling his name once again. "Balthain!" she screamed.

His brain went numb as he jerked the dirk out of the ceiling beam, pulling her down atop him on the bed. When he could breathe again, when he could think and register sensations beyond the limits of his now sated cock, he felt her chuckle against his neck.

"Balthain," she whispered. "Yes, I believe I will keep you for a good, long while. You amuse me, Balthain."

He ran his thumb idly across the tip of one large round breast. There were worse fates in life. "Good. Because I think I want you to show me some more of those ways you mentioned."

She laughed out loud that time. "You seem to be doing fine on your own."

He thrust the dirk deep into the crude oak headboard and slipped the cord that bound her wrists over it.

He'd been hungry far too long.

\* \* \*

Balthain awoke drenched in sweat and hard as a buck during rutting season. By the gods, he needed a woman. But he'd never been one to mate indiscriminately. His body could damn well show a little restraint. A chuckle crossed his lips as he lowered

his hand to stroke slowly over his painfully hard cock. Must have been the trip back to the City of Portsmouth that had triggered the memories. He hadn't thought of Maribeth in years. If they made it back, he'd ask in the Guild about her. Maribeth's was long gone, but someone might know where she was these days. She'd always kept her ear to the Guild. His Guild brothers would do no less for her. He might look her up, for old times' sake. Let her know her faith in him had not been misplaced.

She'd trusted the boy, nurtured the man, and he'd never admitted the truth to her, not once, though he suspected she knew. Maribeth was too shrewd not to know he was after more than the introduction to the Rogues' Guild her backing had bought him. Truth be told he'd had more than a boy's infatuation with those legendary breasts. He'd been in love with her long before he entered The Gentlemen's Club that first time, or as much in love as a fifteen-year-old boy fresh off the streets could be.

He'd had some wild notion that she would change her life for him. She'd done well to send him off to join the Guild when she did, before his naïve infatuation could cost her more than he would ever have been worth. And in all those years he'd never properly thanked her -- for taking him in, or for letting him go.

Nor had he ever again mentioned the Succubus who still haunted his dreams.

\* \* \*

*"You do not belong here, Élandine."*

*Sweat drenched Élandine's skin. The air was so thin he could barely breathe. "I come only seeking a vision."*

*"What vision?"*

*Élandine fought to keep his voice steady. "There is a Northlander. The woman called Tranorva, of the House of Lochinvar. I am sent to find her, yet what I have seen cannot be. It is as if the ground has swallowed her up."*

*The dark mists swirled around him, shades of black on black. "Do you know what you ask?"*

*Élandine swallowed hard. "I know."*

*"There will be a price."*

*Élandine bowed his head. "There is always a price."*

*"Ye may be Fey, but ye are yet mortal, Élandine. The price may be too high. Is the Human worth our price?"*

*What was he without Tranorva? "Tranorva's life is the price of my honor. I will pay your price."*

*"Tranorva's fate shall be your own. You will live as she lives. You will die as she dies."*

*To live as she lived? What did that mean? He was Sidhe. His life was the span of the trees, with an ebb and flow like the oceans. The room was beginning to spin as the sweat drenched his body. Air. He couldn't get enough air to fill his lungs.*

*"Do ye accept our terms, Élandine?"*

*To know he would age, and in the blink of an eye he would be gone.*

*To love...*

*"Think what this means. Ye shall be bound to this Human, from this day forward, Élandine. Her fate is your fate. Her years are your years. From this day forward, your destinies are as one."*

*He was already bound to her.*

*Élandine bowed his head forward as the blackness overcame him. "As is your will, so it shall be."*

*Mortal. He was mortal.*

*He could die.*

## Chapter Three

Tranorva wrapped her arms around Élandine as she slid beneath the fine Faerie linens, her lashes heavy with unshed tears. She pulled his body tightly against the length of her own, trying to share her warmth with him. He was cold, though not yet as cold as death. She felt as if he waged some war behind those closed eyes, a war that this time she could do little to help him win. Never had she felt so helpless. Yet she would try. She must try. “Élandine?” she whispered against his ear. “If ye can hear me, know that I love ye.”

*“I love you,” he wanted to tell her, but now was not the time. A room full of priestesses watched her every move, ready to take advantage of her ignorance of their ways. “You must pick a dancer, M’Lady. None may climax before you have chosen a mate.” And then I will challenge whoever you choose. I will die before I let another lay his hands on you.*

*A deep flush stole up her cheeks. Tranorva closed her eyes for a moment. “I have chosen a mate.”*

*Never had he faced such difficulty keeping his temper under control. She was High Priestess. She could choose whoever she wished. Any of the men who had danced for her. All of them if she wished. A Dark Elf Male would never dream to challenge such a decision. Élandine. He was Élandine. And she was his queen. If Tranorva could play her part, he would be no less professional.*

*“Dance for me, Élandine.” Her voice had a low, raspy quality that set his nerves on fire.*

*“Mistress, I --” His heart raced with both relief and consternation. He was the mate she had chosen. Could she do that? She was High Priestess. She could do whatever she wanted. Was he capable of doing what she asked? Surely anyone who watched him dance would know he was not truly a Dark Male. These dancers trained from childhood in the arts of sensual*

*entertainment. He'd be discovered, and put to his death, and her with him, for aiding his masquerade.*

*'Twas better to die attempting what she asked than to watch another man pleasure her. He forced his voice to sound calm. "For you, Mistress. Only for you."*

*Tranorva's smile conveyed relief. "Never fear. I will not share thee. I am a jealous mistress." A flick of her fingers dismissed the current dancer, who moved to join Jeserat and Wayonka.*

*Élandine took a deep breath. He had not the skills to perform the movements the other dancers had. But there was something he knew. Something he'd practiced for well over a century.*

*He knew the KimJing.*

*Years of training and discipline took over. Élandine took his place, exactly ten paces separating him from the High Priestess's dais. The room went quiet.*

*He was a puppet. A wooden puppet on strings, entertaining the children. They laughed and clapped as he came to life. The drum changed its beat -- something from some exotic jungle.*

*He began to sway gently to the rhythm. He flung back his head, meeting her eyes. The easy moves first. Let him work himself into the pattern of it. A spinning kick brought his right foot to the tip of his outstretched fingers as he rose to his toes until he stood balanced on one foot. The music paused as he hovered there, then took off wildly as he unfolded himself into another spinning kick, higher this time, faster.*

*He knew the others had stopped their play to watch him, but it no longer mattered. He danced for her alone. He wanted her. Wanted her so badly his body was already hard for her. The hunger lent sensuality to his movements, as if he could already feel his hands gliding over her body. With each curve of his arm he drew her to his side. Each raised thrust of his leg skimmed over her body.*

*The light sheen of his sweat made the new sapphire blue silks he wore translucent as they clung, then slipped away, like a lover's hands. He knew she could not help but see how aroused he was. He could see the answering lust in her eyes. When the music fell silent he knelt at her feet, hands outstretched to her, palms up, a suppliant ready to accept his fate.*

*Élandine breathed a sigh of relief as Tranorva stepped forward to claim him. He must not have done too badly. He raised his eyes to meet hers with a slow smile. She held out her hands, and he rose to meet her. When she slipped into his arms, all his uncertainty faded.*

*The audience merely added to the exoticness of it all. He felt as if he might unman himself as her hands slid over his body. Could she not see what she was doing to him?*

*"Ye have no' disrobed," she teased in that thick, husky voice that spoke of promises he knew her body would keep.*

*"Perhaps you would prefer to do that job yourself."*

*She took her time, untying the sash first, and sliding it around his neck to use as a leash, as if he might have tried to escape her. He kept his breathing low and steady, willing himself to maintain some semblance of control, concentrating on the beat of his heart, anything but the feel of her hands on his skin. Anything but her soft, hot breath spreading over his chest.*

*His cock danced against the restraining silks, sensitized beyond belief to the feel of her body, so close, yet so far away. Her hands skimmed over his chest, then moved lower, pausing on the tie at his waist. He would not. He would not spill his seed at her touch like some randy schoolboy.*

*She was going to torture him until he broke. He understood that as her hands moved on, ignoring the tie before her. By the gods, she was going to kill him. Sliding down his body until she knelt before him, she bent her head, using her teeth to pull the cord. He couldn't breathe. He could barely stand. He gripped her shoulders for support. His cock bucked madly at the underside of her chin.*

*He wanted to tangle his hands in that thick black hair, to pull her to him and force her to take him in her mouth, now, now, the watchers be damned. He wanted... her tongue flicked once over the tip of his cock.*

*From a great distance he heard a voice not unlike his own cry out as she raked her teeth over the very tip of his penis. He jerked against her uncontrollably, powerless to stop himself. The musicians began to play a low, sensuous beat, and the lovers around the room picked up their pace.*

*Was this, could this be, his innocent Tranorva? As he thrust, she took him in, massaging the underside of his cock with her tongue, both heightening his arousal, if that were possible, and at the same time easing the urgent need to come right this moment. His hands tightened on her shoulders, gripping her hard enough to leave bruises on a smaller woman. He had to stop this. He had to... "I must -- Mistress, you cannot..."*

*"I can do whatever I want," she reminded him. "Ye are mine."*

*"Yours," he whispered as his knees gave out. She was strong enough to catch him as he collapsed into her arms. Which was, he suspected, what she'd wanted all along. "Trust me," she whispered.*

\* \* \*

His body no longer felt cold to her touch. But that was not what had awakened her. Nor was it his arms, wrapped around her now, holding her tightly, as if she might try to get away. No. 'Twas another of his parts that seemed to have taken notice of her at last. Tranorva nearly cried out in longing as he moved against her again, his cock so rock hard as he thrust himself toward her she feared his erection should have been painful.

He was dead. One did not mate with a dead man.

Lust shook her, a fierce ache spreading through her neglected pussy, crying out for release.

His stiff cock pressing against her, demanding entrance, didn't feel like it belonged to a dead thing. He was quite warm to the touch, and as her hands slid down to trace the length of his rigid cock where he thrust at her, he felt hot enough to burn her fingers.

A shallow moan shook him as she stroked her fingers over the length of his cock. The first sounds he'd made since...

Surely this was a good sign. He was coming around. He was coming back to her. If she could just reach him, just...

He wasn't dead. He'd never truly been dead. Just trapped, unable to tell her what he wanted, what he needed.

She understood well enough what he needed now.

Slowly, carefully, she ran her fingers over the hard, burning length of him once again, then lower, feeling the weight of his balls as they contracted in her hand. Heavy and full. He needed release. As did she, by the gods. As did she.

Tranorva bent her head to run her tongue over the tip of his shaft, tasting the first drops of liquid that escaped. Salty. She tasted again just to be sure. His hands gripped her shoulders, demanding more, and she gave it, pulling him deeper into her mouth, teasing, tasting, sucking while she massaged the large vein that ran along the bottom side of his cock, keeping him near the edge without letting him go over. "Remember," she told him with her body.

*She felt so good... he was losing his mind. He could not... the others were watching, waiting. He must bring her to climax first. Mistress must always come first. She pushed him back, down into the soft pile of discarded silks, taking her time as she watched him, her body always only a movement away from where he wanted her to be. He was Élandine. He was her sex slave. She could do whatever she wanted. He had to maintain his role, no matter what the cost. He had to...*

*He moaned aloud as she slid down over him, taking him full inside her with one long, slow, torturous wave of pulling, sucking muscles. He was going to break. He held himself as still as possible, forcing himself back under control. Only the youngest, most unschooled of males would ever come before his mistress. This was the High Priestess herself. No matter that she held him so tightly he could feel the beat of her pulse pounding against the length of his furious cock.*

*His hands moved to stroke over her gorgeous breasts, pulling first one greedily thrusting nipple and then the other into his mouth, sucking and licking until the tips were stabbing back at him, pointy with need. His hands went to work, then, massaging the generous curve of her hips, tracing forward until his thumbs rode low, between her folds, on either side of her clit, so that when she finally began to move, she rode both his cock and his hands.*

*It was her turn to moan. The sound was so lovely, so rewarding, that he almost laughed. Indeed he might have had not his mouth been trying to maintain its hold on both of those puffed*



*up red nipples. He raised his hips as she rode him, thrusting hard against her with each rock of her pulsing sheath, meeting her, pushing her, demanding. She froze for a moment, her cry filling the room as she broke over him, but that was not enough.*

*Shifting his hands to her hips, he brought her down hard, only to raise her up, demanding more as he slammed up into her, in control now, knowing the entire room watched as he drove her over the edge again and yet again. And then no one was watching as the echoes of their rhythm resounded throughout the room, Dark Priestesses' calls echoing hers. Tranorva screamed as she came the final time, as he finally allowed himself to break with her, the sensation so overwhelming the room went black around him...*

*"Come back to me," Tranorva sobbed as the arms that had held her fell away. She collapsed against Élandine's chest. The heart beneath her ear stayed eerily silent. "Do ye no' know how much I need ye? Do ye no' know what ye mean to me?"*

*His heart tumbled within his chest. "Am I more than just a sex object to you then?"*

*Tranorva propped herself up on one elbow. "Do ye no' know?"*

*He looked away, fearing she would see more than he wished her to. "I know what you tell me."*

*Tranorva's fingers traced over his cheekbone. "I love ye."*

*She could have done him no less injury if she'd slid a dirk through his heart. "No. No. Humans, mortals, they do not fall in love with my kind. We live but to serve. We do not become emotionally involved. We --"*

*"Élandine. Shammall. Whatever name ye go by, 'tis all the same to me. I love ye. I have for years. It angered me that ye took no notice of me as a woman, when I was no longer a child. Angered me because I wanted ye to notice me. Wanted ye to treat me as something more than my mother's daughter, and thy charge of the moment. Wanted ye to love me."*

*"Come back to me, Élandine. I need ye."*

*Élandine kissed her palm. "I have loved you for years, M'Lady. Loved you and needed you and feared for my soul because I knew it was wrong."*

*"There is no right and wrong in matters of the heart."*

*"I am Fey. Such things are forbidden in Faerie!"*

There was an edge of bitterness in his voice, of desperation. He spoke at last, and these were his words? What was forbidden? Their love? Or her demand for his return?

Tranorva bit her lip to keep from crying. Was he simply remembering? They had come so far... surely the Faerie King could not condemn their love. Not after all they had been through.

Perhaps it was not the King who would choose to condemn them, but Élandine himself. Perhaps she had pushed him too hard. Tranorva laid her cheek against Élandine's ebony hair. "I have asked too much of ye. 'Twas selfish of me. Forgive me, my love."

*Forgive me...*

*Chattel in a battle between leaders. What an ignominious way to end an enchanted lifetime. Élandine twisted as he threw himself into Maelyn's blade, tossing the Priestess over his hip. He had time to see his beloved disappear, and to know that the blood was not all his own, as the enraged grizzly shredded the priestess before him until her broken body was no more than a lifeless toy.*

*He chanted softly through bloodied lips as the fog rolled into the room, too tired to stem the flow of blood, unable to lift a hand to the wound. Charms and spells left his mind as the cold muzzle sniffed anxiously at his throat. Tears stained the huge brown eyes. "Forgive me," he breathed against her neck. "I love you."*

Élandine felt more than heard Tranorva's gasp of understanding as his body and soul collided. His heart shuddered in his chest as the wound once again opened. He let go of the magic that had sustained his disguise. He needed to conserve energy. They were no longer in Élahandara. If he was to die again, 'twould at least be in his own form this time. This time he was able to raise a hand, to attempt to stem the flow of blood that poured from his chest before it stained her tunic.

"Élandine!" she screamed. "No! No, not now. Ye cannot leave me now!"

He did not have the strength. The wound was too deep. He was too weak. Still he needed to let her know... he'd wanted nothing more than to let her know... "Forgive me," he repeated once again. "I should have trusted you, my love."

Élandine felt Tranorva's strength wrap around him as he collapsed in her arms once again, felt the tears dampening her lashes as she pressed her face against his.

"I forgive ye, my love. Stay with me. Do no' leave me again."

He wanted to hold her, to comfort her, but he had not the strength. His voice sounded wispy in his ears, but he knew she could hear him now. "No matter what happens, know that I love you, my Lady Tranorva, with a love that is stronger than death itself."

"I will no' let ye go. No' again," she shrieked as she slammed the chamber's door open with her shoulder. "Mother!"

\* \* \*

He awoke to the smell of exotic spices. Balthain rolled without opening his eyes to slide his arm around the form that had crept into his bed. "Did you have a bad dream, little one?"

"I had a good dream. Good enough to make me come looking for you, Rat."

No one called him Rat. Not any more.

Balthain stiffened as he came fully awake. Slim, cool hands found his bare skin beneath the bedclothes. They were a woman's hands. The voice was not the Childling's voice. The body...

His hand slid over her shoulder and down along her side, exploring somewhat discreetly. Definitely not a child's body. Not with curves like that. As the fingers that played against his chest stroked over his left nipple, he leaned in to claim her mouth, his breath dragging in hard as she lowered her fingers to the knot that held his linen drawers shut. "Who are you?" he managed as his hand settled over the handle of his ancient dirk.

"After all these years, do you not know me yet, Balthain?" Her hand slipped lower to stroke his balls into tight knots of need. "I have come to you before, in many forms."

Come to him before...

Her touch felt like the touch of a familiar lover, yet new again. She moaned with need as he took her breast into his mouth, using his free hand to pull her hips tightly against his straining erection.

The woman knew his body too well. She had almost managed to distract his mind as well as his body. Well, two could play at that game. Maribeth had taught him well. He parted the woman's thighs with his knee, stroking her nipple to a long, stabbing spear with his tongue as she moaned out her desire, his pulse hammering in his cock as she ground against his knee.

Long, long silky hair. She wound it now around his cock, stroking over him with sure, knowing hands. Breasts like two ripe melons, heavy and firm, yet pliable as fresh butter against his tongue. Skin like silk velvet, smooth and warming to his touch. A voice that was neither young nor old, husky and sensual without the burr of whiskey in her throat. She tasted -- she tasted exotic. She tasted like spices that tingled on his tongue.

She'd never been this real before.

She was a voice, just a voice in his dreams. That was all she'd ever been. True, he'd caught glimpses of her before, a tall, willowy body, pale, pale skin, clear as the moonlight. But even when he'd seen her she'd always been far away. She'd kissed him once, years before, the first time she found him. He'd been no more than a boy, frightened and alone in the night. But she'd never, never let him touch her.

He shuddered as she teased his cock with her hair, brushing gently over the sensitive tip. He wanted her. By the gods he wanted to pump himself into her until there was nothing left to give, until he emptied himself of a lifetime of needless restraint. He wanted to take her and use her and make her ask him to do it again. He wanted...

"Do you remember me now, Balthain?"

He knew who she was. What he didn't know was why she was here. "I'm not really awake. You're the Succubus from my dreams."

"You are mine, Balthain. You have always been mine."

No point in arguing with that. Sometimes she seemed more real than any woman he could see and touch. This had always been little more than a game to her. Wherever she was, she was lonely and bored, so she had taken to haunting his dreams. Now the rules had changed. He could touch her now. That meant something was wrong. Very wrong. Now she wanted something from him, something she was willing to pay for with the price of her body. "I don't know how to find you. Not when I'm awake."

"Follow your heart. Follow your dreams. I'm waiting for you. I need you." Her hand closed over his shaft, stroking, pulling him toward the edge, as his fingers slipped inside her, making short hard jabs as she rode him in rhythm to the motion of her hand wrapped around his burning cock.

She was small. So small and tight. He wondered that she wasn't afraid of him. He wondered if they would fit together. If he wasn't careful he'd rip her asunder. If he ever claimed his prize, he'd have to be gentle, much more gentle than he was with these two fingers rocketing her toward her release. His breath came in panting gasps. His body jerked against her now as he moved helplessly under her touch, too far gone to care that her cries filled the room as she choked down on his fingers. Her convulsing muscles tightened around his fingers with a grip that promised she'd milk him of every last drop of his seed did she ever get the chance.

She would not escape him now that he had his hands on her. He reached for her, both hands on her hips as he rolled to his back. She would not fade away to leave him like this, alone and unsated once more. Not this time.

He didn't have to guide her, though he kept his hands firmly on her hips. She rose up over him eagerly, the fickle moonlight showing him nothing but her smile as she pushed herself down onto him, her tight sheath a sweet agony as she worked herself slowly onto his aching length.

"I need you, Balthain. Find me. I am your prize. Claim me."

Find her. And how in the nine hells was he to do that? "You're not real... you only exist in my dreams."

"The dreaming is real," she protested as she stretched enough to take him in, all of his length, turning his cock into a quivering shaft of need. He gripped her hips harder, willing himself to hold on to the dream.

"The dreaming allows us this place, where we can meet, between worlds. I need you to believe in me, Balthain. Please believe in me! The dreaming is real..."

He thrust up into her, hard, loving the way her body shook as she rose up only to pound herself down on him again, her hands on her own breasts now only adding to the terrible ache within him as she rode him harder and faster.

She felt real. Her skin beneath his hands felt real. Her muscles clenched around his cock felt real. His world focused down to the size of her tall, willowy body. If she was real, then he would hold her this time. He felt the first fingers of her orgasm tighten around him. It wasn't enough. He stilled within her, regaining control as she shook from the force of her body's reaction. When she recovered enough to draw in a long, shaky breath, he withdrew, sensing her surprise as the cool air separated them. Before she could voice her displeasure, he rolled her to lay face down in the pillows that adorned the opulently appointed bed.

She offered no more protest than a small gasp of surprise. He spread her knees as he grasped her hips, reaching between them to stroke knowledgeable fingers over her quivering folds. She was ready, her muscles sucking greedily at his fingers, her juices filling his palm as he caressed her.

Slowly, gently, testing their fit, he slid himself within her. Yes. That was better. As he'd known it would be. He could penetrate her with his entire length without hurting her. "Balthain!" she cried, arching hard against him as his balls slapped against her.

"Sweet," he gasped. "So sweet..." He lost track of time and place as he pumped fiercely into her. He knew his hands would leave marks where he gripped her hips, but perhaps they would only exist in the dreaming. She rocked back against him, urging him on, harder, deeper, as he bucked up into her hot, greedy sheath. She tightened

around him again and again, pushing herself toward the moment he both dreaded and coveted. For when she shattered this time, she would break him.

When she shattered this time, around him at last, the Succubus would own his soul. She'd offered her price and he'd accepted it. He would search for her outside the dreaming. He would find her if it killed him.

More. She wanted more. He gave her all he had, praying it would be enough to make her stay, to make her last beyond the space of the moonlight. Her cry spilled out like a Banshee's wail as she came, her orgasm locking her tightly around him. He forced himself home for the final thrust as he broke within her. His seed drenched her quivering muscles, and still she milked him for more.

He bucked within her helplessly as she drained him of his seed. At last he grew still within her, collapsing to lie at her side. Regret claimed him as she rolled toward him, her lips soft and sweet as she turned to kiss him in the dark. "Stay," he begged, though he knew it was no use. "Stay here with me." Wherever here was.

It was no use. Already her body grew lighter, her form more translucent. He pushed up into her one last time, but he was too late.

"I would stay if I could," she sobbed, her voice already far away. "Find me, Balthain. Please. I need more than this. I need you..."

"I will find you," he promised, though he did not know whether she could still hear him. "I will find you, and I will claim my prize. You will be mine," he whispered to the empty darkness. "For more than just a passing encounter in the night."

## Chapter Four

“Mother!”

Balthain jerked awake as the doors to the common room crashed open. The dream that was more real than any dream instantly faded into the past as his hands found the hilts of his swords. He stepped into the shadows as he opened his door, ducking low, ready to roll and come up fighting.

’Twas Tranorva, with a man in her arms, broken and bloody. Evalayna appeared, immediately clearing the table in the center of the room with a gesture that sent pottery flying. No armed intruders followed Tranorva into the room. Balthain took one more quick look into the hallway before he pulled his tunic over his head and strapped on his sword belt properly.

The common room had already come to life. The body Tranorva had deposited on the table was not that of the Dark Elf she had called Élandine. This creature was Fey. Still, he looked a great deal like the Mage Shammall who had once been in the employ of Lady Evalayna.

Balthain shook his head in consternation. The fear in Tranorva’s eyes could not be misread. Clearly this man owned her heart. ’Twas certainly the same man whose arms she’d wrapped around her there on the ship’s deck. Élandine and Shammall were one and the same? It was a Changeling, then. A shapeshifter. Lady Evalayna must have sent it into Élahandara as a mole. If it was Evalayna’s mole, that explained how the Dark Elf had escaped Balthain’s tower guards all those months ago. Mere mortals could never hope to keep one such as this under lock and key.

Whoever, *whatever* he was, he was dying. Blood stained his naked chest, flowing from a wound that would not be stemmed. A horrid sucking sound accompanied each indrawn breath, and his life force ran down his chest with each shallow gasp. Blood



tainted the pale lips as the four Shamans converged around the pallid body. The four chanted quickly in unison, their language older than any he understood, as mysterious in its own way as the soft lyrics of Thieves' Cant.

"Stay with me," Tranorva begged, the fear in her voice as tangible as the taste of rain in the air.

Balthain caught the Childling to him, trying to shield her eyes from the blood. "The Shamans will save him, little one. Do not fear. Come away from here with me."

"No," she whispered, though she buried her face against his chest. "I must stay. I have a part in this."

The chant shifted, the rhythm as familiar as life itself, and Balthain found himself repeating the words.

*Eight diamonds form the star.*

*One for the Wind, the Breath of Life.*

*Two for Water, that lends us sustenance.*

*Three for the Wolf, Endurance and Faithfulness.*

*Four for the Bear, Courage and Strength.*

*Five for the Cat, Swift and Cunning.*

*Six for the Falcon, Freedom and Vision.*

*They come together in the center,*

*Earth, Our Mother.*

Back on the tundra after the Orc attack Cassadara had had them join hands, the healthy ones lending their strength to heal the wounded. Those men had been his friends, his handpicked guard. They had been nothing to Cassadara, except for their fear and their scorn. She had risked her life for those men.

Balthain stepped forward, the Childling at his side, slipping easily into the circle that opened to welcome him. The others followed his lead, supporting the Shamans with their strength.

Dahlai ducked between them now to make her way to the wounded Mage's side, where she shook off her Childling's disguise, once again becoming the ethereal beauty who had threatened Balthain's sanity. The Shamans ceased their chanting as the Fey creature stretched out her hand. "Heal," she ordered in a voice that was not her own. Pale blue energy like fire flew from her fingertips, searing the wound shut.

Balthain reached for her as the energy faded, collecting her in his arms. She seemed to be fading away, her body already lighter, her form nearly translucent. For one fleeting moment he dared to believe he'd captured the Succubus in his arms. Then her eyes opened and she looked up at him with the Childling's trusting gaze. Balthain took a deep breath to steady himself as he settled her into the velvet settee.

\* \* \*

He was a fool. Find her? Find a dream. How could he find what did not exist? He was not bound to any promise he'd made in the dark. Truly he had been too long without a woman. It was time to forget the Succubus of his dreams and move on.

'Twould not be easy, leaving a lover was never easy, but he'd had to do it before. A man grew older and the demands on him changed. Leaving Maribeth's had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done, even with her telling him it was time to go. Letting go of the Succubus who inhabited his dreams would be even harder. How could a man walk away from a dream? Balthain saw her everywhere now, imagined her to take every disguise. Just now she appeared before him as a child in a woman's body.

Dahlai paced the common room in long strides that wrapped the sheer gauze of her gown more tightly around her, showing off both her beautiful body and her agitation. Balthain attempted to quiet her fears, as much for the sake of his sanity as for hers. "The Mage will recover now. We must let him sleep for a while. You should rest as well. You have expended much energy."

"I cannot sleep. I am too angry."

Truthfully, the anger only lent to her beauty as she paced the room.

She was a child.

No matter how beautiful the image before him appeared, the body belonged to a child. Balthain tried to concentrate on her story as she paced, her agitation reminding him of a caged cat.

"Mother wanted so much for me to see Tir na nÓg for myself. I am glad she is not here. 'Twould kill her to see the reception we have received."

"Has she been in Élahandara a long time?"

"Since the days of the war with the Élandra at Talandar. The *Sidhe* are nearly immortal. I was born in Élahandara."

Half Fey, half Élandra. He'd figured as much from the color of her skin, though one could never be sure. He wondered now if all the Fey were Changelings, or if Shammall or Élandine -- or whoever he was -- was the exception.

"Mother fell in love with a Dark Male. The males are virtually slaves within the Élandra, you know. The Priestesses train the males from birth to serve their every need. For my father to dare to defy the priestesses by falling in love was unthinkable. He and my mother survived together in secret for many years, until I was born. Then Géndalaine discovered their secret and she killed my father. Now Mother is watched carefully, so that she might not escape."

"She has been held prisoner for over sixty years? Can she not simply turn into a butterfly and fly away?"

"The keeps are protected against magic. She could not change her form while within the dungeons. And above all, the *Sidhe* are loyal. Mother would never have left without her lover, and after he was killed, they used me to hold her there. She would not have left without me. Then too, once I was born and Géndalaine discovered Mother's true identity she was more closely guarded. Fools that they are, the Élandra fear retribution from the forces of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*. Not that any would appear to be coming. These people do nothing but revel and sleep off their drunken stupors. The Dark Elves themselves were more honorable!"

Balthain smiled. For a creature with an infinite lifespan, this one possessed little patience. "Sixty years is a long time to spend in captivity, little one. Perhaps your mother has grown used to the place, and prefers to stay."

Dahlai spun to face him, her temper flaring. "What is sixty years in the life of a *Sidhe*? At this rate, 'twill be another sixty 'fore I find a way to help her escape."

"You escaped," Balthain pointed out.

"I followed my mistress. 'Twas no more than was expected of me. 'Twas my duty. The Lady Tranorva is our High Priestess and I am her bondswoman."

Bondswoman. A slave. Tranorva treated her more like a ward. Balthain nodded his head slowly. "So you just walked out the front gates. The simplest way is always the best. Tell me more of Élahandara, and the prisoners held there. Were there more of my kind within those walls?"

Dahlai paused in her pacing, turning to face him, her hands immediately moving to twirl a strand of hair around her fingers. "There are many from the Bear Clan within the keeps of Élahandara. Some of the first ones have grown old and passed on, but their children live trapped in the caverns beneath the earth, the slaves of the Élandra, working the mines. Hundreds of your people yet survive in Élahandara."

Balthain assessed Dahlai shrewdly. "Conveniently held prisoner, I imagine, quite near your mother."

It was Dahlai's turn to smile. "Naturally."

This was the information she'd given the Lady Evalayna, then. Balthain felt himself drawn into the argument he'd tried so hard to avoid on the ship. Hundreds of prisoners held deep in the heart of Élahandara -- an impregnable fortress the length of a mountain.

Hundreds of General Tranorva's people. Not his. They hadn't been his people since he'd found himself alone on the streets decades ago.

He was a Mercenary, damn it. Not some damn hero out to rescue captive butterflies. Nor anyone else for that matter. Not unless there was a bloody big paycheck attached.

Yet somewhere deep in the dungeons of Élahandara his parents might yet be alive.

Mines. Cold, damp, carved stone tunnels deep within the earth. He hated dark, closed-in spaces. He'd spent decades making sure he never had to go back into places like that. Élahandara no less. Roahr was right. This mission meant certain death. The child needed to find herself a hero.

\* \* \*

The sun had slipped below the horizon, and the moons now took their place in the night sky.

The palace was no longer empty.

The King's Court gathered for midnight revelry.

Balthain searched his memory for the long ago tales of his childhood as those legends came to life around him. Everywhere slim, pale, shimmering beings flitted about, sometimes stern-faced and grim, but more often than not bubbling with laughter. They dressed in loose flowing silks as fine as he'd seen in any court, their colors so riotous as to make the Mage's blue silks seem subdued.

The thing that bothered Balthain most was that none of the crowded activity of the Court seemed to have any purpose. There were no guards to challenge their progress, nor sentries keeping watch atop the walls. 'Twas as if life to these people was of no more importance than designing the next outrageous costume to be worn to their midnight revelries.

The revelers grew quiet as the party of Northlanders approached, their expressions neither friendly nor welcoming, though as far as Balthain could tell, neither emotion was habitual for them. Apparently these people did not miss the presence of outsiders visiting their island.

"We should leave," he repeated for the third time that evening. "I like not the feel of this place."

"I cannot simply leave," Élandine managed, though his voice was still weak. Balthain glanced over his shoulder, noting the worried expression on the Fey creature's pale, drawn features. "No one enters or leaves Tir na nÓg without permission."

Balthain wanted to argue that he had already figured out how it could be done, but the Mage was still too weak to even attempt the escape route Balthain had planned, and no one else seemed to suffer from the unease that had gripped him. He tried to shrug off the feeling, but it simply settled deeper.

Though the four Fey who had come to escort the party of Northlanders to the King's Court appeared unarmed, Balthain was sure they were more than they appeared, even as their own Mage was. Everything about them screamed *wrong, wrong!* The King's chamber door began to look more like prison gates.

Balthain shifted his gaze to Roahr VinDall, noting the tension in the older man's shoulders and the way his hands gripped the hilts of his swords. No. He was not alone in his suspicions. He was simply the only one who thought there might be a way out of the current situation.

An escape route that didn't include them all was no way out.

The doors slammed shut behind them, though no hands had touched them. The King stood before them, his expression as angry as it had been at their first meeting.

This time the King's malevolence was clearly aimed at Élandine.

Suddenly everything fell into place. Balthain cursed himself for an idiot. He had been so focused on the Childling that he had missed the obvious. The King's wrath had never been aimed at Dahlai.

"Guards!" the King hissed, anger shimmering across his features in a fresh wave. All about the court the small jewel-like Faerie ornaments sprung to life. "Seize the abomination!"

The clang of drawn steel rang out across the room. The butterflies took on the look of angry predators too soon awakened from their naps. To have come so far, only to die... even one such as Élandine -- or Shammall -- or whatever his name was -- did not deserve this.

"It is a good day to die," Balthain observed out loud as his swords jumped into his hands. Though he did not have time to look he could feel the presence of his Guild-brother at his back as their circle closed protectively around the weakened Mage. Balthain heard the slight creak as Yarwyn drew back on her ancient bow Nemesis. The room took on an eerie glow as the four Shamans' staffs caught the charge of their wielders' anger. The Faerie Guard circled slowly, approaching the party with due caution, but closing in, all the same.

Roahr VinDall's deep voice flowed out over the room, promising, challenging, urging the King to see reason. "There are but twelve of us, while you have a full company of guards here, King, and no doubt many more such at your disposal. Still, I promise you, we will not go quietly. Truly this one has many crimes to answer for, yet he is ours, and we will not part with him easily. How many of your people is this one's life worth?"

"Surely you did not bring Élandine back just to end his life," Balthain offered, using his voice to sooth and to calm. "Let us deal with the Changeling's crimes in our own way, in our own courts. For surely it was our kind he injured first."

But it was Ayaila who stepped away from the center of their circle to stand directly in front of the King, her eyes snapping with anger. "The boy has done no more than ye would have, no' so many years ago, Pajja. Leave him be."

Pajja. So. The King had a name, or at least a nickname a mortal might use. There was command in Ayaila's voice, power that Balthain could feel permeate the air, and a hint of something unnamed that had once passed between them. Memories shimmered in the old one's eyes, then faded into aged regrets. "Shaymmadah Lochlairnen Élanadhache, by your own admissions you have broken the tenants of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*. You know well the punishment for such transgressions. Yet I will hear your words. What say you in your own defense?"

Shaymma -- right. Balthain eyed Élandine critically. The Mage might be alive, but he was still weak. They could not count on much help from that one.

Élandine kept his hold on Tranorva as he turned to face the wrath in the old King's eyes. "House Lindall has been my charge since you assigned me to House Lindall those many decades ago, Your Highness. I have done my best to serve well and honor our Code. When Lady Tranorva was taken by the Élandra, I sought the help of the gods. As you know, for such guidance there is always a price."

The King appeared to be listening at least, though his scowl did not soften. "How does that price absolve your guilt, Shaymmadah? You have broken our laws. The price of your transgression is death."

Balthain's grip on the Childling tightened spasmodically.

"Every tenet of *Sidhe* Law states that my first duty is to protect my charges, Your Highness. The bargain the gods offered was steep, but Lady Tranorva's life was the price of my honor. I agreed to be bound to this Human. Her fate is my fate. I live as she lives. I will die as she dies. Our destinies are as one. *Sidhe* law no longer applies to me, Your Highness. I am Clan of the Bear. I answer to no one but the Lady Tranorva."

A murmur ran through the gathered Faerie Guards as Élandine turned, dropping to one knee before Tranorva, his long shimmering white locks cascading over his shoulders as he raised his face to her. "I place myself in your hands, M'Lady. I offer no apologies for the life I have lived. By now you know too much of my past to think me an innocent. Judge my transgressions as you will, M'Lady. I will accept your punishment."

Tranorva laid her hand on his cheek. "Give me a lifetime to decide on thy fate, my heart. Whatever ye have done, whatever mistakes ye have made, ye have already paid the price, when ye sacrificed thy life for mine."

The King didn't look at all convinced. Balthain found no reason to sheath his swords. "*Sidhe* is not a name you can choose to cast aside, Shaymmadah. You can no more remove yourself from the race you were born to than you can change your own history. We have but two commandments. No *Sidhe* shall do harm to another of our kind. Nor shall he abandon his charges. You know these commandments well. You have broken both of these commands, and for this you have forfeited your life."



Élandine rose and spun to face the King. Anger restored much of the strength to his weakened form. "I have done many things of which I am not proud, Your Highness, but never, *never* have I broken my vows to my race or to my House." The Mage waved his hand toward the pixie-like guards. "Stand down, brethren, lest you, too, violate the rules of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, and find it necessary to arrest yourselves. There is no substance to these charges. If I must answer to the Laws of the *Sidhe*, I demand a Court of Inquiry before the Tribunal, as is my right."

The King swept his hand in a gesture that included all of their small party. "Think you that those gathered here will not testify against you? What one here have you not injured? You have lived a life of lies, Shaymmadah Élanadhache, and now the time has come to pay the price. But if a court you wish, so shall it be." The King waved his hand in a careless gesture. "Do you all agree to accept the ruling of the Tribunal?"

Roahr VinDall swept the small party with his gaze, securing a nod from each in turn. "We do, Your Highness."

"Then you shall be treated as guests, not prisoners, for the sake of old friendships. But even guests must obey the laws of Tir na nÓg. You will surrender your weapons and agree not to attempt to leave Tir na nÓg until after the Tribunal decides Shaymmadah's fate. Shaymmadah shall be confined to his quarters until the Tribunal convenes. Once the Tribunal reaches its decision, you will be escorted back to your ship. Your weapons will be returned to you then. You will never reveal the location of Tir na nÓg, nor shall you be welcome to return here."

"Why would we want to come back?" Dahlai demanded angrily.

Balthain could think of a few reasons, all of them involving the use of munitions that would permanently change the landscape of the isle, but he held his tongue on the matter.

Roahr looked to each member of the party. One by one they indicated with a gesture or a slight movement of their heads acceptance of the King's terms, though none spoke aloud. "I like not the idea of surrendering my weapons, but we will accept

your conditions,” Roahr announced, his voice carrying easily through the chamber. “I lay my swords into your hands for safekeeping, Your Highness.”

Balthain stepped forward to unload his personal arsenal onto the table before the King. The matched short swords were joined soon by a jeweled dagger and four throwing knives.

Lord Mâkakao divested himself of his twin scimitars. Seanen’s weapons collection outdid even Balthain’s, as he carried, besides his grandfather’s double bladed axe, a short bow and three daggers, as well as several handfuls of the polished throwing stars he kept handy in case of emergency.

It was Yarwyn, though, who caused the biggest stir in the crowd of onlookers. In addition to her bow Nemesis, an artifact Balthain had heard was gifted with magical powers, the tiny Elven woman divested herself of a thin bladed rapier, a short sword, a long bladed dagger, and a dozen assorted throwing knives, as well as a ceremonial dirk that looked extremely efficient.

Tyrell surrendered his staff, as did Cassadara and Evalayna, but Ayaila leaned heavily on her gnarled old stick, as if daring the King to say anything.

The King pondered the pile of weapons before him thoughtfully, slowly stroking his chin. “For the sake of our friendship, Lady Ayaila, I shall not ask you to surrender your staff, but think not to use your powers against me. The boy must accept his fate. He demands trial. I expect you to acknowledge the court’s authority, no matter what the verdict.”

Ayaila grinned at the King in a way that made Balthain want to make sure he never accidentally entered her line of fire. “Staff? This old walking stick? Only a Mage would think a stick could contain a Shaman’s power. My stick merely helps an old woman to support her frail bones.”

The King shook his head, still eyeing her dubiously. “The trial shall begin tomorrow night at moonrise. In the meantime, you are welcome to join us in our revelries this moonrise. Feel free to explore Tir na nÓg. Although we open our gates to

few, our hospitality is unsurpassed. The only restriction I place on you is that none of your party may leave before the Tribunal reaches a verdict.”

## Chapter Five

Tranorva strode to the balcony doors, her fingers immediately trying the strength of the latch, only to find the doors unlocked. She peered down at the courtyard three stories below. "I know no' what to call ye."

He moved to stand behind her, his fingers resting on the curve of her waist. "Names may change to fit the occasion, M'Lady."

"Ye warned me that I would no' find thy true name suited to my tongue."

"I care not what you call me, M'Lady, as long as your heart calls mine home."

His hand asked her to turn to face him. Instead she braced her arms against the balustrade, sucking in fresh air as she looked down. "By the gods, what I wouldn't give for a piece of stout rope right now."

"Tranorva."

"Perhaps Mother could make us all invisible, so that we could simply walk away..."

"Tranorva, my heart, look at me, please."

She turned slowly to face him, her eyes meeting his at last, even as the tears streamed down her face. "The gods are heartless, to have given me what I asked, only to take it away again. What am I to do? My strength lies in my hands. I was never good at politics. I know no' how to persuade your *Sidhe* Tribunal to give me that which I desire most, except to snap their tiny necks in two."

The Faerie creature before her wiped her tears away with his thumbs. "Do not think about tomorrow, my love. I have learned that the time we have together is precious. Tomorrow will come soon enough. I need to hold you now, to remember what we have together, and what I must fight for." He pulled her into his arms,

silencing her protest with a kiss meant to remind her of all they had missed over the long journey here, of all they stood to lose next moonrise.

“Élandine... *Beautiful One*. That shall always be my favorite.” She breathed his name like a benediction as his hands busied themselves sliding up under her light mail, her body soft and pliant under his touch. “By the gods I have missed ye. I feared I would have no more of ye than the shadow of what ye had been, sealed away in my heart.”

“’Twas torture for me, as well, my love, to be so close, close enough to touch you, to smell you, to taste you, yet farther away than when you were lost to me in the depths of Élahandara. You were all that remained of my life that was real to me. I need to touch you now, I need to hold your body against mine. I need to feel --”

But she was already way ahead of what his pitiful attempts with words could explain. With the same speed and efficiency as she might have dressed had their camp been attacked in the night, Tranorva stripped out of her Mithral mail and her soft leather undertunic, throwing her kilt atop the careless pile as she reached for him with greedy hands, paying no mind to the costly silks that stood barrier between her and his skin.

More memories came flooding back, torturing him with remembered lust as her hands -- hands strong enough to wield that huge double-bladed axe -- stroked over his chest with a touch so delicate that it threatened his resolve.

Tears stole down her cheeks again as she bent her head to kiss the spot where Maelyn’s knife had entered his chest. Élandine brushed them away as he tilted her face up to meet his. “Do not cry, my love. Let us spend what time we have making memories we both shall cherish.”

Tranorva pulled away slightly. “What time we have? Ye mean what time we have left. Ye mean to do it again, don’t ye? Ye will leave me again. Ye mean to sacrifice thyself, rather than trust in my strength and the strength of our clans.”

Élandine tried to pull her close again, to bury her fears in kisses, but she would have nothing but the truth. “I shall plead my case before the Court of Inquiry, and I

shall do my very best to persuade them I have committed no crime worthy of my death."

Anger glittered off her everywhere as she stood before him, a naked Warrior goddess whose eyes flashed danger. "Ye do no' expect to win."

"If there were any likelihood I would win, the charges would not have been accepted against me, and court would not have been convened."

"Then we must escape, all of us, now! I will no' see ye executed before me once more."

"This thing would follow me, love. I would spend the rest of my years running. I cannot live like that. I cannot ask you to live like that. I will face the Court of Inquiry, and I will present my case. Mayhap with all of your strength behind me, and three generations of those I have served to testify, I may yet plead my cause sufficiently to persuade the Court of Inquiry to rule in my favor."

Tranorva drew in a shaky breath. "Ye will at least try. Ye will defend thyself. No more noble sacrifices?"

She knew him too well. "We are a race of martyrs, my love, but for you I will fight. I will plead my case before the Court of Inquiry, and though it goes against five thousand years of tradition, I will contest the charges, and if it can be done, I will win."

"That is all I ask of ye, my love. For the rest, trust in thy clans. We will defend ye."

Élandine rested his forehead against hers, allowing his eyes to slide shut. "That, my love, frightens me more than anything else. If I lose, you cannot fight. I will not have the deaths of all I hold dear on my conscience for the rest of eternity."

Tranorva's voice was entirely too calm as she answered. "Then ye must be sure ye do no' lose, my love."

\* \* \*

Evalayna paced the length of the chamber, rubbing her hands over her arms for warmth in a way that had nothing to do with the temperature in the room. "I think he means to plead guilty."

Roahr nodded his head. "'Twould be logical. He is guilty."

Evalayna shook her head. "Shammall would never have done anything contrary to the good of House Lindall. Whatever he did he did because he thought it was the best way to serve my mother's house. I am angry with him, as well, for allowing me to think ye dead, yet no matter what the reason, if Shammall stands before the Court of Inquiry and chooses no' to defend himself, he will be sentenced to death. Tranorva will never allow that execution to take place. And if she chooses to fight..."

"We will all die at her side," Roahr finished. "And if Shammall lives, if we persuade him to take us into the heart of Élahandara on this foolish mission of our daughter's, we will still die."

He could withstand anything but the sudden tears that streamed down Evalayna's cheeks. He went to her, gathered her into his arms as he kissed the back of her neck. "Fear not, my love. We will fight if we must, and we will die if that is the will of the gods. Let us spend what time we have left more profitably than worrying over our impending doom."

\* \* \*

Revelers danced in the streets, laughing and swaying drunkenly to the music as if unaware of the serious issues that would be decided on tomorrow's eve. Balthain watched them, wishing he could forget long enough to join their light-hearted fun. Instead he studied the city as Rat might have studied a mark's territory long ago. There had to be a way out. There was always a way out.

Visions of the woman Dahlai could become distracted him. He felt no such feelings for her Childling's form. Yet the Fey form reminded him so much of the Succubus of his dreams...

Such thoughts were inappropriate. She was just a child. No matter what her appearance -- no matter that she had been on this earth longer than he himself -- she was still a child according to the laws of her people.

It was time to forget the Succubus. Time to lock her out of his nights while some sanity remained to him. He needed a woman, damn it. Were there no taverns, no

whores to be found in this city? He gripped the terrace rail tightly, willing this edgy unrest to dissipate. The timing was wrong. The...

"Balthain?" She slipped a soft hand through the crook of his arm. "I was worried when I could not find you."

"Do not tempt me with this form, child. I am but a mortal."

She grinned at him as she twirled beside him, reveling in her ethereal form. "She is beautiful, is she not? Can you not see why my father risked his life to love her? It's terribly romantic, in a tragic way."

"Speak in the common tongue, Childling, that I might understand you," Balthain snapped.

Surprise lit her shimmering features. "I thought you knew. A woman does not receive her true form until she comes of age. I have borrowed the form of my mother, Tâkuri. Else I would not be able to shift."

Balthain blinked slowly as he stared at the woman before him. This, this was the Childling's mother?

He could feel the cold, dark stone walls of Élahandara closing in around him. By the gods, he was in trouble.

\* \* \*

Élandine tangled his fingers in the length of her thick black hair. "My people are martyrs by nature, but you have given me something worth fighting for, my love. I want to be on *The Maiden's Voyage* with you when she pulls up anchor from Tir na nÓg."

"*The Maiden's Voyage*? Ye know of our ship? Ye were aware, then, the entire time?"

Élandine bent his head slightly to nuzzle her neck just below her ear. "Not the entire time. I was farther away, at first, in a place that was gray and cold, and then you called me back. I could feel your heart calling to mine, and I reached for you, but I could not touch you."



Her head tilted out of his way as her voice became husky with both need and remembrance. "Once, on the ship, I almost thought ye were there, trying to touch me, trying to make me understand that ye were with me."

"I was there. It was the oddest thing, standing there beside you, watching you speak to me, even though the thing you called by my name, this flesh that you prize so, stood behind you. I knew you could not see me, yet somehow I felt as if you understood that I was there... I wanted so much to be able to touch you, to hold you..."

Élandine touched her now the way he'd wanted to as they stood together on the ship's deck, his hands stroking slowly over her skin, as if memorizing her all over again. "We have had so little time together. I am not ready to give you up. Yet I fear you may learn more of me than you wish come the moonrise. Try not to think too badly of me, my love."

Tranorva's hands, strong enough to wield that mighty battleaxe, shattered him with their gentleness as she traced over his shoulders and down across his chest, pausing now to outline the scar over his heart. "I know who ye are, Élandine. I know thy life has been long enough already to take ye places I will never go. I neither envy ye the good nor think it my duty to chastise ye for decisions ye have made in the past. Ye came back to me. That is enough."

He could feel his heart lurch beneath her fingers. "Is it, my love? Why? Sometimes I think you see more in me than I see in myself."

She smiled, though her smile spoke of a sadness where it tipped the corners of her eyes. "Why? Count the number of times that we have come together, love. Ye will no' need but the fingers of one hand. I am well past my youth, past what most would consider my marriageable age. Yet no suitor sought my hand. I meant no' to keep my body reserved for thee alone. I dared no' hope that ye would even see me as a woman instead of a responsibility. Yet no man save thee would have me. Why did ye no' fear me, as most men do?"

"Men fear your skill with your axe. Men fear your strength. That is not who you are. That is what you do."

Tranorva bent her head to press her lips against the scar over his heart. "Why were ye the one who saw past the job I do to the woman who has loved ye for most of her life? And how could I no' do the same? What ye have done is no' who ye are, Élandine. It is the man beneath the job that I fell in love with."

His arms tightened around her, claspings her tightly against his chest, that she might not see the tears blurring his vision and clumping his lashes into thick spikes. "I have lain with other women in my life, Tranorva. You know that. But still you are the first, the first woman who ever wanted to know the man beneath the disguises, the first who has ever touched my heart. What I feel for you frightens me as no weapon's edge ever could. I would kill for you. I would --"

Tranorva broke his revelry with a short right jab to the ribs. "Ye would what? Ye would die for me? I think no', ye bloody fool. If ye ever do anything that stupid again ye best pray the knife does its job the first try, or I swear I will strangle ye with my own hands. To the nine hells with the bloody noble sacrifices! I will have no martyrdom on my hands, do ye understand me? If ye can think of no better way out of a fight than falling on a bloody damn knife, then leave the thinking to me!"

"Ouch! I think you have broken my ribs, woman."

Immediately her hand moved to probe the spot where she'd punched him, but he wasn't there. Faster than the eye could follow he was gone, standing three meters away, directly in front of the bed. And he was laughing.

Irritation furrowed Tranorva's brows into one solid slash across her forehead. "Will ye turn into a butterfly next, or a dragon?"

He dropped slowly to one knee as she advanced cautiously toward him. "What would you have, my love? I am yours to command."

"I would have honesty between us. And trust."

"Aye. If it kills me."

"I would have thy heart."

"It is yours."

Tranorva eyed the hand he clasped against his chest warily. "Kindly leave it beating. In thy chest."

The laughter lit his face still. "You drive a hard bargain, M'Lady."

Tranorva took his hands and drew him back to his feet. "I would have ye as my equal, always. Neither above me nor below me."

The laughter lived in his eyes, now, as his hands became very serious. She shivered as he reached for her, drawing her close against his hard, lean body. "Side by side, then." His mouth closed over hers, sweeping away all coherent thought as he invaded, plundering wantonly.

Yet he was not the only one who could take what he wanted. Tranorva pushed the silks back over his shoulders, needing to feel the warmth of his skin under her hands, the pulse that beat in his veins. "Ye came back to me," she whispered.

"To you, love. To you and you alone. Nothing else but the love I bear you would have persuaded me to don these mortal clothes again. What is the expanse of the heavens to a man alone? I missed you."

Her lips brushed against his, tasting, as her fingers traced over his arms, then slid lower, freeing the tie that held his silks at the waist. His breath caught against her lips as her hands covered the smooth curve of his hips, then moved forward, his already hard cock growing impossibly larger as she captured her prize.

One moment they were standing at the foot of the bed. The next they were atop it, rolling side by side as Élandine's kisses traced the path of the blue runes that ran down her neck and on, toward her right breast.

Tranorva had never thought her breasts much more than an annoyance. They made armor harder to fit, and she'd never be any good with a bow. She forgot to be annoyed with them, though, once his mouth found the valley between them, tracing down the length of her breastbone, awakening sensitive nerves as his kisses moved closer and closer to the nipples that stabbed at him.

His kisses didn't linger there, however. His tongue merely teased each aching tip before he moved on, leaving his thumbs to trace circles against dampened flesh.

Her hands fisted in the bedclothes now as she arched against him, her breasts on fire, straining to press themselves into his hands, while his kisses moved lower. She understood, suddenly, what he was about. He meant to use his tongue as Géndalaine had, to --

She nearly shrieked as his tongue slipped between her folds, bucking her hips up off the bed as her body coalesced into a writhing pool of need centered between her legs. His hands moved down, abandoning her aching breasts, to spread her wide like a feast, his tongue licking and sucking everywhere but where she wanted it. "Élandine," she gasped as he slipped a finger inside her.

It was too much. Too many sensations at once as he licked and sucked and blew his breath softly over the head of her clitoris. She wanted... she needed... she heard him groan as she raised her own hands to knead the aching points of her nipples, rolling them gently between her fingers, then not so gently. His fingers moved within her as his tongue slid back and forth, outlining her clit, passing close, so close.

Too much. His assault was too much to withstand. She thrust at him with her hips, grasped at him with her hands, calling his name as she reached blindly for fulfillment. "Élandine," she moaned. "I need ye. I need to feel ye within me."

He was gone. Cool air struck her tender exposed flesh, sending more waves of sensation washing over her. She opened her eyes in time to see the slender Fey form she loved roll to his feet.

*Sidhe.*

Childhood tales and mythical legends passed through her memory as he rose to stand above her, drawing her toward him at the edge of the bed. She was making love with a *Sidhe*, a Faerie creature from the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, on the island of Tir na nÓg. It was all too fantastic to be believed. She was asleep, a prisoner still at Élahandara, where she would awake at any moment to find the High Priestess Géndalaine ready to resume her torture. Surely the beautiful Fey creature who stood looking down at her was too perfect to be real.

He had a name. A name that was his own, to which he would answer before the King's Court on the morrow. She practiced it again to herself before she attempted it out loud.

"It is said in my people's myths of the *Sidhe* that if ye learn the true name of a Faerie ye take possession of his soul."

The smile erased some of the lines of stress that had seemed etched permanently around his eyes. "You cannot take what you already own."

"Shaymmadah..."

His breath drew in sharply.

"Shaymmadah Lochlairnen Élanadhache."

His hands slid behind her knees to lift her legs around his hips as he slid deep within her, his long, thick cock filling her completely. "Tranorva, Lady VinDall. Know me. 'Tis I who would claim you. Shaymmadah Lochlairnen Élanadhache. I love you, M'Lady."

She moaned aloud as he thrust deep within her, hot forged steel fresh from the anvil sizzling in a pool of liquid need. She wrapped around him tightly, attempting to pull him even farther within her, straining to hold him, to become one with him. He moved within her at a speed so slow it was clearly designed to torment, but the heat between them built like the flames of the forge, the rhythm of their bodies the bellows that fanned the coals. She raised her hips to him with each thrust, her heels pulling at his hips, her hands knotted in the bedclothes as she strained to reach him.

Tranorva lost all coherent thought as he filled her again and again, each stroke long and slow and designed to drive her insane. She clutched at him, pulling him closer, her voice giving way to sharp cries of pleasure as she convulsed around him, her Warrior's strength broken now with the urgency of her need, but his control would not be broken. Somewhere in the dim recesses of her mind she feared the strain might be too much for a man who had bled in her arms only hours ago, but he was Fey, *Sidhe*, and perhaps not subject to the laws of mere human healing.

"Sing for me," he panted, his body glistening with a fine sheen of sweat as he pumped into her. "Sing for me, daughter of the Bear. I want to hear you sing."

She could not, not here, not with their clansmen so close. She could not... but she could not refuse him. Could not have contained the song had she tried. The cry broke from her lips as she came, low and harsh and throaty, the triumphant roar of a mating grizzly.

That snapped his control. She rose with him to the quick fevered pitch as he drove into her, hard and hot and demanding as the need overtook him. The gush of his hot seed sated her as he broke within her, his own cry following hers, loud enough for the entire Court to hear. She understood then. He wanted no discretion. He had claimed her publicly for both her people and his to understand. Her voice rose with his as she shattered around him, triumphant in its song.

"I love ye, Élandine," she murmured against his neck.

He poised over her, his arms trembling with exhaustion, a sated smile on his lips. The lines of strain around his eyes were gone now, nothing but her reflecting from their dark depths. "And I love you, my Warrior woman. You are mine, Tranorva. I will not part from you again."

## Chapter Six

The smell of exotic spices filled the air. She was back again. He knew her. Had known her for years. More than years. Almost two decades, now. She'd lived in his dreams since he was a boy on the streets. He'd know her in whatever form she chose to take. He'd meant to stay awake, or at least close enough to awake to remember -- something. He was supposed to remember something. It was hard to think with her hands on him, cupping his chin as she kissed him, feathering through his hair...

There was something he needed to say to her -- something he needed to remember. He couldn't quite grasp it. Still, Balthain pushed her away resolutely. "This is wrong. Why are you here? Leave me in peace. A man's dreams should be private."

"I cannot leave you." The voice was low and sexy, making promises he knew she could fulfill. At least while he slept. "You are mine, Balthain. You have always been mine." She leaned in to kiss him, robbing him of all conscious thought for a moment as her sharp little teeth nipped at his lip.

"I'm still asleep. You are the Succubus from my dreams."

He fought to remember, even as his body responded to her presence. "You are the Succubus from my dreams, come to steal my soul." The woman I love, he wanted to add. But he did not.

"How can I steal what you do not own?" An edgy tinge of humor now, somehow at his expense. "Find me, Balthain. I need you."

"I don't know how to find you. Not when I'm awake."

"Follow your heart. Follow your dreams. I need you..." Was there a note of desperation in her voice? "I'm waiting for you. I am your prize. Claim me."

There was something he needed to remember... He held her at arm's length, but that wasn't distance enough. He was still close enough to smell the soft perfume of her

skin, to feel the way she trembled under his touch. He'd never had the strength to push her away before. "You're real, aren't you? You exist outside of my dreams," he whispered, almost as certain as he tried to sound.

The whole feel of the dream changed so quickly he almost forgot he was dreaming. The woman stared at him, as if willing him to see her for who she was, though her features were still hard to read in the darkness. Her hands on his arms tightened their grip, her fingers digging in to him the way she might have grasped him had she been falling. "You understand, now? Rat? Are you awake? Can you still hear me?"

"I think I'm still asleep, but I can see you, hear you, as if I were awake."

"Do not fear me, Balthain. I mean you no harm."

He smiled at that. "Fear you, M'Lady? I might as well fear a butterfly."

"You know what I am?"

"You are Fey. *Sidhe*. And you are yet the Succubus I met in the dreaming."

He could hear the desperation in her voice. "Will you remember me when you wake up?"

"Aye, M'Lady. I always remember you."

"Praise the gods..." Her voice shook, and she paused to draw in a steadying breath. "Rat. Balthain. I need your help. Please. I would not ask for myself. I am not important. But my daughter... She is too young. I cannot make her understand. I fear the worst. She has not learned the wisdom of time. She does not yet accept fate and her capricious games. My daughter has escaped, yet I know not whether she is safe. And I fear she will try to free me, at her own peril. She is too young, too brave, too --"

"Too loyal to her mother," Balthain finished. "Dahlai loves you, Tâkuri, and she can be rash at times, but she is wiser in the way of the world than you think. She is also safe. She is with me."

"You know -- but how -- Dahlai is with you? At House Yarishet?"

"At Tir na nÓg."



He could feel her shaking as she pressed her fingers to her mouth. "Tir na nÓg... she is safe, then. Praise be to the gods." Tâkuri came into focus now as her inner light shimmered about her. 'Twas the body he'd seen Dahlai borrow, yet the face was somehow unique, both familiar and still strangely exotic. "Balthain, please understand, she is a child. I know Dahlai looks older to you, and she is older than any mortal child by a score of years, but we are different. We --"

He pushed her away. "Do you think me a despoiler of children? After what we have shared in the dreaming you know me no better than that? I have no feelings for Dahlai other than those a brother might harbor for a sister he must protect. Or a father for his daughter. She is safe with me."

"I -- forgive me. I should not have -- I did not mean to question your integrity. It is just that..."

"You have slipped into my dreams, but you know not the man behind them," Balthain finished when she trailed off. "After all, I am but a Mercenary. What can you know of me that cannot be bought with a night's entertainment?"

He had never seen her eyes before. They were a deep shade of violet, warm and expressive and seemingly incapable of shielding anything she felt from the world. Or from him. They looked wounded now, stricken. "No, Balthain! Think not that I reached out to you because I thought you could be bought for the price of a dream. I knew no other way to reach you. I have the gift of the dreaming, but never have I been able to reach past the barrier of sleep with my gift. Before, it was a gift, meant for nothing more than the entertainment of my lover, or to teach my daughter of the outside world."

Her gaze turned inward, remembering. "In the last few decades I have attempted to use my gift for something more. You must understand, I was desperate. My little girl was growing up, trapped here with me. I am strong enough to survive, but she had never known anything else, save through my dreams. I spent years searching, attempting to locate one of your kind."

Her eyes told him she spoke the truth, though truth had a way of varying from one observer to another. "I did not come to you in your dreams because you are a

Mercenary. I searched for a member of the Bear Clan. Someone who might have interest enough in those here with me to be willing to help us. The others -- they grow tired within these walls. They are leaving me. Soon they will not care enough to try to escape again. Another few decades and their wills will be broken. We have waited so long..."

"You are not forgotten," Balthain promised, his anger fading in the face of her grief. "Do not lose hope. Your King -- Pajja I have heard him called -- is now aware of your plight. With or without his help, you have my word that we will come for you."

She leaned in to kiss him again. He knew what she was going to do, knew he should stop her. 'Twas wrong, to allow her to pay him with the price of her body. But when her lips touched his, that small boy who hid within him clung to her, wanting the rest to be real, wanting...

"You think too much, Balthain." She kissed him again, her hands splayed through his hair at the back of his neck, pulling him closer with a strength that belied her pale, gossamer appearance. "If there is payment to be made, I have funds in the bank in the City of Portsmouth. With near six decades' interest, I am well able to afford even a Mercenary's price. This, this is for me. For the woman who was alone and afraid until you allowed her into your dreams. Take me, Balthain. Make me believe that what has passed between us is more real than the dreaming. Let me know that you still want me, now that you know who and what I am."

Balthain pulled her against his burning body. His voice sounded gruff to his own ears as he pulled her hips tightly against his. "You are more real to me than anything I can see and touch in the daylight. You consume my thoughts as well as my dreams. I thought I was losing my mind. What kind of a fool falls in love with a dream?"

Tākuri's fingers brushed over his lips. "No. You cannot fall in love with me, Balthain. You know nothing about me..."

"I know enough."

Tears soaked his skin as she buried her face against his chest. "I have wasted my life, Balthain. I have wasted the precious gifts that the gods have bestowed upon my people. I have failed at everything I ever set out to do."

"What have you failed at, M'Lady? You have known love. You have raised a daughter who is as good and kind as you are. You should look back on your years with pride."

"The house that I swore to protect is gone, because of my negligence. The man that I loved was killed because of me and I could not protect him. The few charges that remain to me wither and die about me and I can do nothing for them. The only good thing I have done is to place my daughter in your hands, and that was an accident of fate."

"And what was your house, M'Lady?"

"House VinDall, of the Clan of the Bear in the Northlands. Pajja, as you call him, our King, entrusted House VinDall to me when the baby Roahr was born. Pajja sensed greatness would come from this house. Yet that promise is broken. I failed to protect the line. The House has failed, and the great promise it showed lies in ruins around me."

"Roahr VinDall is here with me at Tir na nÓg. We came here seeking healing for one of your order, a Mage known as Shammall, or Élandine, or perhaps a dozen different names. Roahr's eldest daughter, Tranorva, is now Mistress of House VinDall, and she is determined to rebuild the great houses of the Bear clan."

"Tranorva, High Priestess of Élahandara, is Roahr VinDall's daughter? Roahr is here? There? They told me he was dead..."

Balthain laughed at the memory. "You should have seen the pair of them at the pass of St. Gregory. Never has it been my privilege to see such a battle. Ogre heads did roll... Tranorva fights with a legendary black battleaxe, the blade as big as a man's head, while Roahr wields two ancient broadswords, each a two-handed weapon on any other man. I assure you, Roahr is very much alive."

"I have a house," she whispered. "If I have yet a house, I have a duty to that house."

"You have a house," Balthain assured her. "'Twould seem to me that house has a duty to you, as well. And since we are sworn to the same house, that duty would seem to fall to me. But I warn you. When I find you, I am fool enough to claim my prize."

A small sob shook her as she curled against him, soft and innocently alluring. "You are my kind of fool, Balthain," she assured him. "You make me believe I have something left yet to live for."

"You have everything to live for. Have you not claimed my soul, Succubus?"

Her laughter was shaky at best, a little hiccup in the midst of her tears. "I was so lonely till I found you. So many years locked away here. You were like the gods' gift to me, an answer to my prayers. I did not expect I would be able to persuade you that I was real. I only hoped I could plant the dream in your memory, that someone might find us."

"You were real to me, always. I have long known the difference between what is real and what is illusion. A man of my station learns early to tell the difference, lest he be fooled as he tries to fool others." Balthain brushed his lips over the high ridge of her cheekbone, progressing slowly toward the tip of her faintly pointed ear. "You are too kind. Too concerned for the welfare of others. I sensed this in you at the same time I realized you meant to play me for a mark. You have not the heart of a con-artist, my love."

Her breath caught as he sucked gently on the point of her ear. "'Tis you who have captured my soul," she assured him. "When Dahlai's father was taken from me, I swore I would never love again. Yet another vow I have broken."

He paused, his lips against her ear. "Some vows were meant to be broken."

"I do not love you less because I have loved before, Balthain. Only differently. Perhaps more poignantly because I know there is so little hope for us. Promise me you will be careful, Balthain. Our freedom is not worth the sacrifice of your own."

"You must learn to trust me, M'Lady. I am a cautious man. I have never gone after a prize I have not won." His hands stroked up her body, pulling the fine gossamer dress over her head as he spoke. This time the prize he claimed was her breast, hard-pointed and thrusting, eager for his touch.

She clasped his head against her breast, pushing her nipple harder against his sucking lips and questing tongue, her body shaking as he drew her against his hot,

naked length beneath the bedclothes. "I trust you," she promised. "I love you, Balthain."

His lips grew still against her skin. "I have loved before, M'Lady, yet never have I loved one who has loved me in return."

"You do now. You have claimed my heart. I love you, Balthain." She raised his head to kiss him, long and slow and deep, her tongue exploring his mouth even as she pushed him back against the bed, settling herself atop him, all teasing done as she slid down over his aching erection.

The fires of need and desire warred with his certainty that his fulfillment would leave him alone again. He would have set the pace of their lovemaking slow, made it last as long as possible, so that she might be with him that much longer, yet she set the pace, set it hard and hot and fast. Her head fell back as she rose up over him, her long pale hair floating over his knees as she drove herself down again, her sheath so tight around him that he felt ready to burst at her first stroke, like some untrained schoolboy.

He concentrated on slow, even breaths, the long, smooth curve of her waist under his hands, the small rise of her high, firm breasts -- no, that was not helping at all. He pulled her down atop him to roll them to a side by side position on the narrow bed, wrapping her leg over his hip. "Slow," he whispered. "I want this to last. Too much of my heart goes with you when you leave me."

"We have all day," she promised. "I will not leave you this time."

"Then forget slow," he managed as he rolled once more to kneel above her, her legs wrapped around his waist. He slid a hand between them to guide the thick, pulsing head of his penis over the tiny hard bud of her clit, laughing when she moaned in both pleasure and frustration, grabbing at his hips as she writhed against him, trying to draw him in.

When he trusted himself again he slid back into her, pushing slowly into the tightfisted muscles that opened only far enough to capture him within their grasp before they drew him in farther. His entrance met with a sharp cry of pleasure, and a

thrust of welcome from her upturned pelvis. Her hands pulled at his thighs, shoving even more of his length within her when he would have been gentle.

She pulled her knees forward, so that she held him prisoner, her tight sheath squeezed against him now as he thrust within her. Her slim body shook as he pressed down into her, then drew back, only to fill her again. The first orgasm hit her hard enough that he felt it claw at him like fingers closing around his shaft, making his own need ever more desperate.

He stilled within her, trying to regain his equilibrium while he let her catch her breath. Steady. She would not disappear. He didn't need to rush this, but he could push it as hard as he wanted to. They were on no particular timetable. He took two long, slow, deep breaths.

But her quivering aftershocks destroyed any equilibrium he had gained. He rose up on his knees to surge into her hard and fast once again. This time he lifted her legs high against his shoulders, folding her nearly in half as he pressed down into her. She pulled at him, desperate to reach anything she could touch, her tongue rasping over the ridges of muscle where his shoulders quivered with exertion, her teeth nipping gently, then harder. Harder, faster, deeper. The tight walls of her vagina made a wet, sucking sound as they pulled at him, and his balls slapped hard against her ass as he shoved himself home.

His balls were ready to burst with the strain of waiting, but he wanted. He needed. More. More. He wanted so much more. He wanted to brand her, to mark her, to let the world know she was his, so that no matter how far away she might wake in the morning, no other man would dare touch her. Her nails raked over his back, raising welts that only pushed him harder. Would the smell of his seed on her permeate the dream world to reach to the other? Did she mean to leave a sign to mark him as well?

Balthain rode her like a man possessed, determined that at the very least she would want no other. And as she broke under him again, as she gasped out his name, he felt his own blood where her nails had broken the skin as she urged him on. She

twisted her head to nip hard at his left nipple, holding him when he tried to jerk out of her reach.

He screamed as he came, the roar of an enraged grizzly filling the Faerie castle as he emptied himself into her, knowing that his release was no release at all, for she would not be there when he awoke.

She screamed as well, but it was a scream of pain and fear. He felt other arms, other hands, pulling at her, jerking her to her feet, as she fought them, fought to stay in his world. "Find me," she screamed as he reached for her, trying to pull her back as he fought off the other hands, just before an angry Élandra Priestess struck him hard with her staff. He could see her face clearly for just a moment, could see her mouthing words he could not understand as she sought to reach him, to pull him through the dreaming into her grasp.

Even in his sleep he felt the fear gnaw at him. There was only one place she could be. The dungeons. The dungeons of Élahandara. And there was only one way into those dungeons. Through the tunnels. He could not go back there. Not even for her. He could not.

The Élandra Priestess laughed as she wrestled Tâkuri from his arms. "You will never have her, Human. I sense your fear even now. Think you to stand against the powers of the Élandra? Fool!"

Hatred flowed stronger than fear. Balthain tried to reach through the dream to secure his hands around the Dark One's neck, but she was slipping away, taking Tâkuri with her.

"Find me!" Tâkuri screamed again.

"I will," Balthain heard himself promise. "I will if it kills me. I love you, Tâkuri. I will claim my prize."

## Chapter Seven

The ancient one sat behind a podium made of burled teakwood and inlaid with marble, his black robes of office slightly skewed at the collar. He rapped his gavel heavily on the podium's slanted surface, knocking the relatively lightweight adornment halfway across the desktop. "The Tribunal will now come to order before the King's Court. Shaymmadah Lochlairnen Élanadhache, how do you plead?"

A young page leaned close to the King to whisper loudly into his ear. "You forgot to state the charges, Your Highness."

The King blinked once, looking slowly about the room. "Has anyone forgotten the charges? No? I thought not. Guilty. Take him away."

"Wait!" Balthain shouted, his voice vibrating through the stone of the gaily decorated hall. "This is not fair. You are not a Tribunal, King, you are but one man. Not even a man. You are but a butterfly, drunken on a small thimble full of whiskey. 'Tis you who are guilty. Guilty of a travesty of justice that began over three thousand years ago, and is far from being decided in this court here tonight. You cannot make peace within your own house. How dare you to judge one who has given his life to trying to make peace within our world?"

A cheer went up throughout the hall of the King's Court, rocking the foundations of the shimmering city. Balthain grabbed at the Childling as the fortress began to crumble...

"Balthain?" A small hand pulled at his shoulder. "Balthain, wake up."

He came awake with a start, rolling to his feet in a slightly crouched position, his dirk slipping automatically into his fingers. With his left arm he pulled the Childling behind him, using his body for a shield as he searched the dimly lit room. The structure appeared amazingly solid. "What is it, child?"



"You were dreaming," she answered timidly, clinging to his arm as she ducked her head out around his hip. "I couldn't get you to wake up. Momma is frightened. She told me to wake you, but I couldn't."

Balthain slipped the forbidden dirk back into its hiding place. Taking a deep breath to steady himself, he sat on the edge of the bed, pulling the Childling around where he could see her. "You spoke to your mother? Just now? Is she all right? What happened? I thought she couldn't reach you."

"She came to me in the dreaming. She said that you told her where to find me. She was frightened. She said the Priestess tried to catch you, and she barely ended the dream in time. She doesn't think the Priestess was able to identify you, but I'm to tell you we don't have much time. She's afraid to try to contact you in the dreaming again tonight, because they're watching her closely."

"Yet she dared contact you."

"She is my mother," Dahlai replied, as if that explained it all.

\* \* \*

A fine sweat broke out all over his body, even though the air in the common room was cool. Balthain willed himself not to panic as he stepped forward to examine the crude drawings that lined the tops of the tables. The maps appeared as they had in his nightmares. Miles and miles of twisting tunnels. He would go back in and never find his way out again.

No.

He would not.

He could not.

The Childling let go of his hand to resume her perusal of the maps, sketching small changes as forgotten details occurred to her, oblivious to the dangers before them.

"We cannot simply march in the front door and demand that all the prisoners be freed," Roahr argued.

"I walked out that way," Tranorva countered, her eyes blazing. "'Tis my mountain, Father. I can do whatever I like."

"You have been gone for weeks, child. No power vacuum takes that long to fill. You will face the full ranks of the Élandra Priestesses, no longer caught off guard and divided. You will die, Daughter."

"I have no intention of dying, Father. Nor do I simply expect to walk in the front gates of Élahandara and have the key to the city handed to me. But my presence will confuse the High Priestesses. I will remind my council of who I am and what I can do to them should they disobey me, and I will keep them off balance long enough for ye to seek out these dungeons and free the prisoners. If possible I will simply demand that the prisoners be brought before me, yet I suspect that that will not work so easily. Still, we have two members of our party who are familiar with the dungeons, and I should be able to gain ye enough time to locate the mines safely. Once ye free the prisoners, our numbers will be in closer proportions."

No one in this group knew him as Rat except Seanen, and even Seanen would not know how he had earned that nickname. He did not have to tell them that he, too, knew those dungeons, perhaps as well as either Élandine or Dahlai, perhaps better. He did not have to go back in there again.

"The upper chambers hold not the prohibition against magic that the mines and dungeons do," Élandine reminded Tranorva now, his eyes snapping with anger. "The Priestesses will feel no obligation to fight you one at a time again, M'Lady. Are you prepared to face the entire Élandra Council and take the High Priestesses all on at once?"

"If I have to," General Tranorva countered just as fiercely.

"The Shamans will be with her to face the Priestesses," Evalayna reminded the men. "Together we are not so easily overcome."

There. They had a full party. They did not need him. They...

Balthain glanced sideways at Seanen. His old mentor watched, saying nothing, waiting, judging Balthain's reactions to the plans. Seanen was always so calm. How could he possibly understand what those tunnels were like, how quickly the water

could rise in them, how pitch black they were once a body traveled past the first turn... Seanen didn't know...

No. Seanen wasn't as calm as he appeared. There were small lines of tension around his eyes. An alertness that went beyond the arguments in the room. Seanen knew him too well, read him too well.

Whether or not he knew why, Seanen knew he was afraid. Perhaps not of what, but Seanen sensed his fear. Balthain looked away, his gaze carefully avoiding Seanen's. Without moving his hand from his side, he made a few quick signs with his fingers. *Guard my back, Brother. I'm going in.*

The tension on Seanen's face lightened, and he nodded, once, almost imperceptibly. Balthain folded his arms across his chest and said simply, "No."

The room went quiet. Everyone turned to face him. He felt calm, suddenly, and sure of himself. "Only a fool would march through the front gates of Élahandara. 'Tis an impregnable fortress, heavily armed and unapproachable for miles in any direction without giving notice to all who watch that an army approaches. You will never get near Élahandara that way. The forces of the Élandra will meet you outside the gates, as they did at the pass of St. Gregory, with all their reserves at their disposal this time. You will die."

"I seem to recall ye wanted no part in this discussion," Tranorva noted, her face stiff with anger. "Have ye joined us merely to remind us that we are all fools, or have ye another plan to bring to the table?"

"No *army* will march through the gates of Élahandara. But you could, General. You and you alone. You went out that way. You could walk back in the same way."

"She goes nowhere without me," Élandine countered, slipping quickly back to his dark Mage's form.

"You're dead," Balthain pointed out. "Dark Elves don't just come back to life, and you don't have another decade to build a new persona that will gain you access to the Élandra fortress." He went on, before Élandine could protest -- or he could lose his nerve. "And I will need you with me. You and all the other healers."

'Twas Tyrell's turn to take an interest in the conversation. "With you? Why? Where?"

Still, 'twas General Tranorva Balthain chose to address. "Élahandara, like every great fortification, has a back door. A back door known only to tunnel rats."

"Rat," Seanen observed. "So. You earned your old school name in the tunnels."

"Yes." Though not the way Seanen might have supposed... "I'm one of those tunnel rats. Or I was, two decades ago."

Well, he had their attention now. Balthain took a deep breath, willing his nerves away. "The army you envision awaiting you in those dungeons nears death, M'Lady. Some of these people have lived captive underground for more than three decades. Many -- perhaps two generations now -- were born underground and have never seen the light of day. They have never lived outside the shield of the mountain. They have never walked the earth in their true form. Those we free from the mines will be in no shape to travel. Only years in the sunlight above ground will heal them completely, and many may even refuse to accompany us. But for those who join us, as soon as we clear the barriers that prevent the magic, immediate healing will be necessary. All of which will take time." Balthain smiled a slow, wicked smile as he focused on Tranorva. "If the guards discover the prisoners are missing before we escape the tunnels, we will all die. Our only hope is a large and lengthy diversion."

General Tranorva returned his smile, though there was no warmth to the look. "A diversion. Then I believe I can provide that diversion, Mercenary. What price ask ye for thy services?"

He should have managed to look offended, he knew, but instead he grinned. "I shall claim my own prize, M'Lady, within the depths of Élahandara."

Dahlai bounced around the table to fling her arms about him. "You will free my mother! I knew you could do it. Her faith in you is not misplaced."

"If there is a way out, why have others not taken it?" Evalayna demanded.

"Others have," Roahr confirmed. "Shammall -- Élandine here -- led me out of the dungeon through the tunnels many years ago, I suspect. But I was sick with the fever and I had no memory later of how we escaped."

"We escaped," Élandine reminded him with a grimace of distaste, "with me dragging your useless carcass through miles of muck and filth while you sang dirges to me and urged me to leave you behind to die."

"I will need volunteers to help me bring the prisoners out," Balthain cautioned, not anxious to allow the remembrances between the two to erupt into a verbal battle. "The job will not be a pleasant one, nor is it for the frail. The sewage tunnels from Élahandara lead down out of the mountains, eventually intersecting the storm drains from the City of Portsmouth. We will travel for many miles underground through the storm drains, sometimes through brackish water waist high. A sudden storm in the mountains could sweep us away at any time. The sewage tunnels themselves are smaller, and foul, putrid with the smell of death and decay."

His lip curled back in disgust. "And the tunnels are not empty. Dark things live there. Twisted things that belong to the perpetual night of the tunnels. We will be strong enough to kill these things, but the prisoners will not. Most of us will not be able to stand in the sewage tunnels. I came out through the tunnels from Élahandara when I was but a boy, and, except for the storm drains that end at the City of Portsmouth, I have never been back. I have not even ventured into the storm drains since the age of fifteen, and 'twas already a tight fit for me then."

He shook off the memories, concentrating instead on the tactics, as in any battle. "I think the Shamans should accompany us until their powers diminish, then await our return with the prisoners. From what I have observed of the matter, the healings will be taxing enough. Their strength should be held in reserve."

"Ye think I am too old," Ayaila observed, her eyes piercing him shrewdly.

"I think you are too powerful to waste your strength sludging through leech-infested pools of raw sewage when you will not be able to do anything but accompany us back to the intersections anyway," Balthain countered. "But if you wish to battle

through miles of sludge just so that you may say you have done so, be my guest, M'Lady. Better yet, you go, and I will conserve my energies so that I may carry you and your walking stick out of the tunnels after you heal over a hundred confused and terrified prisoners who have just done battle barehanded with poisonous spiders weighing close to twelve stone."

Ayaila threw back her head and laughed. "I like ye, young man. Ye speak your mind. I have tarried too long in a world of politics. Honesty is a rare thing in the circles I travel in. I will no' venture beyond the range of my magic, lest I follow Roahr's example and take to singing dirges to ye while ye cart my carcass about."

A chuckle of relieved tension rippled through the room.

"There is another problem," Balthain continued as if he had not been interrupted. "The prisoners are, in fact, our biggest danger. Some may be loyal enough to their captors to try to raise an alarm. Others -- the ones who are still in condition to work the mines -- may be strong enough yet to lend assistance to their fellows. But we cannot count on much help there. Tâkuri says they are weak and dying. She suspects that the Priestesses no longer depend on the miners, and have little interest in their well-being. And the way through the tunnels is not easy to locate. If it were, many more would have fled long ago. As a child I found my way out as much by accident as anything else. I know the storm drains at the City of Portsmouth better than anyone. Still, finding our way into Élahandara itself is not guaranteed."

"I have entered that way many times," Élandine admitted with a sigh. "Though I never attempted to bring more than one or two from within those depths. I will go with you, Balthain. But I see no point in Tranorva walking in the front gates. What will that accomplish except her death?"

Tranorva shook her head. "Balthain is right. Even if thy plans are executed flawlessly, stealth will be impossible to maintain. Ye will need a diversion. Entering alone, as I left, will put the Priestesses off guard. I have but to act as if I expect them to acknowledge my station, and then follow my act up with a few choice examples of how disagreements will be handled. Perhaps I can summon the guards from the mines,

calling for a tour or an inspection. Otherwise ye will have to fight through the guards to get the prisoners out, and the guards will sound the alarm, calling up reinforcements from all over the keep. The numbers are too large. Ye would never be able to get a party big enough to defeat them through the back door. If ye are fool enough to try this plan, Balthain, I am fool enough to join ye."

"'Tis a damn fool idea," Roahr agreed, "but I cannot leave my brothers to die, and I have no better plan. I am with you."

"I will fit anywhere you will fit," Seanen agreed with a wicked grin.

Yarwyn merely snorted. "Anywhere you fit I will fit better. And think not that you might venture into this pit of hell without me."

The Shamans exchanged glances, and nodded as one. "We can make you smaller," Ayaila offered, "to negotiate the tunnels more easily. Though that will no' help with the prisoners. Once we can reach them with magic, I suspect ye will no longer need our assistance in that fashion."

"I go with my mistress," Dahlai announced. "I followed her out. I will follow her back in."

Balthain wanted to protest, but as the Childling moved to Tranorva's side, he understood the bond the two shared would not be broken by his word alone. "Be careful," he admonished. "If harm comes to you, your mother will make the next few decades of my life quite miserable."

"You all seem to be overlooking one minor problem."

Everyone turned to face Élandine.

"I cannot show you the way in unless the King allows me to leave Tir na nÓg alive."

Balthain fought the urge to laugh. "Do you trust me, Élandine?"

\* \* \*

"All rise."

The King entered the courtroom to stand behind a podium made of burled teakwood inlaid with marble, his black robes of office neat and pristine, yet still

Balthain settled his hand on his dirk hidden under the seam in his leggings. Balthain surveyed the room discreetly, reading the crowd of onlookers, judging their mood. They felt interested, in a politely bored way, but not overly bloodthirsty.

The three members of the Tribunal -- all old enough to look well past middle aged, a rare sight within the *Sidhe* -- took their places along a raised bench to the right of the King, separated from both the King and the audience by a high banister.

The central figure of the Tribunal -- apparently the Chief Justice -- rapped his gavel on the small wooden block provided for that purpose. The podium stayed precisely in place, even though Balthain fully expected it to skitter across the desk as it had when the King hit it in his dream.

"This session of the Tribunal of the Court of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* of Tir na nÓg will now come to order. Shaymmadah Lochlairnen Élanadhache, hast thou obtained council?"

Élandine glanced at Balthain, as if to ask himself once more if he was a fool to have agreed to Balthain's plan. "I have, Your Honors. Lord Balthain of the High House Savinth of the Bear Clan shall represent me."

Balthain took a deep breath, staring at the familiar map of the world where it hung on the courtroom wall while he waited for someone to protest. Surely someone of the King's Court would remember there was no House Savinth, and therefore his title was fraudulent and he was not qualified to act as Élandine's council.

No one seemed to care.

"Shaymmadah Élanadhache," the leader of the Tribunal announced, "ye stand before the Court charged with breaking the tenets of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, in specific, that no *Sidhe* shall harm another *Sidhe*, nor shall he abandon his charges. How dost thou plead?"

Élandine stood at Balthain's side, his face carefully expressionless. Balthain looked down at his notes, making them all wait a moment before he raised his gaze to look directly at the King. "I ask that the Prosecutor please restate the specific charges, Your Honor."



The King looked mildly annoyed. "The charges have been stated. How do ye plead?"

Balthain fumbled with his notes again, as he might have stumbled on the street before filching a hefty purse. "Your Highness. M' Lords. Your Honors. Shamm -- forgive me, but I find your tongue beyond my mere mortal ability to pronounce. I shall refer to the accused as Élandine if it please the court?"

The Chief Justice waved his hand, dismissing the issue.

"Your Honors, we ask not for the impossible, but simply for a clarification. These charges are broad and general. Élandine, as we know him, has served two houses and known many *Sidhe* throughout his relatively short lifetime. Élandine has the right to know which of these Royal Houses he is accused of abandoning and which *Sidhe* he is said to have harmed."

The members of the Tribunal concurred briefly. "This request seems not unreasonable."

The *Sidhe* King looked as if he might do something unjudicial with his royal staff of office. "Specifics? Ye desire specifics? Very well. In specific, as to the first charge, ye knew of the capture and imprisonment of the one known as Tâkuri within the mountain fortress known as Élahandara, and ye did nothing to aid her, thereby through reason of your neglect causing her further harm which ye might have prevented. As to the second, ye knew that Lord Roahr VinDall and the other prisoners yet lived within the dungeons of Élahandara, and yet ye kept this knowledge from his wife Evalayna, encouraging her to marry Lord Lochinvar. Ye also allowed Lord Roahr VinDall to believe that his wife and his children had died, thus causing him irreparable harm and mental anguish."

Balthain raised one eyebrow as he met the King's angry accusations. "These are your charges, in full, Your Highness?"

"'Tis enough! How plead ye, Shaymmadah?"

From his vantage point, Balthain could see Élandine squeeze Tranorva's hand behind the table's edge. Balthain took a deep breath, praying to the gods that he had not missed some fine point of *Sidhe* Law that might prove fatal to them all.

"Élandine pleads guilty to both charges, Your Honor."

## Chapter Eight

"Guilty?" the King sputtered. "Then why waste our time by demanding trial before the Tribunal? What trick is this?"

Balthain bowed slightly from the waist as he attempted to look properly respectful. "Your Highness, Your Honors. We acknowledge that Élandine did, indeed, transgress the laws of the *Sidhe* in his youth. However, he has since attempted to rectify those mistakes, and we ask the Tribunal for leniency in sentencing, taking these attempts into consideration. Witness that all but one of his victims now stands before the Tribunal, ready to testify on his behalf. We would argue before you not Élandine's guilt or innocence, but would seek only to bring understanding to the court of the events that transpired and Élandine's actions, praying that the Tribunal might take those events into consideration before deciding on censure."

The King rose to his feet, thrusting his staff of office toward Élandine, though no sparks of blue fire shot forth from its tip this time. "There is only one sentence acceptable. The penalty for violating the Code of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* is death."

Balthain ignored the King, addressing himself to the Tribunal. "It is my understanding, from perusing this Code, that although the traditional sentence for violation of the Code is indeed death, the Tribunal reserves the right to administer whatever sentence they deem appropriate for any transgression."

The Chief Justice of the Tribunal waved the King back to his seat before he could issue further protest. "We accept thy plea of guilty, Shaymmadah, and we will now listen to sentencing arguments."

Balthain realized he had been holding his breath. He let it out slowly, trying to look more confident than he felt. He was a fool. What had he been thinking, to try this? This was not his battleground. He was no barrister. He was a Mercenary -- a Rogue and

a Warrior. His hand itched for his sword as he turned to face the spectators. "I would request the testimony of Lady Evalayna VinDall."

Evalayna rose to take her oath. A bailiff, who looked far more like a butterfly than a Warrior today, held up a polished quartz eight-pointed star. "Lady Evalayna of Houses Lindall, Lochinvar, and VinDall, by the seven gods and in the name of all that your people hold sacred, upon your oath as a Shaman, do you swear to tell the truth before this Court?"

"I do so swear."

The Chief Justice nodded at Balthain to begin.

Balthain took another long moment shuffling his papers. "Lady Evalayna, how did you learn of your husband's death?"

"When the Outposts first sounded the alarm, my husband had Shammall take Tranorva and I to the mountains, to our safe camp. Élandine brought me word there that Roahr had no' survived the Élandra attack."

"So Élandine -- Shammall -- was with you, in the mountains, taking you and your daughter to safety, when the Élandra first attacked."

"Yes."

"How long were you camped in the mountains?"

"Four days."

"Four days alone at a deserted cabin in the mountains while the Élandra lay siege to House VinDall and the entire valley of the Bear Clan. Did Roahr VinDall manage to visit you at all during those four days?"

"No. The fighting was too heavy. He sent Shammall to tend to us and keep me apprised of the situation."

"So Élandine was not present for the entire battle. There were periods of time when he was en route to and from your mountain hideout."

"That is correct."

"And after the battle, did Élandine -- Shammall -- tell you he had personally seen the body of Roahr VinDall?"

"No. The Élandra piled the bodies within the houses and burned everything to the ground. The fires were huge, and they burned for days. Shammall found naught but my husband's great axe, which my daughter now bears."

"Then how did you know Roahr was indeed dead?"

A look of pain crossed her face as Evalayna shifted her gaze out the window. "I insisted on returning to VinDall to see for myself. It was gone. Everything was gone. No one survived. The place felt empty. There was nothing there."

Balthain dropped his voice to a soft, gentle tone, both pleased with Evalayna's performance and ashamed of the pain he had reawakened within her. "M'Lady, is it possible that in the wake of the battle, with the funeral pyres of the houses burning everywhere, that Shammall might have made a mistake?"

Evalayna snapped back to the present, giving him a sardonic smile. "Oh, aye, 'tis indeed, for my husband sits beside me now, does he no'? He looks verra much alive to me, does he no' to ye?"

A ripple of laughter spread through the courtroom, breaking the tension her story had created. Balthain smiled as he bent over her hand. "Many thanks to you, my dear Lady. I have no more questions."

The King rose to hold up a hand as Evalayna turned to reseal herself. "M'Lady. I have a few questions myself."

Evalayna gifted him with a cold, calculating smile. "Naturally."

"Shaymmadah's mission during this battle was to keep both you and your husband apprised of each other's condition, correct?"

"Aye."

"When he told you your husband was dead, did you believe him?"

"Aye."

"Did he tell you he had not seen Roahr VinDall fall in battle, but only assumed he was dead because he could not locate either the man or the body?"

"No, he didna'. He said nothing."

The King blinked slowly in surprise. "Then how did you know Roahr was dead?"

"Upon his return I looked to Shammall for news, and he said nothing. He only shook his head. But there were tears running down his face. I have never before or since seen Shammall shed a tear. Truly I did no' know thy kind to be capable of such emotion."

"You remarried without knowing for certain that your husband was dead?"

Evalayna's eyes snapped dangerously. "'Twas no' my intent to remarry. 'Twas my intent to cast myself off of that mountain. I was the younger daughter. Alone. Penniless. No House. No future for my children. Shammall brought me Mother's offer of House Lochinvar." Evalayna turned her gaze to the window again. "I would no' go until I had seen the ruins of House VinDall. I accepted House Lochinvar that my children might eat. But in my heart I never accepted Roahr VinDall's death."

The King waved his hand in dismissal, returning to his high-backed oak chair, looking none too pleased with Evalayna's testimony.

The Chief Justice directed his attention to Balthain. "Counsel, do you wish to reexamine the witness?"

Balthain did his best to look bland and innocent, a bumbler wading through papers, as he addressed the court again. "No. No, Your Honor. Thank you. I have no further questions."

The bailiff nodded toward Evalayna. "Lady VinDall, you may sit down."

Balthain looked up briefly from his hastily scribbled notes. "I should like to accept testimony from Lord Roahr VinDall at this time."

Roahr stood without being asked, slowly rising until his mighty bulk seemed to fill the room, a head taller and easily twice the weight of most of the *Sidhe*, broader of shoulder even than Balthain himself. Balthain resisted the urge to back away, as one of his kind might have, had they met on the tundra.

The bailiff held up the quartz eight-pointed star. "Lord Roahr VinDall, by the seven gods, and by all that your people hold sacred, do you swear on your honor as a Warrior to tell the truth before this Court?"

"I do so swear."

The Chief Justice nodded at Balthain to begin.

"Lord VinDall, how did you learn of your wife's death?"

Roahr curled back his lip, showing his gleaming white teeth, the sharply pointed incisors looking large enough to rip the flesh from the throat of his enemies. He waved a huge hand toward Élandine. "That one told me."

"Élandine informed you of Evalayna's death? When was this? Directly after the battle at House VinDall?"

"No. Later."

"How much later?"

"Time is different in there. Years. Perhaps a decade had passed."

"And where were you during those years, Roahr? How did you spend that decade?"

"I was a prisoner. A slave in the pit mines of Élahandara."

"Élandine came looking for you and found you within the mines of Élahandara to tell you of your wife's death."

"No. No one came looking for me. No one knew any of us were alive. The Dark Ones prided themselves on this, and would remind us regularly that no one would come looking for us."

"So how did Élandine find you?"

"I do not know. He found me. He brought me out of Élahandara."

"And when he brought you out of Élahandara he left you alone on the tundra, after telling you of your wife's death."

"No. Shammall -- Élandine as you call him -- left me in the care of the Monks in the city of the Dwarves. 'Twas months -- perhaps longer -- before I came to myself enough to ask of my family. When I asked, Shammall would not answer me. Shortly

after that encounter, I left the monastery to return to the caves in the mountains where my people once wintered."

"And when was the next time you saw Élandine?"

"After I had reunited with Lady Evalayna."

"Did he attempt to explain at that time why he had not told you the truth of your wife's remarriage?"

"No. He was dead."

A soft chuckle eased the tension within the courtroom. Balthain nodded his head once to Roahr, as a sign of respect. "Thank you, M'Lord. I have no more questions of you."

Roahr lifted his gaze to the King, as if daring him to question his testimony, but the King flicked his fingers in dismissal. The chair squeaked in protest as Roahr lowered his weight back onto the spindly legged ornament.

"For my next witness, I request testimony of Élandine himself."

Élandine eyed him warily as he rose, his confidence in Balthain's representation well hidden. The bailiff held up the quartz star once again. "By all that we hold sacred, and by your oaths as both a Mage and a Protector of Humans, do you swear to tell the truth before this Court?"

"I do so swear."

Balthain moved to stand in front of the Mage, pursing his lips for a moment before he spoke. "You are a man of many names. What do you prefer we call you?"

Élandine shrugged. "My true name is Shaymmadah Lochlairnen Élanadhache. In the world of the Humans I am known as Shammall, for their convenience. Within the halls of Élahandara I take on the persona of Élandine, a Dark Elf Male in the service of the High Priestesses. What you call me does not change who I am."

"And who are you?"

Élandine blinked. "I am a *Sidhe* of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*. I am a House Guardian assigned to House VinDall."

"That is what you do," Balthain pointed out. "Is it also who you are?"



Élandine frowned, looking both annoyed and distressed. "I do not understand your question."

Balthain smiled sadly. "No. I do not suppose that you do. Who you are is what you do, after all." He walked to the map of the world, running his finger along the ridge of mountains that represented Élahandara. "Élandine, when did you first travel to Élahandara, and under what premise?"

Élandine's confidence returned as he dealt with questions he could answer. "Some thirty years ago, shortly after Lady Evalayna VinDall took control of House Lochinvar, she requested that I assess the fortification at Élahandara. My mission was to attempt to ascertain whether the Élandra, who had destroyed the remains of Clan of the Bear less than two cycles of the moon past, might pose a real and current threat to the Houses of the Northlands in the immediate future."

Balthain turned away from the map to look straight at Élandine, as if hearing this surprising information for the first time. "How did you manage to enter Élahandara undetected?"

"I assumed the persona of an Élandra Male, a pleasure slave presented to Nafésti, then Queen of Élahandara."

The fair-haired *Sidhe* shimmered softly as he disappeared, a smaller, more delicate Dark Elf taking his place. Balthain took the transition in stride, like a scene change in a well rehearsed play. "And how did you assume this persona?"

Élandine shifted his attention to some small spot on the map, looking aloof and bored. "I waylaid and killed the intended gift and took his place."

Balthain paused for effect, his eyes on the Tribunal rather than the prisoner as he asked his next question. "What would have happened to you had the High Priestess discovered your true identity?"

Élandine shrugged. "I would have been killed instantly."

A small gasp drifted through the spectators. "No trial, no torture, no imprisonment within their dungeons?"

Élandine raised one finely sculptured eyebrow in surprise. “Within the rule of the Élandra, mere males, no matter what their race, are not worthy of such effort.”

“Yet you came and went from Élahandara for over thirty years by your own admission without ever once getting caught. Did not your mistress notice when you were not about?”

“I was but one of Nafésti’s pleasure slaves. I was usually inconsequential enough to come and go without being missed, though Nafésti occasionally remembered me and detained me longer than my true mistress, Lady Evalayna, appreciated.” For this, and this alone, he managed a look of some remorse.

Balthain walked back over to the map, tracing the mountain range again. “So you often had the time and the freedom to explore the dungeons of Élahandara.”

“Not at all. The dungeons are heavily guarded for fear that the prisoners may revolt. I had no reason to be there. Venturing into their depths meant risking discovery and death.”

“Why were you there at all, then?”

“There is what you might call a back door into the dungeons under the mountain. There are sewer tunnels that lead from the dungeons down to the ocean. Those sewer tunnels intersect the storm drains of the City of Portsmouth near the foot of the mountains. That is how I made access to Élahandara on my scouting missions.”

“So you came and went through these sewer tunnels several times a year, passing through the dungeons on your way to your mistress’s bed.” Balthain wrinkled his nose in disgust. A small ripple of laughter rose through the courtroom, then faded away.

“I stopped in the kitchens to bathe,” Élandine explained, his expression still remote and disinterested.

“And what did you find within the walls of Élahandara? Did you accomplish your mission? Were the Élandra a real threat to your Northland Houses?”

“As I reported back to Lady Evalayna, the Élandra gained strength steadily after the fall of Talandar. Within a year of the defeat of the Clan of the Bear, Nafésti began

rebuilding Talandar, and within five years she had reestablished that city. She fortified Talandar far beyond the meager defenses that fell to the armies of the Talandar War in the early part of the century. When Géndalaine became High Priestess of Élahandara, she enlisted the aid of the Orc King to keep supplies flowing and intruders away from the western plains. She even made treaties with the Ogres and the Trolls.”

“So the High Priestesses of Talandar and Élahandara between them now control the entire western coastline of Eurasia?”

“They did. Later Lady Evalayna organized a combined assault on the Orc King’s castle, reopening access to the Northern Plains and considerably lessening the Orc threat to the North.”

Balthain tapped the wall map thoughtfully. “What is your primary role in service to Lady Evalayna, Élandine?”

“I am a mole. I infiltrate wherever I am needed, gain information, and return that information to her.”

“You use your abilities as a shapeshifter to gain information.”

“Yes.”

“Lady Evalayna has never given you military assignments.”

“No. I infiltrate. I blend in. I observe.”

“So when you accidentally discovered Roahr VinDall among the prisoners in the dungeons at Élahandara, you simply did as you always do, and took this information to Lady Lochinvar.”

Élandine flushed, the red visible as a warm glow through his ebony skin. “No.”

“What did you do then?”

“I took him to the City of Portsmouth.”

“You freed one slave from the dungeons of Élahandara and led him through miles of sewer tunnels and storm drains to the City of Portsmouth without getting caught.”

“No. I opened all the cells I could reach easily, to create a diversion.”

“And did Roahr cooperate with this plan?”

Élandine grimaced. "He was sick with a fever at the time. Cooperate is not a word I would have used."

"You had to help him out of the tunnels?"

"I dragged him most of the way on an old blanket, to be precise. While he sang dirges to me of the glory that was VinDall in days gone by."

"I see. And did the other prisoners assist you in reaching safety?"

"No. They were in little better condition."

"But the others followed you through the tunnels?"

"A few did, before the guards got control of the situation."

"So you led, dragged, and bullied a handful of sick and dying prisoners from the tunnels of Élahandara through miles of mountain to reach the City of Portsmouth. But Roahr told us he convalesced in the city of the Dwarves."

"I took the slaves to the Dwarves, not down into the City of Portsmouth, because the Dwarves at the monastery offer hospice and healing where it is needed."

"So you left the prisoners at the monastery and returned to Lady Evalayna to tell her that her husband yet lived."

"I left the prisoners at the monastery and returned to Nafésti that my absence might not be missed, as she had planned entertainment for the evening and I was expected to be at her side."

"I see. When did you tell Lady Evalayna of Roahr's reappearance?"

"I did not tell her."

"Why?"

Élandine shifted his gaze back to the map. "Evalayna had remarried, at my advice, to a man she despised, Lord Lochinvar. Although he was old, and in poor health, he yet lingered. I thought it best to not add to her unhappiness by asking her to choose between the power and stability of her house and a future with an injured, broken man who looked as if he might not survive the night, let alone the year, when I left him at the monastery."

"And when did you see Roahr VinDall again?"

"On my next trip to Élahandara I stopped at the monastery to see if Roahr yet lived. He asked me of Evalayna, and I could not bring myself to tell him the truth. He took my silence as confirmation of his fears, and the next thing I knew, he had shifted to grizzly form, and he was gone. I did not see him again."

"Did you look for him? Or was it more convenient for you to ignore these lovers whom fate had conspired to separate?"

"Lord Lochinvar was old, and in ill health, but he did not do us the favor of departing for several more years. During that time I searched for Roahr whenever I had the time."

"So for twenty years after Lord Roahr was freed and Lady Evalayna was widowed, they lived apart, and you told neither of the other's existence."

"Lady Evalayna mourned the loss of her husband, but she had come to terms with his death. I had no wish to bring her further grief. As for Lord Roahr, 'twas not exactly a safe occupation, wandering up to grizzly bears to ask them if they had once been M'Lady's husband."

Open laughter erupted within the spectators. Even the members of the Tribunal could not suppress their smiles. Balthain waited for the courtroom to grow quiet again before he spoke again, his voice gentle as he asked his final question. "Do you regret your actions, Élandine?"

"Regret?" Élandine turned his face toward the map again. "I live with three of your lifetime's worth of regret. I regret that I did not stay to die at Roahr's side in battle. I regret that I did not detect the march of the prisoners to Élahandara and find a way to free them. I regret leading Lady Evalayna into a marriage in which she was miserable for over a decade. I regret not telling Roahr VinDall that his wife yet lived, captive of an old man whose demands on her far outweighed any advantage she might have gained for her children. I regret that I was unable to stop the war that tore them apart in the first place." Almost in slow motion, Élandine shifted back to his Child of Light form as he turned to face his accuser, dampness staining his long golden lashes almost black again. "Above all, I regret failing the assignment you entrusted me with, Father."

Silence filled the courtroom. At last the King stepped down from the prosecutor's platform and across the room to the prisoner's table. When he spoke, his voice was low, and filled with regrets of his own. "Shaymmadah, even you have not the capability of preventing a war, my son. Forgive me. It is I who has failed you, asking more of you than any one man could give."

A cheer rose throughout the courtroom as the son moved to accept his father's embrace.

Balthain slipped away into the crowd, allowing anonymity to swallow him up once again. Surely somewhere in a city this size there must be a tavern...

## Epilogue

He turned on the narrow bed, trying to find a more comfortable position to settle his body into. She moved with him in her sleep, instinctively curling against his side. He woke enough to run his fingers through her hair, smoothing it away from her face. She turned her cheek to press it against his hand, not really asleep after all.

“Balthain?”

“Who else would find you here, my love?”

“I did not think I would see you again. I feared to search for you here, lest the Priestess find you.”

“I have searched the dreaming for you for days now. I was afraid the Élandra would prevent you from coming to me now that they know of your travels.”

“The Dark Priestesses do not understand how the dreaming works. They think that by keeping my body prisoner they can limit the travels of my mind. They do not understand that for me, the dreaming is more real than the time I spend awake.”

“I am pleased you were able to find me again, yet I long for more. I want to be able to hold you in my arms when I am awake. Wait for me, Tâkuri. Do not give up hope. We travel even now toward your prison. We will bring all the captives out of Élahandara. I am coming for you.”

“I have waited half of one of your lifetimes. Another few passes of the moon is not so long. Yet I am afraid. Your mission is too dangerous. If the Priestesses learn of your plan, they will kill you. So many things can go wrong. I would not have you harmed to save me from a fate I should have accepted long ago. 'Tis selfish of me to ask this of you.”

“If you were not part of the picture, still I would come,” Balthain assured her. “When I followed Élandine to freedom many years ago, I vowed to come back for my

parents as soon as I was able. Though I accepted their deaths long ago, such a vow is not lightly broken, and I am less of a man for having waited this long to fulfill my promise. My brethren are prisoners beside you. It is my duty, and my honor, to attempt to free them. That you are part of the package only raises the stakes."

She snuggled tighter against him, her thin body shaking from a cold he could not drive away. "You are a good man, Balthain. Do not make light of your bravery. A child will make vows that a man cannot always live up to. You have spent your life learning the skills that will free us, and now you have assembled a party that may be capable of the task. The gods willing, we will be together in the daylight soon. For now we have the dreaming."

He held her, then, content with the smell of her skin close at hand, knowing that as long as he held her thus, she would not fade away.

Tomorrow's dawn would lead to the answers he needed.

Tomorrow he would face the tunnels again.



**Song of the Bear: A Prisoner's Desire**  
**A Northlanders Tale**

**Shelby Morgen**

## Prologue

The constant drip of the water was a torture he could not escape, like the smell of the mildewed stone walls and the damp that seeped through the floors into the core of his being. Worse was the drag of the chain that bound his torc to the heavy iron ring on the wall.

He should have felt defiled. Subjugated.

He threw back his head and roared out a bellow of defiance, his laughter echoing through the depths of the dungeon.

He could taste their fear on the air. He laughed again. Their footsteps sounded fainter as they hurried away down the long, echoing corridor. Their whispered voices became almost inaudible as they moved beyond the range of his straining ears.

No matter. He knew what they said.

Hunger gnawed at him. The dinner tray sat just inside the cell door, close enough that he could reach it if he wanted to, simply by extending his toes far enough to grab at its edge. This far they would trust him -- as far as the pole they used to push the tray in would reach -- and no farther.

No matter. He knew what they did.

They could pile the delicacies of a Dwarven Bazaar before him and he would not eat. He was no such fool. He was of no use to them now. The food would be poisoned -- drugged at the very least. Drugged to make him sleep.

Sleep was his enemy, too. Sleep would put him off his guard. They could get to him if he slept. Could get the shackles on him again. Could blindfold him.

If they could blindfold him, he would be powerless against them.

Just as he had been all his life.

Until he had come of age.

“Fools! Surrender now while you may. Your only hope is to set me free!”

Mad. They thought he was mad. And perhaps he was. But he was not the one cowering in the hallway in fear. For once they were powerless over him. He bent his mind to the tray. Earthenware dishes launched themselves into the air and pursued his tormentors down the length of the hall. His maniacal laughter followed their shrieks and the clatter of breaking dishes.

Sleep -- sleep was the only enemy he could not tame now. Blessed, dreaded sleep. He sobbed as he stared at the spot down the hallway beyond which his vision could not reach. “Cowards!” he screamed. “Come fight with me, man to man. I will use nothing more than my hands. Challenge me, cowards!”

The empty darkness responded with silence. They had turned out the lamps. Alone in the darkness he paced the cell to the length of his tether chain, praying to gods he had no reason to believe in not to let him fall asleep.

## Chapter One

Tâkuri jerked back awake as another shout of maniacal laughter rang out through the halls. He was screaming again. The noise brought her back to the reality of her cold stone cell.

Angry tears stung her eyelids. Why did the fool find it necessary to bring her back to this world? She had been happy in the dreaming. Happy and warm and content in the arms of her lover. Now this idiot had to go and spoil everything. If she'd had her powers, she'd have...

She'd have what? Was what she had in the dreaming worth killing a man over? What was she thinking? Had she sunk so low as to ignore the man's pain? Was she so self-centered, so self-absorbed, as to not care that one of her fellow prisoners suffered thus?

The knowledge shamed her. She hadn't even tried to find out who he was or what was wrong. The prisoner's pain pulled at her mind. She took a deep breath to steady herself, banishing her anger. Whoever he was, he was Clan Bear. He was one of hers. He was her responsibility.

She could feel him, his anguish a great disturbance, like a hole in the dreaming. She could reach him. She must reach him. Saving him, if she could, might be her last act as guardian of her people. She took another deep breath before she closed her eyes and slipped back into the dreaming.

\* \* \*

The candle burned to a stub, then flickered and died. His last weapon against the things that lurked in the darkness gone, he squeezed back into the corner, so that they could not come at him from behind. For they would come, now. Of that there was no

doubt. He could hear them, their soft, furry feet sweeping over the tunnel floors. So he waited.

And waited.

The constant drip of the water was a torture he could not escape, like the smell of the mildewed stone walls and the damp that seeped through the floors. But fear itself was his biggest enemy.

The feet scampered, just out of reach, searching, testing, waiting until he was weak enough, waiting, always waiting.

He could wait no longer. He screamed out a war cry as he lunged to his feet, pickaxe swinging through the darkness in wide arcs as he charged down the tunnel, screaming as he ran, slinging their huge, bloated bodies aside as he cleared a way through the nest. He stumbled and nearly went down as one of them gripped his leg. The poison took effect quickly, so quickly, the numbness working its way up from his calf, but the spiders were behind him, and although he stumbled more frequently, he was still running, the terror his only companion.

\* \* \*

*Friend, how can I help you?*

He jerked awake with a start. It took a moment to remember where he was. No long abandoned tunnel, this. No fat bloated bodies gushing their life's blood beneath his feet. No. No, he was back.

Back in hell.

*Let me help you, friend.*

What was this? Voices? Voices in his head? They were trying to take over his mind, now? Couldn't let them. No. Couldn't let them inside. "Get out!"

*I am not your enemy. I am a prisoner here, like you.*

"I don't believe you. This is another one of their tricks."

*Touch me. I am real. I am Tâkuri, of the Tuatha Dé Danann. I am Sidhe. Fey in your language. I cannot harm you. Think. Remember what you know of us. Let me help you, friend.*

He was still asleep. She was not real. *No...* It was more of a whimper this time, almost a sob. *No one can help me.*

He knew, even as he jerked back awake, that he had spoken the truth. "No one can help me," he whispered aloud as he opened his eyes to the darkness of his cold stone cell. He was not lost in the tunnels. Oh, no. He was somewhere much worse. "No one can help me," he whispered to the voice in the darkness. "I will die in this hell. All I ask now is that death might come swiftly."

\* \* \*

Braunna rolled beneath her blanket, trying to forestall the last moment of awakening, but 'twas no use. The idiot was at it again. His laughter echoed throughout the camps, caught by some strange twist of the rock until it shook the very stone she lay upon.

Unreasoning anger catapulted her from her bed. The madman had been at this for nearly two weeks now, and growing steadily worse. She'd had little enough sleep that even the vile camp coffee was no longer enough to keep her awake through her work-shift. She jerked her tattered tunic over her head and marched out of her hut, long strides carrying her quickly through the length of the large stone cavern. She armed herself with a pick as she passed the piles of mining tools. Not that any single guard would be fool enough to stand in the way of an angry clanswoman.

If the guards were too powerless to quiet the fool she would do it herself.

She could not follow the sound of his laughter, for it seemed to seep through the very walls, but she had a good enough idea where he must be. Everyone knew where the isolation cells were. 'Twas not often the guards needed to remind the miners they were prisoners. Prisoners who caused enough trouble to visit the isolation cells once rarely needed to be reminded again.

Those broken former inhabitants of the isolation cells served as a more graphic warning to the others than any threats the Dark Priestesses might ever make. Apparently this prisoner had not broken. Or if he had, 'twas with madness, rather than subjugation.

Braunnnan had no idea who he was. No one from her camp, that was certain. She'd had no madman among her kindred -- nor fools, either, for that matter. She stormed toward the dungeons, intent on her mission, determined to silence the bastard no matter what the cost. The guards had better...

There were no guards. None that she could see. The guard posts were empty. Scattered shards of pottery lay everywhere, along with the remains of an Élandra-cooked meal, as tempting now as the damp stone floor upon which it lay.

The damn fool had thrown his food at the guards?

Another thought filtered uneasily through her mind. If the guards had deserted them, who would protect them from the evils above? What if the Dark Priestesses descended upon them unawares? With no one to guard the passages, her people could be in far more danger than one madman represented. If --

The laughter was her only warning. As she spun to face the cursed voice that had shattered her sleep shift after shift, she caught movement out of the corner of her eye. After twenty years in the mines, she knew better than to wait to see what it was. She tucked and rolled, coming up well out of range of the projectile. Behind her she heard it land with a splat.

Waste.

The smell rose to her nostrils, confirming what her ears and her eyes had already told her. The lunatic was hurling human waste at her.

"Cease, you foul demon!" she roared as yet another missile narrowly missed her head. "Is it not enough that you have robbed your own people of a cycle's sleep? Now you hurl filth at me? Are you a man or an animal? Even rats avoid their own --"

Braunnnan stopped in her tracks as the pile of filth she'd thought to avoid froze in mid-flight, only to drop straight to the ground, as if it had suddenly lost propulsion. How in the name of the nine hells had he done *that*?

"Who are you?" a voice that grated like a sharpening stone demanded.

The mid-air calisthenics of the unspeakable projectiles could wait. "I am Braunnnan, Mistress of the Fifth House of Clan Bear." Braunnnan made no attempt to

stifle the self-mockery in her proclamation. Never had her title felt more meaningless than it did this shift. "And you, fiend? Who is it that so disturbs my sleep?"

"I... Forgive me, M'Lady. Go back to your bed. I will not disturb you again."

He sounded so contrite she almost regretted yelling at him. Almost. "Who are you?" she asked again, a little more gently this time.

"I am no one." She had to strain to hear his answer. "No one. I had not thought beyond the range of my own misery. Forgive me, M'Lady."

Guilt pulled at her, but she shoved it away. By the gods. Was the man actually crying? Was he *mad*? Laughing one moment and sobbing the next? Would he be shouting curses at the gods next? Braunnan said a short prayer for patience, although she knew it to be of little reward. "Well, Sir No One, it would appear you have chased off the guards, at least for this shift. Since your cell door is open, I will pay you a call, as long as I'm here, if you will promise not to throw anything else at me."

"No!"

"No?"

"It is... I am... do not come in here, M'Lady."

He was definitely crying. She could hear it in his voice. Guilt won out over common sense. "I'm coming in, No One." She hesitated just to the side of the open door. "If you throw anything else at me I shall beat you to within an inch of your life."

"No. I... do not come in, M'Lady, I beg of you, in the name of all that is decent," the hoarse, ruined voice croaked. "'Tis no place for a Lady. 'Tis..."

Staring into the dim interior of the cell, she stepped into the doorway, so that he might get a good look at her. "By the gods," she whispered, utterly appalled. Braunnan wrinkled her nose in disgust. A heavy chain suspended from a ring in the wall led to a figure huddled in the darkest corner of the cell, his knees drawn up against his chest, his long mass of hair spilling in a wild tangle over the shoulder he presented her with, as if to hide his nakedness.



The stench in the cell was nearly unbearable. The wood shavings that littered the floor appeared not to have been changed in weeks, and the waste bucket had long ago overflowed.

"Forgive me, M'Lady," the broken voice sobbed. "I would not have you see me like this. 'Tis not fitting that you should have to be exposed to such filth."

He was concerned that she should not be exposed to the filth *he* was existing in? "Are you mad?" she managed through the shock.

She couldn't see his face. The hair trembled as he spoke. "I do not know, M'Lady. Perhaps I am by now."

"Why would the guards do this to you?"

His response was not so quick in coming this time. "They say I'm mad. Dangerous. They keep me here to protect you." He swiped a hand across his face, though she still couldn't see much beyond the hair. "They told my shift-mates I'd been eating Liberty Caps."

Half a smile pulled at her mouth. "Were you?"

"I've tried them," he admitted. "There aren't any growing in this cell though. If I'm mad it's not from mushrooms."

At the very least he was honest. "Are you going to try to hurt me?"

"I couldn't -- I would never -- no. If the word of a madman is worth anything, I give you my word I will not hurt you, Mistress Braunnnan."

Braunnnan snorted softly. "Keep your eyes covered," she warned.

With a perversity she'd almost expected he raised his head. Braunnnan got a glimpse of dark eyes sunken into a drawn face as she shifted her stance to shield his body with her own, although it placed her back to him. The move was risky, but if he was mad enough to attack her, she might as well find out now. Braunnnan tested the weight of the pickaxe in her hands. She was in as good a shape as she'd ever been in her life, and armed with a weapon she knew well. He'd not get far.

She swung the pick in a mighty arc, bringing the tip down hard, slightly above the iron ring that anchored the chain to the wall. The first blow bounced off ineffectively.

"Is it a fight you want, rock?" Braunnnan changed her stance, taking a looser grip on the pick's handle, flexing her knees, swinging from the hips as she attacked again. She poured her anger and worry and frustration out through her pick and turned it loose on the wall, finding comfort in the familiar weight of the swing, peace in a job she understood. This time a chip of rock fell away as she connected the point of her pick with the stone face.

"What are you doing? Have you lost your mind?" the madman demanded, interrupting the solace she'd found in her work. "Do you think the guards will just let me walk out of here? When they come back they will kill me, and give you my cell!"

Had *she* lost *her* mind? Oh, that was precious. Braunnnan worked her words into the rhythm of the pick, refusing to let the madman get to her again. "They. Might. Try."

"The guards want me dead. They will come looking for me."

*Find your rhythm. Don't fight the rock. Let the pick do the work. It's an extension of your arm.* How many times had she said those words? *The rock has been there for hundreds of thousands of years. You will not frighten the rock into submission by the strength of your will.*

The bolt had not been planted into the rock anywhere near far enough to resist her. It fell at her feet with a loud *thunk*.

The sunken eyes looked up at her now from a filthy face streaked where he'd scrubbed at his tears. Whatever she'd thought she'd heard in that voice, whatever spark of humanity she'd been foolish enough to think she could bring back to life, it was gone. There was nothing there but a flat wall, as closed to her as the end of a mineshaft. Braunnnan caught up the chain in one fluid sweep as she shouldered her pick. "You need a bath. After that we'll talk."

"Be merciful. End it now, M'Lady. Please. Kill me."

If she'd considered what would happen next, if she'd actually analyzed what response she'd expected from the man after she'd risked her life to free him, she might

have been surprised, even angry, but as things stood, she was too tired to care. Instead she stood over him with the pick in one hand and his chain in the other, trying to decide whether it was worth her effort to do as he requested.

"Get up," Braunnnan hissed, "or I will use this chain to drag you out of here."

"I would not be responsible for your death. They will come back, M'Lady. The guards will come back, and they will kill us both. They will --"

"Shut up." She knew she would regret this come work-cycle. Braunnnan yanked the man to his feet. The cell was too dark to see much detail, but she could tell he was tall. He must have stood half a head taller than her. Or would have if he could stand up straight. Instead he wavered on his feet, clutching the rock wall for support. With a sigh Braunnnan scooped him up and tossed him over her shoulder.

He made an awkward burden, but as long as he had the sense not to struggle she could manage it. He was heavy, but not as heavy as he should have been. He weighed little more than the stone she carried most of the shift. She paused a moment, testing her balance.

She could take him to the healers in the south wing, but they were healers of the body. They dispensed potions to chase a fever from the blood. What would they know of the demons that could touch a man's soul? Perhaps his mind was too far gone to save anyway.

His hand brushed awkwardly across her tunic, as if searching for some purpose, or something to grasp, coming to rest much too close to her breast. "M'Lady, I --"

"Silence!" she snapped. "Do you not understand the concept? I am tired of the sound of your voice. Say nothing unless I ask you to speak." She would figure out something next shift. For now her body demanded sleep.

The guard station at the end of the cellblock was no longer empty. Darvon and Garrot, the guards who normally stood watch on this shift, had returned, Darvon with a freshly mended scar across his cheek. The guards from all the other shifts were there as well -- eight guards in total.

Eight guards to deal with one man? And she thought she could manage him alone? Only two guards were deemed necessary to keep the caverns free of the Dark Priestesses.

Braunnnan sighed as the guards moved to block her path. They backed up warily as she approached. "I have not slept in several shifts and I am not in the mood for arguments," Braunnnan warned them. "Why try and stop me? Obviously you cannot deal with this idiot. I will take responsibility for him."

The filthy creature slung over her shoulder wriggled slightly, bringing his bare butt far too close to her nose. "Do I have a say in this?" the madman's muffled voice asked from somewhere near the back of her left shoulder.

"No!" all involved answered in unison.

"He is far too dangerous and unstable to allow him to roam free among your crew, Lady Braunnnan," Garrot appealed in his most logical, persuasive voice. "Surely you can see that. Put the prisoner down. We will take care of him."

Braunnnan laughed. "Think what you say. Do you really want me to loose him on you? I have seen what he can do. Do we really want the High Priestesses to take notice of what is going on down here?" She swallowed a small laugh of triumph at the look of pure terror that passed over the guards' faces. "What would you do with him if I gave him to you? Throw him back into that filthy hole and pray for his swift death? I cannot allow that. He may be mad, but he is one of my people. Do you want to fight both of us?"

"All of us," a voice warned softly from the other side of the guards' post.

In the soft light of the torches Braunnnan recognized a score of her clansmen, led by the formidable figure of the shift's blacksmith. "Are you ready to quell a full blown rebellion this shift?" Sandish demanded. His deep voice and massive girth supported his calculated words with a stance that spoke of solid power more than bravado. "We are no more anxious to attract the Priestesses' attention than you are. All we desire is a shift's uninterrupted sleep. Let the Lady pass."

Garrot folded his arms over his chest, doing his best to look threatening, but pacified, although Braunnnan knew he was neither. He might be cunning enough to handle their trade with the Dark Priestesses, but they both knew he would be no match for Sandish's pure brawn. Not here below, where they were shielded from magic. "Take him," Garrot agreed. "But keep the fool quiet. Do not let him trouble us again."

"Aye," Braunnnan agreed. "We all want this fiend quieted. On that part we are of one accord." She stood up straighter as she shouldered her way through the aisle of guards, marching past the guard post and behind the line of safety her own people had provided for her. She would ask next shift how Sandish knew to come when he did. Or perhaps not. Perhaps she would call for a rest shift, and they would all just sleep.

She should have mated with Sandish this cycle, Braunnnan considered fleetingly as he and the rest of her clansmen dispersed. The man was handsome enough, in a raw sort of way. And he'd fathered enough cubs to prove his virility. She needed to start giving some serious thought to cubs of her own.

Yet she felt no regret for the cubs they would not have together this season.

Her crewmates disappeared back into their huts, willing enough to defend her, but not in the mood to help care for her charge. In the strange silence that swept over the halls, her footsteps echoed loudly against the cold stone floor.

What did one do with a madman?

## Chapter Two

The man was too filthy to allow in her hut, and she was too tired to even think of heating water for a proper bath. And it would have to be her hut. Obviously no one else would offer to take responsibility for him.

Braunnnan eyed the lake in the middle of the long stone chamber she called her home. The water was cold, but clear and clean. She often swam in that water by last light of her shift.

The shoreline sloped gently into the icy water. She was waist deep before the madman began to sputter. She expected some protest, but instead he spoke quietly from over her shoulder. "Put me down. Please, M'Lady."

Braunnnan resisted the urge to dump him unceremoniously in the water. Instead she bent forward enough to let him slide off her shoulder onto his feet.

Braunnnan wasn't sure what she expected once he hit the water -- a yelp over the temperature at the very least. Certainly not that the man would immediately drop to his knees in the chill water and bury his face in its crystal surface.

She reached for him, sure he'd lost his balance again, but her hand stopped in mid air.

Drinking. The man was gulping the frigid water as if he'd not had a drink in many shifts. Remembering the broken pottery, Braunnnan thought that assessment might not be so far off. She laid her hand gently on the man's shoulder. His skin shivered under her touch, but he did not try to jerk away. That at least seemed a good sign. "Easy," she cautioned. "Go slow or you'll make yourself sick."

His head came slowly up out of the water, his eyes huge and luminous in the dim light, like a wild thing, water coursing down his face and running in rivulets over his chest. "Thank you, M'Lady."

Braunnnan bent to scoop up a handful of the coarse sands the water had worn away from the rock. "I use this to clean myself. But do not scrub too hard or you'll take off your skin with the dirt."

He just stared at her. Braunnnan demonstrated, using two fingers to smear the damp sand across his cheeks, massaging gently until his face glowed pink under her fingers. She scooped the cool water up in her hands to rinse away the sand.

His hand, larger and darker than hers, came up out of the water to cover hers, pressing her fingers flat against his face. He turned his head slightly under their joined hands until soft, trembling lips kissed her palm.

Braunnnan's eyes widened in surprise, both at the gentleness of his touch and the suddenness of the warmth that spread through her. She'd tried to mate before. Tried to find some connection that would stir a desire for more than just sex within her. She almost felt something for Sandish. He was physically impressive. She knew he would produce good strong healthy cubs within her. But it wasn't enough. He would welcome her advances, of that she was sure. She'd watched him at his forge for hours, trying to stir up even a spark of enthusiasm at the thought of mating with him. Nothing.

Now just the touch of the madman's lips set her nerves on fire?

Perhaps she was the crazy one. She didn't pull away from him. Instead she followed her instincts and bent forward to wrap her arms around the prisoner's shoulders, giving what comfort she could, though she felt awkward at best. Sobs shook him as she held him. "Shhh," she soothed. "It's all right. No one will hurt you now. I won't let them. You'll be all right now."

"You will hurt me," he replied in a broken voice. "With your goodness and your innocence, in ways that no one else ever could."

Shaken, Braunnnan released her hold on him.

Mad. He was completely mad. Had she actually considered mating with a madman? *Idiot*, she chided herself. *He'd certainly father fine cubs.*

She doused her own fires with the cold water as she ducked under its protective surface. "We have to get you cleaned up before you get chilled. This water is frigid."

She scooped up the coarse sand from the lake's bottom and turned to scrubbing his back while he followed her example and scoured himself vigorously, somehow pulling his own scattered emotions back under control.

Braunnan wasn't sure what good the sand would accomplish in his hair, but he scrubbed hard at his scalp, then tried to comb the tangled mass of damp curls out with his fingers. Twice he dunked himself completely under the water to rinse the sand away. Each time he surfaced looking younger and less like a raving lunatic. He seemed perfectly steady on his feet now, and completely in control of himself.

All of which did little to help settle her conflicting emotions.

"Come along now. You're turning blue from the cold. Let's go get you into some dry clothes." Braunnan waded back to the shore where she stood wringing out her tunic before she realized the man was not going to follow her. She looked back with a sigh, ready to argue with him, only to see him standing, still up to his hips in the water, staring transfixed at her.

No man had stared at her like that in a long time. Like she was dinner and he hadn't eaten for a full cycle. She glanced down to see her wet tunic had molded itself to her body, so that her nipples stood out hard and pointy against the thin wet fabric.

It wasn't as if she'd invited him to look. She was just trying to help him get cleaned up. She should have been angry. Would have been angry if another man had stared at her like that. She was angry, damn it. She straightened her shoulders and marched to the lake's edge to gather the end of the chain where it lay in the sand.

Almost against her will, her gaze traveled slowly down the chain toward the man at the other end. He hadn't moved. She pulled gently, picking up the slack until the chain rose to the surface of the water. The cold metal links slowly peeled away from the dark V of his hair just above the waterline. She swallowed hard, realizing she, too, was staring. She forced herself to look up, tracing a trickle of water that ran down the chain from his torc. Narrow hips gave way to shoulders that were wide, wider than hers, wider than almost any man she'd ever worked beside.



Although he was lean after two cycles in confinement, his chest rippled with the kind of muscles a man needed to swing a pickaxe all shift. Dark fire-red ringlets hung well past his shoulders, pushed away from his face now. That face was wide in the forehead, narrowing to a mouth that looked as if it had been a long time since he'd smiled.

Even longer since he'd been kissed.

He needed to shave.

Deep green eyes seemed to see right through her damp tunic, though they eventually shifted their focus back to her face. He flushed a little as if he'd just realized he'd been staring. The look only made him more appealing. Her mouth watered appreciatively. Madman or no, the body -- what she could see of it -- was one prime piece of male flesh.

He would father fine cubs. The fire he'd lit within her began to spread down her thighs and across her belly at the thought, warming her where the wet fabric had chilled her only moments before. In truth, it had been a long time. Too long if just the sight of this man's wet, slippery skin had made her insides turn to liquid fire.

She wanted to see the rest of him. Although she hadn't been paying much attention at the time, now that she thought back on it, the legs hadn't been bad, either. Long and muscular and heavily furred in all the appropriate male places.

By the gods. She'd had her hand on his ass for a quarter of a mile's hike and not even noticed its shape? Where else had her hands been? She fought the urge to brush her shoulder to see if his cock had burned its impression there.

It was her turn to blush.

At the moment she didn't mind him staring at her like that at all.

Braunna cleared her throat, glancing down at her hands. "We're going to have to get this chain off of you." She tried to keep her voice conversational. She was pretty sure she pulled it off.

His gaze met hers, a hungry sweep of conflicting emotions showing in his eyes. "Are you sure you want the chain off?"

She pictured using the chain to bind him helpless before her while she spread cinnamon oil all over that magnificent body. She'd make him wait. She'd make him beg. Before she finished licking the oil from his balls, he'd promise her anything she wanted. *Everything* she wanted. She trembled with the force of the lust that washed over her.

No. There were ropes for that -- ropes and manacles and soft strips of leather. The chain was heavy and awkward and it would hurt him.

She swallowed hard, forcing the image out of her mind. "I'm sure."

His eyes shimmered with self-mockery. "How will you control me without the chain, M'Lady?"

Control him?

Her lust vanished instantly as she remembered who she was dealing with and why they were here. She'd been alone far too long if she was reduced to considering coupling with this madman. The anger she always had so much trouble trying to keep in check bubbled to the surface again, though she fought to keep her tone low and modulated. "I will not control you. You will control yourself. Because if you do, I and my House will stand beside you to protect you from the guards. And if you do not control yourself, if you continue to make my people's lives miserable, the guards will not need to come back after you."

He shrugged, rippling powerful shoulders as he looked her over again, slowly, almost insolently. "I'm mad, remember?"

"Indeed. And I am the Faerie Queen."

The madman bowed until his hair swept the water. "I am pleased to meet you, Your Highness."

Despite herself, Braunnan laughed, the tension between them suddenly broken. "Let's go home," she suggested.

Like quicksilver his mood changed. "Home. I'm sure that used to mean something."

To have lost her home and all that she'd known, and to have been called a madwoman for it... Braunnan tried to feel what he must have been through. She held

out her hand, a peace offering. "I do not have a great deal, but what I own I will share with you. Come with me. Please."

Another lightning mood change. His voice sounded almost desperate. "Do not ask this of me, M'Lady."

He would refuse her help? Now? After they'd come this far? Was he truly mad? "I gave my word to the guards. That has to mean something, or they will not trust me again."

He swallowed hard, his voice sounding gritty again. "I -- M'Lady, I am naked."

Braunnnan simply stared at him. "I've seen naked men before."

He only stared back, the red flaming now in his cheeks.

How did you argue with a madman? Braunnnan slowly peeled her wet tunic over her head. "Now I am naked, as well. Does that change anything?"

If anything, the stain on his cheeks darkened. He shifted his gaze away from her nipples, which stabbed out furiously as the cold air hit her damp skin. "*That* does not help the problem at all, M'Lady."

The prob --

*Oh.*

If she'd thought about it, she would have assumed the cold water would have shriveled everything. He was cold and wet and exhausted and probably hungry, and yet still he had the energy to think about sex? Men were such confusing creatures. Braunnnan shook her head in disbelief as she tossed her dripping tunic over her left shoulder where his body had balanced not long before. Deliberately she turned her back to the man, dropping his chain in the sand. "I am going home. Follow me if you like."

After only a moment's hesitation, the water splashed behind her. She fought the urge to turn and look, knowing she already had the man at a disadvantage. Whether it was a small, shriveled package he wished to keep private or an unconcealable erection, she'd already seen enough of him to warm her against the chill of the sleep-shift. She

said a silent prayer to the gods that the promise his body made would live up to her fantasies.

It couldn't hurt to fantasize about a stranger. He didn't know her yet. Didn't know enough to run. Not that he'd really want to mate with her anyway. Oh, he'd looked, but she couldn't ignore the fact that he hadn't made any offers. It wasn't exactly easy on a man, trying to induce a female into ovulating. Some women took several men to their beds, just to help nature out. Still, she'd never heard of a man refusing the offer to mate. Just to help the gods out a little, she tossed her wet hair back over her shoulders, letting the water drip down her back, knowing the slow trickle would outline the sway of her hips as she walked.

*And they called him the madman.* He hurried to catch up with the woman. Did she not know better than to walk about unclothed before the males of her own species during mating season? Did she not...

No. She made her own rules. She was fool enough to come storming up to the guard post, nothing but a pickaxe in her hands, ready to kill him for waking her up. She'd been ready to kill *for* him only moments later.

Now she was walking away from him, daring him to follow.

As if he had a choice.

Long, long legs, with curves as well-defined as if they'd been chiseled out of stone -- the life's work of a master craftsman. A taut, heart-shaped ass that rippled with muscles when she walked, just begging to be touched. Skin as creamy and smooth as a baby's. Breasts a man would fall on his knees to worship. Hair as dark as a vein of coal. Follow her? How could he not? 'Twould be far easier to leave his sanity behind.

What had she felt when she looked at him? There were too many emotions still raging in her to read her well. Although the anger was fading, it was still close enough to the surface to blanket all else.

His body raged with desire for her. His mind raced with scenarios. A trap. A trap to lull him into sleep. Get him to trust her, get him to... to what? What did they want of

him, anyway? Why had they let him go? Who was this woman that held such power over the guards?

She was with them. She had to be with them. It was a trap. They were using her, her hypnotically gentle touch, her sinfully beautiful body, to confuse him.

Their plan was working, damn them. He was going to die anyway. There was no way they would let him live. What did it matter? His death meant nothing.

If he could just touch her again, just feel her skin beneath his fingertips once more, sink his cock into her until his balls brushed against the pale flesh of those magnificent thighs, dying wouldn't seem so empty.

He had no way to conceal the naked lust in his heart, let alone the thick swollen ache of his cock. His body knew it was still mating season. He wanted her. Needed her worse than he needed food and sleep. He shifted the loops of the bulky chain until they covered as much of his erection as he could manage. Still, he hesitated as she let the flap of tattered skins fall shut over her doorway. Hesitated long enough that when he raised the flap, ducking to fit his tall frame through the short, narrow doorway, the room at first appeared to be empty.

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness of the one-room cabin, he saw her. She was already sprawled face down across a pile of sleeping furs, still naked, that perfect ass laid out before him like an invitation he dared not explore.

"Bread and mushrooms on the table," she mumbled. "Help yourself."

*Help yourself.* Did she not know what he wanted to help himself to? Evidently the flame of desire that burned him to a crisp met no flickering ember within his benefactress. "Thank you," he managed, watching his short lived fantasies crumble to ashes.

As simple as that. Already she had destroyed him.

*What did you expect, fool? That she would welcome you into her bed with open arms, shouting "Mate with me"? Right. You and a dozen other men maybe.*

He *was* a fool.

She knew nothing of him. Nothing of the man he had been. He was but an annoyance to her. She'd found a madman buried in filth. Why would she think of him as anything more? Why would she feel anything for him? No other woman had. If he'd been a real bear he could have hibernated right through the entire mating season and no one ever would have noticed.

He sat on the single bench, his back to the woman, but the image of her dancing naked around the bonfire in the common room while men vied to mate with her consumed him. Hungry as he was, the mushrooms tasted of little more than the dung they grew in. Even the bread was hard to choke down.

He couldn't stay awake all shift. Not here. Not now. The methods he'd used to keep himself awake had hurt others.

Neither could he go to sleep. There was no place other than the pile of furs beside her to lie down. *Could* he lie beside her while she slept and not touch her? Did he have that much control left?

No. He knew better. If he touched her she would reject him. If he slept they would find him. He might be free of the filthy cell, but he was still their prisoner. If he --

"Come to bed."

His already painfully erect cock slammed against his hollow gut. "I dare not, M'Lady. They will come for me if I sleep. They will put me in manacles and hood me to keep me powerless against them. They want me to sleep, so that they can restrain me. They drug the food. I --"

He heard her move in the bedding and turned far enough to see her from the corner of his eye, pale perfection silhouetted against the furs. What was she offering him and why? Her body? In return for what? His soul?

His life?

If she killed him while he slept in her arms it might well be worth the price.

She sighed, shaking her head as if she could read his mind. "How long has it been since you've slept?"

He tried to remember, but the past had grown fuzzy. "Many shifts. Cycles perhaps. I do not know anymore."

She patted the furs beside her. "Come. Put the chain here, behind me, so that no one can get to it without our knowing. Even if one of the guards were foolish enough to enter here, we can take one or two guards between us. No more will fit through the doorway. We will take turns sleeping. Lie down beside me. I will watch your back."

He felt no deception in her. He would be safe here. As safe as he could be anywhere. Sleep itself was almost as seductive as the woman. He had to trust her. Had to trust someone, and there was no one else. He dropped slowly to his knees beside her, stretching to do as she said and place the bulk of the chain on the floor behind her.

His hand brushed her hip on the way.

Mistake. His cock jerked against his empty stomach, threatening to erupt all over both of them.

Bigger mistake. She rolled to face him at his touch. Her eyes glowed green in the dark, no longer looking quite human. He almost pulled back as she reached for him, her hands looking like claws that might slice him to ribbons. "Are you afraid of me?" she asked in surprise, her voice deep as a demon's. "Do not fear me, No One. I will not harm you."

Surely she could not be the demoness who haunted him. No. He was hallucinating. He pressed his eyes tightly shut, willing the images of fear away. Her hands closed over his cock, and the claws disappeared. They were hands. Only hands. He shuddered beneath her touch.

"So big. So hard. So hot. I am not sure we will fit together." She traced the length of his cock with one fingernail, watching the eager dance he did for her. "Shall we find out?"

He couldn't answer. Didn't dare trust himself with words. Didn't trust himself to reach for her, although he wanted to, wanted to with every fiber of his being. How could he tell her that her touch meant more to him than his freedom? He didn't have the words. He'd get it wrong. Something inane would come out. He raised his hand to

brush the hair back from her face. The demoness fled his touch. Human eyes looked back at him.

Her mouth tilted to kiss his open palm. She sucked his finger slowly into that mouth, watching him as she ran her tongue over his knuckle.

She had accomplished in mere minutes what the guards had not been able to do in weeks. Tears coursed down his cheeks as he broke beneath her touch. "Tell me you're real," he begged. "Tell me I'm not going to wake up alone in my cell again."

Braunnnan woke up enough to roll toward the man, already annoyed. The sleep-shift was far advanced. She was tired, damn it. All she'd wanted was a few hours' uninterrupted sleep. Was that too much to ask? Was that...

"Tell me you're real," he begged. "Tell me I'm not going to wake up alone in my cell."

He'd fallen asleep almost the moment he lay down beside her. He must have been exhausted. He was talking now in his sleep, tears dampening his thick dark lashes. He'd thrown off the fur she'd covered him with. She glanced down that intriguing line of dark red hair that led like a path down his torso, taking her time in the journey, until her gaze came to rest on a hard-on the size of a pickaxe handle. Well. That explained a good bit. Amazing a man could sleep at all with an erection like that.

She forced herself to focus on his words. "I'm real," she assured him. "You're not going to wake up alone."

Damn, how she wanted to touch. Just the sight of him sprawled there beside her had her nerves instantly on the alert. She'd wanted to take him when he came to her bed, and the gods knew his body had been ready enough, but he was so tired he'd been asleep almost before he found his way into her furs. She'd thought to wait, to attempt a mating with him at first light. At the start of the shift they'd both be less tired. Once he was rested she'd be able to tell whether it was her he lusted after, or just some fantasy woman from his dreams.

But now her body had other ideas, and sleep was no longer one of them.

"Touch me," he begged.



Braunnnan glanced back to his face, embarrassed at having been caught staring again. His lashes were so thick it was hard to tell, but he appeared to be asleep. Still, it was as much of an invitation as she was likely to get. Granting his request would please her. Braunnnan let her hand do what it had wanted to do all along. Her fingertips brushed slowly along the line of hair that descended from his navel and down, combing through the dark tangle of curls that clustered around the base of that tantalizing erection, delaying the moment of electrical contact until her body screamed with desire.

A hand rose out of the furs to cover hers. Braunnnan glanced quickly toward the shadowed face. Glittering green eyes focused on hers, questioning, yearning. Slowly she moved their joined hands to close over his penis. He made no move to object.

Hot. He was burning up. Fire like the heat of molten metal. She stroked slowly up, closing her hand around the head, raising the drops of pre-cum to her lips with their fingers. "You taste salty."

He rolled to one elbow to face her, moving slowly, as if he thought she might reject his unspoken offer. He leaned in close to her mouth. She swallowed hard. His tongue traced the path where her finger had spread his taste on her lips. His tongue was hesitant at first, just tasting, then forceful, demanding with the hunger of a starving man's desires.

She was hungry herself. There was nothing patient or gentle about either of them now. She bit and pulled and clawed, fighting for dominance. He bit and clawed back. He was her equal both in strength and desire. "Yes!" she hissed as his lips fastened over her nipple, pulling, sucking. "That's good. So good." Her hand fisted over his cock again, stroking, pulling, rubbing the sensitive head over her clit as she drove herself to a frenzy.

"Take me inside you," he demanded as he twisted the ring on her nipple with his tongue. "Ride me, Demoness. Ride me hard."

She was a demoness, was she? She'd best not disappoint him. Braunnnan shoved at him, pushing him onto his back. She crouched over him, smiling in the darkness as she stretched out over him, her weight supported by her hands and her toes, in a

parody of first light calisthenics. She was ready. So ready. She'd been ready since he walked out of the lake. She was greedy now, and desperate to feel the power of his cock moving within her. Her whole body shook with desire as she lowered herself onto the length of that thick, burning cock.

## Chapter Three

Fire. Fire and steel. He was an unfinished sword, and she the blacksmith's burning coals. She swallowed his length until he knew he would combust. He clawed at her desperately, forcing her hips down until she captured even more of his length within that all-consuming fire. Cat-green eyes laughed down at him. Wide lips parted to reveal even rows of sharp, deadly teeth. "Kill me, Demoness," he begged. "Take my soul. I don't care. I don't want it anymore. Take whatever you want from me. Just fuck me."

Whatever she was going to do, if she didn't do it faster than this he would break. He clawed at her hips, hammering up into her as hard as he could. He pumped like a madman, trying to take control, but she fought him, taking away what he needed most. He sobbed out his bereavement as she pinned his hands into the furs beside his shoulders and lifted herself off of him.

"Steady," she warned. "Breathe. Remember to breathe."

"I -- can't --" he managed in ragged gasps. But he did. Because she asked it of him. He pulled in quick lungfuls of cool air, remembering what it was to breathe the air fresh off the waters, uncontaminated by filth and decay.

"I need --" He had no idea how to tell her what he needed.

"I know what you need. I need this too. I want your cock riding hard within me. But we're going to take this slow." She reached back into the furs for a small wooden box.

"Slow," he repeated, staring at the box apprehensively. Slow could be good.

"Slow. First you're going to tell me my name. Do you remember my name?"

Her *name*? At a time like this he was supposed to remember her name? With his cock dancing cold and naked so close to her steaming sheath that he could feel her juices drip against him, tracing their sizzling path over his skin?

She opened the box and reached in, slowly opening her hand to him to display an ivory cock ring.

Slow could be *very* good. He swallowed hard, still staring at the ring. His cock wasn't going to see any more action unless he answered her. He clawed desperately through his memories as she reached in again to withdraw a long piece of soft leather. He wasn't sure what that was for, but his mind thought of a dozen uses that all left him shaking with desire.

He remembered. "Braunna," he whispered. "Mistress of the Fifth House of Clan Bear."

He stared at her fingers as she slipped the cock ring over his quivering penis. His already hard shaft seemed to grow even harder, the ache for her touch almost unbearable. "Braunna is good enough. The rest is my own self-mockery. There is no Clan Bear anymore. No Houses. No Mistresses. I am but Third Shift Supervisor." She clenched her fist hard around his swollen cock, wringing a moan of both pain and ecstasy from him. "Now. Next. What is your name?"

Who... the fear built in him again, pulling, ripping at his gut. Who had he been? The blackness, the nothingness, engulfed him when he tried to think back. "Who," he sobbed. "Who am I? Why am I here? Why are you trying to kill me?"

"I won't hurt you!" she admonished. "No one is going to hurt you." As if to prove the point she rose up to settle her greedy cunt back over his cock, sinking slowly until she swallowed him whole. "I'm Braunna, remember? I'm your friend."

He blinked his eyes clear. He could still hear her voice echoing down that lonely cellblock. "Braunna, Mistress of the Fifth House of Clan Bear."

She reached for the small strip of leather. "Yes."

In his mind, he heard her feet against the stone corridor, approaching, getting closer and closer, like death marching in on him. "You took me out of the cell."

"Yes."

"Are you..." He licked his lips, afraid of her answer, but needing to know. "Are you the demoness?"

Her stern face broke into a parody of a smile. "No. I give you my word that I am not a demoness."

She at least believed she was not the demoness. The fangs retreated under her curling lip. "You're Braunnan."

"Just Braunnan."

"I need you, Braunnan," he begged in desperation. "More than the bread. More than the water. More than the bath. More than I need to know my own name, I need you. I need to know there is something good left within me. Touch me. Hold me. Mate with me."

Braunnan swallowed hard. *Mate with me*. That was different. That was... that changed everything. She wanted to tell him she couldn't. She didn't know how.

But that wasn't quite the truth.

Beltaine, the festival that once marked the beginning of their mating season, had once been their most lavish holiday next to Samhain, the late-year hibernation festival. But since the cataclysm that had driven them below ground and into the protection of the Dark Ones, such practices were no longer permitted.

She'd had sex with other men. What clanswoman hadn't? But the mating ritual... though it was forbidden, most clanswomen still practiced the old ways, or as much of them as anyone remembered or understood. The guards looked the other way, because to do any more would attract too much attention to their failure to keep the clan obedient to the Dark Priestesses' rules. And in truth the Priestesses cared little as long as they were not troubled by those below. They cared that they had their ore, and their gems to trade. The less attention they paid to the race who served them, the better for all concerned.

It wasn't that they were forbidden to breed. Women were encouraged to bear cubs, and were rewarded for successful birthings. No. There were no rules against sex.

It was only the mating ritual that was forbidden. The sequestering of a woman with her chosen mate or mates for several cycles while the man or men mated with her, preparing her body for child bearing, had long been a tradition of Clan Bear.

A tradition which she'd never practiced. Not that she hadn't wanted to. Her body screamed at her every year now that it was time to mate, and she'd tried. She'd sampled several of her clansmen in hopes of finding a potential mate, but whatever it was that made a man more than just a sexual partner had eluded her.

The man who asked for her now might well be a raving lunatic.

He was also the first man in ages who'd truly awakened her desire to mate. His cock pulsed within her, the cock ring rubbing subtly against the walls of her cunt in rhythm to his breathing while he waited for her answer.

She'd asked for his trust. She could give him no less than the truth. "I'm afraid," she admitted. "You -- I feel things with you -- I don't think --"

"Don't think." He laced his fingers into her hair, gently pulling her down against his chest. "Just feel." He kissed her, soft lips quivering against hers, the contact soothing, sedating, the warmth spreading as her lips parted under his touch.

His unexpected calm captured her, giving her strength, helping her find her balance again. "I want you," she breathed against his lips. "I would mate with you."

"I am yours."

She touched. She sat up slowly, letting his hands slide down to rest on her hips while she explored his body, drawing her knees up beside his hips to steady her balance. She could feel the beat of his pulse throbbing within her, growing ever more intense as her hands traced up, over his chest, stopping to palm his hard little nipples. She moved on, stroking across broad shoulders and down, then back up again, until she framed his face in her hands.

"Braunnan," he whispered as she bent forward to kiss him again.

"Yes, my mate." She stroked his mouth with her tongue, then slipped between his lips to tease and taste. She raised her hips up, sliding them home again, still gasping in surprise as she felt him fill her completely.

More. She wanted more. "Do you trust me?"

"With my life."

Hardly a ringing endorsement from a man who'd begged her to kill him a few hours ago. Still, although his eyes widened in surprise, he didn't try to stop her when she slipped the soft leather strap around the base of his cock. The simple quick release knot she used would come off as soon as she pulled on it, but not before. His cock grew harder within her as she tightened the noose around him.

She tangled her hands in his hair, still damp from the lake, rocking back to expose her breasts as she drew his head to her. Nuzzling blindly, he found her nipple, hard and aching for his touch. He licked and tasted first, sucking gently, then harder as she began to move on him again. His tongue and his teeth worked on one nipple while his fingers found the other, teasing, abrading, demanding. She moved slowly on his thick, swollen length, the pleasure building within her until it was almost painful, the cock ring adding more friction as she rode him, the walls of her pussy clenched tightly around his heavy cock.

The heat built between them, consuming, demanding. More. More. She strained to hold him while he pulled away now, only to drive himself home with the full force of his lust. Each thrust ripped at raw nerves, pushing her farther, drawing her in further, demanding more. More. She rode up his length, impaling herself again and again, feeling the lasso holding him back, her pleasure building in intense waves. She broke, drenching him with her shattering release, and yet it was not a release, but only a demand for more.

He fulfilled that demand, his breathing once again ragged and shallow, his face once again strained with the effort as he slammed his hips up against hers like pistons working the big steam shovel below in the mines. She sobbed into his hair, holding him tightly against her breast, riding him harder, wanting, needing, taking all he could give. Again she shattered around him, clenching so hard she feared she would hurt him, but he gave her only a moment's rest before he buried himself into her once again.

His hands worked her breasts now too, stretching and teasing and milking her swollen nipples until she screamed for release. "Now!" she ordered.

His hips arched off the furs, driving into her with the sound of wet flesh smacking together as she fell back to straddle him crabwise, her head resting back against his knees. His hands splayed over her pelvis, his thumbs riding beside her clit with every stroke. Stars that she'd only dreamed about shimmered in a sky she'd never seen. The beat of his pulse hammered in rhythm to her own against her ribs. She screamed mindlessly as she snapped, crushing, pulling, milking him for all he had.

His control broke as she tugged at the lasso, and he pumped into her in a final agonizing frenzy, his climax coming almost in slow motion as the cock ring sustained his pleasure, his semen pumping hot and gushing as he filled her again and again, washing away her innocence with her fears.

When she could move again, she unwound her limbs to lay curled against his chest, her arms clasping him to her, his molten-metal cock slowly cooling within her. She chuckled softly against his chest as the capacity for thought returned.

"What are you thinking, Braunnnan?" His voice came as an amused whisper against her ear, which he gently nipped.

"I made so much noise, I probably woke my shift-mates."

His fingers stroked absently along her arm, an oddly comforting gesture that made her snuggle more closely against him. "I think they will forgive you, considering the other torments you have lifted from them."

Braunnnan adjusted herself more comfortably across his chest, shoving the chain out of her way. "We have to get rid of this, next shift." Her voice sounded like little more than a mumble, even to her own ears.

"Yes, M'Lady. Sleep now. I will watch over you."

She wanted to argue, but sleep pulled at her like a warm, welcoming hand. "Gregory."

"M'Lady?"

"My mate must have a name. I was always partial to the tale of St. Gregory."



He laughed against her neck. "I'm not much of a saint."

"Nor am I. But you have slain me with your sword nonetheless."

"And they call *me* crazy," he teased as he kissed her forehead.

\* \* \*

Braunna wasn't sure how long she'd slept this time. Long enough to feel the ache of the work cycle fade away. Long enough to feel an ache of another kind set in. The shift was still darkened, not yet signaling the end of this sleep cycle.

How many times had she woken up thus, waiting, listening, watching for a sun that would never rise, a wind that would never blow, birds that would never sing?

Not here. Not for her.

She rearranged herself in the bed, pulling the furs up over her chilled, naked --

Strong arms closed possessively around her, pulling her back against a warm, hard chest.

Panic nearly overwhelmed her. She had to fight the urge to break free. She was not alone. There was a man here, with her, in her bed. A man who cuddled her now like a lover.

Who was he? What had she done?

She remembered no revelry last shift. No ale madly sloshed until the floor and the ceiling were as one. No fool of a man making eyes at her until she succumbed to loneliness and allowed herself to be pawed by some sloe-eyed cub who could not see beyond the stone horizon.

She stifled a sob as she forced herself to turn in his arms. Might as well get this over with. Might as well find out just how much damage had been done. Nothing like waking up with a man you didn't remember to get the shift off to a great start.

Her breath caught in her throat. Even in the dark of pre-shift change she could tell she faced a gorgeous stranger. Long and trim, pale skin accented with dark, fire-red hair that led in a point like an arrow to a now flaccid penis nestled safely in a mound of springy curls, sleeping as quietly as its owner.

It was hard to resist the urge to touch. Warmth flowed through her, chasing away the chill of the sleep cycle. Her fingers moved restlessly to push the heavy furs aside. Because she was warm, of course. Not because she wanted to see even more of that magnificent body.

She drifted back, testing her memory to find its weakness. Last work-shift had been ordinary enough. Up at lights-on. Dressed and ready to work by the end of first light ritual. Grab her equipment, slog to the mines in the south wing, rounding up a few stragglers along the way. Flirt with a few tired potential donors from second shift as they passed on up the shaft on their way home.

Nothing out of the ordinary. No bright pockets of hidden gems in the deep vein they'd been working for weeks now. No broken tools or injured miners to care for. Home, and a quick dinner of bread and mushrooms, then time to try to catch up on lost sleep --

Sleep. She had tried to go to sleep. But the madman had prodded her beyond her endurance and she'd --

By the gods. What had she done? Braunnan felt a sudden chill settle over her. She hadn't really brought the madman back to her bed. Surely she hadn't really made all that noise. Embarrassment flooded her cheeks.

"You can always claim I forced you." The man beside her sat up abruptly, pulling away from her as he yanked one of her furs across his waist. He reached to gather the length of chain strewn across the bedding. "Tell your crew you screamed, but no one came to help you."

She'd screamed all right. She licked her lips as details came pouring back into her memory. "I could," she agreed, remembering. "But why would I want to?"

He didn't raise his head. He wouldn't. He was too ready to expect the worst from her.

Not just her. From everyone.

They would have to get past that, somehow, if she was to keep him. And she found that the more she remembered, the more she wanted to keep him. "I don't remember needing any help."

"Better than trying to explain mating with a madman to your crew."

Braunnnan tried not to laugh, knowing he would not understand. "Who I invite to my bed is my business, is it not?"

He was still staring at the wall, his knees drawn up against his chest now, his posture as rigid and defensive as if he expected her to anchor the end of the chain and call for the guards. Perhaps that was just what he expected. His voice dripped with bitterness. "I don't recall being invited. Picked up and thrown over your shoulder. Threatened even. But not invited."

She fought the urge to slap him. "I'm sorry. I'm not at my best when I get woken up. Perhaps *you* should go to the guards. Tell them I raped you. Maybe they'll give me your old cell."

He looked up, large green eyes hurt and confused. "That's not what I meant. You didn't rape me, and you know it."

"What do you mean, then?" she snapped. "Speak your mind."

"Do you think I don't know how you feel? You wake up with a madman in your bed. What will you tell your friends, your shift-mates? Some things you can explain away, but not me. Everyone in your section will know you've mated with me. Well, I'm sorry, but that's not my fault. You knew what I was when you brought me here. Now I'm an embarrassment to you. Fine. Dump me somewhere. Make me someone else's problem. I'm easy enough to get rid of."

She'd hurt his feelings? But how? No matter what she'd thought, she surely hadn't said anything that should have upset him. She hadn't said anything. What she'd thought was another matter. Unless... "Can you read minds?" she questioned. "If you can you don't do it very well. You don't know what I feel. What I felt. Not if that's what you're thinking."

"No. I cannot read minds. Just feeling what other people feel is bad enough. If I knew what they thought I would really go crazy."

"You feel other people's emotions? You're an Empath? I've heard legends of such talents among our people long ago, but they're just legends. How can such a thing be possible? Magic doesn't work down here."

He pulled his knees up even tighter and he started to rock, his head bent nearly to his knees, his confusion and agitation growing by the moment. "I'm not. I don't know. I don't know what I am or how anything works. I can't tell you anything. Just leave me alone."

This was getting her nowhere. Whatever he was, strong emotions -- first her confusion and embarrassment, now her anger -- seemed to shatter him like pieces of broken pottery. If she could bring her emotions under control, perhaps she could stabilize him as well.

Braunnnan concentrated on logical, emotionless thinking.

He had some sort of a gift, but whatever form the gift took, he was unpracticed, unskilled. Perhaps he had not yet had time to learn to master the gift. He would not have had a mentor. None who had grown up below knew aught of magic. There would have been no one to teach him, no one to help him understand.

She glanced up to see what effect she was having now. The rocking gradually ceased as she calmed her thoughts, but he still looked hurt and miserable. She needed to hold him, to comfort him, but he wouldn't let her that close again until she regained his trust. "I know what you felt from me hurt you, but you misread me. You misunderstood what I felt."

"I don't think so," he challenged. "What was there to misunderstand? You were embarrassed."

"Of course I was embarrassed. Have you never woken up feeling disoriented? There was a man in my bed and I couldn't remember his name or how he got there. That's not the sort of thing I usually do."

He stared back at the floor again. "I still don't know his name. My name."

Braunnnan followed her instincts and reached out to lay a hand over his where he clasped his knees against his chest. "I want to help you, to heal you, but I do not know how. Yet somehow I know your mind will heal itself, given time. You're not really mad. Your mind has simply had more to cope with than you could reason your way through all at once. In time you will learn to master your gift, as your mind heals."

He shook his head emphatically. "*Gift?* This is no gift. To know what those around you feel is the worst of all curses. Would a gift rip me apart and drive me insane?"

"People fear what they do not know. You must not be afraid of your gift. You have had no one to teach you. Some things you cannot learn alone."

His fear was easy to read, although he kept his eyes averted. "I have always been alone."

"As have I. But we're not alone now, are we?" Wariness warred with hope in his eyes as he finally looked up. She had yet to gain his trust.

"I trust you," he argued almost immediately. "If you wanted to kill me you could easily have done so while I slept."

"Do you trust me enough to believe I can be angry without being angry with *you*? Do you trust me enough to know that if I'm in pain you may not be at fault? How can you? Those are trusts I will have to earn."

He blinked slowly, his eyes still wary, though he had made no move to escape her touch. "I do not understand."

"If you stand in the middle of the assembly hall with many people talking, the conversations you overhear are not always meant for your ears. So it is with emotions. I can feel embarrassed or hurt or angry for any number of reasons. You must learn to filter the conversations your gift brings to you. When you see a couple across the room screaming at each other, the situation tells you they are angry, but not at you. Yet when the conversation is closer, beside you, it may not be so easy to tell what emotions belong to whom and where they are directed. With time and practice those distinctions should become easier, less overwhelming."

Stormy green eyes gazed into hers, awash with conflicting emotions. "You are wrong."

"Often," she agreed with a smile.

"You said you didn't know how to heal me. When you touch me, you rebuild me. No one has ever cared enough about me to *want* to heal me before. I am lost, adrift, and you anchor me. Right now all that I am is what I see in your eyes, what I feel in your heart. Right now I don't have to wonder who I am."

Braunnnan leaned forward to touch her lips to his temple, her hand still pressed over his. "You are my chosen mate," she reminded him. "Let that be enough. The rest will take care of itself in its own time. For now, come back to bed with me. I want you, my mate."

She watched him force his stiff shoulders to loosen, relaxing muscle by muscle as he lay back. The fur fell away as he rolled to his side, propping himself up on one elbow to look up at her. "Why would you want me here, Braunnnan? You know what they say about me. My own people say I'm crazy. I'm not even sure they're wrong. I don't know anymore."

"I know what they say. I know what I've seen." Braunnnan rested her hand on his chest, playing lightly with the fine curls that surrounded his nipples, watching them pucker with desire, almost as if against his will. "I know what I feel. I'm tired of being alone. I'm not a steam shovel, built solely to dig in the mines. I have needs and desires that stretch beyond the bounds of mining for ore and crystals. Yet I have never mated before. I never found the right man. I don't know how or why, but I believe we were meant to be together, here, now, in this place and time."

His breathing was already unsteady, but still he didn't reach for her. He stared up at her instead, questions still troubling him. "You have a whole crew to choose from, probably two dozen young men available any sleep-shift who would give their souls to lie with you, should you but invite them."

"I want you." She pressed her hand flat over his nipple. "Only you. You asked me to mate with you. Have you changed your mind, or will you stay?"

His eyes closed as his chest muscles fluttered beneath her hand. "I will stay as long as you'll have me."

"Touch me," she whispered.

## Chapter Four

"Touch me," the demoness commanded, her voice low and sensuous. Her claws raked over his chest, almost hard enough to draw blood. His cock throbbed, ready to explode. One wrong move and she would kill him. One right move and she would destroy him in another way.

Did she know, did she have any idea what she was doing to him? He could not resist her. Didn't even want to try. He was a fool, but he was her fool. If she killed him, it was no more than he deserved. He pulled her into his arms, rolling to pin her beneath him, not to control, but simply to touch.

Her glowing green eyes slid shut under heavily lashed lids as he traced the outline of her jaw with his fingertips, careful not to get too close to those fangs.

*Trust me*, she said. How could he trust anyone? If he told her what he had seen, if he tried to tell her about the other world, she would know that the guards were not wrong to have locked him away. Yet how could he trust a woman who did not share his dreams?

His throbbing cock didn't care what she believed. Her low moan of pleasure as he tasted her breasts, suckling first the right, pulling gently on the small metal ring that pierced her nipple, twisting until she writhed beneath him, was as heady an aphrodisiac as any the alchemist might ever produce. Yet she would rip out his heart if he wasn't careful. Those claws would fasten on him and...

They fisted in his hair, now, pulling his mouth tighter against her breast. He trailed his hand down over her belly, slowly, letting her know where it was going, but moving none too fast, teasing, making her wait, making her writhe against him so that his body shook with desire.



Yet if he was to tame the demoness he had to win her completely, he had to break her, had to have her begging. His hand drifted lower, brushing over the thick pelt of lush, dense curls, threading his fingers through her fur, exploring, pleased when she rocked hard against his hand, twisting, moaning.

He had no trouble defining her emotions this time. Lust poured off of her in waves, meeting his own, equally demanding. Beneath the lust there was passion, a desire for something more than the touch of the moment, a longing to hold, to possess, to own. Those emotions frightened him, but not enough to deter his fingers from their mission. He slipped first one, then two through the curls that pressed against him to find the moist heat they concealed, spreading her lower lips wide as he slowly licked his way down her belly.

He moved down her body with as much patience as he could muster, determined to break the demoness, to possess her, to capture her soul. She propped herself up on her elbows to watch him as he lowered his head to take the first taste of her.

"Sweet," he whispered against her hot, delicate skin. He ran the tip of his tongue over her clit experimentally. She bucked against him as if she'd been shot through with a lightning bolt. He spread her wider, tracing her opening, judging from her sharp intake of breath that she was more than ready.

So tight. He pushed into her slowly, sliding his tongue along folds his cock longed to explore, pulling away only to circle her clit, pushing, tasting, thrusting into her until she clutched at his hair, her voice an incoherent plea for more.

He gave her more. He sucked at her juices as she cried out, arching helplessly against his mouth as he lapped at her clit, pausing only to draw in a deep breath, laden with the heavy smell of her musk. Her muscles closed hard over his tongue as he slid it back within her, lapping at her convulsing walls as she cried out again in pleasure.

*Mine!* he wanted to shout. *Mine, for now and forever!* But he knew better. Not now. Not yet. First he must break the demoness.

She had asked him to trust her. He almost felt that he could. When he was done, when she lay helpless beneath him, too spent and exhausted to argue, he would tell her the rest. For now there was only the taste of her, sweet and salty against his tongue, and the feel of her body trembling beneath his touch.

The demoness would not break. He was the one who broke. He wanted her, needed to feel her tight cunt close like a fist around his cock, his aching, wanting, needing cock. She clawed at him as he pulled away, crying out, then clawed at him again, pulling him closer. He moved over her to wait trembling at her entrance for an invitation.

“Braunnnan,” he whispered.

Bright gold eyes focused on his face, glittering in the dark, as she arched up off the furs to take him within her.

It was like coming home. Nothing had ever felt so perfect, so right. He fought to remember to breathe as he slid deep into her cunt, pushing against muscles that were already quivering and contracting around him, pulling back slowly, so that he could feel the waves of pleasure convulsing around him. More of her steaming juices flowed over him, stinging the head of his cock, making it easier to push his way into her, lubricating his path.

He lifted her legs through the crooks of his elbows as he knelt between her thighs, opening her wider to his thrusting, pushing deeper into her, filling her pussy until his balls slapped against her ass in the rhythm of a wild drum beat.

More. He could feel her desperation clawing at him. She wanted more. He wanted more. *They* wanted more. Harder. Faster. He jerked against her in a blinding frenzy as the room went black, filling for the first time with stars he could see with his eyes open.

He was the one who broke, as, ultimately, he’d known he would be. The demoness had won. He screamed out her name as her slick cunt fisted around him, demanding his offering as his seed shot into her, milking him, leaving him helpless as

he convulsed against her, unable to separate his lust, his need, his fulfillment, his release from hers.

When at last he collapsed at her side, spent and exhausted, he felt the emptiness close over him again, and he knew that he had lost. And then her arms wrapped around him, her head nestled against the hollow over his heart, her leg thrown over his thigh, and she filled him again, her contentment overwhelming him as he cradled her against the length of his hard, hollow body.

First light was soon enough to speak of the world above. For this shift there was only this, this warmth, this safety. Within moments she was asleep in his arms.

\* \* \*

*The constant drip of the water was a torture he could not escape, like the smell of the mildewed stone walls and the damp that seeped through the floors into the core of his being. He hadn't eaten for several cycles. His gut was so hollow it might have been a reflection of his soul.*

*Worse was the hole they'd ripped in his heart.*

*For the first time, he felt truly defiled. They'd broken him at last. And they'd done it so easily. All it had taken was the touch of a woman's hands against his skin.*

*He threw back his head and roared out a cry of grief, his despair echoing through the dungeon.*

"Shhh!" Strong arms pinned him against a deceptively soft chest. "Hush now. I'm here. No one's going to hurt you. I'm here."

He sobbed incoherently against her chest as reality shifted again. "I was back in my cell. You were gone. I was so empty..."

"Don't leave me again," she whispered, rocking gently as he curled against her, her lips brushing over the top of his head. "I need you here with me."

"You were gone..."

"No. Stay with me."

"I don't know," he confessed. "I don't know what's real."

"I'm real," she assured him. "As real as you are. I need you. I don't want to be alone again."

She was turning it all around... he hadn't gone anywhere. Or had he? He'd been back in his cell... how could that be? She was still here. They were still here. In her cabin.

She was the demoness, come to trick him again.

Yet he felt no deception in her. Only concern and caring and -- and something stronger he was afraid to name. Were there two realities? Did he have the power to choose? Could he make this life real simply by believing in it? In her? "Braunna," he whispered. "Braunna, Mistress of the Fifth House of Clan Bear."

"Yes!" she encouraged, laughing through her tears. "You remember! I was afraid you would not know me this time."

This time? Had he come and gone before?

He licked his lips, trying to decide how much he could share with her, how much he trusted her. "I -- it was dirty, and dark, and I was afraid to go to sleep..." He took a deep breath, trying to reconcile the two realities. "It was all real, wasn't it? The cell. Everything. You took me out of the cell."

"The cell was real. But it's over now. Now I'm here, and I'm real."

Whether she was real or not, she certainly *believed* she was real. There was more, too. That stronger something that went beyond believing and caring. She felt possessive toward him. She felt -- No. He could not be reading her right. Still, she cared about him.

He straightened, finding the strength to look at her face to face, his fingers brushing over the curve of her cheek, the strong, defined point of her chin, the soft, silky bow of her lips. "Braunna."

"Yes."

Her breath felt warm and moist against his fingers. "If you're real, then the other things..."

"You were dreaming."

He wanted to believe her. Wanted to believe this was real. And that would be his undoing. "I could taste the filth in the air, could feel the damp clinging to my skin."

"Dreams can feel real. Sometimes my dreams feel so real I think I'm dreaming when I wake up here. Sometimes I feel so lost and alone..."

It was his turn to comfort now. His turn to hold and console. The action was so alien to him that merely slipping his arm around her, pulling her against his chest, brought out a fierce protectiveness in him he'd not suspected himself capable of. "What frightens you, Braunnnan?" he whispered into her hair. "What do you dream about?"

A tinge of fear colored her. She wished now that she hadn't told him so much. He cut her off before she could say the words out loud. "I will believe you. You do not have to prove yourself to me, Braunnnan. Not now, not ever."

"I -- I dream of our past. Of our people's past. Before we came to this place. We were not always so, a subjugated race. I dream of freedom."

No wonder she was frightened. "You know. You know what we must do."

"I know we were not meant to live so, buried beneath the mountain, our magic held in check, our children born as slaves."

The lights were fading in. The walls outside the cabin began to glow with a pale phosphorescent parody of the sun they mimicked. He chuckled as he ruffled her hair. "You must not say such things aloud, or you will yet end up in my cell. Come. The work-shift begins. Another new cycle awaits us."

Braunnnan ran her hand through the wispy curls that covered his chest, setting off this new emotion, this feeling of protectiveness and possessiveness, in him afresh. "I like to swim in the lake before start of shift. Would you care to join me?"

Watch her swim, naked and slick as an otter, and come to him dripping and shimmering in the early shift light? When there was not time to do aught about the erection he'd be trying to conceal? The woman was torture itself. "The chain's a bit much to try to swim with, but I will go to the lake with you." As if he could help himself...

"The chain! I can't believe I forgot about the chain!" She scrambled to her feet, holding out her hand to him. "Come. We must take care of that damn chain."

He felt his face color, knowing that she could see the direction his thoughts had taken at the mention of the lake. "M'Lady, I would not be an embarrassment to you. I cannot parade about your quadrant naked."

Her smile left no doubt as to whether she'd noticed his reaction. "Why would I find you embarrassing? You're rather pleasing to look at this way."

"'Tis not appropriate. I am not some young cubling, to wander around naked." And randy as an unschooled boy, he thought to himself. He had to reestablish some control in his life. Some self-discipline. Some...

She bent to extract a tunic from the footlocker against the wall, and his cock sprang to full attention as her breasts dangled before him, full and ripe and plump, like fruit waiting to fill his hand. Her ass faced him, rounded curves turned up like an invitation. The thinking side of his brain, if he had one, shut down. He crossed the small room to her in one stride, his hands framing that lovely ass as he tipped her back against his aching cock.

"Mmm." She didn't try to push him away. Instead she rubbed herself against him, breaking his last hold on sanity. His hand slipped between her legs, spreading her open, feeling her first juices gush onto his fingers as he warned her of what was coming. She spread her feet farther apart, rocking hard against his exploring fingers, a small moan shaking her as she slammed the lid of the locker shut, the tunic caught in her fisted hands.

Still, he hesitated. It was too sudden. He hadn't prepared her properly. He hadn't considered anything but his own hunger, and the inviting picture she presented. He pulled back slightly, trying to think of an appropriate apology. "Braunnnan, I'm sorry. I - \_"

"No you don't. No explanations. We don't have time. Shut up and fuck me," she ordered, pressing back against him.

She bent lower, leaning onto her forearms over the chest. His cock, at least, knew how to follow orders. He thrust hard into her waiting cunt, his hands gripping her hips as he rammed against her. She was as hot and willing as if he'd spent an hour making

her ready. He felt her clenching at him already, and he shoved harder, faster, sliding a hand around to stroke over her clit in rhythm to his thrusts.

He was in control. He could do whatever he wanted. But what he wanted, what he needed, became secondary to her pleasure as he felt her tense, felt her strain against him, helpless to do anything but support herself. He could feel her, feel her universe narrow down to the aching need, the need that only he could fill, and he wanted nothing more than to pleasure her until she fell limp into his arms.

"Yes!" she shrieked as she broke around him, her muscles tightening as if to hold him within her. She locked rigidly beneath him, her juices washing over him like a balm.

It was not enough. He gave her a moment to regain her senses before he drove into her again, harder, faster, demanding more. She shattered around him again and yet again, her skin damp and slick now with the strain of their exertion, her breathing hard and fast like a runner's.

"Now," she managed as she reached for her peak yet again. "Come for me now. I can't take any more."

He held her now, supporting her as her legs buckled, easing them both to their knees without breaking his rhythm. So tight. Had she not been wet and slick with the release of their mating he might not have been able to move within her she was so tight. He abandoned his control, convulsing against her like a madman, feeling her quake beneath him as she broke, her spiraling release sweeping him up until he shattered within her, his seed washing over them both as she cried out mindlessly.

He nipped at her neck, licking at the imagined wound, too sated to do more than collapse beside her in the furs. Her contentment filled him, seeking out all the empty, hollow places and washing them clean, chasing away the smell of the cold, dank cell.

"You frighten me," she whispered against his chest.

"You don't feel frightened."

"I feel. I... I care about you. I haven't cared about anyone in a very long time. I promised myself I wouldn't let this happen. Now here I am. Someone matters to me. When you leave me, I will have to learn how to be alone all over again."

"Why would I leave you?"

Silent tears fell from her eyes. "Because you will heal. You will remember who you were, where you belong. Once you tire of our mating cycle you will return to your life. Such is the way of our world. Yet when you go, my world will no longer seem complete."

He bent his head to kiss her eyelids. "I know who I am. I am a man who is lucky enough to have found the missing pieces of my soul. I will not leave you. Not until you tire of me. And I pray that will be a long, long time from now."

"That *will* be a very long time, my mate. A very long time indeed. Longer than just the matings required to prepare my body to conceive."

\* \* \*

A cub. Cubs. Cubs with her strange amber eyes. Cubs with the face he'd seen in the surface of the lake. How could they bring cubs into this world?

Memories came drifting back. There was another world. He'd begun to remember when she spoke of her dreams. Yet the curtain of fear shrouded that world. Still, new resolve helped him battle his fears. When he closed his eyes and looked up, he could picture it all. The warmth on his face. The brightness that was too much for his unshielded eyes. If the rest would not follow, if he led but one other back to the world above, at least he would not pass on the torc of slavery to their cubs. Somehow he would make her believe...

"Sandish, give me a hand here, please."

A muscle-bound giant who somehow looked vaguely familiar turned at Braunnan's words, his smithy hammer poised mid-strike. "M'Lady?"

The demoness handed over his chain as if he were one of the goats being handed off to the butcher.



No. She was not the demoness. By the gods, he knew better. She was Braunnnan. He had come to trust her. She would not hurt him.

Braunnnan, Mistress of the Fifth House of Clan Bear.

Braunnnan, who had saved him.

Braunnnan, the woman he was falling in love with.

Braunnnan, the woman who had promised to bear his cubs.

"I want this chain off of him. He is no longer a prisoner."

Sandish frowned at the chain, his gaze not quite meeting Braunnnan's. "Are you sure that is wise, M'Lady? The man is said to be mentally unstable."

Anger flared in Braunnnan's eyes. "He is no more unstable than I am. Do you question my sanity, Sandish?"

"We feared for you, M'Lady. It has been three work-shifts since you left your cabin. We began to think perhaps the prisoner had been too much for you."

Three work-shifts... the time had blurred together until he could not differentiate one shift from another. He had thought... It mattered not what he thought. Fear mixed with an unexpected pride. She could be ovulating already.

Three work-shifts were enough to proclaim them mated. Sandish would know this. Her entire crew would know. That explained the man's attitude. Sandish had been a great deal more jealous than worried. "If you thought your mistress in danger, Sandish, I am surprised that no one came to check on her safety."

Sandish raised an eyebrow, but did not in any other way acknowledge the rebuff. "I cannot cut the lock or the chain, M'Lady. Both are of Dwarven construction. I have not the tools to disturb such metallurgy."

He would not be ignored as if he did not exist. He was no longer *No One*. He was the chosen mate to Braunnnan, Mistress of the Fifth House. If Sandish wanted something to be jealous about, he could supply that need. Possessive anger rippled through him. "If you thought Braunnnan in danger, if you thought me a madman who might harm her, why did you not come to her assistance?"

The big man finally seemed to notice he was speaking. Sandish turned, his heavy black brows scowling until they formed one long slash separating his eyes from any remote hope of intelligence. "From the noises, we assumed Mistress Braunнан had managed to control you. She did not ask for assistance. Still, we worried that the deceptions of a madman might endanger her judgment."

"If you two could stop sparring like bears marking your territory, could we just find a way to remove this damn chain?" Braunнан reminded them. "Work-shift begins in one turn, and I do not want to miss another shift. I see no reason to attract the Dark Priestesses' attention by allowing production to fall off while the two of you debate my choice in mates."

Braunнан and her anger were much more real and immediate than any threat the Dark Priestesses might pose. Both men stared at the floor, immediately contrite.

He looked up to meet Sandish's gaze as the man frowned at the chain bound to his torc. "If you cannot cut the lock or the chain, can you break the torc?"

Surprise. Uncertainty. Sandish fingered the torc on his own neck before he laid down his hammer. "It is forbidden to remove a slave's torc."

"Could you do it?" Braunнан insisted. "Have you the skills?"

Sandish flushed. "'Tis not my skills that are in question. The High Priestesses have forbidden the torc's removal. We will be punished."

"I will say that I removed the damnable thing myself," Braunнан insisted.

"You have not the skill. I am the only one here who could do such a job."

"So you could take the torc off."

"I honestly do not know. I've never tried to remove a torc. The torc itself is Dwarven made, so I doubt I could touch it with the crude tools I have available." Sandish fingered the cool metal that bound his neck, fear and curiosity warring within him. "I could not break the torc, but the hinge at the back is riveted. I might be able to break the rivet, but there's not much room to work."

He understood the big man's indecisiveness. Most of his clan looked forward to receiving their torc. It marked their passage into adulthood. He stepped closer to the big

blacksmith's forge. "The guards have tried for two cycles now to break me. Had Braunnnan not rescued me, I would be dead by now. To me, this torc no longer represents my shift, my station in life. It represents their torture. If you cannot remove it, I swear I will tear it off with my own hands, even if my neck goes with it. Will you at least make the attempt?"

Sandish met his gaze as he fingered his own torc again. "Aye. I can. If you trust me that close to your neck with a mallet and punch. I'll be working a finger's breadth from your spine. If you flinch..."

"I'll not flinch." He stared hard at the giant's face. "All I ask is that if you miss, you promise to finish the job."

Sandish blinked once, then again. "Aye. I'll not leave you a cripple, to wait for the Priestesses to have their fun with you before they kill you."

He turned, squatting next to the anvil, pressing his neck hard against its cold iron breadth. Sandish pulled on the collar until it nearly cut off his air supply, but he didn't pull back.

Promising not to flinch and actually keeping perfectly still while a huge hammer came crashing down at the back of his neck were different things altogether. It was all too easy to visualize the hammer, tapping first as if to be sure of the location, sending small vibrations pinging through the iron that held his windpipe half shut. Once, twice, surely he would break the rivet on three. But no. More tapping.

"I have to dimple the rivet first so the punch will not slip," Sandish explained.

He didn't argue. He wouldn't risk breaking the man's concentration. Another tap. Conflicting emotions poured off the big man. He concentrated on trying to read those emotions, trying to translate the feelings into terms he could express. Sandish concentrated heavily on his work, but, while he was not precisely afraid, he was concerned that if his hammer stroke was off, his motives would be questioned. He'd been angry and jealous that Braunnnan had taken another man to her bed. Now he feared those emotions might get in his way.

"Just do your job. I trust you."

Surprise. A hint of grudging respect. The first real blow of the hammer vibrated the collar with a jolt that sent power coursing through the iron. A second blow and the rivet let go, the collar falling away. And with it, the memories came flooding back.

## Chapter Five

A cabin, not unlike the one Braunnnan occupied. Men he worked with every shift who respected him and called him friend. A lake he swam in at the end of his shift in the mines. A pickaxe he swung during the work-shift. Then the dreams had started... dreams of sunlight and freedom. He rubbed the raw skin where the collar had sat all his adult life. Freedom. This was the first step. He turned to face the woman who'd made it possible, and the man who'd swung the hammer.

"Thank you." He extended his hand toward the muscled giant. "I am called Cullaelon. I list myself in your debt. I hope someday I may be able to repay you."

Sandish slowly extended his huge hand to wrap around Cullaelon's smaller one. "Just keep Mistress Braunnnan happy. That is all that I ask."

"I shall do my best," Cullaelon promised. Truly, it was a promise he meant to keep. He turned to Braunnnan and took her hand in his. He could feel the doubt radiate off of her. He remembered what she'd said. She feared as soon as he regained his memories he'd return to his former life. "M'Lady, we have production to make up."

"Aye," she agreed. "Thank you, Sandish."

*Cullaelon.*

He had a name. He had a past. He had a life, people he would return to, a job he was expected to do in another quadrant. Braunnnan moved toward the tunnel, placing her feet one in front of the other, moving forward, forcing herself to go through the motions. She had healed the man, given him his sanity back, along with his name and his past. It was all she'd set out to do.

Now she had to let him go.

This was as it should be. As it had always been. A woman chose a man but for the duration of a mating cycle. After that he returned to his home. She was a fool to want more. To believe the dreams, to think there had once been more.

This was all there was. All there would ever be.

The sadness threatened to overwhelm her.

She gasped in surprise as her feet left the ground, too stunned to cry out. Soft lips covered hers as strong hands pushed her into a dimly lit side tunnel and up against the stone wall. A hard, lean body pressed against hers, pinning her flat and helpless as he kissed her. "Braunnnan," he hissed against her cheek, "do you think me a fool as well as a madman?"

She didn't think. Not at all. Couldn't, not with his hands, hot and angry, doing outrageous things to her only a few feet from where the changing shifts filed past. Her own hands were free, now, and she used them to answer him the best way she could, pulling his hips tightly against her while she wrapped her leg around his waist. His body was all that shielded her from the passing crews.

She didn't care. He knew who he was, and he still wanted her, even if he was angry with her for doubting him. She pulled up his tunic -- *her* tunic -- to push her hands between them, pulling his cock toward where she wanted it. There. Hot, hard, already dripping with the first releases of cum at her touch. She rolled the foreskin back, exposing as much of the sensitive head as she could, letting him feel her clit jump in response as she rubbed his cock over her. He drew in his breath with a sharp hiss as she slid his cock back and forth over her clit, shuddering against him, almost ready to come at just the touch of his sizzling heat against her sensitized skin.

"Do you think to mark your territory, she-bear?" he whispered as he drove into her. "This territory is mine, and I will not let you go. Let them see us. Every man here will understand who I am and that you are my mate. *Mine.*"

He thrust into her in rhythm to his words, hard and fast and already taking her toward a desperate, clawing climax. "My mate," she hissed in return, raking her nails across that magnificent backside. "Mine!"

"I am Cullaelon." He pistoned into her with the fierce, driving need of a man who knew exactly what he wanted. "I want to hear my name on your lips as you come for me."

"Cullaelon," she whispered. That wasn't enough. "Cullaelon!" she screamed as her horizon lit with a field of bright stars. "Mine," she commanded as he broke within her, shuddering helplessly.

"Yours." He dropped his forehead against hers. "Yours and yours alone."

"Yours and yours alone," she agreed.

\* \* \*

Alone. She was so alone. Even the guards feared to speak to her now. There was only one who shared her world, what little of it she could share. Tâkuri wrapped herself in the little warmth she could draw from the tattered skins, calming herself, letting herself drift off to find him.

Always she had had the gift of the dreaming. There were some she could brush, some she could share with, a very few she could gift with the memories she held, and one, only one, she could touch. She had found him years ago. Almost two decades, now. He'd been but a boy, a child fighting for his existence on the streets, but still one of her people, one of those whose charge she was given. She'd sought only to guide him at first, to comfort the lost soul within, but he was strong. Stronger than the rest. He saw her for the voice behind the dreams, and he actually spoke to her within the dreaming.

She could not find him tonight. Perhaps it was not night where he was. It was so hard to tell in this place of shadows. Their captors manipulated the artificial lighting to their own benefit. For each shift, morning, or first light, came at a different time. Three shifts worked the mines in constant rotation, cycling so that the giant steam hammers were never stilled. She had long ago lost track of the measure of the days above ground.

No matter. She needed to touch. Someone. Anyone. Whoever she could reach. She could not let them grow complacent. They had to know. They had to remember. They needed to believe...

\* \* \*

*Braunnnan could see her reflection in the water, framed by the mountains, the sun making a fuzzy halo around her head. The warmth on her back made her smile. She stood slowly, holding out her hand to him, and his fingers closed over hers, pulling her into his arms. His skin was hot with the glow of the sun. The sun had darkened him, melted him to a golden bronze. Her skin glowed a dark tan, the color of the woven linen tunic she wore.*

*He kissed her, a long, lingering kiss that promised more. Together they turned and headed home.*

*Home.*

*She knew this place, though she saw it now with new wonder, as if for the first time. There at the base of the mountains sat the Fifth House of Clan Bear. 'Twas not really a house. 'Twas many houses, gathered together to form a village, with one more predominant, in that its walls joined the portcullises that protected the others, providing the shield for the village within. The ornate battlements rose high and imposing, defense against all who would dare to challenge them, yet the gates were open. The children played in the grass. The herds moved freely about in the pastures beyond the gates.*

*A sudden sense of impending doom shook her. She squeezed his hand, knowing suddenly that he felt it too. They ran toward the gates, shouting their warning as they came, but no one was listening. The day was too glorious, the sun too warm, the city too invincible.*

*The cubs were their quarry, caught up by the dark furies that swept down on them, the parents who ran to their aid slaughtered as they came. "Mommy! Mommy!" The screams reached her ears like distant sounds muffled by the waves, and then they were fighting, she and her mate, back to back, swords in their hands, fighting their way back to the gates, gathering survivors as they went, even though it was already too late, too late, too late... they could not save the cubs...*

*\* \* \**

*Warm hands chafed her, trying to chase the chill from her frigid body. She clutched convulsively at the body beside her, burying herself in his warmth. Cold. So cold. So cold. Like her clansmen cut down in the sun.*



"They slaughtered our people," she sobbed. "And they took the cubs. So helpless. Why did they take our cubs?"

"Shhh." He held her now, clasped tightly against his chest, rocking her slightly in his arms. "I'd tell you it was just a dream, but we know better, don't we? But it was long ago. It was all over long before we were born. Our cubs will not face such a fate."

"Didn't feel like a dream." Her breathing slowly quieted from the hard gasps of running and fighting. "I was there. I feel as if I was there. I fought them. We fought them. So many dead. So many bodies. They took our cubs."

"I know, my love. I have seen the slaughter. But I was not really there, and neither were you. I believe the dreams are racial memories. These things actually happened, but not to us. You were born here, as I was, as all of us that remain were. The cubs we saw were not ours. The cubs taken that shift grew up here in this world. Those cubs were our mothers and fathers. None of us have ever seen sunlight. But we remember, through them. We keep the dreams alive for them."

"Sometimes I think about my mother. All I really remember is that she told me never to forget who I was. Braunnnan. Mistress of the Fifth House..."

"I don't remember my mother at all. We were separated from our parents when we were very young. The old ones died long ago. They were not suited to life underground. We were born here. We are different. Yet we *are* still Clan Bear, and you *are* Mistress of the Fifth House."

Braunnnan gathered her scattered thoughts, pulling herself together as she focused on his words. He was trying to tell her something. He was asking her something. Not directly. He was never direct. But if he was saying what she thought he was saying... "There is no Clan Bear. No Houses. No Houses, no Mistresses. I am Third Shift Supervisor."

Cullaelon held her tightly against his chest. "You know that's not true. In your heart you know. Clan Bear meant something, once. We were a proud people with a rich heritage. You understand, don't you? You've seen the slaughter."

"I... yes. The dreams become more real every time. The details become sharper. The truth harder to ignore. But I... when I try to tell people they laugh at me, or they call me --"

"Crazy. Yes. I know."

"They call me a heretic," she confessed. "They say I would destroy all that we have, all that we have built, and lead them back into chaos and poverty. They think as the Élandra have taught us, that we have always lived so, since the cataclysm, born to be subjugated, born to be part of this world. They think the world underground is our home, and that if anyone at all still survives above, they are enemies who would revile us and destroy us."

"But you remember," he prodded. "You know what we were."

"Yes," she agreed slowly, still not sure where he was leading her.

"You have seen the sunlight."

"I have seen it as if I had lived there."

His hands gripped her shoulders now, almost painfully, as he stared hard into her eyes. "It's all *real*, Braunnnan. Our people were not meant to live underground. We were not meant to be slaves. The sunlight is real."

Was he asking her to believe in the message of the dreams? Or was he telling her... "You have *seen* it? You have seen the sunlight? With your own eyes?"

He nodded his head just once. "I had to know. I went to see for myself. Through the mines. The drainage tunnels. I have seen the sunlight."

"And you came back," she whispered, understanding at last. "But when you tried to tell people, they called you crazy."

He laughed at that, the sound an admission of his own foolishness. "No. When I tried to kill the guards they called me crazy. And I confirmed that notion when I started talking about the demoness."

Braunnnan chuckled against his chest. "I suppose that might make some think you crazy."

"Braunnnan?"

Her lips were much too close to his nipple. She already knew how he would taste. The sight made her hungry all over again. "Mmm?"

"I might really be crazy."

"You might."

"The time I've spent here with you... Braunnnan, I..."

She gave in to her desires and ran her tongue around the base of his nipple, smiling when he gasped, pushing against her lips. "Mmm. The time we've spent together has been perfect." Unless he was trying to tell her... "You don't regret what we've done? Is there someone else waiting for you? Were you already mated?"

Powerful arms tightened around her convulsively. "No! No one... you gave me... everything. You touched me in places I thought no one would ever care enough to touch, Braunnnan. You healed me in ways I cannot name. It has been so long since I could trust anyone..."

He still sounded worried. "You can trust me," she assured him.

"Would you... would you tell me if you thought I was crazy?"

Would she? Could she? "I don't know that I can judge your sanity. What a man does is not what he is. You can do things that seem crazy to me without being crazy."

He snorted softly against her hair. "I didn't go charging off into the dungeons armed with a pickaxe to kill a madman."

"I would not have killed you!" Braunnnan protested. "Never. I could not harm one of my own."

"Couldn't you?"

He had an odd way of redirecting a conversation without seeming to. "I don't know what I would have done, what I meant to do. I wanted only quiet. I don't know why I grabbed the pick. But a miner never goes about empty handed."

"So you reacted instinctively to a perceived threat."

Had she said that? "Yes. I guess so."

"And if you had seen glowing green eyes and razor sharp fangs when you entered that cell?"

Glowing green eyes?

*Are you... Are you the demoness?*

A smile quirked her lips. "I might have found it hard to trust you."

"I don't know anymore. I don't know what is real. I want to believe you are real. I want to trust you. I need to trust you. I can't go on alone anymore, just praying for what I fear most."

"And what is it you fear?"

"Death. But more than that, I fear wasting my life. Wasting the gifts the gods have given me. I have been given a gift so precious, so important to our people, and yet I know not how to use it. I know not how to let others see. I ask them to believe in what they cannot see, and they call me a madman."

She thought she understood, but she had to make certain, had to be absolutely sure. "What exactly do you believe to be your gift? Your ability to read others' emotions?"

"No! That is a curse. I mean the dreams. The memories. Mountains. Sunlight. Things that are so real to me now that this, all this below, this no longer seems real at all. I believe in the dreams. I believe in freedom."

Braunna cradled his head in her arms, her hands tangled in his hair as she pulled him tightly against her, kissing his damp eyelashes as if she could heal the hurt in his soul. "I do not think you are crazy. A man who has seen what you have seen, who has tasted freedom, only to have all he knows stripped from him for believing in his visions, might well begin to doubt himself. That does not make you crazy. A man in the depths of privation might even begin to hallucinate, to see the demons of his soul as they attempt to escape. But if that makes you crazy, then every Warrior who has ever gone into battle is crazy. And make no mistake, we are Warriors, and there is a battle ahead of us we may not win. Will you stand at my side, Warrior? Will you cover my back?"

Dark green eyes searched hers, as if reading her soul. "What are you asking of me, M'Lady?"

And to gain trust, one had to offer trust. Braunnnan let down her guard, let him feel the hunger, the need, the determination that flooded her. "We are kindred souls, the Knights of the Dreaming. I am asking you to be my mate. Not just for one season, but the way our elders did in the legends. For ever and always."

He held her at arm's length, searching her face, conflicting emotions lending a troubled, haunted look to his features. "It is forbidden, M'Lady. A man may not take a mate. Not in the old way."

Braunnnan placed her hand flat over his breastbone, needing to touch, wanting to connect, asking him to believe. "The Knights of the Dreaming will change the rules, Cullaelon. *We* will change the rules. We will fight with words, we will share the dream, we will risk all that we are to show the others that there *is* a better way. Not because we want to, or because it is the right thing to do, but because we must. Because we have seen. Because all that we were must not be lost. Because we are Clan Bear."

His heart slammed against her hand, beating so hard that she could feel it struggle to make the next shuddering pump. "You know what you are saying? They will kill you if we are caught."

"They will kill us anyway. They're doing it now. One dream at a time. We *must* make the others believe, Cullaelon. We must lead our people to the surface. Help me free our people."

He placed two fingers over her lips, as if to stop her heresy. "You are the demoness, come to rip the world to shreds."

"Aye," she whispered against his fingers.

He was quiet too long. Fear set in. If he turned her down, if he told the guards and they believed him --

"I am yours, M'Lady, if you will have me."

"You and no other."

"You and no other, M'Lady. There will never be another for me. Forever and always."

\* \* \*

*She found him at last, his mind searching for hers in the dreaming, like a small boy wandering lost. He was so tired. Even in the dreaming he'd fallen asleep. She bent down to kiss his forehead, cupping his chin as she supported his head, feathering her fingers through baby fine hair...*

*To her surprise, Balthain pushed her away. "This is wrong. Why are you here? Leave me in peace. A man's dreams should be private."*

*The voice did not belong to a child. She had forgotten how fast these mortals matured. Of course. He would be a man now. A man would not need the comfort she had offered the child. Would he send her away? Would he take from her the only hope she still clung to? "I cannot leave you," she protested. "You are mine, Balthain. You have always been mine."*

*The image before her shifted and blurred until she found herself face to face with the man he had become.*

*A Warrior. He was a Warrior. Tall and broad and strong enough to break her in two, and yet he trembled beneath her touch. How much did he know? How much did he understand of the dreaming? Could she actually talk to him? Could she...*

*Could she touch him? Really touch him? She leaned in to kiss him, forgetting herself as she tested the limits of the dreaming. She had to know, had to feel...*

*His arms tightened around her, warm and solid and real. His voice whispered against her skin, deep and seductive as she lost herself in his arms. "I'm still asleep. You are the Succubus from my dreams."*

*Succubus? She almost laughed at the thought, then sobered. He was right. She stole from him in his sleep. Stole his dreams, stole his warmth, stole his comfort. Selfishly took from him while she offered nothing in return, nothing but the warmth of shared dreams...*

*She felt his body tighten against her, felt his arms crush her against his hot, hungry length.*

*He wanted her? Wanted her as a woman?*

*There could be no doubt. She could feel his cock throbbing against her, solid evidence of his desire, hot and needy, begging for her touch.*

*She'd been alone so long. The love she'd felt for the boy blended with the needs of a woman now. Lust clawed at her, its fingers greedy and tenacious as she swayed against his heat. He'd never tried to touch her before.*

*How could he touch her like this? How could his body feel so real? If he could penetrate the dreaming enough to reach out to her, what else could he do? Could she give him what his body asked for, here? It was little enough to ask, little enough to pay for so great a prize. She kissed him again, the kiss of a lover this time...*

*His kiss felt real enough. As real as the hard length of his cock pressed against her.*

*He pushed her away, holding her at arm's length. "You're real, aren't you? You exist outside of my dreams."*

*He knew? Tâkuri pulled him back into her arms, desperate for his touch, wanting him now as he had her only moments before. She clung to him, dizzy with hope and fear. "You understand, now? Rat? Are you awake? Can you still hear me?"*

*"I think I'm still asleep, but I can see you, hear you, as if I were awake."*

*"Do not fear me, Balthain. I mean you no harm."*

*He smiled at that. "Fear you, M'Lady? I might as well fear a butterfly."*

*Her breath caught in her throat, a small flicker of hope. "You know what I am?"*

*"You are Fey. Sidhe. And you are yet the Succubus I met in the dreaming."*

*She tried to keep the desperation from her voice, not wanting him to shake himself awake with the force of her panic. "Will you remember me when you wake up?"*

*"Aye, M'Lady. I always remember you."*

*Perhaps that was why he could touch her. She was real to him. Real enough to touch. Real enough to possess. "Praise the gods..."*

## Chapter Six

The water lapped gently against the stone beach. In the distance a hammer pinged steadily. Occasionally sparks from the forge's vent lit up the sleep-shift like the tiny lights of the darkened sky from above. Cullaelon vowed silently that he would find a way to give her the stars. Even if no one else ever believed him. "Sandish works late at his forge this shift," was all he managed to voice of his thoughts.

"Aye." Braunnnan turned in his arms to lay her head back against his chest, a gesture he found strangely endearing. "I think I know what he works on."

Cullaelon tilted his head to look down at her in the darkness. "What?"

"A safer way to remove the torcs."

He brushed his fingers across the raw wound on his neck. "What? Why?"

"Because the entire shift crew has seen you without your torc this shift and the guards did nothing. Because the world did not come to an end when yours was removed. Because your laughter over the last few weeks has made people uneasy, restless. They have started to question whether guards who cannot control one man can possibly control an entire race. Not that anyone has spoken these thoughts aloud. They're not ready yet. But they feel the change coming, Cullaelon."

He traced the curve of her torc with his fingertips. "The demoness first appeared after I had seen the sunlight. When I came back here, I was filled with wonder at the magnitude of it all. The vast outer world overwhelmed me. I tried to tell my shift-mates what I had seen, but they would not listen. I felt their thoughts for the first time then. Felt their doubt, their scorn, their anger. I brought them news of something so remarkable it would change the way we think, and they reviled me for it. Their emotions crowded in on me, until I wanted to tear my ears out, anything to shut them



off. I vowed to free our people from slavery. So I attacked the guards. I wasn't thinking right, I know. Even if I'd killed these guards, more would take their place."

"And after the guards, the Priestesses would come. And then the High Priestesses. 'Tis said that their magic is all-powerful, and we have no weapons to fight them with. Our people have lost their magic. We cannot fight them without magic. But now you have magic. And you have seen the sunlight. I think there must be a connection between the two. Perhaps the magic is not dead within us, but only asleep. Perhaps the sunlight will awaken our powers."

He scrubbed his face thoughtfully, taking the time to dunk under the water and rinse before he answered her. "I felt different from the moment the sunlight hit me. Stronger. More powerful. The light was so strong -- a hundred times stronger than the lights of work-shift -- it hurt my eyes terribly. Yet once I had time to get used to the light my vision seemed clearer. I knew I couldn't stay long, or I would be missed, and my shift-mates punished. But I wanted to just stare at the colors forever. Everything is so brilliant, you cannot begin to imagine..."

"Cullaelon?"

He held her tightly, no longer even pretending to help her bathe, still afraid she would pull away. "Yes."

"You do not know yet what I would ask you," she laughed.

"It matters not. Whatever it is, if it is within my powers, I will do it. For you the answer is always yes."

"I want to see the sunlight."

She really believed him. Believed he'd made the journey. His breath caught in his throat. His cock jumped to attention. He had not known that just the power of her believing would make him ache for her so. "It was not an easy journey. I was lost in the tunnels for many shifts. I left after the end of work-shift directly from the mineshaft. Getting away was remarkably easy. The guards never check to see that we've left the tunnels. I thought I could go and get back during the respite-shift, at the worst I might

miss a work-shift. Everyone does that now and again. The guards would never question my absence as long as the shift met quota.”

He ran his fingers absently through her hair, untangling the long, dark strands almost automatically. “I figured wrong. I did not take supplies enough for so long a journey. I cannot say how long the trip should have taken. A shift. Perhaps two. But I wandered down many dead-end tunnels before I found the way out. And the tunnels are not empty. Foul things live there. Spiders the size of goats. I fought my way through them, back into the tunnels, but one bite poisoned me so that I was sick for several shifts. My shift-mates took me to the guards to heal. The guards blamed my hallucinations on the spider’s poison at first. The creatures did not follow me back into the mines, but the wound was there, easy enough to see.”

“You were alone. You fought the spiders alone. There was no one to watch your back.”

He closed his eyes, trying to block out the fear. “The spiders live in some of the smaller side tunnels. They come out to hunt. Flame keeps them at bay, but I ran out of torches. I had prepared for three shifts at most. The journey took five. But I believe I could manage more quickly, now. The trip back was much easier. I marked the tunnels that led nowhere. Still, we would miss at least two work-shifts. Some of your shift-mates would have to know in order to cover for you.”

“You would take me? Honestly?”

He laughed as he rubbed his hard, pulsing cock against her. “I would take you anywhere.”

“You lust like a rutting bear.” Still she ran her hands over his body with a touch that had nothing to do with bathing. He felt his balls contract until they turned into one hard knot of need. “Would you really take me to see the sunlight?”

He kissed her, his heart overflowing with the immensity of their combined emotions. “I do not want our cubs born in captivity, Braunnnan. If the others will not come with us, I would seek to find a way to stay above ground with you alone. I saw signs of a city not far away, though I saw none of the inhabitants. There must be other

races who live above ground. Other peoples who would help us. At least allow us to earn our keep. And if there are not, if all above ground lies barren, we could find shelter in the remains of the city. There is game everywhere. I saw small creatures scurrying about, hopping in the grass. Even if, as the Dark Ones say, all else is in ruins, we could survive."

Braunna shook her head. "I must try, first. I must return and try to convince our people to leave this place."

"One or two even might escape through the tunnels with us, but if an entire shift disappeared the Dark Ones will become suspicious."

"I believe I know a way that might work, if we could convince them to leave at all. That first sleep-shift, when I came to the cells, you made things hurl through the air. How did you do that?"

Cullaeron flushed a bright red. "I'm sorry about that. When I heard footsteps I thought you were one of the guards."

Braunna shook her head. "I'm not asking for an apology. I just want to know how you were able to do what you did. No. Even that's not right. I know that somehow you moved those -- you moved everything you threw with the power of your mind alone. All I really want to know is can you do it again, and how big an object can you move?"

"I do not know," he answered, still puzzled.

"Do you remember that large fissure in the roof of the main cavern?"

He stared at her, blinking slowly. "You would collapse the cavern to cover our escape?"

"Where two minds are in harmony, there is a way..."

He meant only to touch her. To comfort. To support. But if the harmony between their minds was a tenuous thing, one she put more faith in than he was able to, the harmony between their bodies was undeniable. His hand cupped her cheek, and she turned her head to kiss his palm, smiling up at him with the trust of her innocence shining in her eyes.

He had not known how her simple faith would feed his hunger for her. The mating ritual was exhausting. Their bodies should have demanded a respite. He knew she was tired. But he was not the only one who hungered. As he fought to contain the raw lust that shook him, waves of desire came pouring off of her, a hunger that demanded his response, bombarding his senses. He pulled her tightly against his chest, carrying her easily in his arms as he strode out of the water and across the short distance to her hut.

He laid her down in the middle of the pile of furs, drying her with scraps of old tunics, still marveling at her beauty. She was tall, almost as tall as he, and broad in the shoulders, strong enough to have matched him swing for swing in the mineshaft all work-shift. Yet there was nothing about her that was not feminine. Even the play of her muscles as she raised her arm to hold out her hands to him set him on fire. Still he moved slowly, deliberately setting their wet tunics aside to dry before he knelt beside her in the flickering light of the candle lantern.

"You are a goddess," he whispered, awed and amazed once again as he reached out to touch her.

"I thought I was a demoness," she chuckled.

"Even as a demoness you were too beautiful for words. Although the teeth bothered me a little."

She bared her teeth as she smiled, turning to nip at his arm. She was only half playing. The need to mate consumed her, growing stronger each time he took her. He'd never seen the effects of a mating cycle on a woman before, though he'd heard stories. What man hadn't? Tales of women so driven to ovulate that they demanded constant attention, their lusts so powerful that one man alone could not satisfy them.

Possessiveness washed over him. He would not share her, no matter what the tradition. He would satisfy her if it killed him. His cubs would live on in her. His cubs would see the sunlight. He alone would make her body ready.

Braunnnan hissed as he moved away from her, searching in the semi-darkness for her small box of toys. He found it, watching her eyes darken as he opened the lid. There

were more toys there than those he'd already seen. He considered them slowly, grinning. Perhaps he could use her impatience to his advantage.

The cock ring she'd used on him before would heighten both of their pleasures. He slipped it on, watching her lick her lips in anticipation. He wasn't sure, however, quite what... The table. It was a solid affair, built from leftover mining timbers. What it lacked in grace of form it made up for in sturdiness. It was also the only thing in the hut that might work. He scooped her up with the furs and deposited her on the small table. Her eyes widened as he slipped the soft leather manacle around her wrist, kissing his way up her arm as he secured her to the table braces. He thought she would protest as he moved to the other side, but all he felt from her was anticipation as he fastened the other wrist in place. She tested the limits of her restraint as he kissed his way up to her shoulder. She could raise her head, could move her hips and her legs, but nothing more.

Her position, spread across the table like a feast, brought her beautiful breasts into sharp relief, but he would not be distracted. Not yet. He kissed each one in passing, ignoring her moans as she thrust them at him, working his way slowly down her belly.

"So beautiful," he murmured as he stared down at her. "You are mine."

"Yours," she agreed.

He picked up her legs to curl them over his shoulders as he knelt between her thighs. Her dark red-brown curls quivered in anticipation as his breath hit them. "Mine," he breathed across their surface. She arched off the table, thrusting her mons toward him. "Mine," he repeated as he slowly parted the delicious covering to reveal the perfect flower hidden within. So red and dark and already pulsing with her desire for him. The wonder of it shook him, stronger even than her lust. "Braunnnan," he breathed softly, so that his warm breath made her clit stand up at attention. "I will not share you. Ever."

"No," she moaned, whether in agreement or not he was not sure, but it didn't matter. He kissed her clit, but a brush of his lips, laughing softly to himself as her hips convulsed against him. He outlined her small erection with the tip of his tongue, then

licked lower, probing, exploring, discovering new sensations as she surrendered fully to him.

"Do you like that?" he whispered with a chuckle, licking her labia clean of her juices.

"Yes!" she fairly screamed as he prodded her channel gently with his tongue.

"Sweet. So sweet." Her heels pulled against him, trying to push him harder against her as he teased her clit, circling, blowing, but never quite touching the sensitive head itself.

"Cullaelon!" she screamed, twisting and writhing beneath his touch as he licked her like some sweet confection. "I need -- I want --"

"Doesn't matter what you want right now, does it, my love? Slow. We're doing this slow." To prove his point he pulled away, letting the sweep of his hair fall over her, taking a handful and using the tips to brush over her skin, laughing when she moaned, her fists tightening around the table braces as if testing their strength.

His cock bobbed hard against his belly, but he ignored it, choosing instead to spread her wider with his fingers, lapping up her fresh flow of juices. He slipped three fingers within her, loving the feel of her muscles contracting against him. Slowly he moved to suckle her clit.

"Cullaelon!" Her heels drew him in closer, and her head thrashed from side to side. Words failed her as she screamed out her release.

He stood slowly, his fingers still gently massaging. "Mine," he reminded her, thrusting hard into her tight, burning cunt, pushing the cock ring against her contracting muscles. "Mine."

"Yours," she agreed. "Yours and yours alone."

And then slow was the last thought on his mind.

\* \* \*

*She screamed in pain and fear as powerful hands yanked her out of the dreaming. "Find me!" she cried.*

*The Priestess reached through her dreaming to strike at Balthain with her staff, laughing as she wrestled Tâkuri from Balthain's arms. "You will never have her, Human. I sense your fear even now. Think you to stand against the powers of the Élandra? Fool!"*

*Balthain tried to reach through the dreaming to secure his hands around the Dark One's neck, but Tâkuri pulled back, trying to shield him from the Dark One's anger. "Find me!" Tâkuri screamed again.*

*"I will! I will if it kills me. I love you, Tâkuri. I will claim my prize."*

*\* \* \**

*The constant drip of the water was a torture he could not escape, like the smell of the mildewed stone walls and the damp that seeped through the floors into the core of his being. Worse was the drag of the chain that bound his torc to the heavy iron ring on the wall. He fought against it, enraged, digging and pulling at the chain as if he could fight the wall, cursing the guards with all the strength he had left.*

*"Cullaelon! Cullaelon, don't, please don't, you'll hurt yourself! I'm sorry! Forgive me. I'll take them off. Cullaelon, it's Braunnnan. I'll take off the manacles, I swear, just let me get to them. I wasn't thinking. I only meant --"*

*"Shhh." The present came back into focus slowly, starting with her weight over him as she reached for his restraints. He curled a leg over her, running his toes along the curve of her calf. "It's all right," he assured her, using his voice and his body to break through her hysteria. "I'm all right. It was just a dream."*

*Braunnnan calmed slowly, letting him nudge her down against his chest. "I wasn't thinking. It was a stupid idea. I should have known after the guards' torture you wouldn't like this."*

*He twisted enough to nip at her shoulder. "Did you see any dead guards in my cell, Braunnnan?"*

*"No." She wiped at her eyes with her fingertips.*

*"That's because the guards didn't chain me up so they could mate with me, my love. I will not mistake you for the guards." The fine sheen of sweat that had broken out on his skin as he fought with the dreams began to dry, like a cool breath blowing over*

him. The thought of what she might do to him tied down like this made him hot all over again. He tested the strength of the wrist cuffs experimentally, flexing his arms hard against the restraints. The table's legs would give way before the cuffs would break. And that wasn't likely. Not with timbers strong enough to shore up a mine. "Anything you want to do with me is all right, Braunnnan. Anything at all. But I think you might need to wake me up first. At least until I get past the dreams."

"Do you trust me?" she whispered hesitantly.

He groaned as she ran one fingernail up the underside of his cock. "With my life."

She snorted softly, laughter mixing with her tears. "You once begged me to kill you. Name something you value more than your life."

"You." He reached for her neck with his teeth. "I value you above all."

"I will not hurt you," she promised.

He lunged for her breast with his tongue, making her laugh when he missed his target. She ran her hands down his arms until her fingertips found the cuffs she'd slipped over his wrists while he slept. "I'm your prisoner, Mistress Braunnnan. You've captured me. Do what you will to me."

Her smile grew more confident as she straddled him, slowly working herself back into her fantasy. "I want to make you beg."

His cock jerked against her, already hot and hard and dripping. "Then I'm begging. Fuck me, Braunnnan. Have your way with me. Do whatever you want. *Please.*"

She did something. She stood. She took her heat away from him, rising to strip her tunic back off over her head. From a shelf he couldn't see she pulled down a small bottle of murky liquid, holding it over the flickering flame of the candle until it took on a golden glow. She poured a small amount into her hand. Her skin glistened wherever she rubbed her hands.

*Oil.* Her hands slid over her body, leaving a shimmering path of oil behind. A faint scent reached him, though he couldn't identify the smell. Subtle. A spice he was



not familiar with. One of the guards must have smuggled it in to her. Such things could be had. For a price. He would not think about what the price might have been.

The scent of the oil became stronger as she ran her hands over her skin, paying extra attention to her breasts, hard now and rising firmly out to sharp peaks of desire, the nipples bright coral where she touched them. The candlelight reflected off her glistening skin, making her look foreign, exotic. Even more exotic than she already was.

Standing over him she tilted the bottle slowly. A drop of her oil ran out, dripping onto his chest with an audible plunk. It was warm, but not hot enough to burn him. Warm enough for him to feel the path the oil traced. He shivered as it ran down his breastbone. Another drop followed, slowly, so slowly, in line with the first, but lower. Already he could picture her hands as if he could feel them, spreading the oil, touching him everywhere. Could he come from just thinking about what she was going to do to him? His body trembled with need for her, his cock already thrusting toward a heat he could not possibly reach. He wondered if the anticipation might drive him mad as she dripped her slow, steady way toward his cock.

There was something in the scent of the oil. Something that made him toss his head, trying to capture more of the smell. He felt warm, hungry. Hungry for her. He wanted to touch her. Needed to touch her. Now.

She stopped at his navel, watching as the drop of oil hovered on the edge before rolling inside. He couldn't help himself. His hips jerked up out of the furs, thrusting madly toward her. "Braunnnan," he whispered, his voice already hoarse with desire. "Fuck me. Please. Touch me. *Anything*."

"Don't move," she admonished.

"I'm not going anywhere, my mate. You've seen to that."

She only smiled, the amber light of the candle reflecting wickedly off of her eyes. She was the demoness. His demoness. And he had created her. He groaned in frustration as she dripped another drop of her scented oil into the dark V of hair that started below his navel. He could feel it spreading, like tiny invisible hands, creeping across his skin. He would go mad before the first drops reached his cock.

Another drop. Then another. He could feel each hair on his bush as his cock danced before her. The urge to snap the legs off the table and grab her, pushing her underneath him and ramming himself into her over and over again, was nearly overwhelming. He flexed his wrists again, testing his restraints. She wanted him to beg? He would beg. "Braunna. Please."

Oil spread through his bush, dripping slowly down over his balls. She grinned down at him as she let the first drop roll down the length of his cock. He screamed out her name, thrashing wildly as he attempted to rip the legs off the table, but the sturdy timbers held. Then her hands were on him, stroking across his chest, her heat hovering over him, her fingertips brushing his nipples, and he screamed out her name again. "Braunna," he sobbed. "Please."

She would not be hurried. The ache in his cock built to an unbearable pressure as she bent her head to lick his nipples, and only her weight planted over his hips kept him pinned to the furs. "Please," he begged, tears of frustration dampening his eyes.

She moved down his body, slowly, so slowly, working the oil into his skin, the scent filling his senses now, sharp and sweet and spicy at once, until he could no longer think. He was made to mate with her. Yet he couldn't reach her. She lingered just beyond the touch of his aching cock. She rose up over him. Yes. Yes!

He cursed as she resettled her hips just below his throbbing cock. He thought he would break when her fingers began to comb through his bush, so close, touching everywhere but where he wanted them. He stilled completely as she massaged the oil along his balls, then swept back, back and up, his body frozen in delicious anticipation as she explored the tight muscles of his anus.

Her touch disappeared. He raised up his head as far as he could to see her reaching for her little wooden box. He'd seen inside that box now. There was only one toy she hadn't used. A string of three large beads, knotted a finger's breadth apart on a leather cord. He forgot to breathe as she closed the lid, slowly turning back toward him. The oil from her hands made the beads glisten in the soft glow of the candlelight. He

closed his eyes, swallowing hard. Then her fingers were back, probing once more, gently urging him to relax.

"Do you trust me?" she asked again.

"With all that I hold precious in life," he whispered.

Her finger circled his anus, probing gently, slowly pushing its way in. The universe focused down to the feel of her finger sliding within him. He was dangerously close to coming, and she had yet to actually touch his cock. "I need to touch you," he managed. "I want to lick you all over. I want to fuck you till you scream for me, then do it again. I want to --"

"It really doesn't matter what you want, now does it?" she reminded him in his own words.

She pulled her finger slowly back out of his anus, leaving him sobbing with need. He'd taught her too well. "No, Mistress Braunnan. What you want is all that matters."

Conscious thought failed him as she inserted the beads, first the smallest one, next the larger one, and finally the largest, stretching him as they slid slowly over sensitive tissue, her finger pushing them farther inside, so that he could feel each one with every minor movement he made, even the shallow tug of his gasping breath.

She dropped the lasso around the base of his cock, pulling it tight enough that he wouldn't be able to come until she allowed it. Just thinking about what she was doing made him need to come now. "Braunnan," he whispered, his voice nearly breaking. "I'm begging you. Fuck me."

## Chapter Seven

Braunnnan bent over her victim, blowing softly on the tip of his penis.

Cullaelon screamed out her name as her tongue tasted the cum that managed to leak past her lasso. If she took it off now he knew he would spurt like a geyser. He might anyway. Her mouth slid over his shaft, licking, sucking, demanding. He bucked off the furs, only to remember the beads as they sent his nerves screaming with the need for release.

There was something in that oil. Something that made him want to lick her all over. Something that made the urge to fuck her uncontrollable. Yet she'd taken care of the control part. The more he thrashed about, the more the beads moved within him, hitting the sensitive spot that made him scream with need and frustration. And then there was her tongue, licking him now, licking his balls, licking his cock, his belly, his chest. He bent his head as far as he could reach, kissing her hair, nipping her ear, roaring out his need as she poured oil into her hands, stroking him now until he dripped, then spreading herself open to comb through the coarse fur covering her mons until the thick curls reflected candlelight like the surface of the water.

She was the demoness. Her eyes no longer glowed green, her nails no longer ripped him open, but there could be no doubt, she was the demoness. She sank slowly over his impossibly hard cock, her muscles already so tight that he had to fight his way in. Each thrust of his pelvis carried him deeper within her. Each stroke brought him closer to losing his mind. She rode him like a woman possessed, her skin glistening with a fine sheen of sweat now, her body jerking mindlessly with the need she'd built, his cock slamming into her in perfect rhythm to her moaning dance upon his shaft, need screaming through both of them in a furious frenzy.

It didn't take long. Not now. She broke over him in moments, her muscles contracting so hard around his still thrusting cock that he could feel the cock ring pushing against the strength of her orgasm.

It wasn't enough. Not nearly enough. He quivered within her, giving her a few moments to steady her breathing before he fought his way back into her, thrusting as hard as he could against her quivering muscles. Within moments she was gripping his hips, riding him as hard as she had the first time, screaming his name as she shattered around him, her fingers digging into his flesh as she jerked back and forth over him, riding him like the demoness possessed.

It wasn't enough. It was too much. It was more than he could handle. The room faded to black as he gasped for breath. He heard her calling his name from a long way off. Felt her fingers fumbling with the knot of the lasso. He would have emptied himself into her like a fountain, but even now he could not. The cock ring sustained his orgasm, holding him back as she screamed out her release, her claws digging into his chest as she reached for something he did not know how to give her. Still he thrust into her, unable to help himself, his cum shooting into her until he knew his balls must be milked dry, and yet still there was more.

He screamed out her name, loud enough for the entire crew to hear, as she pulled on the beaded leather thong, the lights and the stars exploding all over again as first one then the next passed through his tight opening.

He was no virgin. He'd never mated, but he'd had sex before.

But never like this. Nothing even close to this. She'd reduced him to ashes, destroyed him, only to put him back together exactly the way she wanted him.

And still it was only sex. Sex alone wasn't enough. No. It was worse than that. *He* wasn't enough. She'd come for him, over and over again. But there was something more. Something they both wanted that they could not reach. She would turn from him now. Call in another. He'd seen it happen before among the females of his shift-mates. Tradition said it took a whole crew to father a cub.

He pictured Sandish reaching for her and he roared out his denial as he buried himself within her again, his balls aching with the pressure as he spurted out the last he had to give her.

And still he knew it was not enough.

The sound of their breathing was all that disturbed the quiet that followed. Braunnnan curled against his chest, too sexually sated to voice her unsatisfied needs at the moment. But once she recovered they would have to talk about what hadn't happened. They would have to discuss the cubs she had not conceived.

A new resolve filled him. He would take her away. As soon as they could safely escape he would take her to the surface. Perhaps they would find what they searched for there.

He would not share her. Not now. Not ever.

Some traditions were meant to be broken.

\* \* \*

He was in as foul a mood as she'd seen him in. Braunnnan kept her mouth shut and her torch high, scanning the darkness for signs of the vermin that inhabited the tunnels. *This was your idea*, she reminded herself once again. *He tried to warn you. You knew he didn't want to come back down here again. Now you know why.*

The why was easy to figure out. Foul bloated bodies that dropped out of the darkness to attack them from all sides with almost no warning. Leagues of unmapped tunnels that seemed to run in no discernable pattern.

His mood was another matter. She no longer feared for his sanity. They'd been together long enough for her to believe he had but reached the limits of his endurance when she first found him in that dark filthy hole.

That didn't explain the present. He'd slept. He'd fed. He'd regained his memory. The gods knew his other physical needs had been met. Even if she hadn't...

She hadn't ovulated. He knew. Somehow he knew she hadn't ovulated. Why should that put him in such a foul...

*I will not share you.*

He'd said that on more than one occasion. He'd driven himself to impossible lengths, pushed himself to impossible goals, held himself to unachievable standards, all because he feared she might take another mate if she did not conceive?

"Why are men so stupid?" she muttered under her breath.

"We think with our cocks," Cullaelon responded morosely.

His hearing was more acute than she'd anticipated. It didn't matter. They were both more than ready for a fight. She stopped in the middle of the tunnel, thrusting the torch into a fissure in the rock wall. "Would you have tried to take me to the sunlight if you weren't so concerned that I might take another mate to my bed?" she demanded.

"I gave you my word, didn't I?"

"You didn't act on it until you felt your territory threatened."

His lip curled back in a snarl, and he started to respond, then thought better of it. His shoulders slumped in defeat. "No. You're right. I did nothing until I knew you would not bear my cubs. I told you men think with their cocks. I would rather have died in that cell than to watch another man mate with you, Braunnan. But my death will not give you the cub you deserve. I am sorry. I will take you back to Sandish."

She reached out to punch him playfully on the arm. "Men are idiots."

"'Tis no huge secret."

She sighed as she sank to her heels, too tired to continue sparring with him. "Why didn't you say something? We could have talked about this."

"If we had talked there would only be one logical conclusion. I must share you with Sandish. I thought if I could give you what else you wanted, if I could give you the sunlight, you might forgive me the cubs, at least this mating season."

"Whether I ovulate or not is neither your fault nor your triumph, idiot male. I love you. Does that mean nothing to you? Do you think it means so little to me that I would take another man to my bed just because I did not ovulate the first season we attempted to mate? Can we not simply enjoy the trying without there having to be cubs this season? Will the world end if I cannot bear cubs? Are these cubs that we may or may not ever have more important to you than I am?"

"Braunнан, I..." Words failed him. He came to kneel before her where she rested, his head falling into her lap. "Forgive me. I am an idiot male. I was so afraid... there is a reason we have a matriarchal society. I love you, Braunнан."

Braunнан sighed as she pulled him into her arms. "As I love you. I would not share you, either, foolish one. Do not think that I would not become your demoness and claw you to pieces if I thought you lusted after another."

"Never. There will never be another for me."

"Are you certain? You seem to have some fascination with Sandish. I might forgive you if I thought --"

"No!" The last of his angst dissolved into laughter. "I would not share you, my love, nor would I ask you to share me. Not even with Sandish. Especially not with Sandish."

"As men go, he's rather well built," she mused. "If you like that sort of physique."

"I do not," he assured her. "I like your muscles. Female sort of muscles. The kind that come with curves in all the right places."

"Then get me out of here and into the sunlight," she suggested as she ran her fingers through his hair. "I would mate with you somewhere there are no fat bugs waiting to feed on our juices."

"I like the sound of that," he whispered as he kissed her nipple through the thin tunic.

"Even if I don't ovulate this season?"

"Even if you don't ovulate at all," he promised.

Braunнан held him against her chest, settling her mind on her love for him, doing her best to hide her fear, for though he had not said so, she was convinced they were hopelessly, helplessly lost.

\* \* \*



The constant drip of the water was a torture he could not escape, like the smell of the mildewed stone walls of the tunnel and the damp that seeped into the core of his being.

Worse was despair that seeped into his heart.

He was lost. Hopelessly, helplessly lost. What was worse was that this time he was not lost alone. They sat, not speaking, with their backs against the stone, resting, for far too long this time. Braunnan's eyes had slipped closed. He could feel her exhaustion. She had trusted him to lead her through the tunnels safely. He had failed that trust. This was the third dead end tunnel he'd led her down this shift. The tunnels all looked alike in the darkness, endless holes leading nowhere.

The torch burned low, but still gave enough light to illuminate their pick handles, dripping with the gore of a dozen huge spiders, any one of them big enough to kill a man caught unawares.

Cullaelon rested his head against his forearms. "I don't understand. No guards ever come down here. The shift crews won't come here. Yet someone has cleaned the tunnels. My marks are all gone."

Braunnan grunted wordlessly as she stared off into the darkness. He tried to read her emotions, to judge how badly she rated his failure, but all he could feel was her careful concentration, like hitting a hard, unyielding wall that locked him out.

"If not *someone*, then perhaps *something*," she replied at last.

"What?" Her words pulled him back from the edge of the black abyss of his despair. "What something?"

"It's here in the walls. Can you not feel it? I feel just as I do when we're about to break through in a shaft. Water has flowed through these tunnels. That's where your marks went. The water washed them away."

She wasn't angry with him, nor even disappointed, which might have been worse. Where despair had defeated him, she was still thinking. But... "Water? How would water get in here?"

Braunna shook her head. "I'm not sure. From somewhere above, obviously. There is much about the outside world we cannot fathom. What if water is moved from one place to another in trenches, as we do with the water from the lake to irrigate the granary? Perhaps when there is excess it uses these tunnels to drain to a lower lake... perhaps these tunnels are where our own excess from our irrigation runs off."

Cullaeron stared at her in the darkness for a moment longer. "You are a genius," he murmured as he stood at last, pulling his tunic up around his hips.

Braunna laughed as she jumped to her feet. "Are you crazy, Cullaeron? What are you doing?"

He grinned at her over his shoulder. "Taking a piss."

She laughed at that, really laughed for the first time in three shifts. "My profound scientific thinking inspired you to take a piss in the middle of our path?"

"What do we know about water that cannot change, no matter where we are?"

Braunna looked away from his face to watch the golden stream blend with the trickle of water disappearing down the tunnel. She grasped his shoulder, shaking him as the excitement caught her. "It always runs downhill. Water always runs downhill. No matter how confusing these tunnels are to us, they were built with a purpose. If the purpose is drainage, for either our waste or the irrigation runoff, the water must go somewhere. We know it does not run into the lake. The lake water comes from the springs. So the drainage must run to the outside. The slope is gentle, but now that I know to look for it, I can feel it under my feet." Braunna flung herself at him, nearly knocking him off of his feet. "I love you, madman! Piss your way right to the sunlight!"

Cullaeron gathered her into his arms to kiss her properly. His tone turned serious. "I would do all in my power to share with you the gods' greatest gift. Walk with me into the sunlight."

"I would follow you anywhere, Cullaeron," she whispered. "If you turned around now, if you knowingly chose to walk back into slavery, I would give up the dream to follow you."

"We cannot," he chided. "For what are we without our dreams? We are the children of darkness, born to know only slavery. I want something better for our cubs. I want them to know freedom."

Braunnnan pulled away, and he thought for a moment that he had presumed too much, to lay claim to the cubs, to presume he had any rights over them, until she spun back to catch his hand. "Come along then. There's no time to waste. I think already our cubs grow restless for the feel of the sunlight!"

\* \* \*

They staggered on, blindly trusting the downward slope, for at least another shift, though they had no way to gauge the time except by the ash of the burning rags wrapped around their torches. They spared the torches as much as possible, feeling their way along the long straight walls, saving the rags for emergency encounters with the tunnel spiders, though they seemed to have moved out of their territory at last.

They stumbled now, neither leading nor following, callused fingertips worn smooth from tracing along the walls, leaning against each other for support. Braunnnan shrieked out a warning, almost too late, and threw out her arm, grasping at Cullaelon as she rocked back toward solid footing. The tunnel floor ended abruptly under her feet, a darkened hole opening into more darkness. She dropped slowly to her knees at the edge of the nothingness, staring into the void, wondering how they would bridge this chasm.

"I should have warned you," Cullaelon murmured, bending down to take her in his arms and help her back to her feet. "Look. We are at the end of the tunnels. It's just that the outside has shifts, as well. It is but sleep-shift here. The light will return."

He stepped into the chasm, but he did not disappear. 'Twas but a short step down into the void ahead. Relief watered down her disappointment. "Of course. The Dark Ones sought to mimic the cycles of nature, to fool our bodies into being content below ground. Are we -- do you think us safe here?"

"We are safe." Cullaelon took her hand and led her out, a few steps away from the cold stone of the mountain. The ground under her feet felt carpeted with some

vegetation, cool and soft to the touch. He nudged her chin, nipping at the soft folds of her throat when she tilted her head to grant him better access.

"Cullaelon!" she gasped, suddenly distracted from his tender love bites. "Lights! Lights in the above! So many of them!"

"Yes. Are they not beautiful?"

"Aye," she agreed. She clutched at him as the above shifted. "It moves! Look! There are more lights. Two of them are so much larger! Is this indeed the work-shift about to begin?"

But he was staring at her, not at the sky. "Those are lesser orbs. They are but a pale mimic of the sunlight. Still, the pale light that falls upon you reveals your beauty, as a precious gem glows among the debris. I can never repay the debt my heart owes to yours. Thank you for believing the words of a madman. I love you, Braunnnan. I never thought to say those words to any woman. But 'tis true. I love you."

She looked down from the glistening orbs to see their light reflected in the tears that pooled behind his eyelashes, almost threatening to overflow. "I love you, Cullaelon. Mate with me. It is time. I am ready. Make our cubs with me. I want our cubs conceived in freedom. I would know you as a free man, would know that you had the power to choose, and you chose me."

Strong arms crushed her against his chest as he kissed her. "For me there is no choice. There is only you."

\* \* \*

Nothing. She searched the dreaming, but she could find nothing. All that she could touch were beyond her reach.

Perhaps they had found a way to lock her out of their dreaming. Perhaps the dreams were but a nightmare to those who could not believe in the truths she shared from her past. She was old. Older than their lifetimes by more years than they could fathom the existence of.

Perhaps they no longer needed her.

Perhaps there was no one. Perhaps there had never been anyone. She had been locked away here so long, perhaps she was going insane. Tâkuri pulled her knees up against her chest on the narrow cot, indulging herself in a long overdue cry.

*He turned on the narrow bed, trying to find a more comfortable position to settle his body into. She moved with him in her sleep, instinctively curling against his side. He woke enough to run his fingers through her hair, smoothing it away from her face. She turned her cheek to press it against his hand, not really asleep after all.*

*"Balthain?"*

*"Who else would find you here, my love?"*

*"I did not think I would see you again. I feared to search for you here, lest the Priestess find you."*

*"I have searched the dreaming for you for days now. I was afraid the Élandra would prevent you from coming to me now that they know of your travels."*

*"The Dark Priestesses do not understand how the dreaming works. They think that by keeping my body prisoner they can limit the travels of my mind. They do not understand that for me, the dreaming is more real than the time I spend awake."*

*"I am pleased you were able to find me again, yet I long for more. I want to be able to hold you in my arms when I am awake. Wait for me, Tâkuri. Do not give up hope. We travel even now toward your prison. We will bring all the captives out of Élahandara. I am coming for you."*

*"I have waited half of one of your lifetimes. Another few passes of the moon is not so long. Yet I am afraid. Your mission is too dangerous. If the Priestesses learn of your plan, they will kill you. So many things can go wrong. I would not have you harmed to save me from a fate I should have accepted long ago. 'Tis selfish of me to ask this of you."*

*"If you were not part of the picture, still I would come," Balthain assured her. "When I followed Élandine to freedom many years ago, I vowed to come back for my parents as soon as I was able. Though I accepted their deaths long ago, such a vow is not lightly broken, and I am less of a man for having waited this long to fulfill my promise. My brethren are prisoners beside you. It is my duty, and my honor, to attempt to free them. That you are part of the package only raises the stakes."*

*She snuggled tighter against him, her thin body shaking from a cold he could not drive away. "You are a good man, Balthain. Do not make light of your bravery. A child will make vows that a man cannot always live up to. You have spent your life learning the skills that will free us, and now you have assembled a party that may be capable of the task. The gods willing, we will be together in the daylight soon. For now we have the dreaming."*

*He held her, then, content with the smell of her skin close at hand, knowing that as long as he held her thus, she would not fade away.*

*Tomorrow's dawn would lead to the answers he needed.*

*Tomorrow he would face the tunnels again.*

## Epilogue

Cullaelon raised his head to the breeze, sniffing softly, as if searching for something. He took her hand and led her across the strange, springy ground, toward some target only he could fathom. Braunnnan followed, stepping cautiously as the ground gave way under her feet here and there, glanced back for only a moment as she followed him into the unknown.

Freedom, she reminded herself. The world outside was meant to be their home. Their cubs would not be raised to serve as slaves.

Their cubs would grow up with no home. No guarantee of finding food. No way to earn a living. Panic set in. "Cullaelon, I --"

He turned and pulled her against his chest, strong arms surrounding her, warming her against the chill of the sleep-shift air. "We will not starve, my love. Our cubs will not starve. Trust me. Trust in us. We are strong enough to face this new world. Together."

"But what if --"

"No questions. Not this shift. We must not torture ourselves with questions we cannot yet answer. Leave the questions to the sunlight. We will find the answers together."

She closed her eyes and rested her head against his shoulder. She had asked him to trust her, to believe that she was not a demoness, to follow her back from the world of madness privation had led him to. Now he led her into the darkness with a promise of sunlight. "Lead on, my love. I will follow you."

"'Tis not far," he comforted, running his hand over her hair. "A place I found, with fresh water and small, edible plants. A safe, comfortable place to lie till the end of this shift."

A shiver ran up her spine. She knew what he meant. A secluded place where, if others were about, they would not be disturbed. Braunnan turned to tug at his hand, no longer afraid of the cool, springy ground. "Show me."

Laughing, he broke into an easy lope beside her, leading her unerringly forward. The above shifted again, bringing the lesser orbs into full focus, allowing their light to show her the shadow of large waving plants that towered far above their heads. She might have been frightened at the immensity of it all, had not the heat consumed her. Freedom. They would mate in freedom. Her body was ready, she was sure of it.

Water ran down a small leg of the mountain that thrust itself out into the flatness, pooling into a lake that blocked their path. The springy ground gave way to smooth sand, not unlike that which lined the bottom of her lake at home.

No. Not home. In the place where they had been held captive.

Cullaelon led her straight toward the falling water, laughter trailing behind him as he rounded the lake's edge. He stopped near the water, bending to scoop up something from the ground and pop it into his mouth. "Taste this," he managed around whatever it was that he chewed. She opened her mouth to protest and he stuffed a small fragrant object between her lips. "They're safe. I promise."

Juice flowed over her tongue as she bit down involuntarily. Sweet. Somehow she knew this taste. From the dreams? They had been gathering something from the wild in the dreams. She dropped to her knees beside him, gathering as many of the sweet things as her hands could hold.

"Good?" he asked between mouthfuls.

"Good," she agreed, stuffing herself as fast as she could. "Better than good."

Cullaelon looked over at her and laughed. He pulled her close to lick at the juice that ran down her chin, then follow its stain back to her lips. She closed her eyes, forgetting the hunger of her stomach as another hunger took over.

Then his hands were in her hair, and her hands were under his tunic and they were falling, falling atop the soft, sweet food, the scent of the plants wrapping around them as they devoured each other.



Something was different. Something was -- more. Stronger than she'd ever felt it before. She pulled and tugged at his tunic, her hunger insatiable as she reached for him. She could tell he felt it as well. Her tunic disappeared into the darkness. He pushed her down onto the soft, cushioning plants, his lips sucking now at her throat, her breasts, his hands sliding down her waist, then gripping her buttocks as he pressed his hot greedy shaft against her.

"Yes!" she hissed. "Now. Take me now."

He needed no further invitation. His cock plunged into her as she wrapped her legs around his waist, opening herself up fully to him. That, *that* was what she needed. The feel of his hot, burning cock coming home to her. "Yes!" she breathed. She bit at his neck as she raked her claws over his back. Her body changed so quickly she barely registered what was happening. Strong, powerful arms flipped her around so that she now lay beneath her lover.

No. Stood. She stood on all four limbs, digging her claws into the earth as he held her, his teeth gripping her skin at the back of her neck, his powerful front feet clamped around her shoulders as he stood over her, his long, thick cock surging wildly in and out of her welcoming sheath. So familiar, yet so different. Her lover's arms, her lover's body, hot and heavy around her, demanding all that she had to give, and still she answered him with more. Her senses sharpened, focusing on the smell of him, the heavy musk of their mating. She owned him, owned him body and soul. Yes. Yes! This, this was what they had missed. She raised her head and screamed out a roar of thankfulness to the darkness.

He answered her scream with a frenzy that threatened to knock her from her feet as he pumped into her, driving his bursting cock into her with all the force of half a ton of momentum. Braunnan fought him now, fought to hold him within her, her muscles clamping down against his thrusting cock, claiming, demanding release. He screamed out his roar of triumph as she shattered around him. She was certain she heard laughter in that feral song of victory.

The hot gush of his semen burst over her, searing its way down her virgin path, christening their new bodies with wave after wave of ecstasy as she milked him of all he could give her. More. She wanted more. She grasped him as tightly as her muscles would allow, until she felt his balls draw up against her, struggling to fulfill her body's command. Yes. She would take all he could give. She would conceive. She would bear his cubs. She would bear them here, in sunlight and freedom.

The first light of shift washed over them as he collapsed, pulling her with him as he rolled to the ground. He snuffled anxiously near her ear, as if to make sure she was unharmed. She snuggled tightly against him, too contented to do more than absorb his warmth as they drifted off to sleep together, their thick shaggy coats more than ample protection against the cool breeze that blew off the water.

There was something she wanted to tell him. Something she needed to say. Not that she knew how in this form. She snuffled at him instead as she buried her face in his fur. She blinked slowly in heavy lidded surprise as he snuffled back at her, his limbs already heavy with sleep where they wrapped around her.

"I love you," his sated bear voice seemed to say. "We will be safe here. Trust me, my love."

\* \* \*

"Mommy! Look! Naked people have crushed all the strawberries!"

"Evanya, come back here, child. How many times have I told you not to go running off like that? What are you thinking? You could get hurt. You could..."

Braunnnan stirred herself enough to raise her head toward the mother's voice, still too disheveled to organize her thoughts past shielding her eyes from the bright light of the sun.

Sun.

They were above ground.

There were *people* here.

She ran her hand through Cullaelon's hair, waking him gently as she lifted her breast away from his lips. *Naked people...* the wonder in the child's voice told her this

was not their way, whoever they were. She sat up enough to grab for their tunics. She understood their language, though the accent was strange. Cullaelon only rolled against her as she moved, pawing sleepily at her. She slipped from beneath his arm as she pulled the tunic over her head, draping his about his slumbering form as she rose to face the strangers.

The mother stood with her hand about the little girl's shoulders, pulling the cub tightly against her legs. Those legs were encased in massive quantities of colorful fabric that billowed about in the breeze. Braunнан shielded her eyes against the sun with her hand as she studied the pair.

She held her head up, her shoulders spread wide as the sun shone down on her back. "Hello," she offered, making no move to close the distance between them lest she frighten the mother and cub. "I am Braunнан. Mistress of the Fifth House of the Clan Bear."

**Song of the Bear: A Sentinel's Secret**  
**A Northlanders Tale**

**Shelby Morgen**

## Prologue

So close. Anika clawed desperately at the male who had invested so much of his skill into trying to satisfy her. She writhed and twisted as she reached for the one thing she could not grasp, arching hard beneath him as he surged into her. His thrusts grew harsh and mechanical.

No use. It was no use. It would not be enough. He was too far gone now in his own passion to fear her retribution should he fail her. Still, she closed her fist around the cock of the slim beauty standing at her side, rewarding him for the fine job he'd done of sucking her nipples. He bit her, hard, harder than he intended to, she was sure, jumping in surprise at the strength of her grip as she pumped his swollen cock in rhythm to the male who strained over her aching cunt.

The pain of the male's teeth on her nipple sent her over the edge again. She convulsed around the first male's cock one last time as her ripe body gripped him tightly. She clamped down hard, harder, as she reached for something more, something beyond her grasp, something he could not give her.

He cried out, an inarticulate moan that might have been pleasure or pain, as he lost his battle for control, shooting wave after wave of searing cum into her. Even as he wilted, another cock took his place. Fresh. Young. Eager to pleasure her. Highly skilled in the arts of service to a Priestess.

Anika wanted to sob in frustration as yet another, even more vicious orgasm ripped through her, wracking her spent body with wave after wave of -- of what? There was no release. What she felt was no longer pleasure. All she felt was failure, and the ever increasing urgency to try again. Why? What was wrong with her? Why was it no matter how hard the males worked, no matter how hard she tried, she could not reach her goal?

Why could she not shift?

With a cry of anger and a wave of her arm she ordered them all away, dismissing eight terrified males with a single command. This was a waste of her time. No matter how hard they tried, no matter how hard she tried, they were simply not enough. They would never be enough. They were but pleasure slaves, trained to fulfill her every physical need.

They feared her. They needed her. But they cared nothing for her. Even the sex meant nothing to them. She was sure those who had not had a chance to join with her would feel more relieved than disappointed. They would but go entertain each other, mating for hours before the aphrodisiacs wore off. They would slink back late tomorrow, ready to perform their duties again.

And she, she would sleep the sleep of exhaustion. Her shadow lover would come to haunt her dreams, once more whispering the lie. "Trust me." All the while, the hunger would build within her, build and build until she could no longer stand it. Despite her resolve, the urgent need to mate would wake her soon enough. She would try again, and she would fail. Eventually the truth would consume her.

"Trust me." A lie built on lies. He was but born of her dreams.

One of the males stayed behind, the first one, she thought, to assist her in bathing. She ordered him away with an angry glare of warning. She did not want him cowering over her. She slipped silently down the ancient steps into the subterranean hot springs, letting the warm waters hold and caress her, soothing her as no male ever could. The temptation was there, to slide her head under the placid surface, to let the heated waters take her to that land of eternal sleep.

Sobs shook her small, delicate frame. What was wrong with her? Was she some misconceived reject of a bloodline grown weak with age? Why, why could she not find her release? Was what she asked so much, simply to be allowed to shift to her higher form?

Yet she knew. Even as the waters wrapped around her, supporting her with their warm, comforting hands, she knew the fault lay not within the males who served her,

but within herself. It was she who was not content with her lot. She who wanted more. She wanted, perhaps, something the males assigned to her had no idea how to give. She wanted something no Élandra female had asked of her males for thousands of years.

Anika did not want males simply to service her.

She wanted a male who came to her freely, of his own accord.

She wanted a male who was not afraid of her.

It was her mother's fault. Sure it was Nafésti herself who had put such foolish thoughts into her head. Nafésti and her tales of the lover who had pleased her as no male ever had before or after.

Surely somewhere there was a male like the one from Mother's tales who could satisfy all her needs. She would find him. The gods willing, she would find him. She sent up a silent prayer to whichever gods were willing to fill the great empty void within her soul.

Theirs was a long-lived race. If Élandine still drew breath, Anika vowed, she would find him.

## Chapter One

The slaves shifted restlessly in their chains as the smoke and the heat of the fires grew ever closer.

"He's not coming back."

"Thallin will return."

"And if he cannot? If the guards have captured him? If the flames block his path?"

"Then you will have your wish, Donovan, and you will die at my side."

"Aye, 'tis my wish! 'Twould be better to die with you than live with the burden of your sacrifice!"

"The decision is not yours to make, Donovan, therefore you bear no responsibility. 'Tis better for one man to give his life that others may live. Besides, I have heard stories of the great beyond. I shall spend my days mating with the great she-bears, one after another, and they shall always be in season."

"Aye, for the likes of us, death is the only way we'll ever get a woman."

That would be Stefan, ever the joker. Great guffawing laughter shook the subterranean stables, a needed release in the mounting tension. "With all that brawn you can earn enough to buy yourself a woman," Calib countered. "Remember the lot Argolyn brought through here those months ago? I noted the big blonde lass took a fancy to you."

"Aye, she took a fancy to me -- at the end of her sword! I want to get laid, not battle for my life!" Stefan argued.

Another loud guffaw split the smoky air before impending doom settled back over their heads. Calib searched his mind for a lifeline to offer his men. "Sing for us, Bard. I would hear the song that came to you in the dreaming once again."



"I --" Donovan started, then stopped again, as if he'd been about to argue, then changed his mind. "All right. For you, Calibeth."

*The Bear awakes in the spring.  
As the goddess she comes  
To rend the Earth.  
Hungry and powerful,  
Angry and desolate.  
Like the lone avenger she comes.*

*Come to me, my people,  
At the water's edge.  
Come to me, my Warriors.  
Let the blood flow.  
Come to me, my children.  
Let us cleanse the Earth.  
Let us sing the Song of the Bear.*

*She cries for her children,  
Ripped from her arms.  
She cries for her mate,  
But he is no more.  
She cries out for blood,  
In a voice that will not be still.*

*Come to me, my people,  
At the water's edge.  
Come to me, my Warriors.  
Let the blood flow.  
Come to me, my children.  
Let us cleanse the Earth.  
Let us sing the Song of the Bear.*

*Let us rend that which destroys.  
Let us maim that which defiles.  
Let us free all who are enslaved.  
Let us sing the song of sorrow in victory.  
Let us lament  
That which we must not forget.*

*Come to me, my people,  
At the water's edge.  
Come to me, my Warriors.*

*Let the blood flow.  
Come to me, my children.  
Let us cleanse the Earth.  
Let us sing the Song of the Bear.*

Sung in Donovan's rich baritone, the simple words seemed to take on a life of their own. A she-bear, a Warrior-woman who would lead them into battle, who would lead the Clan of the Bear back to its rightful place. Calib closed his eyes, picturing her, tall and broad of shoulder and strong, all her strength directed at him, calling him to her side. They would fight together, side by side. Calib could swear he heard the pounding of a Warrior's drum calling them to battle.

After the battles would come the spring mating. It would be like nothing he'd ever known before. The dream was so real -- more real to him than the dampness and misery of the stables where Argolyn kept them chained to the wall. The woman came to him in the darkness of his dreams, her hands on his skin, her lips touching him everywhere. His cock swelled at the thought. He could feel her as if she were real.

"Trust me," he urged as she opened herself to him. They would roll, locked together in passion, and they would shift. He could feel her claws on his skin, his teeth fastening in the fur at her neck. They would mate for hours as two giant grizzlies. The song of the Bear would once again be raised to the stars. So real. He could feel her. Touch her. Taste her.

There was only one problem.

He was about to die.

For him there would be no mating with the she-bear in her true form. The dream, like his life, amounted to nothing.

The men were silent in the wake of the song. All knew Thallin's mission. Calib was to sacrifice his own life that they might not all die. If a leader was coming, she would be too late for them. Was it enough to know future generations would not perform at the end of a chain, like animals in a show?

They were stoic, mostly, brave men made braver by the absence of choice. The unknown could be no worse than the known. Death would be easier to face than life, but still, they would choose life while they had breath left to choose.

Somewhere above, timbers gave way with a crash, a door splintering beneath a mighty blow. Calib jerked on the chain that bound him to his fellow prisoners, urging the men to their feet.

Thallin was back.

Calib squared his shoulders, offering a quick prayer to the gods. *I would not ask you to spare me. I ask only that you protect my men. But if you would grant me one boon, I would not spend eternity alone. If it is not too much to ask, I would have a companion. The she-bear who comes to me in the dreaming. I need more than a lover for my bed. I need warmth on a cold winter's night, someone to hunt beside, someone to share my hopes and my fears. If it cannot be so, then spare me the next life, that I might simply fade into everlasting sleep, for I am tired of being alone.*

Two figures appeared out of the smoke. Calib raised an eyebrow in surprise as Thallin's companion pulled the cloth from her face. Thallin had brought a woman with him? A woman? Here? Why...

No matter. Thallin knew what had to be done.

"I am sorry, Calibeth." Thallin's voice was far from steady.

"Do it," Calib ordered. He closed his eyes and turned toward the wall, exposing his neck to the executioner's axe. "Grant me my freedom, Thallin. Do it!"

"No!" the woman shrieked. "Stop! Thallin, stop! You don't have to do this!"

Why in the seven hells had Thallin ever brought a woman with him? Calib turned in time to see her throw herself between him and Thallin's axe. Anger made his hands rough as he shoved her out of the way. "Fool woman, do you think this is easy for him? Can you not see that we will all die here? Let him do his work!"

She lost her balance as he shoved at her, dropping something as she stumbled. "No, no, you don't understand. Just give me a moment!"

Too late. Calib swore under his breath as the axe fell from Thallin's grasp. The big Northlander dropped to his knees, tears streaming down his face. The man had lost more than his nerve. He had lost his mind. He was laughing and crying at the same time as he sifted through the dirt for whatever she'd dropped. "By the gods. These are lock picks! She's a thief."

"A Mercenary," the woman corrected. "At the moment I'm working as a Bounty Hunter." She snatched her tools out of Thallin's hands. "Thank you."

Laughing now himself, Calib stretched his neck and turned his head again, giving her as much room to work as he could. "The gods are with us this night. Our prayers are twice answered."

Calib offered another prayer to the gods. The thief had better be good if she was to open a Dwarven lock. 'Twould be a cruel twist of fate to have this picklock fail now.

"Can I fetch ye anything?" Thallin offered his picklock. "Do ye have need of a light?"

"No!" the woman snapped. "Just be quiet."

The fighters all held their breath as they waited for the woman to decide Calibeth's fate. Calib eyed the axe where Thallin had dropped it in the dirt. If the woman couldn't open the lock, Calib prayed Thallin would still have the strength to free the others.

A click echoed through their silent tomb. "One."

The smoke was getting thicker. The roof must be caving in. Yet the woman's hands felt steadier now where they rested against his neck. Another snap. "Two."

She shifted her feet restlessly. "Now you're so damn quiet you're breaking my concentration. Breathe, damn it."

Calib chuckled. "If that isn't just like a woman. Give 'em exactly what they ask for and what do you get? Nothing but complaints."

The men laughed softly, their tension easing.

"Three!"

As the chain fell from his torc, releasing the men, Calib tossed the picklock into the air, hugging her before he passed her to Thallin. The men began yanking the chain back through their torcs. Thallin crushed the woman against his chest, kissing her thoroughly while the fighters sent up a cheer.

"Let's get the hells out of here, men," she urged. "I believe we all have better things to do."

As something beyond the miracle of his own narrow escape from death penetrated Calib's thinking, he realized the woman's appearance was no accident. She'd said she was a bounty hunter. There was only one reason for a bounty hunter to be here. Thallin had given up his own freedom to save them.

Calib looked around at the men who had been his companions for the last three years. Although she was not the size of Stefan's blonde, the woman was not small, nor was she likely to be unskilled in the use of the axe that had found its way back to its scabbard on her belt. His men were fighters, seasoned veterans of the arena, but they were unequipped, unarmed, and ill prepared. He signaled to them silently to search the ruins of the smoldering arena for anything that might be of use.

The woman moved now to the lock that still tethered Donovan to the other end of thirty-odd feet of heavyweight chain. She didn't look evil.

Calib rubbed his palms against his tunic to dry them as he shifted his grasp on the battered pike he'd armed himself with. Could he kill a woman who had just saved his life? To sacrifice his own life to save his men was far easier.

"Go," Thallin ordered, as if reading his mind. "Argolyn will be back all too soon with the prisoners who staged the escape. Ye must be far away when he returns."

Calib threw his arms around Thallin in a show of parting affection, whispering near his ear. "We could take her. We wouldn't have to kill her. Just slow her down enough to give you time to escape."

"No. Do ye no' dishonor me. I have given my word."

"We go," Calib agreed, loud enough for the woman to hear. "We will take refuge at the Dwarven Monastery until we are strong enough to return to our homes. Argolyn

dare not pursue us there. His own people have exiled him for his traitorous ways. Come with us," Calib offered, glancing back at the woman again. "You know you will be welcome wherever we travel."

"I canna'." Thallin raised his head toward the mountains, and the tundra beyond. "My way lies north. Fear not. I will no' travel alone. Safe journey to ye, friends."

So. That was the way of things. Thallin had found his mate. Bittersweet envy washed over him. Calib swallowed hard. "Safe journey." He rounded up his ragged troops with a gesture toward the gate that led to their freedom. He would not let Thallin's sacrifice be in vain. He would live. He would lead the men to freedom. He would find his Warrior Queen, and he would follow her into the very hells and back again if that was what was necessary to win his people's freedom.

He would have the she-bear who came to him in the dreaming. Find her and hold her and tame her for his own.

He would earn her trust.

He would find his mate.

\* \* \*

For a healthy party, traveling in strength enough to fear no enemy's eyes, the journey from the City of Stone to the Dwarven stronghold would have taken no more than three days. Two if they might shift to cover the ground at the speed of their totem forms.

Calibeth's men had no such luxury. The Dwarf Argolyn had feared them, feared their strength even as he built upon their reputation, keeping them ever at the edge of privation, lest they might find the strength to band together to overthrow his cruel yoke.

They traveled at night, avoiding the open areas where sharp eyes might spy them, eating what they could forage, consuming what they found without aid of a campfire to cook. Four of the men were of his own clan, and could, under better circumstances, have shifted to the lumbering stride of the giant grizzly, as could he.

Two more, like Thallin, were Wolf Clan. The other three were Humans, and had no form but their own. At the moment none of them could shift, anyway. They had not the strength in reserve.

'Twas an hour before dawn of the fourth morning when Calib called the night's journey to an end. "We will camp here, in the shadow of the cliffs. The shelter will conceal us better."

None argued that another hour's journey might possibly bring them within the range of the Dwarven Monastery they sought. If any thought at all 'twas more of their friends, who were surely as likely as themselves to collapse under the first modest appearance of cover that might present itself.

"Looks like a cave there," Donovan pointed out as he scrambled up the slope.

"Even better." Calib thought he'd managed the words aloud, but he was too tired to be sure. A cave would mean shelter secure enough to allow them the luxury of sleep, and perhaps even a small fire. If there was game about, they might stay a day or two.

He would think about that tomorrow. Above all, they needed sleep.

Tonight, he needed to dream.

\* \* \*

In her dreams she had found him again. A shadowed male who came to her, holding her as if she meant more to him than the simple fulfillment of his duty. He loved her as no man had before, his cock stretching her as he rode her, hard and thick and demanding. "*Trust me, M'Lady,*" he whispered again, his breath hot on her neck as she opened herself to him, giving him all she had. Her dreams and her fears and her secrets, all were safe with him. He loved her. Anika clung to her shadow lover, desperate to hold him, determined to keep him, but as the door burst open the dreams ripped away, and she knew she had lost.

The commotion woke Anika instantly. Once more bereft of her lover, she rolled out of her bed, hands reaching for her weapons, at full alert as the males poured into her antechamber.

"Mistress! We have found --"

"We think they just wandered --"

"It was not my watch, Mistress, but I --"

"Silence!"

To a man, the entire patrol dropped to one knee before her, heads bowed, hardly daring to breathe. Anika wanted to rub her temples to ease the instant ache that pooled behind her eyes, but she had learned better. At least two of the males would soon be brawling over the right to rub her temples *for* her and she would end up with a worse headache than she already had. "You!" Thank the gods she was not expected to remember their names. "Tell me exactly what has happened."

"Men, Mistress. We have found Humans in the outer cavern."

Her fingers moved toward her temples only to stop in mid air. "How many?"

"Ten, Mistress."

Ten Humans? Here? Impossible. *Nothing* ever happened at this outpost. Ever. Anika was sure she'd been given this assignment precisely to avoid such problems. Now this. She was sure this incident would prove to be nothing more than some fantasy of the males. She deserved better than to have to deal with these bumbling idiots. She managed to stir some basic anger at the injustice of it all. Whether she wanted her mother's throne or not, she deserved a seat on the High Council instead of being relegated to this gods-forsaken hole in the rocks. If she hadn't found politics so dreadfully boring, she might have raised the energy to fight for the position that was her right. If --

"What should we do, Mistress?"

They had to ask?

She backhanded the nearest of the foolish males hard enough to send him flying across the room. She should beat them all, she knew. She was expected to use physical



force and violence whenever necessary to control the males, or simply because the whim struck her. By the gods, what was wrong with her? No Dark Elf Female ever behaved so. These were *males*. Her males! If she did not discipline them, who would? How would they ever gain the status necessary to earn even a moderately ranking Priestess' attention? They needed her discipline, and all she could think of was how to get rid of them.

Anika sighed. She would never be a successful trainer. She did not care enough about their needs or her social position to expend the energy necessary to do anything with them. She gave herself a mental shake. Boring or not, if she was to obtain a seat on the High Council she would have to find a way past her indifference. For if Élandine still lived, she would find him there, in the Royal Harem.

Élandine was her right. Her inheritance. She would be Queen.

She would possess the legend himself.

Perhaps she could use the recovery of these slaves for political leverage. At the very least they presented a challenge -- one that actually interested her. "What are the Humans doing?"

"Sleeping, Mistress."

Sleeping? That didn't sound very threatening. Anika licked her lips thoughtfully. Ten slaves. She could recapture them easily enough as long as those who served her didn't see precisely *how* she managed to secure them. One thing she was certain of. She needed to get these useless males out of the way.

"Go. Search the tunnels. Make sure there are no others attempting to escape."

"But, Mistress --"

"I do not think --"

Anika pulled a light robe over her naked body to keep the chill of the morning from disturbing her concentration. "Silence!" She did rub her temples this time, casting a withering glare at the fools, warning them not to attempt to touch her.

Anika closed her eyes, then opened them again, hoping to find the males gone. Instead they stood trembling before her, pure terror written on their faces. She didn't

have to put on a show of anger for them this time. She felt her hatred of them in every fiber of her being. "Why are you still here? Did I not give you your orders? Go! I want the entire tunnel system swept! Every square inch!"

"Yes, Mistress!" the chorus answered.

Anika felt a weight lift from her shoulders as they disappeared. She raised one slim, elegant hand to her mouth, suppressing a giggle. There were leagues of tunnels to sweep. She should have thought of this assignment before. They would be busy for days.

The silence surrounding her in their wake was refreshing. She smiled as she made her way to the front cavern. Once there, however, a single look at the Humans told her what eight males could not manage to explain. These were no runaway slaves - - at least not from the mines of Élahandara.

They were outsiders.

## Chapter Two

Anika bent to study her prisoners, moving silently so as not to wake them from their fragile sleep. The captives were so intriguingly different. Although they were still merely males, they appeared to be taller than she, and broader of shoulder. Sprawled as they were, huddled together for warmth, they still looked far from peaceful. They looked hard. Seasoned warriors.

How did they get here? And why?

Could she be wrong? Could they have come up from the mines?

No. They were pale by nature, but their skin had seen sunlight. Having spent most of her life above ground, she knew well the effects of sunlight upon the skin. Unlike others of her race, who usually avoided the heat of the sun, she often basked in its rays. She had used the powerful effects of the sunlight to hide her dreadful deformity for years. 'Twas the sunlight which allowed her to keep her secret safe.

This one, the tallest one, with the long, dark hair, looked particularly luscious. She laid one hand against his arm to compare. Midnight against deep golden tan. The sight distracted her for a moment. So different from her kind.

How else might he be different?

Could a man like this, a Warrior by the looks of him, give her what all those who served her could not?

He would not come to her bed. Not voluntarily. He would fear her, if not for the color of her skin alone, then for her gender. She was wasting her time.

Still, if she could not shift, she would never obtain a seat on the High Council. Without power and position, she would never be able to claim her mother's famed lover as her own. He would remain but a shadow figure in her dreams. She would spend the rest of her days exiled to some insult of a post like this.

Sentinel. Even the title was an insult. She should be Queen.

Anika latched on to her newfound resolve.

The male before her distracted her again. So pretty. What if -- could she even mate with a Human? Moving the scrap of fabric about his waist aside, Anika examined the male before her speculatively. He was well endowed. Even flaccid, his organ clearly exceeded the size of any of the Dark Males she'd had at her disposal. But he didn't look all that different.

She slid her hand to his thigh, aching to touch. She could already feel him, stretching her, testing her boundaries, filling her as no male before ever had. She let her hand inch closer, aching to touch, already wet just from looking at him. *By the gods.* A cock like that could change everything she knew about mating. His organ grew firmer as she increased the pressure of her hand on his thigh. She ached to do things to him she'd never considered before. He could be the one.

Her hand trembled, aching to touch him. So big. So beautiful. Already his cock promised more than all the Dark Males put together had managed.

He would be the one.

What if he would not agree to her terms? Could she force him to become her lover?

Had he been a Dark Elf Male, she would have needed merely to point. She would not have cared if he loathed her. For an Élandra Male, the difference between life and death was as subtle as the tone of her voice. There was no sport in the game the Dark Males were ordered to play.

Taking this one might be more amusing. Surely he would prove infinitely more satisfying than her own males.

The golden skin beneath her hand fascinated her. She had yet to actually see a slave from the mines, but it was said their skin was pale as alabaster, despite the sun replicators below. This man was darker, well weathered by the sun. If only she could seduce him, convince him to come to her bed willingly, perhaps...

*"Trust me,"* the voice echoed in her head.

No. Some fantasies were destined to failure. She was who she was. She was Élandra. She was destined to be Queen. All she had to do was learn to enjoy her power and her birthright.

All she must do was accept her destiny.

All she must do was learn to enjoy the kill.

Perhaps what she needed was a little practice.

Anika licked her lips again. Somehow she knew this man would not grovel before her. He might fear her, but he would not grovel. She ached to touch him again, but she had to get the other prisoners secured before any awakened to see her art at work. After that she should have plenty of time before the Dark Males returned to fawn at her feet. They would be jealous if she played with the captives, but they would not dare tell her so. They would not risk her wrath.

Now. What was she to do with the others? They couldn't stay out here. They'd be too open to the elements. The north chamber would do. It was far enough away from her own quarters that she would not hear their pleas for help when they awoke. Closing her eyes for concentration, she called forth her webs. No true spider could have spun better. Or faster.

With a wave of her hand she wrapped the men in her webs, securing them safely with yet more webs, so that they looked perfectly prepared. Although she knew she shouldn't care, she noted her captives looked tired, worn. She moved the webs gently, floating them, rather than dragging the bundles across the rough stone floor, cautious not to disturb their sleep.

Nine cocoons floated in quiet procession to the darkened stone chamber. A massive gridwork of a net formed at her command to cover the wall, offering a safe framework in which to anchor the cocoons. With another wave of her hand, she settled deep, peaceful, healing sleep over her prisoners, that they might not awaken and begin to struggle before she was ready.

She would not kill them until she was sure she had no need of them. If the current one disappointed her, it might be wise to have a backup plan.

Anika toyed gently with the length of hair that had escaped to cover her choice prisoner's mouth. Could she *force* him to become her lover? Such was not the way of her people. A Priestess might order, might even slay one who refused her order, but she had no need to force herself upon anyone. But was it not her right to deal with the captive as she saw fit?

Anika knew what she wanted. She had long ago accepted the terms of her own reality. She was not as others of her race. She was weak. Too weak to do the things her sister Priestesses did. Anika had to find her own way to accomplish her goals.

She would take this one, because she had no other choice.

She would be Queen.

He would be the one to give her her rightful place on the High Council.

Pleased with her decision, Anika studied the male once again. Cleaned up, he would be pretty. Long, dark hair touched with the sun's highlights fell past his shoulders. Thick ropes of muscles stood out despite the obvious signs of privation. A scar showed here and there, but none marred his face. Generous lips formed into a sensuous curve when relaxed. His hands looked strong enough to make her believe he could hold her should he get loose.

She shivered in anticipation. Something about him told her he would not be easily cowed into submission. She wanted that. By the gods she needed that. Let him fight her. She would win, in the end, because she was stronger, more powerful, than any mere male could ever hope to be. If she could not have passion, then she would accept whatever substitute she could get. At least this one would be a challenge.

Once she had him secured in her antechamber, she would take the time to savor, to touch all she wanted. A pang of longing stabbed through her, leaving her hot and wet with need. Had she been what she pretended to be, what she had trained to be all her life, her needs might have been satisfied long ago, for the Dark Males would do anything, everything, she wanted. As well they should. They knew their duty.

Yet for all their dedication, they took little pleasure from their work. They feared her. That was as it should be. But they also saw her weakness, and loathed her for it. It

was she who was lacking. Some imperfection in her blood caused her this constant turmoil, this irritating need to question all about her, to analyze what should be taken for granted, to feel when she should take.

The mask provided by the sunlight allowed her to maintain her position in the Élandra society, but it was no longer enough to satisfy her. She might look like a Spider Queen, but she did not feel like one inside.

All that would change once she was able to shift.

Once she stood over the males as a true Spider Queen, they would fall at her feet, ready to give their lives for her. She would have earned both their fear and their loyalty.

It mattered not how she achieved her goal. She would shift.

Anika conjured a soft cloth dampened with warm water and ran it slowly over her captive's glowing skin. With a flick of her wrist his clothing, what little there was of it, disappeared. He moaned softly as she ran the cloth over his chest and down the sweep of his side toward his hip, his cock springing to bold attention as her cloth caressed the juncture of his hip and thigh before sweeping downward.

By the gods he was gorgeous. Her hand would have barely closed around the girth of his fully erect cock. He had not been clipped, as the Dark Males were. As his cock stiffened, the outer sheath of fine, thin skin rolled back to reveal a large, almost purple head. Following her instincts for once, she allowed herself to take what she wanted. She bent her head to taste, licking once, then again.

Her spell would not let him wake, but her touch would not let him drift away. His body jerked helplessly against her lips as he slept. For once she enjoyed her power. There was something deliciously naughty about sliding her tongue around his cock, watching the dark blue vein pulse and throb as she backed off again. Yes. She would take her time. She let the robe drop off her shoulders. She would savor. When he awakened, he would have her scent all over him. She rubbed her tits over his cock, enjoying the feel of hot against cool, hard against soft.

With a last lick up his sternum she rose to her feet, backing away. Time to let him rest, let him heal. He would be worth the wait. He would need his strength. She smiled

to herself as she summoned a thick pile of skins to her antechamber. She would sleep here, trusting her acute senses to tell her when he awakened.

He would be worth the wait, she promised herself. He would be the one. He would have the strength to give her what she needed.

It was time she learned to embrace her heritage.

\* \* \*

She came to him out of the darkness. Always she came in the darkness. Though he could not see her, he felt her hands on his skin, felt her presence confound him. Who was she? How did she find him, night after night?

The questions faded away as warm, willing woman rubbed against him, her breasts brushing over his skin like two glowing mounds of fire, leaving him hot and hard and aching to hold her. He clung to the dreaming, shivering under her touch as she took his cock in her mouth, his hips jerking toward her as her tongue rimmed the edge of the head of his penis. He moved restlessly in his sleep, thrusting, shaking with need as he slipped awake.

Once again the loneliness assaulted him. The woman was but a creature of the dreaming. She came to him often, but he'd never seen her face. Each time she left him more lonely than the time before. In truth he had welcomed the release Thallin's bounty hunter had spared him.

Calib shifted to ease the tightness of the painfully hard erection the dream had left him, only to freeze in sudden panic.

The woman from the dreaming had never left him tied up.

No. He must stay calm. Panic would gain him nothing. It wasn't as if he'd never awakened in captivity before. Such had been his existence for the last three years. Yet this night was different. He wasn't in chains. Not exactly. He tested his bindings experimentally. He was suspended, tied hand and foot. The bindings gave slightly whenever he tried to shift his weight, but would not allow him anything more than the slightest of movements. Struggling only seemed to make the bindings tighter. He could



turn his head, but not far enough to see his wrists. Whatever was holding him felt... odd. Slightly sticky, and stronger than rope, though somewhat pliant.

It felt like -- spider webs. Huge, thick strands of spider web.

By the gods. What kind of spider had the strength to wrap a sleeping man in its web without disturbing his dreams? Perhaps whatever it was had drugged him. Spiders were known to immobilize their victims.

He didn't feel like he'd been drugged. He felt rested, and randy as a young male fresh from hibernation. Better than he had in months, now, actually -- almost as if he'd been healed.

The thought was ridiculous. Why would anyone heal him only to tie him up? Perhaps 'twas simply the adrenaline surging, like battle lust. Or the effects of another kind of lust. He struggled, twisting his hips as far as he could, hoping to ease the uncomfortable tension centered in his groin.

Where were his men? Had they escaped? Try as he might he could not turn far enough to see anything but shadowed rock walls. He dared not call out to them. He couldn't take a chance on awakening whatever foul creature had put him here.

He rolled one wrist back and forth, attempting to loosen the restraint, but to no avail.

A soft laugh jerked his focus to the far side of the small stone room. For it was a room, as he should have realized when they had crawled in here this morning. Or at least he thought it was this morning. Days could have gone by, for all he knew. In any case, no cave was this smooth, this perfect, this planned. Only one kind of cave came with a female voice that lurked in the shadows, blending perfectly with the darkness.

The painful erection faded as quickly as the memory of the dreams. He must have been drugged, to be so slow. Only one creature could spin a web that would hold a man tighter than any rope, then bother to heal the man she held captive.

This was no cave. He'd led his men into the lair of an ebony-skinned Elf.

He was back in Élahandara, and at the mercy of a Dark Priestess.

Calib licked his lips, trying to stay calm. He could taste his own fear, metallic and thick, like blood on his tongue. He'd faced death. Even come to welcome it as his only escape. But death was a luxury compared to what the Dark Ones would do to a captive.

Her torture would be long, and slow, and thorough. She'd destroy everything he was, all he stood for. She'd punish his body and his mind, then make him beg for more.

Before he could summon the strength he needed to rip the web to pieces, she moved out of the shadows, drawn to the smell of his fear. Though his eyes were well accustomed to the dark, still she was but a creature of shadows. Even when she was close enough that her breath brushed over his skin, he couldn't really see her, as if she were wrapped in illusion.

Hot breath puckered his nipples. "Coming around are we, my pretty one?"

Foolishly he tried to maintain the guise of sleep. He needed time. Time to think. Time to plan. He needed to find out what had happened to his men. He needed...

One nail, sharp enough to split his skin if she applied just a little more pressure, traced the line from his sternum all the way down to his cock, which rose to meet her touch.

All right. He was officially awake now.

"You're an exquisitely gorgeous specimen. Had to heal you a bit. All those nasty cuts and bruises. You must learn to take better care of this body." Her voice purred as her hands caressed, examining, admiring. "I've been alone at this post far, far too long. Imagine my surprise when I found such a luscious fly had wandered into my web."

She leaned in to kiss his nipple, once, her lips hot and wet, with a slow swipe of her tongue across the sensitive bud.

Once was enough. His body convulsed under her touch, his traitorous cock pulsing with need.

"You taste sweet, my pretty one. Good enough to eat." He tried to call the gore of the arena to mind, hoping to squelch the raging desire her touch fostered in his body, but all he could focus on was the dark shadow before him. Furious, as much with himself as with her, he turned all his efforts to breaking free from the web.

“Oh, yes,” her voice purred from out of the darkness. “Fight me. You can’t escape me, but I want to see you try. All that power, all those muscles, all mine, to do with as I please.” Her hands slid further down, lifted his balls to roll them between her fingers.

Either the room had some source of light he could not pinpoint, or his eyes were adjusting to the dim interior. Perhaps it was the woman herself who added the soft glow to the walls. In any case, she was slowly coming into focus.

Violet eyes laughed at him from the shadows. Her skin was as dark as the shadows, and black, not brown, like some of the darker skinned races who lived above ground. Delicately pointed ears were sculpted into an upsweep alongside her angular face. Her hair hung in long, gently curling waves half hiding the two upturned peaks of those ebony breasts. Generous hips curved into an ass just made to fit a man’s hands. The soft triangle of thick curls hid a treasure men gave their lives for. Long, curving legs brought her almost to the height of his shoulder, suspended as he was in her web.

By the gods. She didn’t look evil. She looked stunningly beautiful. He would have thought himself blessed with the exotic fantasy woman of his dreams, had he not known what she was -- what she was capable of. But then, why should evil be unattractive? Would that not rather defeat its purpose?

He closed his eyes as she knelt before him to take his cock in her mouth. He wanted to scream in anger and frustration and guilty pleasure as she brought him back to full erection with but the tip of her tongue circling the head of his cock. He’d known of the Dark Priestesses and the uses they put men of his kind to all his life, though he’d never actually seen one of them before. To the Priestesses, males were little more than sex toys, built to service them.

Some of the males of his clan actually boasted of their prowess before the Dark Ones’ altar. Calibeth had never been one of them. He’d mated before, but only with those of his own kind, deep below in the caverns of Élahandara. Long ago. So long ago.

He needed a woman, but not this woman. He would not service the Black-hearted One. He could not. Not like this. Rage boiled in his blood. "No!" he roared. "I will not be party to your games."

She only laughed evilly as he tried to twist out of her grasp. "Fight me, my pretty one. I like that. Yes. Show me how strong you are." She laughed again as she drew his cock back into her mouth with slow, seductive kisses which deepened until he forgot how to breathe.

As if he had any choice. As if he could keep his body from responding with her hands kneading his balls, her mouth wrapped around his cock, first sucking, then licking and nipping. As if he could stop himself from growing harder with each stroke of her tongue.

Calib bit the inside of his lip to keep from moaning as the shadow creature before him slowly destroyed all he had ever been.

He had to act quickly, while he still had the courage to defy her. Closing his eyes, he dropped his head forward, then slammed it back as hard as he could into the rock wall of the cave. He laughed softly as the stars swam before his eyes, laughed again as the room faded to black.

## Chapter Three

Calibeth's victory was short lived. He awoke to the feel of a warm mouth sucking his cock like an expert. He tried to move his head, and found it anchored and padded with thick swaths of webbing.

The Priestess laughed as she took her mouth away, leaving him aching with a need more painful than anything he'd ever felt before. "You'd run if you could, wouldn't you, my pretty one?" She climbed up into the web to face him, sliding the length of her body up his until her cunt rested against his throbbing cock, her heat a tantalizing trap just out of reach. "You'd run as far and as fast as you could."

Lonely and bereft, his cock surged against her, his pelvis thrusting out as far as the bindings would allow, grazing, but unable to reach. "I'd find my men and escape," he hissed, praying it was the truth, knowing it would destroy him if he couldn't sink his cock into the scalding cunt that even now pressed closer.

"If you try to hurt yourself again, I shall have to wrap you in a cocoon for your own protection. Then I shall send for one of the others to pleasure me. Is that what you wish?"

One of the... she meant one of his men. She held them somewhere, much as she held him. She would do as she threatened. He could pay her price with his body, sacrifice himself to her pleasure, or she would hold him helpless while he watched some other man sink his cock into her.

She didn't wait for his decision. He roared out his defiance -- and his need -- as she slid down out of the web. Her breasts left a burning trail where they touched.

She was nearly to the door before he could find his voice. "Take what you want from me, Mistress."

She turned to face him again, her smile feral as she ran her gaze over his body. His cock twitched at her frank perusal. With each step she took back to him, his cock twitched harder, straining to reach the promise she held.

Seconds ticked by like hours as she studied him. "You will not fight me?"

"No."

She leaned closer, so close he could feel the heat of her skin almost touching him. "What if I do this." Her tongue traced the line of his sternum up to his throat, until her teeth closed lightly over his throat.

With an effort, he held steady, though he could not stop the shiver of anticipation that raced over his skin at the nearness of her body.

"Or this." One delicate foot traced the length of his thigh to fold next to his hips, pressing her cunt hard against his quivering cock. Her eyes widened in surprise as she opened herself farther, sliding her searing cunt down against the tip of his aching penis. She hovered there for a moment before she pushed, hard, harder.

Was she a virgin? Or just too small to hold him?

Calib closed his eyes, trying to hold himself back from the pleasure that became more painful with each passing second. She pushed against him, delicately balanced on her own web, but no matter how she wriggled it soon became apparent he wasn't going to fit within her. He almost laughed at the irony of it. He wasn't sure which was worse at this point -- if she fit or if she left him alone like this, hard and aching and hating her for what he was feeling.

He shook with a need that would not be denied. By the gods, she would break him. She hovered there, just barely covering the tip of his penis. So small, so tight. She gasped, in pleasure or pain, he wasn't sure, but clearly she wasn't going to give up. Her hand fisted around his cock now, she slowly forced herself onto him. His cock throbbed in helpless anticipation as she pushed herself down over him, a fraction of an inch at a time.

"What do you want now, my pretty one? Shall I wrap you away and send for another?"

"No," he whispered.

"Then tell me what you want."

He would not beg. He had some small shred of dignity left to hang on to. He would not beg her. He would not.

Damn her soul to the nine eternal hells.

He couldn't even pretend it was someone else's cock, not when he could feel his body tightening with anticipation as she quivered there against him. He was only a man. He could not stop the natural response of his body to the nearness of her quivering heat. He wanted her. The consequences be damned. He wanted to rip free of the webs and pound himself into her until she begged him not to stop. Instead all he could do was watch, and wait, and curse the weakness of his body that did not care about good and evil, right and wrong, but wanted only to feast on the banquet laid out before him.

She laughed, pushing until he filled her, then stopped, pressed tightly against him. He could feel her body changing as she slowly adjusted to the fit of him within her, could feel her cunt flood with moisture, could feel her panic at his size giving way to lust and need as strong as his own. At last she began to move, sliding her tight, wet cunt slowly back up the length of his rigid cock. He could feel the hot, guilty pleasure taking over, her cunt tighten around him as she leaned in and out, riding his length in a slow, delicious rhythm designed to drive him mad.

Her mouth hovered close to his neck, her tongue darting out to lick the place where his pulse beat wildly under her touch. "Fight me, my pretty one," she whispered, her breath blowing hot over his shivering skin. "I want you to fight me." The room had grown brighter. He could see her now, skin as dark as night glistening in the muted light, long, elegant fingers cupping her breasts, bringing the nipples into erect peaks while her hips brushed against his, her head thrown back, exposing the long, bare curve of her neck, her soft black curls spilling over her shoulders like a cloud.

Would he have held back if he had had the choice? Could he have denied himself this sinful pleasure?

He couldn't. Not now. "Fuck me!" he demanded.

She laughed again, though the sound held more malice than humor. The leg that had supported her drew up now so that she knelt in the webbing, gravity apparently not affecting her, her cunt spread wider, her breath hissing in sharply as she rose up over him to drop down his length. She tried the movement again, slowly finding her rhythm. Up and down, up and down, tight, tight cunt straining to hold him, hot, needy woman gasping as she tried to force what she wanted from him.

The right and the wrong of it didn't matter anymore. He had promised only that he would not fight her, but now he wanted to give her whatever she needed. But he couldn't. Not like this. Not bound and helpless. He tried. He met her rhythm with as hard a thrust as he could manage, though there was little enough give to his bindings. His frustration built along with hers until he wanted to scream.

She tightened around him, a weak quiver that did more to frustrate them both than it did to satisfy her.

He wanted, he needed, to touch her. She was beautiful, so beautiful, so deadly, so evil. He'd never been one to lie to himself. Better to face the truth. If he was free his hands would be buried in her hair, his lips would be pressed against her breasts, his cock would be straining to bring her to pleasure. He was weak, too weak to resist what his mind told him was evil, but his cock told him was perfection. It had been so long... so long. He needed this. He had prayed for this -- for a warm, willing woman riding his cock, taking him for all he could give. How could this be wrong? Had his people not served the Dark Ones for generations?

"Let me help you," he begged, almost ashamed of himself. "You asked what I wanted. Let me taste you. Touch you."

Her hands stilled on her nipples. Her pussy stilled on his cock. She looked -- frightened? Of him? He was the one bound. How could he frighten her? She was in control. Wasn't she?

"No," she whispered.



*Battles are won not with the sword, but with the mind.* He could hear his mentor's voice echo in his head even now. *Every enemy has a weakness. The advantage is yours as long as you keep thinking.*

Calib lowered his voice to a seductive purr. "I am Clan Bear. I was born to serve you. I want to run my hands over your beautiful skin. I want to suck your nipples till you moan for me. I want to taste your juices with my tongue. Let me worship your body properly, my beautiful one."

Oh, yes. With every word he could feel her cunt tighten around his rock hard cock, as if he were sending a jolt through her system. "Come closer, my dark beauty. Let me touch you. I want to fuck you until you scream, until you beg me to stop. No one has ever satisfied you as I will. Let me touch you."

She looked confused, frightened, now, but most of all, needy.

Calib used what little movement he had available to rotate his hips in small, gyrating circles that ground his pubic hair across her clit. She hovered over him, her face a mask of indecision, her nipples stabbing with want against the cool night air, while he rocked his hips against her, back and forth, in and out. Small movements that made him hotter, made him want her more, rather than satisfying.

"Kiss me," he urged. "Is that too much to ask?"

She trembled as she leaned down against him, her lips brushing his with a tentative tremor. So soft. The taste of evil was sweet. So sweet. His own lips trembled against hers before he reached to suck her full bottom lip between his, tasting, sucking, gently taking control. Her lips parted for him, allowing him to slip his tongue inside, over the edges of her sharp, even teeth, coaxing her tongue into a tentative response. Tips touched first, then battled for dominance as he taught her this new dance.

Her cunt contracted tightly around him, shivering in anticipation. "No," she whimpered. "I must -- You're not supposed to --"

"Feel me within you. Feel how hard I am for you. No other woman has ever made me feel like this. I want to touch you. I want to hold you, and lick you, fuck you senseless." He didn't have to lie about that.

"I could kill you as easily as fuck you." She sounded frightened. Of his words, or of her own needs, he couldn't be sure. Was she trying to convince him? Or herself?

He kissed her again, just the barest touch of his lips to her neck. "I'm sure you could, Mistress."

Her pussy tightened around him as if in response to his words. He forgot to breathe while she stared at him, her face a mask of indecision. One second. Two. His cock pulsed in rhythm to the seconds. Four. Five. The bindings around his left wrist fell away. Without hesitation he slipped his arm around his dark beauty, cupping her ass. She was so small and light. He supported her easily, pulling her closer, penetrating her more fully. He'd been right about how well her ass fit his hand.

With his arm free, his shoulder peeled away from the web, allowing him to bend his head far enough to taste her mouth. Their tongues met and mated in a fierce dueling match that soon had them both panting for breath. She moaned into his mouth as he guided her up and down the length of his frantic cock.

There was something he should remember. Something he'd heard about Elves.

He broke away from the kiss to nuzzle against her neck, working his way around to her ear. Yes. He could feel her shiver in anticipation as he got closer to his target. Her pussy sucked harder around his cock, tightening with every thrust. The first tentative swipe of his tongue over the tip of her ear had her melting against him, her voice a low moan of ecstasy as he pulled the tip gently between his lips.

Gently, cautiously, he sucked the delicate tip into his mouth, licking, sucking, swirling his tongue against delicate ridges. The rumors, it seemed, had not been wrong. She clung to him, her body writhing against him now, shaking with need. He sought to oblige her, guiding her up and down the length of his straining cock in an increasingly fierce rhythm.

"Yes!" she screamed, pumping her body faster, harder over his straining cock.

So tight. So deliciously tight. So fierce. So needy. He nuzzled her neck, licking the spot where the pulse beat so frantically, then slowly up the other side.

An inarticulate cry broke from her lips as he found her left ear, taking his time now, working up from the base, pulling the slight roll of the outer edge into his mouth. She shuddered, then moaned out her desire as he sucked the sharp point slowly between his teeth.

In and out, slow, then fast, deep, then deeper. He controlled the pace now, while she clung to him, urgent, needy, desperate. Each contraction that shook her was stronger than the last, testing his stamina. He wanted, he needed, more, but not like this. Not tied here in her web. He nipped the tip of her ear.

The woman screamed, the force of her orgasm like a mighty fist closing over his cock, breaking him, shattering him with a power that ripped an answering scream from his lungs. His seed emptied into her in hot gushes that washed over them both, burning, branding her flesh with his scent. Right and wrong no longer mattered. She was his. His! He roared out his possession as she strained against him, her body milking his of his very last drop.

Calib hooked his chin over her shoulder, his arm still wrapped tightly around her ass, holding her close as he grew slowly soft within her, her tensed body slowly relaxing against his.

To his chagrin, he felt her tears against his chest. "What's wrong?" he demanded, his sated haze dissolving in an instant. Guilt tore at him. It made no difference that he had had no part in her decision to use him as she saw fit. He had mated with her. Had she been a virgin after all? He'd felt no barrier, other than her size, and she seemed to fit well enough after her initial difficulty. Every instinct he possessed screamed out with the need to protect her. "Have I hurt you?"

She sniffed, snuggling tighter against him when he would have leaned her back so that he could see her face. "'Tis nothing wrong. Not the way you mean. You were everything you promised. I, I am what's wrong. 'Tis the foul corruption in my blood that will not allow me to become what I am not. 'Tis not your fault. You were wonderful. You have given me more than any other male has managed. I simply want what cannot be."

"Shhh," he whispered, his lips against her ear again. "Do not distress yourself so. Tell me what's wrong, Mistress. Let me help you." He had little enough experience at soothing a distressed female. He could but follow his instincts. He nuzzled her neck, whispering the words from the dream. "*Trust me.*"

"Trust you? What will that change? Can you not see?" she sobbed. "Can you not see what I am?"

"I see only a beautiful woman who has landed in my arms, a gift from the gods to be cherished," he answered cautiously.

The dim light that seemed to emanate from the stone walls themselves grew a little stronger. "Can you not see? It is as I have always feared. Look at my skin! I have masked my deformity through the years with the help of the sun, but I cannot deny the truth."

Calib stared at the dark beauty before him in amazement. "I see no deformity, Mistress. But a man does not see as a woman does. I see only perfection."

"Perfection?" she hissed. "Are you blind?"

"Perhaps, Mistress. At least where you're concerned. But truly, I see only an exquisitely beautiful woman."

"A woman! That is the problem. I am still a woman! I cannot shift!"

Calib fought back bitter laughter, knowing she would not understand. "Mistress, you ask too much of yourself. No one could shift like this. Not for the first time. A man's body is an easy thing to seduce, but you require a different sort of seduction to achieve your goal. The gift must be freely given. You cannot take what you need. Even your gods would not grant such a gift in this fashion."

"Gods? My gods no longer speak to me. They have tested me and found me wanting. I am alone. No one will mourn my passing."

She would have left him, then, would have twisted out of his grasp, but he held her, though in truth his arm was tiring. He took her ear gently between his lips again, knowing she could not resist such an intimate caress. "Please, Mistress. Do not say such

things. Let me but hold you for a while, and we will try again. I can teach you how to shift."

"How?" she demanded, hope warring with disbelief in her voice.

"You will have to trust me," Calib bargained. He held her as close as he could, trying to soothe her with the warmth of his body and the gentleness of his touch. "Let me help you. Let me guide you. Free me, Mistress. I would hold you, touch you, make love to you properly." What would happen after was another story. "Are you afraid of me? Are you afraid of what I can do to you? I'll make you tremble with want until you beg me to take you."

"You'll try to escape," she argued.

"I'm your first, aren't I? Your first of Clan Bear. Why do you think your Priestesses prize us so? We can do things for you your own males could never imagine. I might try to escape, but not before I make you scream with want for me. Not before I teach you how to shift."

She wasn't trying to escape him anymore. She seemed to be considering his offer. Following his instincts, he kissed his way along the gentle curve of her neck, slowly making his way up to her cheek, gently licking the tears from her face. She seemed secure enough in her web. He let his fingers stroke where they would, along the curve of her hip, up over her shoulder, tangling in her hair as he pressed his lips to hers, just a whisper of a touch at first, then a true kiss that deepened as her body responded to him.

"*Trust me*, Mistress. A man will not run from a woman who offers him what he desires most. I want you. I need to feel your lovely ass molded in my hands, guiding you as you ride me. I want to worship your body, everywhere from your toes to the tips of your ears. Let me hold you, Mistress. Let me be the one to take you to the next plateau. Is it so much that I ask? My freedom that I might make love to you properly? Trust me, Mistress. Please."

The web was changing, loosing its hold on him. His right hand came free as she dissolved against him, too boneless to support herself any longer.

Yes.

So small and light. His feet slid to the floor of the cave as the web dissolved around them. He held her easily as he stepped clear of the rock wall, searching the dimly lit room for something gentler than the rock floor. One shadow separated itself from the rest, a mound of furs that cushioned them as he tumbled her into the soft warmth.

Calib knelt between her thighs, bending to kiss her once, thoroughly, before he gently caressed her face. "Is there an invading army at your door, Mistress?"

She blinked at that. "No."

"No urgent affairs of state that demand your attention? No wars will be fought over your continued absence?"

She smiled a little at that. "No."

"Then we need not be in a hurry." He ran his hands over her shoulders, along her sides, and down, gently lifting and molding her breasts to his hands. "The first time is different. There is no room for anger and fear. You must give yourself over to me completely. You must learn to trust me, with your needs as well as your body, as I must trust you."

"I have set you free," she pointed out. "Does that not prove my trust?"

He smiled at that. "That's an excellent start. But then there is the problem of what you will shift to. In truth, Mistress, I have no desire to be the first meal for a Spider Queen."

She giggled at that, the first truly lighthearted sound he'd heard from her. "You have my word. I will not harm you in any way."

"Nor my men."

"Nor your men."

Calib fought for his voice, almost afraid to ask. "They are safe, then?"

She looked truly amused at his question. "My web protects them and heals them even as they sleep. They are also far enough away not to hear any noise we might make."

“Good.” He laughed at the way she shivered when he licked her jaw line, laughed again as he watched her pulse jump when he nuzzled her neck. It would be so easy to forget what she was and succumb to the innocence that was the smell of her skin, the warm, willing body beneath him.

Calib reminded himself again that no matter how good she tasted beneath his lips, no matter how perfectly his cock fit within her tight, wet pussy, the woman wrapped around him was still a Dark Elf Priestess. She could kill him with little more than a thought. The goddess of perfection was nothing more than an illusion created to convince him to let down his guard. Illusion. He had to remember she was illusion. All illusion.

It was that illusion of perfection, in the form of her breast, that he sucked into his mouth now, swirling his tongue around her nipple. Was this not what he had prayed for? Warm, willing woman wrapped in his arms, her eyes gazing up at him in uncertainty, ready to trust him with her soul?

Did it matter so much that he once would have thought her the enemy? She had done him no harm, save to offer him her body as a sacrifice to her own needs. He brushed his stiffening cock against her mons, smiling as she thrust against him. “Already my cock grows hungry to taste of you again, Mistress.” He lifted her perfect little ass, settling her on his thighs, tilting her pelvis up so that she opened to him. She cried out as he teased her first with his fingers, brushing, testing, finding her more than ready. “You feel so good around me,” he groaned as he sank the tip of his penis slowly into her wet pussy. He watched her arch up against him as she tried to suck the rest of him into her. “Patience, my greedy lover. Patience.”

“I have been more than patient,” she gasped. “Fuck me!”

## Chapter Four

Calib laughed as he slid into her fully, feeling each ridge as her muscles contracted around him, sucking, pulling, demanding. He shut his eyes in concentration, moving slowly, the sensitive head of his penis rubbing in and out over the top wall of her vagina as he searched for her center of pleasure.

Yes. There. He felt her swelling slightly, heard her excited moan, felt her hands fasten on his hips, now, trying to guide him in, harder, faster. Smiling again, he opened his eyes, giving her what she wanted. Short, hard thrusts that raked her mercilessly until she writhed beneath him, her hands alternately pulling him closer then trying to push him away. Watching her come was its own reward. Her body rose up out of the furs to thrust hard against him. Her nipples stabbed like ebony spears, reaching for his touch. A warm flush rolled across her skin, seemingly from nowhere and everywhere at once. Her cunt, that tight well of perfection, closed around him in waves, threatening to break his concentration, threatening to push him over the top before he was ready.

She cried out as he pulled free of her, not some innocent little mew of protest, but rather the angry hiss of a tigress displeased with her mate. She cried out again as he slid down her body, but 'twas not in displeasure this time. Her hands tangled in his hair as he ran his tongue over her pulsing clit, lapping at the juices they'd made together. She screamed as his tongue traced the outline of her opening, then pushed slowly inside.

He alternately licked and sucked and thrust deep into her with his tongue. He could feel her tighten beneath him as one orgasm flowed into the next. She was sobbing by the time she broke again, thrashing wildly beneath him as if trying to escape, all the while holding him pressed tightly against her straining, convulsing cunt.

Her hands pulled at him, telling him wordlessly what she needed.



He broke away as the spasms that shook her began to relax again, taking his time as he kissed his way up her belly, stopping to circle her navel before he moved up farther. Her back arched up out of the furs, thrusting hard, pointed nipples toward him. He accepted the invitation, first licking, then blowing gently across the damp surface he left behind.

"Tell me what you want, my dark beauty," he whispered to her damp nipple. It didn't seem fair to ignore the other one. He licked the areola, circling in closer until only the nipple itself remained untouched.

"Want?" she gasped. "Idiot male! I want you to fuck me!"

"Is that any way to talk to your lover?" He brushed his cock against her mons, close, but refusing to be drawn inside. Instead he sucked her nipple between his teeth, biting gently, then apologizing with a swipe of his tongue.

She screamed again, a cry of frustration and longing and need. "Fuck me!" she ordered.

"How much do you want me, my darkling beauty?" He ground slowly against her wet, thrusting cunt. "I made you a promise. Remember? I am a man of my word."

He watched the indecision battle with need, anger and pleasure warring across her beautiful ebony features. As a gentle reminder, he reached between them to guide the tip of his penis through her hot, slick folds, circling the tiny nub of her clit, letting his touch brand her.

"Please," she hissed between her teeth.

"There. Was that so hard?" He let the tip of his penis slip inside her again.

"Please!" she whimpered, wriggling against him. "I'm begging you, damn it! Fuck me!"

"No," he teased. "Your turn. You fuck me." He rolled so that she straddled him, her hands braced against his shoulders, her cunt inches from his aching cock. "Slow, my delicate beauty. The race goes not to the one who finishes first. Relax. Sex should be enjoyable. Do not worry so much about whether you shift this time or not. We will try again later if we need to. For now, let us just enjoy each other."

She blinked, seemingly confounded by his words. "Enjoy?"

"Yes. Put my body to whatever use you desire. This time, I just want you to have fun."

She hovered there, poised over his cock, confusion lending an appealing innocence to her dark features. "I... no one... that is, I'm not sure I know how to have fun."

Calib laughed at that. "Then I shall be honored to teach you!" He pulled her hips down hard over his, driving deep within her, only to wrap his arms around her and roll. When she lay under him again, he rose up enough to kiss her soundly, thrusting into her in deep, slow strokes. "We need not rush to the finish. 'Tis the journey that consumes..."

She shivered as his tongue swiped over her ear, tracing the whorls, but not yet attacking the delicate tip. She gasped as he raised up enough to lick her nipples, first one, then the other, playfully sucking them into his mouth, then letting them go with a popping sound that made them both smile.

Calib rolled again, setting her back on top of him, grinning up at her. "Show me what you like. Teach me how to worship your body properly."

Her smile turned predatory. Her head darted down to his chest, her tongue flicking across his nipples. She laughed at last when he bucked up helplessly within her. She laughed again when his traitorous nipples arched back toward her touch.

She sucked now, instead of licking, swirling her tongue over the hard little buds while she slowly rode the length of his shaft. The muscles of her tight cunt pulled and sucked at him even as her lips pulled and sucked at his nipples. He twisted from the sensations that were too much to withstand, but she was in control now, and she would not be dissuaded. Her hands moved to his hair, her nails raking over his scalp, sending waves of a long forgotten sensation pouring through him. "Too much," he protested. "Too much."

"You said I could pleasure myself," she whispered against his lips. "I find making you ache for me pleases me."

His control broken, he pulled her roughly against his chest, rolling until she lay beneath him once again. "You have your wish, then, Mistress. I ache for you as I never have for any woman before."

Laughing, he sank back into her, thrusting deeply into her with his thick, aching cock, burying himself to his balls once more. The fever pitch took control with the first few thrusts into heat that resisted him now, still tight and wet from his tongue. She was too weak to push him away as the frenzy built, the need making him careless as he pounded into her, absorbed in the sound of their hot flesh slamming together, the feel of his balls, pulled up high and tight now, slapping against her delicate ass, the sight of her nipples stabbing up to meet his questing fingers.

"No!" she hissed, as if suddenly afraid. For a moment she fought him in earnest.

Fire washed over his skin everywhere she touched him, her nails clawing at him as she tried alternately to pull him closer or push him away. He was still cognizant enough to know she feared what was happening to her as he pounded against her, thrusting hot and wild into resisting flesh. Her body shook beneath him as she fought the final release, but it was too late to stop now even if he'd wanted to, and he did not want to stop. What could be more right than the feel of his cock, scorched by her heat, engorged with his blood, driving, thrusting, relentlessly pursuing that final release?

Unless it was the feel of her skin, so soft beneath his hands, or the tips of her ears as they sought his touch, or her lips, as they screamed and growled and begged him for more. Or the feel of her cunt fisting around him once again, so tight, so slick, so perfect.

He said a silent prayer that the thing she became might not consume him. He willed visions of monstrous spiders out of his head.

If the skin beneath him grew softer, silkier, covered with a layer of fine, shimmering scales, if the limbs that embraced him now were capable of rending him with talons as sharp as razors, the wild fear and delight only mixed to propel him into the most fierce release he'd ever experienced.

The room went dark -- darker, perhaps -- and stars the equal to any fireworks he'd ever seen exploded against the black velvet of the night. He ached to follow her, to

shift with her, but he fought the darker desire down. There were rules. Rules even a rutting bear had to follow. He held her tightly, arms cradling her iridescent skin, careful of the scales that felt more fragile than he would have expected. He held her more tightly as he buried his cock deep within her, seed erupting to fill her, the need to shift almost overpowering.

Her new body welcomed his release, milking him with muscles far stronger than the woman's, her claws tightly sheathed, her large violet eyes pressed tightly shut now behind iridescent lids as she held him clamped against her. The beautiful head pressed his cheek, her breath but a warm hiss across his shoulder, jaws capable of breaking him with a single crunch nuzzling him instead.

Even as the lethargy reached out to claim his sated, exhausted body, he knew this was wrong. Not that he'd mated her, though that in and of itself was surely taking his life into his hands. But if there was one thing he was sure of, no Dark Priestess had ever shifted to anything but a Spider Queen before.

Soft. So soft. He relaxed against her, face angled flat against her shimmering scales, fingers stroking lightly over her luxurious wings. She made a sound deep in her chest, low and rumbling, almost like a big cat's purr. He found the vibrations oddly soothing as they tangled together on the hides.

In the morning. He would figure it out in the morning. For now there was the feel of her heart beating wild and strong beneath his ear, and the knowledge that for the first time in ages almost beyond memory he was not alone.

Whoever, whatever she was, she wanted him there.

Did it matter if the wings folded around him belonged to a Dragon?

\* \* \*

Calib woke to the sound of her deep, rumbling breath. The night felt far advanced. Soft, sleek scales pillowed his head. If he'd thought about it, he would have expected the scales to feel rough, like armor plating. Instead they felt as soft and fragile as a butterfly's wings.

He sat up slowly, careful not to disturb her.

Beautiful. He'd never seen anything so beautiful. Her skin shimmered in the dim light, the movements of her breathing animating the iridescent scales.

He brushed her lightly with his fingertips before he rolled away, watching her carefully for any movement or change in her breathing that would warn him she was waking up.

He was not sure just what she was capable of, or what mood she would be in when she awoke. Perhaps 'twas wise to be cautious when dealing with a sleeping Dragon. Years of training kept his footsteps lighter than the brush of a whispered breath across the cold stone floor.

Nothing. Her deep, steady breathing resonated through the rock, caressing his feet as he slipped silently toward the entrance. He found Donovan first, suspended in another huge spider web, like a meal to be savored at some time in the future. It was no easy feat to tear the bindings loose. Calib had nothing but a shard of rock to help him saw through the thick, sticky mass, but once he had Donovan's right wrist free, there were two of them to attack the web. Before the sun was more than a hint in the eastern sky they had the men assembled at the cave's entrance.

"Take the men to the Dwarven Monastery. The Clerics there will help you. From there to the City of Portsmouth. You will find employment along the docks. There will always be work for strong men at the wharf. Watch, and wait. There are more of us than you think above ground. You will know our people when you find them. Gather them to you and wait. I will join you there when I can."

"You mean to sacrifice yourself to the Web Mistress," Donovan hissed angrily. "No. You cannot do this. Not again. Think you not that we pay the price for your martyrdom in guilt? I will not have it! Not again!"

Calib smiled at that. "I have felt a ripple in the dreaming for months now. Remember the Prophecy you sang to us, Bard. A new leader will rise among our people, to lead us to freedom. We will take back what we have lost. We must be ready. I will stay here yet a while, but you must take the men and go. In truth there is more than one way to distract the spinner of webs. Do not feel too sorry for me."

Donovan started to protest, then laughed instead as Calibeth's meaning penetrated. "Do not dally here overlong then. We have a higher purpose than the relief of your randy cock. I'm sure there are whores in the City of Portsmouth."

"Nothing like this," Calib answered truthfully.

Donovan wrapped his arms around Calib briefly before turning to lead the men off at a swift pace through the first glimmerings of dawn.

"Why did you not go with them?" Her voice -- the voice of a woman -- sounded bitter, defeated.

Calibeth stood staring out across the desert. "In truth, I had no wish to leave you."

She came to stand behind him, not touching, but close enough he could feel the heat of her body. "You layer your truth with half truth and lies until you make all sound the same. I should kill you now before you destroy me."

Calib turned, then, to take her into his arms, pressing her tightly against his aching cock. "You have already destroyed me. I have turned away from my men and my duty to stay with you here. What more do you want of me, Mistress?"

She didn't answer him with words. Instead she rose up on her toes to kiss him, her lips hot enough to melt the chill of the morning from him at her first touch. Her eyes shone bright violet in a sea of ebony, harboring doubts mixed with need, anger mixed with fear. "You should have run while you had the chance, slave. Do you think you can buy me with the strength of your cock and the price of your silence? I would kill you before I let you use what you know against me."

He could still run. He was one of the best runners in his Clan. No one ever beat him in the tunnel races. She'd be hard put to track him through this rocky terrain.

He ought to run.

Dragons could fly, couldn't they? Surely those wings were not just ornamental. His men would be too easy to track in the open like this.

He could lie to her, he could lie to his men, but he could not lie to himself. 'Twas more than duty kept him here. He had no wish to run. "I would not use what I know against you, even if my life were of no value to me."

He slipped his hand under her tunic to comb through the curls at the apex of her thighs, feathering through the soft pelt that pushed toward his touch. Her body trembled against him, war warring with distrust. She tried to pull him away, but there was little conviction in her movement. "Have I not yet earned your trust? Have I not done all that I promised?" He nuzzled her neck as he spoke, ever closer to her sensitive ear. He let his breath blow over her, teasing, never quite touching. "You may not need me, not now, but I need you, Mistress," he admitted.

He maneuvered her back into the caves as he spoke, away from the sight of his men disappearing down the valley. They were unarmed now, but even fully equipped, no man on foot could outrun a Dragon. Assuming she was a real Dragon, though none had seen one of her kind for more ages than he knew the history of.

Legends and myths filled his mind. Warm, willing woman filled his hands. Hot, raging desire led him on. He would tame this Dragon. He would learn her secrets. He would bind her to him, he promised himself, even as her lips against his skin warned that the binding might work both ways.

"Feel how hard I am for you. My heart desires you as much as my body does. Whoever, whatever, you are, I would not be parted from you. *Trust me,*" he whispered once again.

"No!"

Rage and despair and confusion warred for dominance within her as Anika shoved her prisoner away. She needed to think. What did this mean? Who -- and what -- was she? Why had it taken *this* male's touch to awaken this foul corruption within her? Why did he speak to her with the words from her dream?

There was only one sensible thing to do, and she did it. She ran. Ran from the male. Ran from herself. Ran from what she had become. In another time, another life, she might have run to her mother, seeking knowledge and understanding and comfort,

but Nafésti was dead, had died at the hands of a mortal, a victim as much of her own arrogance as anything else.

Had Nafésti lived, Anika knew she would have found no comfort at her mother's side. Their kind did not give comfort. Her mother would likely have killed her for the mere suggestion that she required such.

Nafésti would certainly have killed her for the aberration she had become.

Sobs shook Anika as she stumbled into her private chambers. She tore at the very stone of the walls, her rage and despair bringing pieces of rock crashing down. Her mother would have been right to kill her. She was a freak. An abomination.

"Goddess take me!" she screamed as she pulled the chamber down around her head. "Forgive me for this atrocity that pollutes my blood! If by my death I may atone for this impurity, then let my life be forfeit!"



## Chapter Five

"Shhh. Quiet now. Shhh. You will hurt yourself like this. Come, my beauty. Let me hold you. There is nothing so wrong that it cannot be dealt with. Talk to me. Trust me. Let me help you."

*Trust me.*

Trust me? He dared mock her with the words of the dreaming?

The rage lost out to the despair. Even the male did not fear her. Strong arms lifted her free of the stone floor. The male lunged to the left as the last shard of rock swirled past their heads. Anika found herself cradled against a chest broad enough to dwarf her, yet held with hands that stroked and comforted.

Comfort. The receiving of it was as strange as the need she so suddenly felt. More tears welled up from the great emptiness within her. A door snapped shut behind them as the broad chest and strong arms sheltered her from knowing, or caring, what he was about. The softness of heaped feather beds beneath her told her the male had brought her to her own bed. Still the arms held her. She wanted to lie there in the comfort of those arms for an eternity, until the pain subsided, until the wings she had yet to test fell into dust. Great sobs shook her as her world crumbled around her.

"Shhh. Calm, now, my beauty. That's it. Cry yourself out now. Then we shall talk. When you are ready."

"Who am I? What am I? What have you done to me?" she demanded.

"I, Mistress? I have but worshiped a thing of beauty. Have not men always done so? Is this not why women rule our world? Women think with their brains, while men are oft ruled by their cocks. This wisdom has served our peoples for generations untold. Truly, Mistress, I have never seen anything as beautiful as you."

He thought her beautiful? How could he? "I am grotesque, an abomination! My mother should have destroyed me at birth, as is our way!"

His hands turned rougher, ceasing their stroking to force her to meet his gaze. "You must never, never say such things. You have been given a gift such as the world has not seen for more centuries than a man could ever hope to count. I know not how this came to be, but I do know all things are as they were meant to be. This gift comes to you of a purpose. Do not waste it by hurling rocks again at your fine, beautiful head."

Anika shook her head vehemently. "You saw. You saw what I became. I am a monster! My people will destroy me to purify our blood. Once word of this spreads, I will be called before the High Council, stripped of my birthrights, and executed."

The man -- did he have a name? Never before had she thought to ask such a question. At any rate, he looked as if the notion of her execution truly angered him. "This I swear to you. I would give my life to protect you, from your own people -- from yourself if necessary. No one will harm you while I yet live. *Trust me, M'Lady.*"

*Trust me, M'Lady.* No one had ever called her M'Lady. 'Twas a term of both endearment and respect. She was always *Mistress*. The feared one.

No one except the lover who came to her in the dreaming.

*Trust me, M'Lady.*

No one, certainly no male, had ever offered his life for her before. 'Twas not the way of her people. She tried to give voice to her feelings, muddled and confused as they were, but no words could express what she felt. She curled back against his chest, seeking shelter there from the storms that threatened to tear away all she was, all she had ever seen herself becoming. "Who are you? You are no mere slave. Do you have a name?"

"I am called Calibeth, M'Lady. Sometimes Calib by those who know me well. I am from the Third House, Clan of the Bear. I was born a slave within the mines of Élahandara. Unfortunately there was something within me that did not make a very good slave. I escaped, only to end up a slave again, in the arena at Stone City. 'Twas from there I escaped most recently, only to be captured once again by you."

"We are all slaves. There is no escape. We are born into roles we must fulfill, whether they are of our choosing or not. I did not ask to be the daughter of a Queen. You did not ask to be born a slave. Yet there it is. We cannot escape our destiny."

"But we can, M'Lady! We can. Have I not twice escaped slavery? Have I not seen the above? Have I not lived a life unknown to my peoples for generations now? And you. Are you stuffed away in some court far below ground? You have seen the sun! You know of its glory! And now you have discovered within yourself something which separates you from a people who were perhaps not your own to begin with. There are other lives to be lived than the ones within Élahandara. No Dragon was ever meant to live in the evil below."

A vague sense of uneasiness warned her she should not be having this conversation. This was wrong. He was a slave, her slave, perhaps, but not her confidant. "Yes, I have seen sunlight!" she snapped back. "I was born above ground, in Talandar. But I am what I am. I am the daughter of a Queen. I was raised to rule Talandar, perhaps even Élahandara itself. I have trained from my birth to be a Queen. There is no other life for me!"

"And what is a Queen doing alone at a Sentinel's outpost, guarding the rear doors to the foulest place on the earth?"

"I -- my mother died. Nafésti was killed by one of your kind, a great Warrior Woman, at the pass of St. Gregory." She tried to dredge up some anger for that, but there was nothing there.

"I am very sorry, M'Lady. Your mother's loss must have been very difficult for you to bear."

He was too close. Anika moved restlessly in his arms, without actually trying to get away. "I never knew Nafésti as more than my Queen. It is not the way of our people to be dependent on our mothers. I shall miss her influence in Council. While she was alive I would never have been relegated to this insult of a post."

His fingertips caressed her, stroking through the hair at her temples, while his lips pressed against her eyelids. "My mother was a slave, but I knew her as everything a

mother should be. She would have laid down her life for me. I cannot imagine not having that bond."

Anika blinked, trying to imagine her mother sacrificing herself for anyone. That vague sense of uneasiness became something more, some reminder of the yearning she'd always felt for something unnamable. "'Tis no matter. Nafésti is dead, and I have no other family. No one will champion my birthright now. The less so did they know what you know. I am not of pure blood. There can be no other explanation. Had I the courage, I would kill myself now. That would be the honorable thing to do. But I think I am more interested in my life than my honor."

She tried to keep her tone light, jocular, but she had little experience with such things, and she was sure she failed miserably. Especially when the tears threatened to escape her traitorous eyes again.

*Abomination!* Nafésti's voice rang through her head. *A Dark Elf High Priestess does not shed tears! Ever!*

She did not have to imagine Nafésti's retribution for such a disgrace. Nafésti would have disavowed her parental responsibility, then personally executed her.

As if everything else wasn't bad enough, she had shed tears. Anika rolled away across the bed, breaking free of the male's hold at last. Had she been of stronger blood, she would have known what to do.

'Twas simple enough, really. All she need do was to kill the only one who had seen her shame, then make sure her impurities never allowed themselves to manifest again.

She had no choice, else her own life would be forfeit.

Yet the very idea of shedding this one's lifeblood repulsed her -- more evidence of her impurity.

Calib watched the illusion she maintained, the persona of strength and indifference, crumble about her. Great tearing sobs shook her, yet she did her best to keep him away. He needed to do something, anything, to help, but he wasn't sure how.

What did one say to comfort a Dragon?

He followed his instincts, or his cock, he wasn't sure which, and gathered her back into his arms, despite her protests, giving what comfort he could with his body. He pulled her down to kiss her eyelids, licking the tears from her ebony skin with the tip of his tongue. His hands caressed, worshiping the hollow of her throat, the delightful curve of her neck, the fine upsweep of her long, elegantly pointed ear.

Her body responded almost immediately, as if against her will, melting into him, twisting in his arms to grant him better access to that traitorous spot. The small part of his mind that remained clear enough to think marveled at the transformation. That which the laws of the universe had decreed to be the most powerful, the most evil force on earth, turned suppliant in his arms. Something within him shattered as she opened herself to him. The need to protect her rose like a wave, nearly overwhelming him, stronger, even, than the need to bury his cock deep within the folds of her flesh.

Protect her? From what? Herself? She was an Élandra Priestess! He was insane!

She was more. Even as she took his cock in her hands, stroking, teasing, pulling the thin sheath back to expose the weeping head, he knew she was more than the sum of her mother's heritage. She was -- *by the gods!* How was he supposed to think when she twisted in his arms to take his cock in her mouth? His hands settled on her hips, drawing her around the rest of the way, so he could reach, touch, torture in rhythm to the path her tongue swirled over his pulsing cock. She cried out as he blew heated breath over her crisp dark curls.

"I would know your name."

Her mouth went still on his shaft. Her body tensed, then relaxed, slowly, as if with a great force of will. Cool air hit his damp, trembling flesh. "Why?"

Why, indeed? He had not asked for this. He had not asked to be bound to her web and forced to her service. "I could have escaped with my men," he answered truthfully. "I could have attempted to kill you in your sleep to insure their safety. I did not. I've never wanted anything as I want you now. I would know you, M'Lady, in all ways."

Her eyes shone radiant in the half-light. "I am known as Anika."

"Anika." He sank back to breathe the name over her mons. "A woman has more than one parentage, M'Lady Anika. The blood you spurn is not impure. Perhaps 'tis only the mortal flesh that confuses you. Perhaps you have bred truer than you think. Among my people, a woman inherits her father's House."

"House? What house?" she laughed bitterly, though she licked him once again as if his cock were some sweet confection.

"House of the Dragon?"

She laughed again, with a shade more humor this time. She seemed about to protest his logic, but he drove his tongue deep between her folds, smiling as he felt her convulse around him. She froze for a moment, then set to work in earnest sucking his cock, both hands fisted around the length of his shaft. In turn he transferred his attention to her clit, licking and sucking until she quivered helplessly beneath his relentless assault. In moments all she could do was scream out his name.

Calib rolled her over, then, lifting her hips up off of the bed, sliding his cock deep into her tight, wet cunt. She mewed in protest, unable to reach him, but her cries soon turned to demands as he pumped into her, his hands grasping her hips. "Yes!" she screamed as she thrust her gorgeous ass back at him, harder, tighter, her muscles fisting around him. Supporting herself on one forearm, she freed the other hand to stroke over her clit. "Sing for me, Calibeth!"

He couldn't. Not without her. He wanted to. By the gods he wanted to. He shouldn't have chosen this position. So close to the mating he desired. So close. His balls ached with the strain to maintain his human form. The urge to shift was stronger than anything he'd ever felt. But it wasn't right. It wasn't...

"Calibeth! Now, Calibeth! I know what you want. Sing for me! Take me, Calibeth!" She screamed out his name as she shattered around him, shaking helplessly as she went limp in his arms. Arms that were paws, now, strong enough to hold her as he drove his fur-covered pelvis hard against her.

To his surprise the ass that rose up to meet him was no longer the small, perfect delicacy he remembered, but the strong loins of a she-bear, taking all he had to give and

demanding more. He'd never mated in this form before. The magic did not work in the depths of Élahandara, and he'd never found a she-bear here above ground.

Calib roared out his triumph as he shot his seed deep into her cunt, exalting in the feel of her ursine muscles closing around him, milking him for all he had to offer her. He understood her roar as she screamed out her climax, as well. He closed his eyes and sent a prayer of thanks to the gods as he pulled her back against his chest, rolling to cradle her against his fur-covered body as she held him locked within her yet a little longer. Tomorrow. Tomorrow he would try to understand this magic. For tonight there was only the she-bear locked in his paws, the answer to every blessing he'd ever asked of his gods.

The perfect mate. And neither of them knew what or who she was.

\* \* \*

Glittering violet eyes blinked slowly awake. "You're still here."

"Aye, M'Lady. 'Twould seem so."

Her hand rose to brush the hair back from his face, a gesture he found more intimate than the deepest kiss. "I thought sure you would be gone this time."

He had meant to be gone. Had meant to be well on his way to the City of Portsmouth to rejoin his men by now. Why in the name of the seven was he still here?

He knew the answer. Whoever, whatever she was, her magic held him more firmly than any chains ever had. "Where would I go without you, M'Lady?"

Her fingers traced the outline of his mouth, her touch soft and delicate, shattering him with its very innocence. "Wherever you sent your men. I thought you meant merely to divert my attention, to give them time to escape."

He smiled under her fingertips. "The thought had occurred to me. But I found I was not in so much of a hurry to leave your bed, M'Lady. Truly you have bewitched me."

She sighed. "I doubt I have even that small power. But 'tis just as well. I didn't really want to kill them. I've never enjoyed the killing. I guess I didn't make a very good Dark Elf Priestess. I shall be no great loss to my people."

“Do you mean to leave Élahandara, then, M’Lady?”

Her hand stilled as she shifted her gaze to some remote point in the room. “I -- no. There is nowhere for me to go.” She turned her focus back to him again, stroking her fingers across his chest, now, until her hand lay flat over his breastbone. “It is past time for you to ‘escape’ now, Calibeth. The Dark Males must soon be returning. Even those fools cannot spend forever roaming about on some pointless errand. Eventually they will realize they’ve left me unguarded and come running back. I would not have them find you here.”

“I --” His words caught in his throat, the truth too painful to speak aloud on the first attempt. “I do not wish to leave you, M’Lady.”

To his surprise, her eyes teared up again. “Thank you, Calibeth. Your passion, your kindness, has torn my world apart, but I find I did not like my world. No one has ever cared for me before, not since I was a child in need of a nurse. You have filled a void in my life that I only vaguely understood. I know now I can never be what I was trained to become. I have not the heart nor the desire. Whatever I am, I shall never be a High Priestess of Élahandara. If all I was to have was these few days, then I am glad I found you.”

He sat up, alarmed. “You speak as if --”

“You are a good man, Calibeth. I wish I had known my father’s people, that I might understand more of this mystery, but there is not time. You must go now, before the males return. When you think back on the time we have shared, try to remember me as more than the color of my skin.”

He shook his head defiantly. “I shall not leave you, M’Lady.”

“How long do you think I can keep this secret, Calibeth? It is only a matter of time before someone else discovers the impurities in my blood. When that time comes, you will die. I do not want your death on my conscience.”

He laughed at that. “There is your answer, M’Lady. No Dark Elf Priestess before you ever had a conscience. If I must go, then come with me. We will search for your answers together. We will find your father’s people.”



She let him pull her back against his chest. "Tell me more about this tradition of your people."

"Which tradition, M'Lady? The one where a male loses his soul in worship of a beautiful woman? Have not all the races this tradition?"

She snuggled closer as his fingers stroked lazily over her skin. "You make me laugh. No male has ever done that before."

He nuzzled her ear again. "Perhaps it is a new tradition your males should embrace."

"Mmm," she agreed. "But I meant your tradition of male lineage. The concept intrigues me. I would better understand your traditions."

Calib propped himself up on one elbow to study her face as he curled a strand of her ebony hair around his finger. "Are our ways so different, then?"

"Were you not whelped in Élahandara?"

"Aye, M'Lady, but we knew naught of the Priestesses except to fear them."

"In Élandra society there are many men to choose from, and few women privileged enough to command a seat at the High Council. There are few enough women born to the Élandra in the first place -- less than one fourth of our offspring is female -- and fewer still survive the political intrigue of court to become one of the High Priestesses. Since only a Priestess of the High Council may breed, and there are but nine seats on the High Council, including the High Priestess herself, a High Priestess must take care not to conceive two children by the same mate. When it is her time, a High Priestess will take several men to her bed. Who is to know which one donates his seed to the child? An Élandra Priestess would never know her father, let alone his lineage."

Calib's hands stilled in her hair. "And how do the Priestesses make sure they do not conceive by the same male twice?"

Anika shrugged, as if not noticing, or not caring, the direction his thoughts had taken. "The bloodlines must be kept pure. No male may conceive children by more than one female, else his genetics might be passed on to a sister and a brother who might

then reproduce. Once his Priestess has conceived, a male who has taken part in the mating dance will sacrifice himself on the blade of a High Priestess' dagger."

## Chapter Six

"You kill the males who mate with you?" Calib pulled back in horror. "No wonder you find it necessary to bind prisoners helpless in your webs! What now? Will you hold me captive in your web again until your next cycle to decide whether I deserve the honor of sacrificing myself before you?"

She looked more puzzled than concerned by his reaction. "Why? I cannot conceive. Not here, with you. I am not seated on the High Council. It matters not who I couple with. But I assure you, males compete fiercely for the right to mate with the High Priestesses during the conception ceremony. Males chosen to be breeders spend their whole lives in preparation for the mating dance, perfecting their skills that they might be chosen by the High Priestess."

"And if they are not chosen?"

"'Tis no insult to his training to be chosen by the first or second chair Priestess. However not to be chosen at all, by any of the Priestesses, is a shame no male could live with. A male who is not chosen might well sacrifice himself for his impurities. But such a thing has never happened that I know of. The Priestesses, too, desire to mate."

Calib frowned heavily, not sure he quite believed her point of view would coincide with that of a male's. "You mean to tell me your men spend their entire lives waiting to mate with one woman, prepared to die for the privilege, and if they don't get the chance to die they kill themselves?"

Anika considered his summation of her story seriously for a moment. "'Tis more complicated than that, naturally. Before the conception ceremony, a Priestess may entertain herself with any male of her choice should it amuse her. The males seem to enjoy honing their skills. Their training usually takes many years."

Calib shook his head, willing the confusion away. "I do not understand. Men from my shift were often chosen to service the Priestesses. How is it the Priestesses never conceive children with the slaves from the mines?"

"We cannot conceive until it is our time. Once the season for mating has been announced, a High Priestess must not mate except with those who have won a place in the lottery. Twelve males compete for the honor of dancing before the High Priestess. She then has her pick of the dancers. The other eight seats then get their choice in order of rank. If there are not enough males to go around the Priestesses of the lower chairs may not reproduce until they have risen in rank."

"If a Priestess should conceive outside those chosen for her, what would happen to the child?"

Anika shrugged. "I have never heard of such a thing happening, ever in our long history, but should a child of impure blood be born, it would immediately be destroyed. This is not so among your people?"

Calib blanched in horror. "No! No mother among us would ever kill her cub, unless it was hideously deformed, and to do so would spare it a life of incredible pain. We cherish our cubs. The fathers are chosen for both position and family, to produce strong, healthy cubs. Because fertility is low among my people, a woman who does not conceive with her first choice of mates has the right to choose another man from another house, but she does so with the knowledge her daughters will inherit the father's house."

Anika sat to face him then. "What if the cubs are born -- different? If they are not pure? What happens then?"

He took her hands in his, understanding, finally, the question she was really asking. "Among my people, you would not be considered of impure blood, M'Lady. Your mother would have cherished you. Had she been unsure of your parentage, as sometimes happens when a woman has enjoyed the favors of multiple partners, you would have still taken the name of your surrogate father's house until you came of age. Once you had shifted for the first time, should your lineage become obvious, as, say,

between the mating of Clan Wolf and Clan Bear, you would have the right to claim your true father's house as your own, and your rightful clan would welcome you into your own house."

She shivered delicately, turning to face the wall. "Even your laws do me little good. There is no Clan of the Dragon. I have no people. Under the laws of my mother's house, the house I thought someday to rule, my life is forfeit. It is my duty to sacrifice myself in order to maintain the purity of our blood."

Calib clutched her tightly. "No, M'Lady. Anika, please, you must trust me. Trust your own instincts. You know you do not belong here. I think you have always known. I know of no clan claiming the ability to shift to the form of a Dragon, nor how someone as wondrous as you came to be, but somewhere someone must know of your father's people. Sacrificing yourself at the altar of the Spider Queen would be a poor way to reward the gods for the magnificent gift they have bestowed upon you."

"Gift? I am cursed! How can you call this a gift?"

Calib smiled as he kissed her tears from her cheeks. "You're thinking as an Élandra, Anika. All you can see is that you don't fit into your mother's clan. Consider instead what this means to the rest of the world. You're a Dragon, M'Lady. The most mystical of all creatures, with powers beyond the scope of our knowledge. You know not yet what you're capable of. The magic is still relatively young. If you're the first, then you shall be the Queen of a new race. If you're but the lost daughter of a forgotten house, then somewhere you have a rich heritage to discover. Either way, a great future awaits you."

She curled more tightly into his arms, hiding her face against his chest. "I see no future before me but uncertainty and loneliness. I cannot stay here to live in fear that my secret will out itself and I shall be exposed. I have no home. 'Twas bad enough to be given this insult of a post. But to give up what I have to wander the earth in search of a clan I know not the existence of? I cannot see that I have a great deal of choice."

Calib thought of those waiting for him in the City of Portsmouth. "Come with me, M'Lady. I swear on my life to protect you and keep you from harm. I have naught

but the strength of my sword arm and the belief that we are meant to be together to offer you. 'Tis not overmuch, but perhaps 'twill be enough. Come with me. We will find your father's people. If we cannot, Clan Bear will welcome you as my mate."

"Have you a fever? Have the gods taken your senses?"

"Perhaps, M'Lady. I would not leave you. I know not by what magic you came with me as I shifted, but you have fulfilled my every desire. I am not fool enough to let you go now that I've found you."

She frowned, her tone almost bitter. "'Tis the she-bear that has won your heart? I am doomed to disappoint you, then, Calibeth. I know not how I accomplished that magic."

"It was not your choice to shift?"

"I but felt the need from you, and I shifted with you. I know not if I can do it again, or how or why it happened. It was as if in that instant I owned your powers as well as my own."

Calib worried the thought like an old woman making a stew. "You sensed that I wanted you to become a bear, and you shifted?"

"Yes. Well -- yes. I can explain it no other way."

"And if I wanted you to become a wolf? Or an Elf?"

As if to illustrate his point, she frowned in concentration, then shifted within his arms, first to the she-bear again, then next to an arctic wolf, then a Troll, an Orc.

"Could you do this magic before? Before you shifted? Is this how you hide your true form from the others?"

"No," the deep, guttural voice spat. "Not know how before."

"A shapeshifter," he murmured in awe as she became Anika again. "By the gods I am slow. You are not houseless, M'Lady. You must belong to none other than the oldest of houses on earth. This magic could come only to a *Sidhe*, a Faerie creature! I knew not they could take the form of a Dragon, but little of the *Sidhe* is known among my people."

"Fey? You name me Fey? How could that have happened? How could Nafésti have mated with one not of our race and not known?"

"How else would a High Priestess conceive a child she knew not the parentage of? From what you have told me, Nafésti would have taken none but an Élandra Male to her bed during her mating season. Her mate must have been *Sidhe*, for who else could have assumed the shape of an Élandra Male so perfectly that even Nafésti would not recognize him within her bed? But you need not take my word, M'Lady. Come with me. We will find others of your kind, and unravel this mystery."

"Come with you where? How shall I live? Where can I go that I will be welcomed? One look at me will frighten all who see me. I do not know by what fortune fate has dropped my secret into your hands, but know this. Others will not see in me your *Sidhe* maiden. Humans will see an Élandra Priestess. All shall fear me. I would rather die at my own hand than stoned in the streets at the hands of some frightened mob!"

She was right, and he knew it. A Dark Elf could not wander abroad in daylight without suffering the fate she called up, or worse. Much worse. He would not see her tortured and killed for the color of her skin. "Can you not shift as your father must have, to assume the disguise of one of my race, perhaps?"

"Yes." She did, in fact, shifting easily to the form of a broad shouldered, heavily muscled female with skin the color of his own and long curling black locks reaching down to her waist. "But for how long? I have known magic all my life. The magic to make a spider web appear, or to float an object within my reach. I can send a fireball large enough to wipe out a small party of men. But this is magic I know. I know not how long such an illusion as you speak of might last. I was not Bear when I awoke by your side. A year from now, I might try to pass myself off as one of your people. But I am not yet skilled enough to maintain the disguise for hours or even days." The illusion shattered, and she was Anika once again, small, and fragile, and bereft of her world.

Calib searched his memories frantically for some alternative, some possible...

One answer came to mind, but he shoved it down. Still, the idea would be voiced. Calibeth licked his lips, trying to find his voice. "Could you -- can you shift to a Spider Queen?"

Anika stared at him, her dark features paling as she understood what he asked of her. Slowly she took the form he feared most. "But 'tis tricks," the spider hissed. "All tricks. Magics. I knows nots how I knows thiss, but I knows 'tiss sso. Only Dragon iss more than skins deeps."

Calib steeled his nerves against the horror before him -- a Spider Queen with the face of a woman, large and strong enough to rend him limb from limb.

She was Anika. She was still Anika. His heart thudded in his chest as it did when he armed himself for the arena.

*Trust me...* how many times had he asked that of her? Could he give her no less?

He kept his voice low, willing himself to stay calm. "Anika, do you see what this means? It matters not how you shift to this form. It matters only that you can. Once the High Priestesses have seen you like this, they will not question your bloodlines. No one need ever know of the Dragon. Élahandara can be yours."

The eyes in the evil face grew bright, glittering shrewdly at him. "Someones woulds knows... You woulds knows..."

\* \* \*

"Mommy! Look! Naked people have crushed all the strawberries!"

"Evanya, come back here, child. How many times have I told you not to go running off like that? What are you thinking? You could get hurt. You could..."

Braunna stirred herself enough to raise her head toward the mother's voice, still too disheveled to organize her thoughts past shielding her eyes from the bright light of the sun.

Sun.

They were above ground.

There were *people* here.



She ran her hand through Cullaelon's hair, waking him gently as she lifted her breast away from his lips. *Naked* people... the wonder in the child's voice told her this was not their way, whoever they were. She sat up enough to grab for their tunics. She understood their language, though the accent was strange. Cullaelon only rolled against her as she moved, pawing sleepily at her. She slipped from beneath his arm as she pulled the tunic over her head, draping his about his slumbering form as she rose to face the strangers.

The mother stood with her hand about the little girl's shoulders, pulling the cub tightly against her legs. Those legs were encased in massive quantities of colorful fabric that billowed about in the breeze. Braunnan shielded her eyes against the sun with her hand as she studied the pair.

She held her head up, her shoulders spread wide as the sun shone down on her back. "Hello," she offered, making no move to close the distance between them lest she frighten the mother and cub. "I am Braunnan, Mistress of the Fifth House of the Clan Bear."

The woman stared at her, her hand grown still where she caressed the cub. "There is no Bear Clan."

"There is," Braunnan insisted gently, peering around her fingers as the sun drew water from her unaccustomed eyes. "My people have worked the mines of Élahandara all our lives. Below we are taught that all above was left a barren waste after the wars, unfit to sustain life. My mate and I have come to see for ourselves whether this be true."

"You have lived all your lives below ground?"

"Aye."

The woman's cautious welcome turned to alarm. "The Dark Elves will come looking for you, once they know you have escaped."

"No one will come looking for us. No one will know we have left," Braunnan assured her. "Within our society, we are autonomous. The Dark Elves will know they receive their ore. That is all they need know."

"Why have you come?" the woman demanded.

"We wished but to learn the truth. My people tire, and their spirit is broken. They no longer believe in a world above, or a sun they have never seen. I come to learn the truth of the above. If I cannot bring my people to above, I will find a way to bring the sun to my people. I will offer them a choice."

The woman held out her hand. "Well, Braunnnan, Mistress of the Fifth House of Clan Bear, while you are here, you will need a place to stay. Come with me. I am Giselle."

Braunnnan took the offered hand, holding it gently in her own. "I am grateful for your welcome, Mistress Giselle. Your hospitality overwhelms me."

Giselle snorted. "Judge not till you've seen the place. I inherited the tavern from my mother. She named it the Golden Eagle Gentleman's Club, but in her day 'twas a whorehouse of some renown. These days I rent out the rooms above by the month, not the hour. The entertainment can get a bit rowdy when the ships dock, but all in all I run a respectable place. Still I think you will find it a far cry from what you're used to."

Blinking sleepily, Cullaelon pawed crushed strawberries from his hair as he rolled to a seated position, popping them into his mouth with an appreciative smack of his lips. "What's a whorehouse?"

Giselle blushed a bright red. "I can see I have my work cut out for me. Ma would have loved the two of you, bless her heart. Always taking in strays she was. Come along now. Pull on your shirt and give me a hand here. I dare say there's a good many things you'll have to learn all about. Let's make the first one breakfast. How does flapjacks smothered in strawberries sound?"

Braunnnan and Cullaelon exchanged worried glances. "You smother Jack with straw-berries? Why? And what are berries?"

Giselle shook her head, laughing as she pointed at the red juice running down Cullaelon's arm. "Those are strawberries. Flapjacks are pancakes. Sweet flat cakes made on a griddle. The strawberries need to be picked. It's a bit of work. Come. Watch Evanya. Do as she does. You'll sort things out in no time. As soon as you --"

The smaller woman's mouth dropped open as Cullaelon pulled on his tunic and jumped gracefully to his feet. He swept Braunnnan into his arms, nuzzling her hair. "Straw-berries. You smell like straw-berries, my mate. I am hungry. Jack had best watch his back."

"My goodness!" Giselle gasped. "You really are Clan Bear, aren't you. You're taller even than I am!"

"Taller?" Braunnnan looked down at the woman, confusion written on her face. "Among my people, you would be thought small."

Giselle laughed at that. "In all my years, no one has ever called me small before. My mother was a Human named Maribeth. I never knew my father, but Mother said he was a giant. They called him Rat. She said once when he was ill my father told some fantastic story about escaping from Élahandara through the sewers. Said he always meant to return, to try to find his parents, but that was years ago. She put it down to the ravings of a man down with the fever."

Braunnnan looked up from the strawberries to glance sideways at Giselle's cheerful face. "Others have come up from within the earth before us?"

"Mostly I don't ask questions," Giselle explained as she picked. "But there are others of our size about the wharfs. Not many, but we are easy to spot among the Humans. Eventually they gravitate to Maribeth's. All are welcome at the Gentleman's Club. Most never talk about where they come from, but many take rooms, and they stay."

Cullaelon reached over to touch Braunnnan's arm, a question she well understood on his face. Braunnnan nodded. "We had meant to go back right away, but we think now to stay, at least long enough to learn something of your people and your ways. 'Tis one thing to repopulate a wasteland. 'Tis another entirely to learn to live in an existing society."

"Complicated thoughts, and complicated choices," Giselle agreed. "My day is not so complicated. The sun is near up. The dockworkers who room with me will be

wanting their breakfast. Come on now, Evanya. Quit eating the strawberries and put them in the bucket."

Cullaelon looked up from his work again, his face flushed as the juice dripped from his chin. "I beg your pardon, Mistress Giselle. I understood the picking part well enough, but not the bucket."

Giselle looked over at Cullaelon kneeling in the strawberries and sat down abruptly, laughing so hard tears came from her eyes. "Oh, my. Oh, just look at you. We shall have to dye your tunic in strawberry juice. We'll never get the stains out. You do look so like a bear, right out of his den in the springtime. Only once before have I shared this patch of a morning. Two springs ago I came one morning to find a bear feasting here, both paws full of strawberries. It's a sight I'll not soon forget! One look at him told me I had best fix something else for breakfast. You remind me so of that bear."

Cullaelon cocked his head to one side, studying her seriously. "As well I should, M'Lady Giselle. 'Twas I you saw. I felt as if someone watched me, but I never saw you that morning."

"You have been here before? You can come and go from Élahandara as you please?"

"I came once before. But when I went back, the others would not believe what I had seen here above. They called me a madman. Only Braunnan. Only she believed me."

Giselle nodded her head in understanding. "One who believes is enough. People spend all their lives searching for one other who will share their dreams. When you find that one, you must keep her close to your side."

Was there a hint of sadness in her voice?

"Aye," Cullaelon agreed. "I mean to do so." His hand cupped Braunnan's face in a gesture that felt as intimate as sex. Braunnan smiled as she felt again that familiar possessiveness as his touch branded her. She still found it amazing that this man thought her worthy of such jealousy. She did not bother to tell him that he had no

competition to fear, either above or below. There was time for that later, when she held him wrapped in her arms.

"Below, the Bards sing songs of the long ago. Their legends tell us that once, when we lived in the above, a man kept one mate by his side for all of his years. The Bards sing of a ritual that the priests performed, recognizing these pair-bondings between our people. Does this custom still exist here above?"

Giselle's face clouded again, and then brightened. "Pair-bonding? Do you speak of a wedding? Marriage?"

"I know not these terms. But if we are to live here with other males about, I wish it known to all that Braunnnan is my mate. I will not share her."

"A wedding, or marriage ceremony, is an ancient tradition in which two people formally declare that they are mated for life. But if you wish to marry Braunnnan, there are other customs you must first consider. A man does not simply scoop up his bride, his mate-to-be, and take her before the Priest. He must ask the woman if she will agree to this bonding."

Agree? She had already given him her heart and her soul. Still, she understood. The Élandra had feared him, stripped him and locked him away, robbed him of all that he was, including his sanity. A man who had nothing might need to hear the words spoken aloud. This formal declaration would please him.

Braunnnan felt her skin flush, but it was not with the heat of the sun. She turned her eyes to the side, watching Cullaelon's reaction to Giselle's words. His hands grew still. He reached out, and she placed her hands in his, kneeling to face him. Never had she seen him look more vulnerable, not even when he'd been her madman, without so much as a name.

Another man might have looked the fool, kneeling there with leaves and berries mottling his hair, with red stains on his shirt, and sweet, sticky juice on his lips. To her, Cullaelon looked perfect. Her eyes teared up even before he spoke, his voice so low she had to strain to hear. "Braunnnan, I would --"

"Yes."

He grinned at her, relief washing over his face. "You must let me ask the question, my love."

"Then ask it, so that I may say yes once more."

"Braunnan, I love you. I would make our mating formal, according to the old ways. Will you take part in the ancient ceremony with me? If we can find a Priest who will perform this ritual while we are here, above, will you --" He glanced up at Giselle. "Wedding?"

"Marry!" Giselle prompted in a loud whisper. "Will you marry me!"

"Braunnan, will you marry me?"

"I will declare with you anywhere, any time, in any language or custom or ritual, Cullaelon. You are my mate. I love you."

To both of their surprise, Giselle promptly burst into tears.

"I did it wrong?" Cullaelon asked, clearly mortified.

"No. No. You did it right. Perhaps as well as it has ever been done. No one could have asked more beautifully, or accepted more graciously."

"Then why are you crying?"

Giselle shook her head, her black curls fanning out around her face with the movement. "Because I'm so happy for you. I always cry at weddings."

## Chapter Seven

"Trust me, M'Lady. I would never hurt you. You know that, Anika."

The huge eight-legged creature moved, raising a foot, as if to reach for him, then lowered it again. The woman's face, so like his Anika's yet so different, studied him speculatively. "Yesss. We trusts you. We just trusts you more when you cans nots gets away." The leg lifted again and webbing shot out from her foot, strapping him neatly to the bed.

"Anika --"

The legs shifted, and the spider moved closer. "We trusts you mosts when you is quiet, asleepss, waiting for uss."

Calib eyed her nervously. "I have sworn to protect you, M'Lady, in whatever form you take. If by my death I can serve you best, then I would give my life to protect you, though I should, of course, prefer not to be your dinner."

The face before him shifted, losing its hard edge, and the body once again held the generous curves that had captured his imagination. "Did I scare you? I did, didn't I?"

"No," Calib lied.

He wanted to laugh, she looked so disappointed. "Not even a little?"

He did laugh at that. "M'Lady, I have never been so terrified in all my life. I have never seen a real Spider Queen, and I hope never to, but I cannot conceive of one any more frightening than you."

"Good." She plopped beside him on the bed, giggling as she reached for him. "The she-bear was meant to be my parting gift to you, repayment in kind for the gift you have given me. A fond remembrance of the time we spent together. I knew not that I could do more with my powers."

He did his best to hide the stronger, deeper fears from her. He tried to keep his tone light. "And now that you know?"

Anika sighed. "To live the lie, to take what I care not for, to consume my world and its power, or to wander your world in disguise in search of a people of myths and legends and children's stories? These are my choices?"

Calib swallowed the bile that rose in his throat. "There is another way. I cannot say you will like it much, but there is a way you can travel anywhere with me in safety, without having to trust your fate to a disguise that may or may not last."

"How?" Anika demanded skeptically.

"As my slave. No one ever looks twice at a slave. I should know."

He wasn't sure what he expected -- anger, argument, fierce denial -- certainly not the reaction he got. Anika stared at him for a long moment before she threw back her head and laughed. "Your slave? You would lead me about on a leash as your slave? I have come full circle. From the heir apparent to the throne of Élahandara to the slave of a slave. How the mighty have fallen!" She knelt before him on the bed, bowing until her forehead rested on her knees, her arms outstretched before her in a position of supplication. "How may I serve you, my master?"

"I can think of a few ways," he promised as he raised her head to kiss her. "I think you'll enjoy all of them."

Violet eyes searched his, the laughter fading. "I am afraid, Calibeth. The fear is not a new thing. I have lived a lie all my life. When I was a child, the others mocked me for the lightness of my skin. I learned to disguise myself with the help of the sun. When others shifted, and I could not, I learned to cast the illusion of webs, that they might not know of my inadequacy. I have played my part, and I have played it well. To be discovered was to die. I have learned to live with the fear. At least I knew my enemy. Now you would have me leave all I know behind."

Calib pulled her into his arms. "Forgive me, M'Lady. I should not have asked so much of you. I am selfish. If you would stay, then I shall stay by your side. As an Élandra Priestess, you have the right to any lover you please. If you tire of me, you have



only to send me back to the mines. I have spent my life looking for you. I would not be parted from you now."

"Spent... what do you mean?"

"I have been with other women before, M'Lady. But always there was something more I wanted. I wandered the world in search of my perfect lover, my mate. I could not find what I needed in the mines, nor in the cities of the tundra, nor the desert. I found my mate only in the dreaming. In the darkness she came to me, and I felt her fear. When I called to her, I said the same thing, always. *Trust* me. But always as I opened my arms to her, the dreaming would fade, and she would be lost."

Anika looked up at him, tears glistening in her eyes. "Say it again."

"Trust me, M'Lady."

Her eyes slid closed, and he kissed the tears from her cheeks. "I tried. I tried to come to you in the dreaming, but I was afraid. I have never known anyone like you. You would have given your life to save your men. The Élandra know nothing of self-sacrifice. They would find the idea an abomination to our gods. All serve the High Priestesses. No male among my people would ever offer his life for me. I am still afraid, but I would rather be afraid by your side than alone within these cold stone walls. I follow you, Calibeth. Wherever you go I will go with you."

The raw power of it shook him. She would give up all that she had ever known, had ever dreamed to become, for him? "I love you," he whispered.

She was silent too long. He was a fool. He'd moved too quickly, frightened her again. He -- "You cannot love me. You barely know me. I am but the Mistress of the Web. To capture a man's body is not to own his heart."

Calib remembered to breathe again. "I love you, Anika." He kissed the tip of her ear. "I fell in love with you long ago, when I first found you in the dreaming. I did not flee the mines of Élahandara for any quest of honor or ideals. My quest was but to find you. Everywhere I searched took me farther from you. The fates have led me back to your arms."

The skin under his hands glowed with a warmth unlike anything he'd ever felt before. The air around her shimmered with a force so strong he could feel the current raising the hair on his arms. She was going to shift. He could feel it. This time she did not look frightened. Her hair turned pale as a ray of crisp, clear sunlight. The color faded from her skin until she shone as pale and vibrant as the Dragon's skin. Power radiated from her, power so intense he wondered if it would consume him and the room around them. When he dared to look again, deep violet eyes smiled down at him from a face so beautiful he could hardly catch his breath.

"Anika," he managed. "Whoever you are, whatever form you take, it matters not. I love you. But I fear this one will cause me infinite trouble."

She pulled back a little. "Why? You do not like this form?"

"My darling, truly I have never seen a more beautiful woman. Or whatever you are. But if you are seen in public thus I shall spend my days fighting off your suitors to defend my claim to be your mate. 'Twill be worse than the arena. The bodies of those I have slaughtered shall be strewn everywhere."

Anika giggled at that. "I love you, Calib. I can assure you, no one but you shall ever see me in this form. I think --" she cloaked her eyes in pale lids that could not extinguish their glow, "-- I think this, too, is my true form, as much as the Dragon. This form feels -- right. But somehow it feels as if it must be kept secret. I believe I have another name, but it too is secret. I think only someone I love could ever see me in this form. Perhaps -- perhaps Anika herself is the illusion."

"You are a wonder to me," he laughed as he took her ear between his lips once more. "One thing is certain. I shall never grow bored with you. But whoever you are, whatever you look like, I shall always desire you, and you alone."

Her body trembled beneath his touch. "Calibeth?"

"Yes, my love?"

"I fear this body is even more sensitive to your touch. I -- Calib!" she screamed as he flicked his tongue over the whorls that led to the slim, elegant point.

"I love you," he breathed over the dampness his tongue had left behind.

"Calib!" she screamed again, her body arching hard against him.

He skimmed his fingers over her, down the long, sleek curve of her side, over the smooth, round surface of her hip, and down, tracing her thigh as far as he could reach before his fingers came up along the soft inside where the fine invisible hair felt like velvet under his touch. She moaned as she threw herself open to him, her hands reaching now, capturing his cock in fists that demanded, pulling and stroking even as he slipped his fingers inside her clenched sheath, easing his way between the fierce contractions.

"I love you," he whispered again. "I love you, Anika." His breath over her ear, his fingers buried deep within her sheath, her hands urging him on, this, this was what he'd searched for. This was perfection.

"I want to feel you inside me. Now!" she ordered as a second, even stronger orgasm tore through her.

"Anything for you, M'Lady," he promised, his breath already tight in his chest. She was so hot. So wet. So slick with need. He pushed into her slowly, so slowly, savoring every movement, every ripple of her straining muscles, as if treating himself to a delicious dessert that he knew would not last.

Anika moaned against his hair as he licked and sucked her ear, her hands clawing at his ass. "Fuck me!" she demanded. "Now! I want you now!"

"But will you want me tomorrow?" he teased.

"Not if I kill you tonight," she reasoned. "And if you don't fuck me --"

Conscious thought became impossible as he gave her everything she had asked, the roar of the blood in his ears demanding more, more. His balls pulled up hard against the underside of his shaft, so tight he felt as if he might split. He thrust into her hard, harder with each stroke, long and hard varied with short and fast, her leg over his hip pulling him closer, his hands on her hips pushing her up and down his rigid length. Hard, harder. More. Always more. The sound of her breathing came harsh against his skin as she bit his shoulder, desire radiating from her in waves that were only as strong as his own.

"Anika, I cannot --"

"Calib, I --"

"Come for me, M'Lady. Now, Anika! Now!" He broke within her, his last hold on sanity stripped away, as he succumbed to pleasure too intense to be contained. He felt her shriek of joy echo through the stone walls of the chamber.

For a long time they lay tangled in each other's arms, too sated to move, too exhausted, both in mind and in body, to care. At last Calib moved slightly, mindful that his weight was too much for the delicate creature beneath him. She laid a hand on his arm, a feeble attempt to still him, but the effort only convinced him the more of movement's necessity.

"Calibeth?"

"There is nothing left, M'Lady."

Anika snorted softly, the sound so out of character for the austere persona she had first played with him that he nearly summoned the energy to laugh. "Fool of a male. How could you think I would ask for more after that?"

"Think, M'Lady? You ask too much."

She did laugh at that, a soft whisper of sound as she rolled against him to lie tucked at his side. "Where were you going, Calib? Why were your men in my chambers?"

"We were on our way to the Dwarven Monastery. The Monks offer sanctuary to those in need. It is a place of refuge for those of any race. We thought to take shelter there until we were strong enough to travel on."

"What were you seeking sanctuary from? What had you escaped, Calib?"

"I -- we were slaves, M'Lady. I told you this."

"Yes. Slaves in the arena you said. This means nothing to me. But just now, just before, you spoke of the arena again. You spoke of slaughter."

"'Tis not a fit subject for M'Lady's bed. In any case, that part of my life is over. We need not speak of it again."

Anika sat up, tugging gently on his hand. "Come. There is something I would show you."

"You wish me to move?"

"'Twill be worth the effort, I promise."

Calibeth pulled himself to his feet, following blindly where she led. Steps sloped gently down from a hidden corner of her chamber, down into a small natural cavern where warm, moist air scented lightly with the smell of the forest greeted his nose. He pressed his lips to the back of her neck when she stopped beside the edge of a crystalline lake. "How can this be? Is this more of your magic?"

"No," she laughed. "'Tis no magic at all, save that of Mother Earth herself. Élahandara is riddled with hot springs. The scent comes from the roots of the trees, which seek entry through even the tiniest cracks in the stone, hunting moisture. Have a care. The wet stone can be slippery."

He well knew how slippery wet stone could be, but Calib said nothing as he followed her into the water. She led him to natural benches carved out of the cave floor by the combination of water and time, and they lounged there, bathed in the heat, hands clasped together, until sleep nearly took them.

"I have done things I am not proud of," Anika told the ancient ceiling. "I told myself I had no choice, that I must live as the Élandra live, or die. But that does not excuse all I have done. You might not think me so perfect could you see into my heart, Calib."

"What would I see, M'Lady?"

"Enraged that I could not become what I was not, I have taken all that was set before me, in greed and gluttony and anger, because I could. My males fear me. Pleasure slaves do not fear their Mistresses. I have vented my resentment at them for their inability to give me what I needed. In my fury I was cruel. It was my right to do as I did, and none would question my authority, but it was not necessary. My men think me cold, and heartless, and they no longer seek my bed except at my command. In truth I no longer wanted them there."

"Have you killed?"

She turned to face him then, large violet eyes bright in the darkness. "I have sent men to their deaths."

"I have done more than kill, M'Lady. I have laid waste to all around me until the stones ran red with the blood of those who were not even my enemies. Men have died at my blade for the amusement of those with more money than soul, that they might bet on the outcome. One man at a time, first, then two, then three the slaver Argolyn sent at me. When the battle lust was upon me so that I could not help but kill, I shifted for the first time, not in the arms of my lover, but in the arena, for the sport of the Humans and their Ladies."

Calib stared at the ceiling, willing the tears from his eyes. "I killed and more came and I killed those as well. The bets went higher and the men Argolyn sent at me got meaner. All the while I told myself I had no choice. No choice but to kill. Argolyn feared me by then. He took me out of the main arena and gave me a cage of my own. He sent in wolves and panthers and even brown bears captured on the tundra. When nothing could kill me he sent three of my best friends against me, three men from Clan Wolf. They came at me as a pack, two in front, one sent behind to rip my hamstring. As I held the last one's life in my jaws, he called my name, and I tossed him aside, to be carried out with the other broken, bleeding bodies.

"When the fires broke out, when the stables where the slaves were kept chained to the walls for their fear of us were already engulfed in flames, Thallin came back. I had come to my senses before I severed his jugular. In throwing him on top of the dead, I had unknowingly granted him his freedom, for Argolyn discarded the bodies of man and animal alike for the wild things of the tundra to feed on. Thallin gave up his freedom to rescue the man who had tried to take his very life. I swore to the gods that day that I would not waste the life they have given back to me. I swore to answer the call of the dreaming."

Soft hands slipped around him, gathering his tense body into her arms, holding him, caressing, giving comfort he'd not thought to need. Slowly her warmth penetrated

the chill that had consumed him as he told the story, until at last he could feel again. “*Trust me,*” she whispered against his ear. “These words I heard in the dreaming, and no other. *Trust me.* I do trust you, Calib. I trusted you to come for me. I trust you now. You’re a good man, with a true heart, and no evil that has been thrust upon you can change that. I trust you with my heart, Calib. The evil that is Élahandara had no need for my heart. That I give to you untouched and pure.”

She was pure. Too pure and clean and innocent to be polluted by his touch. But when he would have moved away, she pulled him closer, holding him while the despair leaked from his eyes, letting the tears wash the pain away, until nothing came between them but the warmth and the air and the water.

Still she held him, taking him inside her, so that they rocked together, making soft waves that lapped gently against the sides of the pool, lips brushing, fingers touching, hearts beating together in gentle rhythm, a long, slow fire that consumed their pasts and left them awash with the glow of their love.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow they would deal with the world outside. Tonight was theirs and theirs alone.

## Chapter Eight

"M'Lady?"

'Twas not the word, but the trepidation in his voice that brought Braunnnan to her feet, already reaching for the war hammer she'd purchased at a shop along the wharf. "What's wrong?"

He sat up, smiling at her in the darkness. "Nothing, M'Lady. Nothing you can fight with your hammer."

Slowly, almost reluctantly, Braunnnan set the weapon aside. "I grow too comfortable here. I could sleep through anything."

"Anything?" Cullaelon demanded, pulling her against him where he sat now on the edge of the bed.

Braunnnan pushed her knee gently between his thighs to run her skin over the hot flame of his shaft. "Almost anything." She leaned her breasts toward his mouth, shivering in anticipation as he licked the tip of one wanton nipple. "Did you wake me just to let your randy cock have its exercise?"

"No. Though that's not a bad idea at all, now that you bring it to mind." He pulled her down to kneel over his thighs, the tip of his cock just teasing her as he nuzzled between her breasts. "I had the dream again. But it was different this time."

Braunnnan shut her eyes tightly, blocking out the horror of the dream. "I'm so sorry. I hoped that now, here above, we would not be plagued so." She raked her fingers up through his hair, caressing his scalp, giving what comfort she could with her body.

"It was -- it was different. Not nearly so bad. Almost -- I was walking through the fields again, with you at my side, and our cubs between us. I saw the village before us, in ruins, and I started to scoop up the children, to take you and them and to run as



far and as fast as we could. But the woman stopped me. The woman who tried to warn us before. She called my name, and she told me to look again. I turned, though I knew I must take you to safety. But when I looked, I realized the destruction was long ago. All was in ruins, but it stood empty. The fields were grown thick with lush green grasses. The gardens and trees had gone wild. The houses were in total disrepair. The woman called to me again. She told me to look with my heart."

Cullaelon pulled her down to lay beside him on the huge four-poster bed, looping his leg over her thigh, touching her, stroking her skin almost unconsciously as he spoke. "I didn't know what she meant, but I tried. I tried to see it all put to rights. The harder I looked, the more work I saw to be done. But then I looked instead as I would look at a new mine to be dug. I saw people. Teams clearing the fields, shifts assigned to build roofs on stone bowers, seeds stockpiled in caves, bears hibernating through the long winter buried deep in the hillsides. I saw cubs eating strawberries in the springtime, rolling in play beneath the sun. Our cubs. They were fat with berries, as was their mother. She rolled in the long grass with me, and we made more cubs."

"So you think the dream meant that we should eat strawberries and make more cubs," Braunnnan teased as she pushed him back to settle herself astride his hips. She played her fingers over his skin, stroking his chest, drawing her hands down toward his waist, then up his sides, everywhere but where she knew she wanted them. His cock jumped to meet her, but she pleased herself with the feel of his skin, warm and sweet beneath her hands, and the beat of his heart as she laid her ear against his breastbone.

"I think," Cullaelon gasped, "that you should cease this torment and make love to me, M'Lady."

"Men think with their cocks," Braunnnan chided. "Can you not talk while I take my pleasure with you?"

"No, M'Lady. Such a thing is not possible. Only one head works at a time."

Braunnnan sat back, her arms folded over her chest. "Very well then. What does your dream mean and what are we to do besides make cubs?"

Cullaelon sighed as she resisted his efforts to pull her back down to his level. "The woman in the dreaming becomes stronger, clearer. I think she is real, a prisoner in Élahandara as I was before you found me. Her name is Tâkuri. There are others she has touched within the dreaming. Sometimes I can almost feel them. She said we will know them when they come."

She had tortured him long enough. Braunnnan laughed as she rose up over the cock that sought her heat, sliding slowly down over him until they fitted perfectly together. "If they come like you do, my love, we shall have no problems finding them. We have only to listen for the roar of the grizzly."

"I do not remember," he lied. "Perhaps you could remind me."

With a roar that was both laughter and need, Braunnnan dug her nails into his shoulders, rising up again only to drive herself down on the burning heat that stretched and filled her to her limits. She slid up over him, dragging her breasts against his chest, then slipped slowly back down, her back arched as she rose over his straining cock.

It was more than he could take, as she had known it would be. She reveled in his strength as he rolled with her, pulling her hips up off the bed as he knelt between her thighs. She fisted her hands in the bedcovers, biting the sheets as his cock slid easily into her already wet sheath. She pushed her ass higher, harder, helpless to do more, wanting, needing, but unable to touch.

His hand cupped her pussy, giving her the hard ridge of his thumb to ride as he stroked her, all the while lifting and pulling her closer as he slid his cock in so deep she could feel his balls tickle her flesh.

His other hand had begun its own exploration, sliding up the ridge of her ass until he found the tightly pucker of her anus. His fingers pressed and caressed until she relaxed enough to open to his familiar touch. She arched hard against him, crying out his name as she broke.

Again and yet once more she came, flooding his hand with her release, before his carefully timed movements gave way to a frenzied need that sent them tumbling over the edge together.

As Cullaelon's cry split the night, Braunnnan laughed into the bedcovers, listening to the echo that came back to them, one voice, then many voices, filling the night air with song. "I think they are already here," she laughed as he collapsed at her side.

"There will be more," Cullaelon promised.

As she curled against his side, Braunnnan felt the first stirrings of life within her. She smiled as she brushed warm thoughts over the cubs. "Our cubs will be born in the sunlight," she promised. "They will play in your fields and eat your strawberries, and their cubs shall be born to a title that is as rich as the lands. We will find your Tâkuri, and she shall have a place of honor in our house, or a house of her own, if that is her wish. But let us wait till the morning to gather the crews that will start the rebuilding. Tonight I would sleep in your arms, the cares of the world far away."

"I love you, my wife," Cullaelon assured her as he kissed her ear.

"I love you, as well, my husband." But he did not hear. He was already asleep.

\* \* \*

Braunnnan struggled to untangle herself from the sheets, giving Cullaelon's sleeping form a none too gentle shove toward the far side of the bed as the knock on their door sounded again. "Have patience. I'm coming."

"'Tis Evanya. Momma sent me."

"Is all well?"

"There are men here looking for you."

Braunnnan paused in her attempt to find something more than her skin to wear as she answered the door. "Men? What sort of men?"

"Big men."

"Cullaelon!" Braunnnan hissed near his ear. She would marvel later at how the sleeping bear who would not be wakened jumped to full alert with but a small change in her tone of voice. He rolled to his feet, half crouched, his weapons finding his hands before he was even fully awake. "Giselle has sent the Childling to fetch us. Evanya says there are men looking for us. Big men."

Cullaelon nodded once as he pulled on his clothes. He was fully dressed and armed, ready at the door, while she still hunted for the rest of her garments. "Tell your mother we will be but a moment," Braunнан called to the door.

"We would be faster did you not worry with this foolish clothing," Cullaelon pointed out.

Braunнан hissed as she pulled her skirts from under the edge of the bed. "We would be faster had you but waited for me to undress myself and hang the garments in the wardrobe last night."

"I don't recall you complaining at the time."

She turned to kiss his smirking mouth. "Nor I you. But as long as I've to conform with this culture's way of dress, perhaps we should take these things into consideration when we're undressing."

Cullaelon wisely said nothing as he handed her the odd looking sandals the women here wrapped about their feet.

Big men indeed.

Four of them.

Braunнан barely had time to register their faces before they dropped to one knee before her, swords and axes and hammers held out to her in a gesture she recognized instinctively.

"We are Warriors, M'Lady, come to answer your call."

Her call? Her mating cry from the night? One look at the man beside her told Braunнан this was not the time to break into hysterical laughter. "I am sorry. I already have a mate. Please. Get up. Our kind attract enough attention among these Humans without pointing ourselves out. Stand up!"

As a man they jumped to their feet. Cullaelon moved to plaster himself against her side. "I am Cullaelon, and this is my wife, Braunнан, Mistress of the Fifth House, Clan Bear. What do you want with us?"

One stepped forward slightly, offering his hand to Cullaelon in friendship. "I am the Bard known as Donovan. Prophecy has come to me in a dream. At the water's edge we are to meet the great she-bear, the Warrior Queen who will lead us to destroy the Élandra and free our brothers."

"This is not the water's edge," Braunnnan pointed out. "This is but a tavern and rooming house where those too poor in the cash of this realm take sanctuary. I am no Warrior Queen, and I did not call you. What you heard was my mating cry. As you can see, I already have a mate."

Cullaelon touched her arm, an amused smile tugging at one corner of his stern mouth.

"Goddess protect me!" Braunnnan all but screamed. The first four were not alone. More were coming. They came singly and in pairs, from the broken and haggard to Warriors in full mail, one by one they found her, offering their swords and their pikes, their hopes and their dreams.

With this many men, they could begin to fulfill Cullaelon's dream. Braunnnan took a deep breath, holding fast to Cullaelon's arm to steady herself. "Donovan. I would hear your Prophecy, Bard."

The room went quiet as his deep, clear voice filled the air.

*The Bear awakes in the spring.  
As the goddess she comes  
To rend the Earth.  
Hungry and powerful,  
Angry and desolate.  
Like the lone avenger she comes.*

*Come to me, my people,  
At the water's edge.  
Come to me, my Warriors.  
Let the blood flow.  
Come to me, my children.  
Let us cleanse the Earth.  
Let us sing the Song of the Bear.*

*She cries for her children,  
Ripped from her arms.  
She cries for her mate,  
But he is no more.  
She cries out for blood,  
In a voice that will not be still.*

*Come to me, my people,  
At the water's edge.  
Come to me, my Warriors.  
Let the blood flow.  
Come to me, my children.  
Let us cleanse the Earth.  
Let us sing the Song of the Bear.*

*Let us rend that which destroys.  
Let us maim that which defiles.  
Let us free all who are enslaved.  
Let us sing the song of sorrow in victory.  
Let us lament  
That which we must not forget.*

*Come to me, my people,  
At the water's edge.  
Come to me, my Warriors.  
Let the blood flow.  
Come to me, my children.  
Let us cleanse the Earth.  
Let us sing the Song of the Bear.*

Goddess save me. The bard had sung this song the length of the wharf? One look at the men crowded around her told Braunnan no amount of logic would convince them she was not the object of Prophecy.

In truth, she herself could use such a leader.

"Listen to me, men," Braunnan announced in the quiet that followed the song. "I am but Braunnan, Mistress of the Fifth House. I am not the Warrior Queen you seek. Yet I have a part in this Prophecy. I am come to prepare you for what is not yet. We must come together as a people. If you will follow me until the great Warrior Queen comes to us, we will begin to rebuild what is lost. We will need money and tools and

weapons and supplies. All these things can be had here for the price of a day's labor. We will work as we have all our lives, together, in shifts, and we will share what we have, as we have always done. We will prepare. When the time is right, we will take back what is ours. Who is with me?"

A great cheer shook the ancient building. With the skill for which she had always been known, Braunnnan moved among them, helping the men to sort themselves into groups by their skills, instinctively finding the leaders and dividing the men into crews.

"Momma? What is Braunnnan doing?"

Giselle laughed softly as she fingered the child's unruly curls. "She's doing what no man has ever been able to do on these wharfs. Mistress Braunnnan is organizing a labor union. Within the week, Clan Bear will own every dockworker's job on the wharf. Even those who have never heard the Bard's song will follow her."

"Is she the she-bear the men sing about?"

"No, Evanya, my love. Mistress Braunnnan is something much more important. An army must have a general to believe in, someone the men will follow to their death if need be. The general must have someone she relies on. Braunnnan is the one who will make sure they have boots to march in and swords to wield. When the war is over, Braunnnan will be the one who sets the men to building houses and stacking wood for the winter. Braunnnan will build a new world."

"Will there be a place for us in the new world, Mother?"

Giselle smiled down into dark eyes that saw too much. "We will do as we have always done, Daughter. We provide beds for the weary and food and ale for the hungry and a Bard with a song to lighten their hearts."

\* \* \*

"Momma, Momma, look!" a boy screamed, pointing an accusing finger as he hid behind his mother's abundant skirts.

"This is not going to work," Anika hissed as she pressed against Calibeth's side.

Calib tugged on the chain attached to her torc, the glittering threads of his vestments catching the light as he spun her about to face the boy. "You look, boy," he ordered as he displayed the nearly naked slave before the growing crowd. "Gather around me, people, and behold! Behold one of the most dangerous females on earth, forced now to serve as my slave. Beware! Clan of the Bear yet lives! Our vengeance on those who have betrayed us shall be returned tenfold!"

A cheer rolled through the crowd that had gathered along the wharf, restrained at first, then growing in volume. Some among the crowd waved weapons or shook fists in the direction of the despised Priestess. A filthy beggar's child picked up a handful of pebbles from the beach and flung them at her. She turned, playing well the helpless female, hiding her eyes and cowering back against Calib, as if seeking protection in his arms.

Playacting be damned. He would not see her hurt. Anger welled up within Calib such as he had never known before. The man disappeared as the bear took form, forty stone of giant enraged grizzly roaring his defiance, clawing the sky and baring his teeth as the tiny woman huddled against his fur. The mob backed away, weapons disappearing and all thought of confrontation fleeing with their temporary courage. Satisfied, Calib shifted back again, needing the man's voice to deliver the rest of his warning. "Know this! Should any harm befall my property, I shall exact the law of retribution as is my right! I name her price at forty thousand gold pieces. After all, where will I find another such exotic beauty to warm my bed?"

"Why don't you just tell them I will dance for them at the local tavern?" Anika hissed in outrage.

Calib ran his hand over her ass in a public display as he smiled down at her, kissing her soundly despite her objections. Laughter folded through the crowd, easing the tensions among the spectators. "Not a bad idea."

"Calib, I swear to you --"

"I have, however, a treat to offer you gentlemen," Calib announced before the crowd's interest could dissipate. His eyes scanned the waterfront briefly. "It is my



pleasure to offer a viewing of this rare and exotic creature tonight at the Golden Eagle Gentleman's Club. Come see this dark beauty dance the dance of the nine veils for your erotic entertainment. The price for the night's entertainment is but ten silver pieces. But bring extra coin, my friends! You will want a woman after the show!"

"You planned this all along," Anika hissed. She kicked him hard in the shin. "I suppose you think it amusing to display me as some trophy before these fools. Whatever you have planned, you can do it yourself. I shall not dance like some trained circus bear for the unwashed masses. I am not your slave, Human, no matter what role I may play! I will not so debase myself!"

Calib hugged her tightly to his side, despite the anger that stiffened her body to near brittle tenseness. The crowd parted before them, giving wide room to one who so obviously needed to be humored. He pitched his voice low, so that only she could hear. "I planned nothing, my lovely one, but to gain safe passage through a crowd that would have killed us given the opportunity. You are too precious to me to see harm befall one hair of your head." He leaned down to run his lips along the edge of her ear, trailing up until he captured the sensitive tip, feeling her melt against him despite her anger. "The dancing was your idea."

"'Twas a joke!" she spat. "You knew 'twas a joke. One that made its way to your lips all too easily!"

"I know something of slaves, M'Lady, and the uses they are put to, remember. The Dwarf Argolyn could, I assure you, produce piles of silver pieces from a crowd of beggars. A man will not stone what he wishes to fuck. These men and more will swarm the tavern tonight, eager to hand over their money."

He ran the tip of his tongue along the edge of her ear, persuading her body as he seduced her mind to his plan. "But if the idea of dancing offends you, we will locate my men. They may have secured employment by now, and perhaps have space we can share among the dockworkers' barracks."

Anika shuddered delicately at the thought of the hovels they could see squatting along the warehouses at the water's edge. "You should have been a Priestess," she

sighed in defeat. "You twist my own words back on me until I cannot tell which ideas are even my own. Very well. I shall dance. I shall make the men want me, that they may burn with a lust no woman can quench. But know you the price I exact from you will be written in your own blood should you forget this slave's collar, too, is but an illusion."

Calib laughed as he tossed her into the air, catching her against his chest as she returned to his arms. "I would expect nothing less, M'Lady. After all, one must take care not to get burned when dealing with a Dragon!"

## Chapter Nine

"Calibeth! Behind you!" Anika warned.

Calib spun, all laughter gone from his heart as he turned to face this new danger, shoving Anika behind the protection of his body.

"We have heard your call and come to answer your challenge," the towering male announced, his hand on the axe in his belt.

"Who are you and what do you want with us?"

The female at the man's side looked vaguely annoyed. "The whole wharf must have heard you roar." She placed a hand over the male's where it gripped the axe. "This is my mate, Cullaelon. I am Braunнан, Mistress of the Fifth House of Clan Bear. We feared one of our own was in trouble."

"Calib!" Donovan's voice interrupted. "You are well. We feared not to see you again on this earth. Braunнан, we heard the call and came running. This is Calibeth, the friend I spoke of to you. You will not find a stronger sword arm anywhere. Calib, meet Braunнан. Mistress of the Fifth House, Clan Bear. She is the one."

Calib eyed the woman before him. Tall and broad of shoulder, built to be the equal of any male she chose to battle -- or mate. Once he would have thought her the answer to his prayers. "I am Calibeth, last heir to the Third House, Mistress Braunнан. It is my honor to meet you." He offered Anika his hand, coaxing her forward from where she'd hidden behind him. A gasp ran through the Bear Clan gathered about. "Allow me to present the Lady Anika. Let not the collar fool you. In truth I am her slave."

Braunнан smiled as she extended her hand to Anika. "Welcome, sister. I have had overmuch of the company of men of late. They have decided I am some goddess of Prophecy, and will not listen to reason."

Anika shook her head. "Idiot males. Some things are the same, no matter what the race." She jerked her leash out of Calib's numbed hand. "I don't know about you, Braunnan, but I could use a drink."

Braunnan shrugged. "Sounds like a better plan than listening to them squabble."

The men watched, stunned, as the two enemy females walked companionably down the wharf together.

\* \* \*

"If she is truly *Sidhe*, then why does she appear as one of the Élandra?"

"Why do you appear as a man? We all have two forms."

"But I appear as a man when I am a man because I am a man," Donovan argued, taking an unnecessarily long draught on his beer. "Clan Bear is Clan Bear. We are what we are till we shift. Then we are bears."

Calib rolled his eyes. "She is what she is, which is a Half-Elf. The half that is Elf is Élandra. The other half is Fey. Only among the Elves would her half-blood matter. To us she is Fey. To them she is impure. No matter what the status of her bloodlines, she is no friend of the Élandra. There is an old saying passed down through the ages. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. The Élandra would kill her did they know what she is. Therefore she is our ally."

"How are we to believe this story? Perhaps she has bewitched you!"

"You are to believe it because I say!" Calib answered, slamming his now empty tankard down too forcefully on the table. "Would you have me ask her to prove herself? Do you wish to deal with an angry *Sidhe*? An angered Élandra would be bad enough. I should not like to see both halves angered at once! I'll not give her reason to set the room alight with her breath. That might attract a bit of the wrong sort of attention, don't you think?"

"Well 'twould be easier to believe than the word of a man besotted with a pair of dark tits and a lovely ass!"

"What would you know of her tits or her ass?" Calib demanded.

\* \* \*

"They must pay," Anika vowed as she slammed her glass down. "The males must pay for their arrogance."

Giselle giggled as she leaned down to fetch the mug. "Pay? I believe you're the one who will pay, with a nasty hangover come the morn. You're more than a bit tipsy."

"Naw. I'm a bit tipsy," Braunnan assured them. "She's drunk."

"I can drink you under the table any day," Anika responded.

"You're already under the table."

"Oh. Well, 'tis not my fault. 'Twas your idea to hide down here. Bastard male. He should not have offered to share me so readily with the crowd. Give a man your heart and he thinks he owns you. Thank you both for helping me escape that crowd."

"'Twas the easiest way for us to escape." Braunnan downed the rest of her ale in a single gulp. "I knew they would do you no harm with me by your side. They worship me."

Anika decided Braunnan's grimace of distaste probably had more to do with the thought of the men than the dregs of the ale. She leaned forward to plant a wet kiss on Braunnan's cheek. "Still, 'twas very brave of you to champion me, sister. Were we back in Élahandara I should take you as my lover, and to the nine hells with that fool of a man. Dance, indeed. I shall dance. I shall make him want me as he never has before, and see rivals in every man in sight -- and a few of the women as well."

"Cullaelon already sees rivals in every man about. He has a vision for our people, a powerful vision, and we could use this Prophecy to fulfill his dreams, but I feel I am pulled both ways. The more I try to do to work with the men, for the good of our clan, the more he fears their competition. And yet I cannot ignore them. They will not go away. Yet I feel him growing more distant with each passing day."

Braunnan sighed as she peered around the curtain at the crowd filling the tavern. "Look at them. They are already half drunk. Are you sure you wish to go through with this? We have been here long enough to have amassed a few silver pieces, and there is more in the Clan treasury. More than enough to pay our bar tab. Perhaps we should clear them out of here before they make further fools of themselves."

Anika shook her head. "We shall need more than your hard-earned pieces of silver. The Monks at the Monastery of St. Gregory have pointed us toward a ship, *The Maiden's Voyage*, that might grant us passage to Tir na nÓg, the home of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*. I must learn more of my father's people if I am to survive."

"*The Maiden's Voyage* set sail last week. She will not return for at least a fortnight."

Anika sighed. "Then I have no choice. I'll not be content to bunk with Donovan and his men in the shacks at the wharf, and Giselle's lovely tavern is quite full up. I have never danced for anyone. Always the males danced for me. But I believe I can manage well enough to satisfy these fools here tonight. I'll trust you to keep the crowd under control."

Braunnnan snorted. "Aye, that I can, though I doubt I'll have much to do. Most of these Humans have never seen a Dark Elf. They'll be too distracted to cause much trouble. May the gods take their souls if they do. Have you ever seen an enraged grizzly? Our men will tear them to shreds."

Anika felt herself blush, though the color of her skin would most likely hide the evidence of her train of thought. "I've seen the great bear in action. I'll try to keep my dance -- soothing."

Braunnnan snorted again. "Soothing... best of luck. What are you going to wear?"

"Wear?"

"To dance? You cannot dance in the rags of a slave. I doubt Calib has coin enough to hire a seamstress. Not that you could find one on such short notice."

Anika frowned down at the few scanty rags of clothing the slave had worn into the city. She thought briefly of the sheer silks the males wore for their dances. Silk. Yes. That would do. She closed her eyes briefly.

"By the gods! How did you do that?"

Anika shrugged as she ran her fingers over the fine silk robe that hung down to her knees, perfectly matching the silk pantaloons in a beautiful shade of scarlet. "Clothing is one of the illusions I'm best at. It's easier to practice without getting

caught." She reached out to touch Braunnan's worn linen shirt. The fabric shifted under her fingers until it became a fine brocade tunic in woven shades of rose on rose, perfectly accenting Braunnan's lightly tanned skin.

"'Tis beautiful!" Braunnan gasped. "I have never owned anything so fine. But it is an illusion, you say? How long will it last?"

Anika shrugged again. "I know not. I changed my own wardrobe too often to find out. I will change it back in the morning for you. Not the sort of thing one wants to wear to work on the docks, but a woman deserves to look her best while watching her men make fools of themselves."

"Aye," Braunnan agreed with a sigh. "That they will. I wish I could dissuade them of this notion that I am some returning goddess. The Bard should stick to singing the old songs."

"'Tis a good thing they have other redeeming qualities," Anika agreed. "Else we would surely kill them. I begin to understand the ways of my mother's people more and more. Once you've mated them into exhaustion, 'tis simpler to just kill them off."

"I wouldn't know." Braunnan's blush showed prettily on her cheeks. "I've yet to manage to wear Cullaelon out."

Anika laughed as she lifted her hand, catching a fine spun silver scarf that appeared out of the air and winding it about her waist. "I shall indeed make Calibeth pay for this night's entertainment. Why don't you join me? We will torture the men together."

"Me? Dance? Are you insane? No man would pay to see me dance! You, you're small, and delicate. Men like that. I'm as far from small and delicate as a woman could be. I'll enjoy seeing you work the crowd, but I'd rather stab myself in the eye than get out on that stage."

"Men would love to see you dance," Anika argued. "Perhaps I shall prove it to you before the night is over."

"You'll not drag me out on that stage, so don't even bother to try!" Braunnan warned, planting her feet firmly. Her hand fell to the war hammer in her waistband.

Anika only laughed, then laughed again.

Braunna frowned, reaching out a hand to steady her. "Perhaps you are too drunk to dance?"

"The magic will burn the impurities from my blood." Anika concentrated on Braunna's features, picturing her shoulders widening, her hair turning deep mahogany, her stance that of a Warrior. The silks needed some adjustment to fit her new form. She spun in a graceful pirouette, sending the silks swirling about her like a cloud. "Would you like to watch yourself work this crowd?"

Braunna gasped in disbelief and delight. "How did you -- never mind. Yes! Look at you! At me! You're me, but you're not me. There was never anything so graceful about me!"

Anika laughed as she spun about again. "Watch, and learn. I suspect there is much about yourself you have yet to discover."

"Eeep!" Braunna gasped. "How did you -- what -- no. I don't want to know. By the gods, I will enjoy this!"

"But stay out of sight, lest the men get too much of a good thing."

"Is it possible -- can you make me you?"

Anika frowned, delicately lining Braunna's face. "That would be a different sort of magic, but if I can change the appearance of the clothing then perhaps I could as easily rearrange your appearance. I think it cannot be too dangerous to try. My magic always wears off. Eventually."

"Try it!" Braunna giggled. "I may regret this tomorrow, but I have always wondered what it would be like to be small and delicate!"

Anika shook her head. "How our worlds do rearrange themselves. I have never thought myself either small or delicate, but then, our males do not find the ceilings so low as do your mighty grizzlies." She frowned in concentration, finding she did not know her body so well from the outside. She had to close her eyes and picture herself from the inside as she transformed Braunna to her own likeness.



The sound of bones cracking and tearing sent shivers down her spine. She opened her eyes to look quickly, but Braunnan seemed no worse for the use of her magic.

Except that she was now Anika.

Braunnan-Anika stared down at her body, running her hands over her delicate upturned breasts, her tight, flat stomach, her small, well sculpted hips, her ebony skin. She shook her head, letting the lengths of her ebony curls flow over her shoulders. "Eeep!"

Anika chuckled. "I may have improved on the original a bit. The ego tends to allow us to see what we wish to see, rather than what is truly there, but you'll pass for me admirably well, especially in this crowd." Another idea began to form in her mind. "Now will you dance?"

"Dance? Me? Even in this body I doubt I could manage to dance believably."

Anika laughed again. "Surely you must have some dances among your people."

"No. We don't -- well, there is the dance of the swords, but since we don't have swords, we practiced with mining picks. But that is not an erotic dance!"

"The dance of the swords? I do not -- wait! The dance of the scimitars? I know this dance. I know not how I know this dance, but I have some memory of it." She closed her eyes, pulling the memories to the surface. "Yes. I remember now. A uniquely talented Dark Male performed this dance for my mother's court many decades ago. Come. We will dance together." Anika waved her hand, and a chainmail belt graced her double's waist, an ornate gold-hilted scimitar poised delicately in a sheath on either hand. Another wave of her hand added a similar, though larger, belt to her own waist.

"I would feel better about this if we had had time to practice with something not of a razor's edge," Braunnan argued.

"I trust your skills with a weapon. Just trust yourself to me, and follow my lead in all things. And remember our purpose. To torture the males. Particularly our own."

"I pray to the seven that you know what you're doing!" Braunnnan murmured as the stage manager signaled to them. She nodded her head, telling them Anika was ready to begin.

No. Wait. She was Anika! She was no more ready than --

Anika-Braunnnan smiled, reaching down quickly to give the smaller, darker her a hug. She found the new gesture oddly comforting. "Let us remind these men why women rule our world."

"Aye," Braunnnan agreed, straightening her shoulders.

The room fell silent except for the low, steady beat of a single drum. The curtains fell open, gliding slowly to the sides of the stage. Out of the darkness, a single light shone down, forming a ring of shadows and light. Into the ring, two warriors moved, opponents at arms.

One light, one dark, the Warriors circled warily, their hands on their weapons. The crowd watched, all eyes riveted on the circle that shimmered and wavered with the beat of the drum. As if on cue, both women drew their scimitars. The clang of cold steel shattered the quiet of the night.

Swords crossed before them, the women moved toward one another, their blades meeting, locked in a parry. Four fine silk veils dropped from the ceiling, covering the tips of each blade. The drumbeat changed, and the warble of a flute joined the beat. The women twisted, turning beneath the blades, coming together breast to breast, then turning back again, their blades still locked, as the veils caught the breeze of their spinning turn. Blades parted and clashed again, women spun, legs kicked high to step over the falling veils. The music picked up the tempo. Faster, faster they twisted and turned, sweeping the veils up with the tips of their swords.

All four blades spiraled into the air, only to be snatched up again before any could hit the ground. The light-skinned Warrior took center stage now, twirling on one foot as the swords flashed about her, spinning until the scarves wrapped around her,

then twisting about to set them free. She scooped the smaller, darker one up in her arms, holding her like a lover, then letting her slide to the floor.

The men shifted restlessly in their seats as the darker hands wrapped around the taller Warrior from behind, skimming over her breasts as the veils settled about them. Slender hands settled on the thicker waist, outlining and defining what the silk robes hid from view. The pale Warrior spun, sending the veils flying again, to take her lover in her arms, bending her back for a kiss that left their watchers panting with need.

Without warning the tableau shifted, the dark one sent high into the air, her scimitars reappearing as magically as they had vanished, the golden light shimmering off their highly polished blades. A lute and a lyre had joined the music, though no man could have said when.

The dark one fell into the lighter one's arms, and now both sets of blades flashed as they twirled together. The silken scarves whirled about them, opposite to the direction the women turned. Blades and scarves and women turned faster and faster as the music built to a final crescendo, until all blended together, and no watcher could tell where one ended and the other began. The music hit a high, clear note, then stopped. The scarves settled to the floor together, revealing two lovers locked in each other's arms, the scimitars nowhere to be seen.

A hush spread over the crowd as they kissed, as if no one wanted to break the trance.

"They're not clapping," Braunnan whispered against her lover's ear.

"Take my hand, turn, and bow, as if we've done this a thousand times before. Trust me," Anika ordered with a too-bright smile. "You were brilliant."

"I was you! You were brilliant."

"We will argue about this as we count the money. Later. Much later." Anika bowed deeply, Braunnan's hand locked in hers. "Calibeth looks sufficiently tortured. Perhaps I shall make him beg before I allow him back in my bed."

Whatever Braunnan might have said got lost in the roar of the applause.

Anika turned back to bow again, her breasts nearly spilling out of the sheer silk wrap. As she leaned forward, she caught Calibeth's gaze. Her body's response to the look on his face, the hunger in his eyes, told her she would not make him beg very long.

\* \* \*

"Cullaelon!"

"Yes, Mistress?" He stopped, waiting there in the darkness, all hard angles against the soft shadows of the night. She had to run to catch up with him.

"Where are you going, Cullaelon? Do you mean to go back without me?"

"Go back? No." His voice sounded distant. Cold.

She stopped behind him, close enough to touch, raising her hand, then letting it fall back to her side. "You would leave me, then. Why? Have I shamed you with my dance?"

He turned to face her, looking darker and far more powerful there in the night. "Shamed me? How could you shame me? You were radiant. Magnificent. Power shimmered from you at every move. Any man who saw you dance tonight would lay down his life for you."

"Then why? Less than a fortnight ago we spoke vows. I remember them well. '*I take thee to my hand, my heart, and my spirit, to be my chosen one.*' I am pledged to you, Cullaelon. What part of this pledge sends me chasing after you of a night?"

He reached out to touch her face, his hand trembling as he wiped the tears from her cheek. "I but meant to grant you your freedom. You were meant for more, so much more. You have a higher destiny. I was a fool. I thought only of myself, and my jealousy, when I asked you to take these vows. I feared you would find one among those from above who would claim your loyalty. Instead there are scores. Our people need you, Braunnan. They do not need me. You do not need me."

"Need you? I wanted nothing but you, and the sunlight, and the above. I never wanted this. I wanted but to help our people. Not this. Everywhere I turn someone needs me. I am pulled in every direction, and I know not where to turn. I want to go *home*, Cullaelon, and I know not even where home *is*. Who will show me the way if you

leave me? Who will build the home you have seen for us? Whose vision will guide us if you are not by my side?"

"Calib knows the tunnels better than I ever could. The Bard's Prophecy will guide you. The people will be behind you. You have a great future here, Braunnnan. I do not wish to hold you back."

Braunnnan took his hand and pressed it to her lips. "The Prophecy will live on without me. The one they seek will come. Without you all of this means nothing to me. We made our vows before the gods, Cullaelon. No longer are we two separate people. *'I promise to love thee without restraint, in life and beyond.'* I meant those vows. You own my heart and my soul."

"I..."

She watched the indecision war on his face, as it had the first time she found him. She watched her dreams crumble to ashes as cold as the ruins that had once been Clan Bear. "Very well. If this is what you wish, I shall grant you your freedom." Braunnnan turned, feeling the sand cool beneath her feet as she walked down the beach.

"Braunnnan..."

The water was cool, still, though the season was well advanced. The waves splashed over her toes, then higher, each step drawing her closer to the swirling tides.

"Braunnnan? What are you doing? Braunnnan? Braunnnan! No!"

The waters pulled at her heavy brocade tunic. The darkness reached for her, its arms a welcoming embrace. The salt of the sea spray matched the salt of the tears that slid down her face.

"Braunnnan!" He screamed her name, his voice an inhuman cry as he splashed after her, but he had hesitated too long. A wave rolled in from the ocean, black as night and cold as death, taking her into its arms. Blessed quiet washed over her. In truth, she welcomed the peace.

Fear worse than any he'd ever known consumed him as he shoved through the water, desperate to reach her. *Fool!* he cursed himself. *Why? Why when she needed you*

*most did you let her think she was alone? Can you do nothing right?* He roared out his helpless anger as he dove under the water, shifting almost without thought to ursine form. The bear. The bear would know what the man could not. *Find. Mate. Must find!*

Powerful jaws meant to rip and tear closed gently over her, arms holding her as he rose to his hind legs, roaring his defiance to the gods of the wind and the water. *Mine! I will not share her with you! She is mine!*

The burden in his arms shifted, coughing as she rolled to face him, words he could not understand dashed away by the spray of the sea washing in over the rocks. She fought him now, pushing against his paws as he carried her back toward the beach, then twisted again, until thirty stone of angry grizzly female became more than he could hold aloft.

Her feet hit the sand, and she ran. This time he did not have to ask what to do. This great, lumbering body was more sure of its instincts than the human form was. With another roar he took off in pursuit. *Mate. His mate. She would not escape him.*

*Mine!*

Fear and anger propelled her on. He was right. She did not need him. She could find her own way.

*Mine!*

Larger, more powerful, his stride shook the ground. She ran harder, determined to escape him, though instinctively she knew it was no use. He was male. These forms were ancient, as old as time itself. Here he no longer acknowledged her superiority. Huge jaws snapped at her, closing on the hair at her haunches, yet still she ran. Powerful arms wrapped around her, tackling her to the ground. *No!* she cried. *You have made your choice!*

Arms and legs tangled as the two grizzlies battled for dominance. It was a battle she was destined to lose, but still she fought, until he held her pinned, his massive body weight holding her down, his jaws clenched over the nape of her neck.

*Mate. My mate.*

*You do not want me. Let me go.*

*Never. Mine,* he snuffled softly against her ear.

*No.*

*Mine,* he snuffled again. His jaws loosed their hold, and his cheek rubbed gently against her head. *My mate. My heart.*

She could not forgive. *No...*

*I love you.*

She could feel his cock, hard and hot where it lay along his lower abdomen, swelled with need for her. She would not forgive. *No...*

*Need you.*

Hot, hard cock pushed against her. Thick, sturdy paws held her captive. Massive jaws rubbed against hers, capable of more force should he need it. A shiver ran over her body. He did not need her permission. This time he was in control.

Still he waited. Hovering there, the tip of his thick shaft barely grazing her opening, he waited. Need flooded her channel. She raised her hips as much as she could, opening herself to him. It was all the invitation he required.

Fear and pain and need drove him into her hot and hard, his thick bear's cock spearing her from behind like a battering ram. She fought him now, afraid of his strength and his size, but he held her, his cry of triumph splitting the night. She stretched to hold him, digging her hind claws into the sandy beach as she sought purchase, pushing back now, forcing herself to take in all of him.

She was a greedy lover. Now that she had him she wanted more. He held fast within her, pulsing and twitching, his every vibration making her body scream *more, more*. Her muscles clenched around him as she quivered with need. She squirmed beneath him, raising her ass higher in invitation. Her body shook with the effort as she tried to satisfy herself.

*Mine?* The snuffle was a question this time, rife with longing.

*Yours,* she admitted at last, letting go of her anger.

He pulled back, only to drive into her again. Hard. So hard. Stretching, filling, searing her with every stroke. She could feel every ridge and ripple as he moved, her body straining to hold him, fighting him now as she fisted around him. *More. More.* She wanted more.

With each thrust he grew bolder, stronger, his giant haunches quivering over her as he rode her. He pounded her mercilessly, but it was what she wanted. *More. More.* Each stroke grew faster until he churned against her, the need building, consuming, demanding all they had to give.

*More. More.*

She cried out to the night, lifting her voice in song as she shattered beneath him, all conscious thought lost to the waves of pleasure that broke over her, washing away all that had been. Her orgasm bound him to her, drawing him deeper inside her. Pulling him with her so that she took all he offered, her body milking him of his seed. The searing heat of his cum sent her over again, letting her ride the waves of pleasure out into the star-filled night.

*Mine*, he snuffled as he grew still within her.

*Yours*, she returned. *Forever and always.*

*Yours*, he admitted at last. *Forever and always, my love.*



## Epilogue

*Balthain?*

He reached for her in the darkness, but found only emptiness at his side.

*"Balthain? Can you hear me?"*

*"Aye, M'Lady. I'm coming."*

*"Balthain, I must speak with you, warn you."*

*"Tâkuri? What is it, M'Lady? What is wrong?"*

*"I have found others, lost in the dreaming. Even now they wait for the one who is with you. But not all believe. There is one they would follow, but even she despairs. I know not how long they will wait for Tranorva. The Bard has spread my Prophecy among those above, and I have sent visions to those below, but still they do not understand. They do not believe. Not all will follow you. I would not have you lose heart. You can only save those who wish to be saved."*

*"What of you, my heart? Are you well?"*

*"I -- I am waiting for you, my heart. I am waiting."*

Like her voice, the dreaming faded, as gossamer pulled too thin.

**Song of the Bear: A Bard's Prophecy**  
**A Northlanders Tale**

**Shelby Morgen**

## Prologue

Élandine paced the length of the ship's deck. This was wrong. So wrong on so many levels. He wanted to go below, to open his mouth and let his disgust pour out, but that would only draw more attention. He couldn't do that. That was not how he worked. That was not how he lived. That was not his way!

The breeze changed, swirling his pale blond hair about his face, temporarily obscuring the angry ocean. No wonder the ocean was angry. Frustration oozed down his arms and coalesced at his fingertips, a wave of energy looking for a way to escape. He couldn't. Couldn't let it out. Couldn't attract undue notice.

Why not? What was there to hide now? Stealth was... unnecessary. Six decades of scheming and plotting and carefully laid plans to bring House Lindall, now House Lochinvar, to absolute power in the Northlands, and all for what? So the fool of a woman could throw herself into the arms of her enemy!

Who needed finesse, who needed secrecy, when *General* Tranorva decided to simply walk in the front door and surrender herself to the enemy?

Tranorva.

Her name glided through his thoughts. The scent of her filled his nostrils. Need coiled like a snake in his belly. His cock struck out, hard and aching, like a divining rod pointing the way to her.

*Tranorva.*

Élandine played the fool for her. For her he would give up everything he was, everything he had ever hoped to be. Why? Was it just for the sex? Just for the feel of that legendary strength bending to his will? Was his need to possess, to capture, to penetrate more important than his need to exist?

It was she who possessed, who owned, who had captured and penetrated. She'd seeped into the very core of his being. She owned him. She owned his soul. Should she but ask it of him, he would walk the lengths of the nine hells for her.

Again.

By the gods what had he been thinking? He'd known what Yarwyn was. Had known what the use of her powers might do to him. Yet he'd wanted what she had so badly... He'd possessed Yarwyn's gift for but a few moments, but those moments had been enough to show him what he had not discovered for himself in all the many decades of his existence. In just those few short moments he'd come to understand the great void within himself. The void that only Tranorva could fill.

Now the one woman he could no longer live without stood at the head of the table, surrounded by fools who would tell her whatever she wanted to hear, as long as they got the glory they sought. They could not see what she meant to do, but he knew. He felt it deep in the hollow space that had once been his heart. Tranorva would march in the front gates of Élahandara like the Warrior General she was. She would lay down her life that others might live, while he, Élandine, would live out the centuries alone. The gods had not changed him as they had promised. The blood of his forefathers still flowed within him, or the others could not have called him back. When Tranorva died, she would take all that he had become, the very heart and soul and essence of him, with her to the grave. He would be as he had been before. Cold and empty within.

How could he possibly manage to survive the long years that lay ahead of him knowing she had sacrificed herself and he had been unable to stop her? There was not enough mead in all the bottles in all the inns of the four lands to drown the ache in his heart. There were not enough whores in all the brothels to ever expunge his grief.

He could not, he would not, go on without her!

A steadfast calm settled over him. There was no reason he must go on alone. No reason at all. He would see her mission through. He would see the lost ones to their freedom. Then his duty would be fulfilled. He had seen enough. He had done enough. He had lived enough. He had done all he could to see to his charges. When the time

came, when the walls of Élahandara crumbled to ruin, he would be there, ready to take his place with the ancients. 'Twas the gift the gods had given him, he saw now. He had a way out. They had given him the gift of release.

The seas calmed, the waves settled, and the small ship came to rest peacefully on the glassy surface of the water. A slow, malevolent smile took its place on Élandine's lips. Now was not the time for the winds to calm. He had made up his mind.

With but a flicker of a thought Élandine shifted, taking his place at the ship's broad stern. The sea would not torture him with waiting. Not this night. He let the power flow, trailing down the length of his arms till it dripped, pooling in long, thick rivulets about his huge spurred feet. He spread his great wings, beating down once, twice, the sails filling fuller with every stroke as the ship shot forward again, flying toward their doom. Raising his mighty head, the great black Dragon bellowed his defiance to the night. He turned his head at the last moment, tempted to take them all with him now, deciding instead to leave them in the hands of fate. Flames shot out across the water for a hundred yards as he screamed at the night.

Those who heard wisely chose not to meddle in the Dragon's affairs...

## Chapter One

Donovan jerked awake with a start, pushing his empty mug across the bar.  
“She’s coming.”

“What?”

“She’s coming. Can’t you feel it? Gather the others.”

“Feel what? Gather them? Where?”

“Feel the power of her. The rage. She comes from the water. She is ready. She will strike soon. We will wait at the docks. We will stand vigil until she arrives.”

Giselle placed her hands on her hips, glaring at the drunk before her. “Stand vigil. You want me to wake up a hundred-odd Clan Bear in the dark of the night and have them go freeze their shaggy asses off standing around on the docks, waiting for further instructions from your mug of ale? When She does not show, do you know what those Bears will do to you, Bard?”

“I have seen a vision. She comes on the wings of a Dragon. She will be here soon. With the dawn.”

Giselle reached for his mug. “Have another drink, my friend. Maybe you’ll pass out again, like a nice, peaceful drunk.”

“I am not a drink. Drunk.” He said it slowly, one syllable at a time, gathering his tattered dignity around him like a wrap against the chill of the night.

“Donovan, you sit at my bar all night, every night, consuming ale at a rate that would down a smaller man in half the time. You, my friend, are a drunk.”

Anger flashed briefly in his eyes, giving way to a deep sadness that almost moved her heart. “I drink. That does not make me a drunk.”

“What does that make you?”

"A man who has seen too much and loved too little. A poet who has been given a sword to wield, and has learned to kill." He downed the ale she'd set in front of him. "A man in love with a woman who sees only the blood on his hands and not the song in his heart."

"And who is this wench who has stolen your heart?"

"What do you care?"

She flinched at that. "I am not uncaring, Bard, but I have seen much in my years here. If I fell for every sad story that comes with every mug that passes over my bar, I would be a pauper many times over, my heart in pieces in a jar to display on the shelf."

Donovan looked away, nodding toward the flame-headed child who came running through the door. "Someone won your heart once. You do not remember him fondly?"

Giselle snatched up the daughter who flung herself toward her mother's arms with the unwavering faith of a child. "Hello, my lovely! Where have you been?"

"At the docks, watching the ships unload."

"What have I told you about wandering the docks alone?"

"Not to get caught picking the pockets of the fine folks who wander too close to the wharf."

Giselle shook her head. "I? I think not, child. That must have been one of your other mentors. I shall have to speak to my fine, light-fingered friends about what skills they pass along to you."

"Mommy?"

"What, my lovely?"

"What does it mean when the ocean catches fire?"

Giselle forced herself to laugh. "The ocean cannot catch fire, darling."

"It did. I saw it. Huge waves of flame lit up the water. I'm not telling stories, Mommy. Other people saw the water catch fire."

Giselle glanced back at the one they called Bard, chewing her lip thoughtfully. Flames on the water. *She comes on the wings of a Dragon.* If the child spoke the truth --

and Evanya had not yet learned to lie to her mother -- then the Bard might indeed be a prophet. "Dawn is a long way off, Bard. You'd best get some sleep."

"Sleep? How can I sleep at a time like this?"

"'Tis easy. My mother always told me, 'Let tomorrow's troubles wait on the horizon until their time arrives.' She knew well the ways of the world, Maribeth did. She was a wise woman."

"I'd sleep better did I not sleep alone."

"This place ceased to be a whorehouse many a long year ago. I suggest you find what comfort you can with your pillow and blanket, and keep your eyes -- and your hands -- to yourself."

\* \* \*

"There is a Dragon sitting on the back of the ship. I suppose ye know this?"

Ayaila looked up briefly from her charts. "Leave him alone, child."

Cassadara tried to control the tic in her left eye. Compared to Grandmother's age and level of skill, she was a child. Still... "Would ye mind telling me what in the nine hells is going on?"

"He grieves, Daughter. Despite his years, Élandine is new to the ways of love. His emotions are no' yet his to control."

Élandine? Shammall? She had seen the Faerie King transform himself into a Dragon. But Mother's errand boy? Cassadara blinked, feeling the fool. "What has love to do with this?"

Evalayna pushed away from the table, rotating her shoulders as if she'd pored over the charts too long. "He would die at Tranorva's side rather than trust her to assault the front door while he sneaks in the back. He thinks she will sacrifice herself for her people."

Cass felt her own anger rise at the suggestion. "Does he think my sister a fool? Tranorva has never been defeated in battle!"



Ayailla only smiled. "Do ye trust thy husband in everything, Granddaughter? Would ye fight beside him? Or would ye shield him in battle, preferring to take thy enemy's assault head on rather than see him in harm's way?"

Ayailla knew her too well. Cassadara covered her embarrassment with anger. "I am no' married to Tranorva! Is she no' General of all the armies? Did she no' personally defeat Nafésti in combat? It is her destiny to lead Clan Bear. She canna' do that if she is dead!"

Ayailla raised one long, dark eyebrow in a sharp, questioning arch. "Perhaps ye would care to explain that philosophy to yon Dragon?"

Tyrell motioned to the seat beside him. "Perhaps now is no' the time. Sit beside me, Sister. Let us make sure we can prove the Ancient One wrong."

In truth, the idea of planning their attack held far more appeal than explaining to an angry Dragon the error of his ways...

\* \* \*

*She could see her reflection in the water where they bathed. Behind her the mountains touched the sky at the horizon. The sun's warmth on her skin made her smile. Surely the gods were with them this glorious day. She held out her hand to her mate, and he pulled her into his arms. His skin glowed where the heat of the sun had painted him a golden bronze. Her skin, too, shone with a dark tan, the color of the linen tunic she wore.*

*Her mate brushed his lips over hers, a light caress of a kiss that touched on the promise of longer, deeper kisses once they were back in their own den. Together they emerged from the water and turned toward home.*

*Giselle let her gaze wander through the dream, like a visitor, taking everything in. She knew this place, though she saw it now with new wonder, as if for the first time. There at the base of the mountains sat the seven houses of Clan Bear. There were far more than seven houses, in all actuality. There were seven strongholds, like small towns, spread out along the mountains' feet.*

*Each stronghold held many houses, grouped into villages, with one more predominant, in that its walls joined the portcullises that protected the others, providing the shield for the village*

*within. The seven strongholds with their ornate battlements rose high and imposing, their fingers reaching out to touch each other, providing a formidable wall of defense that stretched down the length of the valley. Yet the gates were open. The children played in the grass. The herds moved freely about in the pastures beyond the gates.*

*A sudden sense of impending doom shook Giselle. She squeezed her mate's hand, knowing suddenly that he felt it too. They ran toward the nearest gates, shouting their warning as they came, but no one was listening. The day was too glorious, the sun too warm, the city too invincible.*

*The dark furies swept down on them like a plague of locusts, slaughtering all in their paths -- except the children. The children were their quarry. The screams reached her ears like distant thunder, and then they were fighting, back to back, swords in their hands, fighting their way back to the gates, gathering survivors as they went, even though it was already too late, too late, too late... they could not save the cubs...*

*Giselle awoke screaming in rage, instinctively reaching for Evanya in the darkened room. She was there. Her baby was safe. Her baby was here with her, and they were both safe.*

*Slowly her mind fought its way back from the edge of hysteria.*

*As her breathing quieted, she realized she could still hear the screams on the edge of her consciousness, other bewildered souls awakened from their living nightmare. Had it been but a dream? It had seemed so real. The others reached out, touching cautiously as they became aware they shared the magic's flow.*

*A voice filtered through the darkness, chanting softly, then stronger, a voice she knew well, but found she'd never really listened to before.*

*The Bear awakes in the spring.  
As the goddess she comes  
To rend the Earth.  
Hungry and powerful,  
Angry and desolate.  
Like the lone avenger she comes.*

*Come to me, my people,*

*At the water's edge.  
Come to me, my Warriors.  
Let the blood flow.  
Come to me, my children.  
Let us cleanse the Earth.  
Let us sing the Song of the Bear.*

*She cries for her children,  
Ripped from her arms.  
She cries for her mate,  
But he is no more.  
She cries out for blood,  
In a voice that will not be still.*

*Come to me, my people,  
At the water's edge.  
Come to me, my Warriors.  
Let the blood flow.  
Come to me, my children.  
Let us cleanse the Earth.  
Let us sing the Song of the Bear.*

*Let us rend that which destroys.  
Let us maim that which defiles.  
Let us free all who are enslaved.  
Let us sing the song of sorrow in victory.  
Let us lament  
That which we must not forget.*

*Come to me, my people,  
At the water's edge.  
Come to me, my Warriors.  
Let the blood flow.  
Come to me, my children.  
Let us cleanse the Earth.  
Let us sing the Song of the Bear.*

The rich, deep timbre of that voice reached straight into her soul.

"Mommy?"

"I'm here, darling."

"I heard a voice in my head."

"I heard it too."

"She's coming, isn't She?"

"Yes, dear, I think so. I think it's time to heed the Bard's Prophecy. Get dressed, darling. We have work to do. I think it's time to head to the docks. We must raise the others. Dawn is coming."

\* \* \*

*You are not alone, brother.*

The pain that flowed on the current of the magic dimmed for a moment, then flamed again. *I have always been alone. As I have lived so shall I die.*

*Do not despair, young one. The gods have a plan that is far beyond our understanding.*

*The gods? We are but toys to them! We are but pawns. Chattel to be spent for their entertainment.*

*You are young to have known so much bitterness. Is there no love in your life? No one whose happiness is more important than your own?*

*Love is a curse, sent to rob me of all that I am.*

*No, my child. Love is its own reward. To know love is to know fear, because love makes us vulnerable, but love also makes us better than we were. When we love, we sacrifice all that we are for the sake of another. We become as we were meant to be. Stronger. More noble. More giving of ourselves.*

The rage, and the despair, flared again. *Sacrifice? My lady would sacrifice herself, that she might provide a distraction. A distraction! There is nothing noble about this sacrifice! I have dedicated my life to her, and she is to die as a distraction? Without her my life, my death, they are meaningless. I have no reason to go on without her!*

*Do you know that she means to die?*

*M'Lady plans to walk in the front gates of Élahandara!*

Élahandara? Tâkuri pressed her eyes tight shut. Praise the gods. There was only one who might attempt such a foolhardy plan. *Does Tranorva not own those very gates? Are they not hers to walk in and out of as she pleases?*

*A mere technicality. More of a ruse, actually. Because it worked once does not mean the lie will work again.*

Hope surged in Tâkuri's heart. She had guessed right. Not such a difficult guess, actually. There was only one who commanded such power. *She will do what she must, Shaymmadah, because she trusts you. I, too, place my trust, and my faith, in you. Already your power feeds me. The touch of your mind across mine heals me. There are more of us. Your call has reached others. Tranorva will not walk into Élahandara alone. Nor will you find those below unready. You have much to live for, Brother. Have faith in your lady, even as we have faith in you.*

A questioning thought brushed her mind, soft, tentative, like the touch of a child. *Who are you, and what know you of my mission?*

*I am called Tâkuri, and those I love travel with you. I speak to Balthain often in the dreaming. My daughter Dahlai is in his care.*

*Tâkuri... The pain shifted in hue, to an older, deeper regret. It is true, then. You yet live. Forgive me. Had I known...*

*Had you known you would have risked your life in some foolhardy attempt to rescue me, whether I wished to be rescued or not.*

*Confusion. Disbelief. Do you not wish to be rescued?*

*I do now. But had you come for me two decades ago, I would not have wished it so, for my people were not ready to leave.*

The night grew quiet. Too quiet. She feared for a moment the connection had been broken. *Trust her, Shaymmadah. The lady did not get to be a general by sacrificing herself on Élandra blades.*

His voice came again, steadier, on a current of power so strong she felt herself floating, almost pulled from herself with his strength. *Thank you, Tâkuri. Few would have dared to tell me what I needed to hear. It is you who gives me strength.*

\* \* \*

*Balthain? Can you hear me?*

He turned in his sleep, reaching out to her, but his arms encountered only the mist of the dreaming. He sat up carefully on the narrow bed, ducking lest he bash his head into the upper bunk. Again. "Tâkuri?"

*You are close. I can feel you.*

"Aye. I can hear you, almost feel you. I'm awake now. Truly awake. How is this possible?"

*There has been a surge in the magic's current. One of great power draws nigh. He is feeding me. Channeling to me.*

Great power? Shammall? Well. Perhaps there was some use for the bloody Dragon then. "I have felt your spirit grow dim. You must not leave me, my love. I am coming for you. Do not give up on me. We will be there soon. Very soon."

*I -- I do not want you to come for me, Balthain. You must go with the others, with General Tranorva. You are a great Warrior now. Your place is with the main assault.*

How had she known his fear of the tunnels?

*I do not just hear you, Balthain. I feel you. You would face that for me which you fear most. Your devotion gives me strength. The young one's anger gives me strength of another kind, the strength to do as I must.*

"What must you do?"

*What you have already found the courage to do, Balthain, my love. Fight. I must fight. I have played the victim too long. It does not become me. I would not have you see me thus, cowering at their feet. The young one has rewritten the rules of our universe, Balthain. No longer will we hide beneath the veil. He has issued a challenge to us all.*

"How will you fight them, Tâkuri? You told me yourself you have no power beneath the halls of Élahandara. The stone shields you from the current of the magic's flow. Without the magic, you are but a woman, with no more strength than any other mortal."

*I will fight with ideas, Balthain. I have the power to reach them all now. I have touched them in the dreaming as I could not before.*

"No one knows the tunnels as I do, Tâkuri. This is something I must do, for myself as well as for those who await us. Your courage shames me. How can I ask you to face what I would not? Were you not waiting for me, still I would come. My brothers are waiting. Tell them to be ready. By this time tomorrow we will be back in the earth."

*We will be ready, Balthain. Clan Bear will welcome your rescue.*

Balthain reached for her, but there was naught but a kind of light mist, so insubstantial it might not have been there at all. "You feel so close. I would swear I could touch you. I need to see you, Tâkuri, with my eyes open."

The mist grew thicker, shimmering in the hint of pre-dawn light, then seemed to coalesce. For an instant he had an image of a small, dank cell, and a huddled figure in a torn, tattered dress. Then the image changed. No, the woman changed. She stood, her arms outstretched like the limbs of a tree lifted to a sun only she could see, her face upturned.

"Say my name."

"What?"

"You must speak my name. *Tâchaernán Glèbrèagha Élanadhache.*"

There is great power in the true name of a *Sidhe*. Balthain swallowed hard. He'd heard parts of that name before. He wouldn't think about that now, or what it might mean. "*Tâchaernán Glèbrèagha Élanadhache.*"

Light seemed to pool on her fingers, gradually burning her clean as she gathered her power. Her palms began to glow, and gradually the glow spread up -- well, down, actually -- her arms until her whole being took on the ethereal light he'd seen just before Dahlai transformed herself.

Once again the maiden of light stood before him, as pure and beautiful as she had been before, but stronger, radiating a power he'd barely conceived of. The glow became a shining light that emanated from her, engulfed her, burned so brightly he had to shield his eyes. The walls of the small stone cell burned clean, purified by sunlight, and then melted, until she stood alone, a glowing light against the night sky, shining bright as any star around her.

She hovered there, beautiful and awe-inspiringly terrifying, a captive bird set free, for the length of time it took him to decide he should be thankful she was not his enemy. Then the creature of light shifted again. This time the shift created its own power, rather than taking power from the force that had fed her. Balthain wanted to

close his eyes against the flare of light, but he could not. He had to see. Had to know what he'd let himself fall in love with.

Wings. Huge wings with a span that appeared greater than that of a ship's sail beat down, once, twice, and the glowing mass took shape and form.

There could be no doubt to what form the wings belonged. Once before this night he'd seen that same shape, only where the Dragon that was Élandine's pure self had absorbed all light -- he had shone a deep and terrible black -- this Dragon glowed a shimmering shade of purest blue. Her cry broke through the pre-dawn stillness, sounding shrill and close and very, very real.

The Dragon sailed through the pale sky, gliding, twisting, turning, glorying in the power of her freedom. Balthain didn't question how he could see her from where he stood in his small cabin. Didn't need to know. But then the vision shifted, and he could see her through the porthole. Could it be? Could she really have...

Shimmering blue against soft, pale gray hovered, then turned, gliding on the wind, swooping straight down on a collision course with the ship. She was headed straight for him. He should move, should go out on the deck to greet her, should...

He could feel her. So much power, centered, focused, on him. She came to him like a hawk called from the sky by her handler. He closed his eyes, suddenly afraid. Who was he to call forth such power? He was Rat, a child from the sewers, a pretender in the world of men. He was not worthy. He was...

He felt more than heard her land at his side in the tiny cabin. How could a Dragon land in his cabin? As if anything as unsubstantial as earthly laws could possibly stand between them. Certainly nothing as thin as the hull of a ship.



## Chapter Two

"Balthain?"

He turned to face the woman's voice. For woman she was. The creature of light stood at his side in the small ship's berth, an ethereal beauty too pure and pale to be real, too perfect for words. Only the tattered rag of a dress remained of the woman who'd reached out to him from her cell. She reached out again, tentatively now, to touch his arm, as if afraid he might disappear.

"You're real." There was a slight hitch in her voice, like tears too close to the surface. "Look at you. By the gods. You're beautiful."

He would have argued with her, told her he was just a boy from the sewers once known as Rat, but she knew that already, and still she had come to him. He pulled her into his arms, no longer afraid, needing to touch her, hold her, feel the magic as he brushed his lips against hers. Real. She was real. She was everything the dreams had promised and more.

Lips as soft and sweet as dark cherries pressed against his. Soft, delicate skin shivered under his touch. Real. She felt so real. She was real. Warm and willing and alive.

Her teeth closed over his bottom lip, biting down hard.

"Hey!" he protested.

"That wouldn't have hurt in a dream, would it?"

Why had that small pain made him so hard he wanted to spill his seed all over her before he even tasted her? Years. It had been years he'd dreamed of her, wanted her, needed her.

The fine, tight lines around her eyes betrayed her. She was unsure of herself, still. She, who was perfection incarnate, doubted.

Her doubt gave him confidence. No matter how perfect her body, her heart was the heart of a woman. Not just any woman. The woman he had been in love with for two decades. He reached out to tilt her chin up with one finger. "Tâkuri, look at me."

Her gaze flicked up toward his, then tried to roam away again.

"What's wrong?"

"You -- I never expected -- you've grown up, Balthain." She swallowed hard. "Look at you. You -- you're perfect. You're at your peak. You look like a god. I know you to be as intelligent as you are pleasing to the eye. You should be with a mortal woman. One of your own. Not some old dried up husk who has squandered her life chasing one dream after another."

"I have loved you since first you came to me, Tâkuri. I have had mortal lovers. Women who have come to me, and gone again. They could not compare with the ideal of you. You were in my mind as you are, my perfect mate."

*Perfect...* she mouthed the word, almost a question, as if trying it on for size. As if trying to remember a time when she'd felt perfect.

A surge of primal lust shot through him. She was his and his alone. He would possess her as no man ever had before. They had, perhaps, two hours before the ship would dock at the City of Portsmouth. No reason to rush things. He would take the doubt from her. He could heal the wounds that had put it there. If... "Do you trust me?"

She looked startled at the question, but she didn't hesitate to answer. "With my life. With my daughter's life."

"I want to see the rest of you."

She blushed -- a stain of bright red across ethereally pale skin -- hesitating before she waved her hand. The tattered tunic gave up its hold on reality.

She stood before him naked, letting him look his fill. Smooth, glowing alabaster skin hugged a body that had seen too few meals of late, but still held enough curves to make his mouth water. Short silver hair that looked as if she might have hacked it off with a small dagger framed her face. Somehow the haphazard look of it suited her well

enough. The face itself might have belonged to some mythical creature -- so small and delicate and nearly transparent she looked almost childlike.

He would have expected her to be dirty after the filth he'd seen in his vision, but the magic had burned her clean and pure as the driven snow. He wanted to touch, to take, to consume, but she needed more. She needed to be worshipped.

He let his fingertips brush slowly over high, arched cheeks, along the edges of her hairline and down to frame a delicately pointed chin, then down again, outlining the long, slim neck, then out to the edges of two fine-boned shoulders. He could see her pulse shivering against her throat. He'd made love to her so many times in the dreaming. But this was real. At least he thought it was real. She felt real enough. His cock believed she was real.

For a brief moment he thought to ask her, but 'twas better not to know. If she was going to fade away again he'd rather not know.

Balthain touched his lips to the pulse at her throat, feeling the steady flutter that matched the rhythm of his throbbing cock. He leaned in just enough to let her feel his pulse throbbing back again, pressing the thin fabric of the loincloth he slept in against her, letting her feel the need that burned for her.

He held her for several long moments, until her hands rose to sweep through his hair, sending shivers down his spine as she raked her nails lightly against his scalp.

"Balthain."

Her breath against his ear shot hot tendrils of desire curling through his cock. He kissed his way down, across the slight V where her chest began to swell into the gentle rise of her breast. A soft moan escaped her throat as his lips grew closer to his target. "Is there something you want?" he teased.

"Anything. Everything. It's been so long. The dreaming was good. But this -- to actually feel you, touch you -- it's too much. It's not enough. I want everything at once. I'm afraid I'll wake up and you'll disappear again!"

He brushed the loincloth aside, pressing his tortured cock against her smooth, naked skin, letting her feel his desire pulsing against her belly. "I'm not going

anywhere. I'll not let you go. Never again. I've waited for you for years. You're mine. I'll never let you go."

She cried out as he circled her areola with the tip of his tongue, just flicking at the nipple, teasing her with his nearness. She had other things in mind. Her hands in his hair tried to hold him captive as she lifted slightly, pressing the nipple itself toward his lips. With a chuckle he sucked the elongated point into his mouth. Her hips curled against him convulsively, pressing her mons upward against the heat of his cock.

He'd learned the rewards of patience early in life. He'd had a great teacher. Nothing like life in a whorehouse to teach a boy to conserve his energy. He leaned into her embrace, swaying his hips slightly left and right, enjoying the friction of their colliding textures. Burning need against sensitive skin. Soft curls against the hard length of his cock. Warm, willing woman shivering in his arms, but not from cold.

The nipple between his lips grew under his touch, lengthening and thickening, growing harder, yet opening at the tip like a flower blooming when he probed it with his questing tongue.

Some part of his mind urged him to forgo patience and plunge his cock into her now, give them both what they wanted, before the casters' meeting broke up, and Tyrell returned to claim the upper bunk, but he quieted the voice. 'Twould not be the first time he'd put on a show for an audience. Tyrell could watch if he felt so inclined.

"Balthain..."

He chuckled against her nipple, still sucking and stroking in long, easy sweeps. Her hands slipped down to his shoulders, her grip changing to one of strength and purpose. Her weight shifted to one foot as the other snaked its way up, curling around his thigh as she tried to push herself onto him. He would have laughed in earnest, but the nipple in his mouth required constant attention. Instead he slid his hands down her backside until he could support her slight weight with both hands under her ass, lifting her free of the floor, settling both legs around his waist, his cock still trapped between them.

Balthain shivered as Tâkuri set about exacting her revenge, kissing him everywhere she could reach. He'd never known the feel of a woman's lips wrapped over his eyebrow could make his cock dance. But this was not just any woman. This was the Succubus, his Succubus, the woman he'd dreamed about and lusted after since he'd first known the meaning of the word. As her sharp little teeth nipped at the corner of his brow ridge, he almost forgot his slow torture in favor of sinking his hot, needy cock into warm, willing woman flesh.

No. He could not let her distract him. This was too important. She had to know she belonged with him, to him, had to know her body would want only him. This was not the time to rush things.

Balthain loosed the nipple he'd been feeding on. Tâkuri wailed, thrusting it back at him, but he had another quarry. The bunk had been built for Humans. Or rather a Human. He barely fit into its too short length.

There was nothing else in the small passenger's berth. Nothing but the wall. A wall lined with hooks used to suspend gear and clothing. A few of the hooks sported leather straps to secure bulkier items. There were rings in the ceiling, too, to support a spare hammock. He plastered her against the wall, holding her there with his body pressed against hers, while he considered the possibilities.

She'd been a prisoner for years. He didn't want her to feel subjugated. Not by him. But there were other ways... "Greedy little wench, aren't you?" he teased.

"Yes!"

She took that opportunity to wrap her arms around his head, pulling close enough to kiss him properly. He almost forgot his mission as her hands tangled in his hair, her tongue teasing his in a game he enjoyed losing. Still... He pulled back, smiling down at her.

"Do you trust me?" he asked again.

Her eyes darkened, questioning. "You know I do."

"Enough to know I would never hurt you? Ever?"

"I -- yes. Of course."

“Tākuri, if you’re frightened, or you don’t like what I’m doing, all you have to do is tell me to stop. I promise if you say stop, I will.”

Fear and excitement warred in her eyes. “Stop. I can remember that.”

As if she knew what he was about to do, a small shiver raced over her skin. His fingers made a leisurely journey from her ass up over the curve of her waist and on, to capture her hands in his. He lifted them above her head, holding both of her hands in one of his, while he wrapped one of the leather straps around her wrists, leaving the ends long enough to tie together through one of the hammock rings.

Her breathing quickened, coming hard and fast now, and her eyes widened, the pupils large and dark, but she wasn’t screaming in terror. He kissed her again as he lifted her hands high enough to tie off the ends of the leather strap, securing her tightly to the ring in the ceiling. Her nostrils flared, but she didn’t try to fight him. Which was a damn good thing. He could hold the woman, in whatever form she came to him. The great blue Dragon was another story. If she panicked...

Tākuri didn’t try to fight until he stepped back. Then her legs clamped around his waist, seeking to hold him as she suddenly twisted in her bonds. He gently untwined her, pulling away gradually. When he stepped away, she realized her toes barely brushed the floor. She could either support herself, or keep trying to reach for him. She stood staring at him, her eyes wide, as he backed up enough to really look at her.

She was everything he’d ever wanted. So powerful. So dangerous. Yet she was his, held captive as much by her love for him as by his thin leather bonds. He untied the loincloth, letting it fall from his waist, so that he stood before her naked. “Do you know how hard I get just looking at you?”

He slid a hand down to cup his balls, rolling them slightly to ease the pressure. She whimpered as he stroked the other hand slowly, deliberately, over the length of his cock. “You do this to me. Just thinking about you does this to me.”

He stroked himself slowly once again, so hard he could have come just from looking at her. He thought about relieving himself while she watched, knowing he’d

recover long before she was ready for him to sink into her, but he could wait. He was making her wait, after all. Instead he squeezed, hard, at the base of his cock until he felt his balls relax just a little.

One leg lifted to try to wrap back around him as he stepped closer to her again. He captured her leg in the crook of his elbow, helping to support her slightly as he kissed a path back down to the nipple he'd neglected, pausing there to give it the treatment he'd lavished on the other one.

Still she shrieked when he lifted her leg over his shoulders, dropping to his knees in front of her. At the first touch of his hands against her springy curls, parting her lips so that he could see what he was about to taste, her hips curled up toward him, shuddering with need. He spread her wide like a banquet, blowing a soft stream of warm breath over her swollen pink flesh. But he didn't stop there. She shrieked again as he turned toward her thigh, nipping her gently on the soft inner skin.

He blew his breath out over the small red mark his teeth had left. "I don't care about your past lovers. I am the one you'll remember. Hundreds of years from now, I'll be the only one you remember."

"Yes," she agreed. "Only you. So don't force me to kill you."

"Patience, my love. Patience." He kissed his way slowly down to the faint hollow at the back of her knee, laughing as she curled her toes around behind his head, trying to coax him closer. "You have beautiful skin. So smooth. So soft. It's almost magical."

She grew still at that, her foot no longer tensed against the back of his head. "It is magical. I -- I took this form because I thought it would please you."

"Which form pleases you, Tâkuri? Is there one you favor more than others?"

"You might not find the others so attractive."

He stopped to admire the shapely sweep of her calf, fascinated by the shift of the muscles beneath the skin as she reacted to his kisses. "Who you are is not merely what you look like. I want to see all your forms. I want to make love to all your forms."

"No, you don't. A *Sidhe* can take any form. I can be any living sentient thing. You would not love the Troll, nor the Orc. And I can't see you with a bearded Dwarf woman."

He grinned at that. "I don't know. I've never made love to a Dwarf woman."

Her voice dropped so low he could barely hear her. "I could be Clan Bear for you, Balthain."

"Aye, I'm sure you could. That would be fun. Especially if we shifted together. But I don't want you to be someone you're not. I love you for who you are." Still, it would be a bad time for her to shift back to the Dragon, with her small, delicate toes curled against his hand as he kissed the arch of her foot. She shivered, but she did not shift. He smiled to himself. He would face the Dragon. Eventually. 'Twould not hurt him for once to be the smaller one of the pair.

Her foot nearly jerked out of his hand. He looked up, watching the quick rise and fall of her chest as she fought for air, her eyes squeezed shut and her head thrown back as far as she could. "What have we here?" He laughed as he ran his thumb over her instep, watching her squirm under his touch.

Little mewls of protest escaped around the lip she had clamped between her teeth. Balthain grinned up at her, her foot cradled in his hands. "Is there something you want, my love?"

"Yes, damn it! I want to feel your cock buried within me!"

"But you're not in charge here, are you?"

She rocked forward, her mons invitingly near his head as he knelt at her feet. Too close to ignore. He let her foot escape, catching the other one up as she shifted her weight off its straining toes. Tight. She'd been working too hard to keep her weight off her wrists, to give herself more freedom of movement. He stopped to massage the abused foot, watching her eyes slip shut as she groaned at the combined pleasure and torture. He needed to keep her off balance, distracted, focused on him. Should she remember that with one moment of thought she could shift to a form that might easily overpower him...



Balthain smiled to himself as he kissed his way back up to her mons. He was young. He was strong. He was well trained as a Warrior and as a street fighter. He wouldn't mind taking on the Dragon in a friendly wrestling match. As long as she didn't barbecue him.

He thought she might as he returned his attention to the small patch of fur between her legs. She struggled as he slipped both legs over his shoulders, fighting to pull him closer, faster, trying to press her mons against him. He used both hands to spread her wide, watching the soft pink flesh turn bright red before he even touched her.

The first long, slow lick had her writhing, her heels clasped hard against his shoulder blades. By the second lick she was shuddering against him, whimpering as she twisted, trying to get closer or pull away, he wasn't sure which. He rimmed her opening with the tip of his tongue, teasing, before he slipped forward to taste the flood of juices that greeted him.

His cock hammered at his belly, demanding attention. He could feel the drip of pre-cum trickling slowly down toward his balls, designed, he was sure, to drive him insane. He thrust his tongue into her harder, no longer teasing, but demanding now.

Her breath came in whimpered pulls as she thrust back against him, lifting herself toward his touch. He flicked his tongue over her once again, then switched his attention back to her clit. It was almost completely hidden now, drawn in deep and tight. He teased the underside of the small hooded shaft with light strokes, then circled the base before he slipped his lips over her to suck gently at the hard little nub.

She screamed as she came, something incoherent but loud enough to let anyone who might be listening know he was no longer alone.

Good. Let them wonder.

Unless of course her screams attracted unwanted visitors. The last thing he needed was Dahlai bursting in the door to find her mother tied to a ring in the ceiling. The girl was nearly an adult, but still, this was her mother...

He knew damn well he hadn't locked the door. He'd left it open for Tyrell. He didn't mind putting on a show, but he damn sure didn't want Dahlai in the audience!

## Chapter Three

Balthain stood, Tâkuri's legs still wrapped around him, reaching backwards awkwardly to throw the bolt. The sense of risk hadn't dimmed his arousal. If anything he was harder than ever. Urgency pushed at him. What was he waiting for, anyway? He would have her. Now.

He slipped her legs down until only her heels clung hooked over his shoulders, leaving her folded almost double as he pulled her hips closer. Supporting her with one arm under her ass, he reached up with the other to untie the tether from the ring in the ceiling. Her bound wrists fell over his head, pulling his face toward her kisses. The sense of urgency mounted as her tongue sparred with his. He pushed her back against the wall, guiding his cock into her with a shaking hand.

There was no such thing as control with this woman. She tore him apart and rebuilt him with every touch. Deeper, deeper he slid into her, moving slowly, carefully, to make sure he didn't hurt her, but she took all of him, pulling at him with her hands and her heels, demanding all he had to give. It was like sliding a heated rod into the armorer's forge. Heat into heat, so intense, threatening to scald him with her white-hot flames. More. He needed more. He rocked back, the cool ocean air hitting his cock as he pulled out of her, only to thrust back in. Desperation drove him harder. He needed more of her. He didn't want this to be over, but he needed...

"Yes!" she hissed. "Now, Balthain! Now!"

Harder. Faster. In and out. Cold and hot. Hard friction against smooth skin. With each stroke he could feel the coarse hair of her mons tangling with the fur at the base of his cock, could feel his balls slap against her. Harder. Faster. Hotter. She clenched around him, trying to hold him, then rocked, pushing him away, the backs of her thighs pressed against his chest. The sound of their sex reached his ears, wet, sucking noises as

he thrust and pulled back, her moans of pleasure and torture, his own little grunts of frenzied desire.

He wanted, needed to shift. She could be anything. Surely a Bear was no more challenge than a Dragon. The rational part of his brain argued that such a thing was not possible. Not here. Not now. They wouldn't *fit*. The room was too small.

Her orgasm built, a tightening around him that became more, urged him to push harder, deeper, until the heat between them exploded and she screamed out his name. He kissed her as she screamed, swallowing the sound, holding, quivering within her, while she burned hot as a forge-fire under his hands, then slowly cooled.

Lifting her free of his cock, he placed her bound hands on the lower bunk's footboard. He grasped her hips as he rammed himself back into her, grunting with each thrust as he battled the need to shift. The bed shook with the effort of his thrusts, despite its firm anchoring to the wall. He hammered into her, straining, wanting nothing more, now, than to empty his seed into her. The need to shift was as strong as the need to come, but there was barely room between the end of the bunk and the ship's outer wall for the man. He roared out his frustration, pounding relentlessly, knowing even as he did that it would not be enough.

"Bears -- come in -- different -- sizes!"

Balthain had to concentrate to make sense of Tâkuri's words. Not exactly something he was at his best at right at this moment. Different sizes? Well, some were probably better hung than others, but -- Oh! The bears! Not -- he laughed as he remembered the brown bears they'd seen near the City of Portsmouth. Small bears. Almost miniatures of themselves.

The shift was so smooth, so seamless, that it came almost without thought. One moment he was laughing, pounding into his intended mate with the ferocity of a sex-starved, battle-crazed Warrior, and the next he was a smallish brown bear, his cock buried deep in the sheath of an even smaller brown female, with long, glistening fur that was just perfect to sink his teeth into. He opened his jaws wide, grasping her by the

back of the neck, his paws pulling at her shoulders as he slid his long, thick shaft into the tight, wet depths of her cunt.

So tight. So needy. She strained against him, taking in his length and grasping him like a fist, trying to lock him in her channel with each stroke. His balls, already farther back now from the cock that hung tied to his belly, felt so hard and tight he was sure they would explode any minute. Frantic, urgent need made him less careful than he might have been, pulling at her with paws and teeth as he fought to plant himself in her, then fought to pull free again. The tight clench of her walls around him drove him over the edge, his pace that of desperation now, hard and wanting, each plunge coming hard on the heels of the last, a frantic piston working in and out, in and out, reaching for oblivion.

*More. More!* His hips bucked against her, driving, demanding. He could feel the change in her, feel her stiffen, her back legs stretched out under him, pushing her hips hard against the ridges of his pelvis. *More. More!* Her sheath tightened around, milking, demanding. Fierce need gave way to pleasure almost too painful to be borne, wave after wave of shooting stars colliding in his field of vision as he spilled his release into her waiting body.

When at last their tense muscles began to relax, he kept his paws locked around her, cradling her as he dropped to the floor, his cock still buried within her. From this vantage point, lying on his back with the weight of her cuddled in his arms against his belly and chest, she didn't look so tiny. She was a bear, sure enough, with all the strength and power that went with his species. Just smaller. Small enough to fit in a -- a more confined space. Like a ship's berth. Or --

Once the laughter started, he couldn't stop, even though to an outsider 'twould have sounded more like insane snuffling.

*What?* she snuffled back, her own voice tinged with laughter.

*How?*

*How?* Her snuffled response sounded puzzled.

*Small bears. You? Magic?*

She stretched against him. *You thought it.*

So. He'd done this himself. He laughed again. He'd never tried to be anything but a grizzly before. *Small bears fit in small places.*

*What -- Oh!*

Yes. He laughed harder.

*Love you.*

*Love you.* He touched the tip of his nose to hers. *My mate.*

*Mmm.* She turned her cheek against his chest. *Mate. Like that.*

They drifted off to sleep together, a perfect fit, two shaggy brown bears entwined as lovers. They were perfect together. Powerful enough to bring down prey twice their size, gifted with vision to see in total darkness, armed with claws meant to rend and destroy, small enough to fit in a ship's berth, or a tunnel carved by the hands of the earth dwellers, the Dwarves who had first mined the heart of Élahandara.

\* \* \*

Shaymmadah stumbled down from his perch at the ship's stern, too exhausted to remember why he'd been angry, too tired to care. Strong arms captured him, stroking, soothing, supporting his useless weight, comforting. Too big. He was too big for even the mighty General Tranorva to deal with. He let his mind focus on the form she liked best, the one that took the least energy to maintain. It was his last coherent thought before she swept him into her arms and he drifted off to a deep, dreamless sleep.

"The gods must have been crazy. What could they have been thinking? No sentient being can possibly be expected to think with two heads at once."

The rant was low, almost under her breath, but not quite out of range of his hearing. He frowned, trying to escape, but 'twas no use. Apparently she'd been going on like this for some time. There was no way around it. He was definitely awake. Awake and naked and sprawled in a large, lavish bed. The floor seemed to rock gently under a bed that could therefore only have been that of the Captain's quarters on a ship. Remembrance came crashing down on him.

"First there was the knife. 'Twas no' as if I could no' have taken on a few Sorcerers on my own. 'Twas no' as if falling onto that wee knife made it any easier for me to deal with the witches. Then the gods send me to some lost island no mortal can locate in search of his soul. And what do I find there? An island of bad-tempered butterflies. Now he decides he's going to turn into a Dragon and burn down the ship."

Shaymmadah rolled to his back, smiling despite himself as he scrunched farther up on the pillows, watching her pace the length of the small quarters. If she knew he was awake, it didn't show. Her pacing -- and ranting -- continued uninterrupted. Her thin leather undertunic molded itself to her agitated body as she paced, showing off hard lines and broad planes of tight muscles.

"Why? Will we be in less danger adrift on a pile of charred boards out in the sea? Then as if one bad-tempered Dragon isn't enough he has to go and call forth another one. Why don't we just call them all? They can burn down the halls of Élahandara and then we won't have to worry about bad-tempered males with no common sense who have no' learned to trust. We can just cook the place and scramble about in the ashes to see if there's aught left to rescue. What good is it to be the most feared Warrior in all the lands when the fool of a man finds it necessary to do his best to get us all killed at every chance he gets?"

He would not laugh. No. That would be bad. She was obviously not in the best of moods in the first place. Though truthfully her anger made her that much more appealing. Instead he arranged himself carefully in the bed, taking on the darker form of Élandine, courtesan to the queens, for the contrast his skin tones would make against crisp, clean bed linens. He turned the covers back into an artfully arranged tousled mass, exposing the length of the naked body he knew she admired, his cock rising hard and proud into the cool ocean air.

"Come to bed, M'Lady."

She whirled to face him, her expression all too easy to read, freezing in place as she took in the picture he'd chosen to present. He swallowed a small gloating laugh of triumph as her expression changed, needy hunger flickering across her face. All that

power. In this form, she could break him in half with her bare hands. Seven feet of honed muscle and massive bone, eighteen stone of seasoned Warrior, the shaft of her battleaxe stained to a dark mahogany with rivers of blood, and the sight of him naked could undo her.

He smiled, the wolfish smile of a predator about to devour his prey. He made his voice softer this time, barely more than a low growl. "Come back to bed, Tranorva."

"No." Her voice sounded petulant, almost childish so. "I am angry with ye."

"Aye. I'm sure you are. And with due cause. We shall discuss this anger, and the reasons for it. Later. Right now I have need of you for other reasons. Right now I want only to sink my cock into that tight, hot cunt of yours until you make me forget what a fool a man can be. I want to hold you and kiss you and fuck you until I forget there's a world out there waiting to share its problems with us. The world can wait. I want you to myself for the little time we have left."

He stretched out an arm, fingers reaching for her, his eyes feasting on the raw power and rugged beauty before him. "Come here."

She turned toward the door. "No. Ye will no' distract me with promises of sex."

"Do not make me chase you."

"Would ye? Would ye run naked after me through the ship?"

"You know I would."

Her face seemed to be at war with itself, a grin trying to rise through the anger. "I find I rather like that image."

She was closer, but he was faster. He reached the door first, blocking it like a defensive guard. He crouched slightly, ready to pounce, but she feigned left, then changed directions, diving across the bed with a shoulder roll. Damn agile for a seven-foot Warrior. He lunged to meet her, capturing her from behind as she tried to spin away from him. His hold around her waist brought her ass back firmly against his cock, which was, of course, right where he wanted it. Her teeth snapped at his throat as she twisted in his arms.



The feel of her hard, toned body ready to fight him made him want her even more. He lunged to meet her offensive, biting her lip as her teeth missed their mark. She countered with a wicked snarl that sent the blood pounding through his cock. They came together in an assault that was one step away from open warfare, growling as their tongues sparred for supremacy, darting between snapping teeth and lunging lips. He pulled her hips hard against his needy cock, grinding against her in an attempt to find some relief, and instead finding he wanted her even more. Her hands tangled in his hair, pulling him closer as her assault on his mouth deepened into something more demanding.

The undertunic she wore was in the way. She let go of him long enough to raise her arms as he yanked the thin leather up and over her head. She backed him across the room toward the bed -- or he pulled her toward it -- though they could not possibly have arrived there by mutual agreement. He thought to pin her there, driving his cock deep into a pussy that was already wet and more than ready for him. Instead she rolled with him until she was on top, driving herself down on his thick shaft until the coarse hair of her mons tangled with the dark, springy curls around the base of his cock.

He let her win for the moment, satisfied to pull her down far enough that he could capture an unbound breast, sucking the nipple into his mouth, flicking his tongue over the sensitive bud in the middle, teasing until she smashed down harder against him, riding him for all she was worth.

Her ride took on a fevered pitch, plunging up and down on the length of his cock until her skin glistened with sweat and her breath came in ragged gasps. Loosing his hold on her nipple, he caught her off guard, reversing their positions with a quick flip of her hips. He pulled her legs over his forearms, opening her wide as he pushed down into her, pausing to savor the moment. "My turn."

He caught her hands as she pulled at him, pushing them down against her breasts. "Show me what you want."

For a moment her dark eyes opened wide, staring up at him in confusion, before she arched up against him, her fingers brushing over her breasts. His cock twitched

hard within her as she pinched and twisted at the dark flesh of her nipples. A feral smile settled over her face. She raised a hand to her mouth, then went back to rolling the slick, glistening nipple between her hard Warriors' fingers. She moaned as she twisted and stretched the twin points of desire, grinding her hips up against him.

She squirmed, moaning in protest, as he pulled almost out of her, then cried out as he plunged in hard and fast. It wasn't enough. He could never get enough of her. He stroked hard against the top of her vagina, sliding a hand between them to play with her clit as he pounded into her. Hard and fast now, deep, sharp strokes that demanded. He got what he wanted. She came for him as he slid the hard ridge of his cock's head in and out over the sensitive spot she could never resist. He held for a moment, watching her face contort as the waves of sensation washed over her, loving the feeling of her hard muscled body contracting uncontrollably, all that power, all that strength, undone by the feel of his cock buried in her cunt.

He gave her but a short respite before he began again, pushing her hard, demanding more. Slick, wet flesh banged together with a sucking sound that urged him to more. *Harder. Faster. Deeper. More.* She twisted, trying to get away, gasping for breath as she came again, screeching out a thin, high-pitched wail. This time there was no relenting. He was too close. He needed too much. Wanted so much that it frightened him. Her hands rode his hips now, pushing, pulling, giving, taking.

She laughed as she raised her hips to meet him with each thrust, urging him on. She reached for him now, nipping, biting, kissing his lips, his chin, his shoulder. Never, never in all his more than a century as an expert in pleasuring women had he met one who demanded as much from him, or who gave him as much in return. She clenched her sheath around him, squeezing hard. In revenge he sat up straighter, wrapping her legs around his waist as he knelt between her thighs, leaving room enough between them so that he could see all of her. He grinned, loving the look of his ebony skin against her warm ivory tones. As he watched, her cunt swallowed his dark, glistening cock until it all but disappeared into swollen pink flesh, her body shaking with the impact of each thrust.

There was room now to slide his thumbs alongside her clit, sending her into an orgasm so strong that her hips rose convulsively off the bed. Her nails dug into his thighs as she twisted beneath him. The tight clench of her greedy pussy around his cock sent him over the edge, arching back hard as he made his final thrusts. He cried out with the pleasure that was almost pain as her cunt fisted around him, wringing the spurt of his seed from him like so much juice from an overripe lemon, sucking and squeezing until there was nothing left to give.

When at last the spasms that had held him rigid subsided, he slumped over her. She was the one who found her strength first. He was too exhausted to object as she cradled him against her chest, laughing against his hair as she smoothed it away from his face.

“You will be the death of me, woman.”

“Aye. One way or another. If I don’t strangle ye I may fuck ye to death.”

He curled more comfortably against her damp, flushed skin. “I can think of worse ways to go.”

She swatted weakly at him. “The real reason I have no’ killed ye yet is that ye keep me well entertained.”

Life slowly dripped back into his muscles. “Aye. Well, it’s good to have a purpose.” He thought to mention that Géndalaine had once said very much the same thing to him, but decided perhaps now was not the time.

## Chapter Four

"You said something earlier. About a Dragon?"

"Mmm." Tranorva ruffled her fingers through his hair. "I have no wish to discuss thy temper tantrums at the moment."

"Not me. You said I called forth another Dragon."

"Aye. Do ye not remember?"

"Not entirely. She -- I touched her somehow. She said my anger gave her strength. I couldn't let go. She was so hungry."

Tranorva's touch changed, becoming more the light stroke of a mother comforting her child than that of a lover. "She came to ye from the northeast. I was most jealous at first when I saw her coming, but she disappeared. From the sound of things, I should say she has been entertaining Balthain these last few hours."

Élandine groaned, hiding his head. "Balthain? Tåkuri is with Balthain? You mean they are lovers?"

"Aye. A noisy pair of lovers they are, too."

"No. I don't want to know this."

Tranorva's hand stilled in his hair. He felt her tense ever so slightly, as if preparing for a blow. "Is she -- was she thy lover?"

He didn't even try to smother his laughter this time. "Tåkuri? My lover? May the gods save me from such a fate. No. No, my love. Tåkuri has never been my lover. 'Tis much, much worse. She is my sister."

"Thy *sister*? That great blue Dragon is thy *sister*?"

He rolled to lie beside her, propping himself on his elbow to watch her face contort with rapid changes of emotion. "Well, half-sister. She is one of Pajja's get. One of hundreds. *Sidhe* breed true. A Human mother or a Bear, it matters not. My mother

was an Elf, one of the elite from Talismar. But she could have been a Dark Elf from Élahandara. *Sidhe* breed *Sidhe*. My father has sought to repopulate the world with *Sidhe*, siring children with any woman who would have him."

"And ye? How many *Sidhe* children have ye left behind? Shall Dragons begin to drop out of the sky, calling out to ye? 'Father! I have come home to ye!'"

Élandine stretched his length against her, fully recovered now. Dipping his head, he flicked his tongue over her breast where it jiggled with her laughter. "Should they do so, I will be as surprised as you, my darling. To the best of my knowledge, I have no offspring to date. Perhaps we should make some. Would you like that? A little baby Dragon of your own? They're so cute. Especially when they first learn to breathe fire."

"I suppose they shall all have tempers like their father's? Angry one moment yet demanding attention the next?"

"And they shall be as lovable as I am, too. But they will have their mother's strength, and her compassion."

Tranorva propped herself up on one elbow to face him. "I have no' heard of this fable. Their mother is no' known for her compassion. Lest ye mean the forbearance by which she allows ye to live when ye plague her so." She slid a hand behind his head to pull him closer. "Remind me again why I show ye such tolerance."

Perhaps Tâkuri had seen the right of it. Tranorva was not a woman -- a General -- who thought in terms of losing. Ever. Élandine ran his fingers through her hair at the temple, studying her bold features once more. "I love you, Tranorva. If you tell me you are going to walk back out of Élahandara, you and you alone I will believe, though of any other mortal I would think it impossible."

"I have no intention of dying in those accursed halls," she promised. "I will live to govern House VinDall, First House of Clan Bear. But tell me ye will stand on my right, father to my children, and the voice of reason when my Warrior's heart would rule, lest I too learn to breathe fire and roast all who petition me."

"I will be there at your side," he promised.

It was a promise he had every intention of keeping.

\* \* \*

*She stood over him, her smile indulgent as he looked up at her from the grass, his arms crossed under his head, the sun warming his skin, her smile warming his heart. "Come see what I have found." The light breeze lifted her hair around her face, like a dark halo glowing in the sunlight. She held something out, letting it fall into his waiting mouth. Even before he tasted the fruit he knew it would be plump and ripe and delicious. She always found the best strawberry patches.*

*A scream of fury rent the morning air. The children's laughter stopped as they all turned to look toward the sound, but the warning came too late. The darkness swept over them like a summer squall, slaughtering all in its path -- all except the children. The screams tore at his soul. He reached for his sword, knowing he was already too late. Then they were fighting, urging those who could to defend the gates, even though it was already too late, too late... They could not save the children...*

A shriek of pain and rage pulled him from his troubled sleep. "Father! Father, help us!"

"Anika?"

"No! No! Father, help me!"

"Anika, let go of the dreaming. Come back to me."

She fought him for a moment longer, her body as toned and tight as a Warrior expecting attack. At last she took a long, shuddering breath, relaxing slightly under his touch. "Calib?"

"I am here."

"The children. They -- we -- my mother's people were after the children."

"You had the dream as well, my love?"

"Dream? It must have been a dream, but it was so real! It was as if I were there, in the midst of the battle, yet apart, looking down on what was happening. I wanted to let my anger loose on those who attacked my charges, but I could not. I do not understand why. It was so hard to watch them die while I did so little. I fought them,

but I fought them as a Sorceress. My strongest spells were not enough to stem the tide. I cursed my father's house for the weakness of the form I was forced to assume. Why? Why could I not shift? The Dragon could have done so much... she could have saved them..."

Calib cradled her against his chest, rocking gently as he held her. "Think, M'Lady. Remember your history. In all the stories passed down to us, when did you ever hear even the legend of a Dragon?"

"I... the pass. The Pass of St. Gregory."

"And what happened there?"

She pulled back enough to stare up at him, her eyes widening in understanding. "The Knight slew the Dragon."

"Even in our times, when magic has returned to the lands, we know naught of Dragons. Why? If legends surround the death of just one of your kind, then the father you spoke of might well forbid his daughters to show themselves."

"People would have been afraid of us," she reasoned. "We're bigger. Faster. Stronger. I could -- the woman I dreamed about could have stopped them all. But she didn't. She wasn't allowed to shift. There was some great prohibition against her shifting. Maybe there was a war, between Mortals and Dragons. Maybe we learned never, never to show ourselves to the Mortals again."

"But why now? That's what I don't understand. The magic has returned. Why the need for secrecy now? Such magic could turn the tide of battle. Such magic could change the face of our lands."

"Such magic, such power as I felt, unleashed, could have destroyed all those who oppressed us. I could have single-handedly shifted the balance of power. Defeated the enemies of Clan Bear with a single blast of my breath."

Calib stared down at her, comprehension dawning. "Unless they'd had a Dragon, as well. One for each side, to keep the balance of power."

"And if one was good, two would be better. Or three. Or whole armies of Dragons."

“But how would one enslave a Dragon?”

Her skin grew cold as ice under his hands. “The same way one would enslave a Warrior. With loyalty and honor and love. In the dream, I was part of the Clan Bear. I was there with you. But had I come to that scene even a year ago, I would have come on my mother’s behalf. Perhaps she knew what I was all along. Perhaps I was to be her secret weapon. I can tell you she had no such power. Had I shown any sign of my true bloodlines earlier, my powers would have been worshipped. I would have owned my seat on the Sacred Council. I would have had my choice of mates, and I would have bred by now.”

The fear he’d lived with since he first touched her claimed his heart again. “You could still have all that. If that is what you want.”

Irritation flicked across her face as she rose to pace the small room. “Damn all males. Perhaps Mother was right. Perhaps you are too dense to be trained for anything besides pleasure slaves. Do you not understand what I am saying? Think, man-thing. Think! What do you know of spiders? How do they breed? There is a reason only the Queen and the High Priestesses of the Circle of Eight are allowed to reproduce!”

Calib swallowed hard. “Spiders -- spiders lay eggs. Hundreds of them.” He jumped to his feet. “We have to warn the others. How many? How many sisters were born of your brood?”

“I do not know. My mother never spoke of my sisters.”

“How many could there be? Dozens? Hundreds?”

“We are not as prolific as true spiders. Four or five at the most.”

“Five Dragons waiting for us inside that mountain. Clan Bear will all be gathered in one place again. But this time the balance of power will be shifted. It will be genocide. We have to warn the others.”

She shifted before him, faster than she had that first time, bigger and angrier than he’d seen her before. The great white Dragon blocked his path, her wings partially unfurled. “No. Ye shall not passss, little man-thing.” As if to emphasize her point, she



grinned at him -- if a grin it were -- her open mouth revealing dozens of razor-sharp teeth.

"Would you hold me here against my will, Anika? Is that what our love has come to?"

The Dragon's face showed what appeared to be sorrow. Still, the wings stretched farther, and a small singeing hint of flame scorched the air when she spoke. "Now iss not the time to be spreading rumorsss of armiesss of Dragonsss."

\* \* \*

A cry of rage and defiance tore Braunнан from her sleep. She reached for her weapons, instantly alert. Even as her hands closed over the hilt of her war hammer, she realized where the cry had come from. She rejected the weapon, rolling instead to wrap her warmth around Cullaelon's frigid body. As she stroked her hand over his shoulder, he drew in a hard, shuddering breath. "I am here, my love," she promised. "You are not alone."

"Braunнан?"

"Always, my mate. Forever and always."

His breath came in short gasps, as if he'd been running. Or fighting. Slowly his hard muscles relaxed under her touch. "I -- the dream. It was so real this time."

She didn't have to ask what dream. Only one dream would have affected him like this. "Our cubs are safe, Cullaelon. They will come next spring, when the world is green and the strawberries are full and ripe again. We shall have two, I think. A boy and a girl. To preserve the balance."

He rolled in her arms, his body warmer now, his touch light as he swept his hand over her thigh and up to rest on her belly. A low growl rumbled in his throat. "Are you sure, my love? Perhaps we need to store up a few more."

She adjusted her body to lie more comfortably against him, already nudging her breasts toward his exploring hand. "It never hurts to have extra embryos ready," she agreed. "They will keep until they are needed."

She reached for him in the darkness, knowing almost instinctively where his mouth would be. His teeth closed over her lip, sending shivers down her spine. He didn't ask questions now. His hands were firm and possessive, rolling her to her back, spreading her legs as he came to his knees between her thighs. She could see his silhouette in the early light of pre-dawn, a huge bear of a man who knelt over her now, his long hair loose, his shoulders blocking the moonlight that came in through the one small window, making him look wild and predatory.

Such was not far from the truth.

His talent for sensing the emotions of others seemed heightened since they'd been above ground. Almost as if he knew the small jolts of electricity his teeth had sent spiking through her, he reached now to graze her nipple with the edges of incisors that, while they were not as ferocious as the grizzly's, still reminded her of the power and strength with which the grizzly could so easily dominate her. A shiver of anticipation ran through her. She reached for him, intent on pulling his head down until he did more than just tease her aching breasts.

Or rather she tried to reach for him, and could not. Her arms wouldn't move. Braunnann fought momentarily against bonds she couldn't see or feel before understanding came to her. Cullaeron. Cullaeron was doing this with his mind. He must have sensed more than she'd wanted him to. She hadn't meant to encourage him to dominate her. Not like this. Had she?

Then his lips were on hers, biting, kissing, battling with her tongue as she tried to regain some control. His hands were everywhere, stroking, caressing, waging war against her senses. She squirmed, fighting him now, not to get away, but to get closer, pushing herself against the molten heat of his cock, so close, yet beyond her reach.

"Is there something you want, Mistress of the Fifth House?"

He was laughing at her. "You know what I want, you beast. Fuck me!"

He sat up again, leaving her cold and alone. "I don't think so. Not just yet."

The bonds still held her, arms above her head, legs spread wide, as if she'd been tied to posts the bed didn't have. "You have something better to do?"

"I just like looking at you. All that power. Muscle and bone, what is it without a mind as sharp as yours to go with it? And it's all wrapped up in a package that's as beautiful as it is powerful. From the first moment I saw you I wanted you."

Braunnnan snorted. "You thought I was a demoness."

"That doesn't mean I didn't want to fuck you."

In the name of the seven, what was he doing now? She whimpered as she saw what he'd gotten up to fetch. She'd found it in one of the waterfront shops just today. A bottle of cinnamon-scented oil. She wriggled against the restraints -- or perhaps in anticipation -- as he warmed the bottle in his hands. She knew from experience how warm his hands could be.

One small drop rolled out as he tilted the bottle, landing an eternity later to roll down the cleft of her sternum. The next, coming ages later, settled in the budded tip of her left nipple. It stayed there, hovering on the tip, while they both watched and waited, a warm, glistening drop of need that made her want to shriek. She couldn't object. She'd taught him this game. But still, the slow, thorough torture was going to drive her insane.

She jumped when the next drop hit her right nipple, sending both droplets spreading over her breasts in a slow, rolling wave. She bit her lip, hard, as two drops hit in fast succession, spreading like warm kisses over her mons. Her hips bucked up hard off the bed, but she couldn't reach anything now.

Strong, work-hardened hands moved to spread the oil over her body with long, sweeping strokes. She writhed and twisted against him, almost ready to come from just the touch of his hands on her skin. She wanted everything all at once. His hands. His lips. His tongue. His teeth. His cock. "Cullaelon!" she sobbed. "Now!"

"Now?" His cock teased her opening. "Is this what you want?"

The slow, steady friction as he slid into her sheath pushed her over the edge. Her muscles tightened around him, clamping him as the waves broke over her. "Yes!" she screeched. But it was not. She wanted that, and so much more.

He knew. He gave her what she wanted. Slow, deep thrusts. Hard, fast thrusts. His hands on her nipples, butterfly kisses against her belly, her shoulders, her throat. Harder. Faster. Slower. Deeper. Pushing now against the top of her vagina, demanding her response as she broke for him again with a long, shuddering moan.

His hand slipped beneath her, teasing the other opening with one thick, oiled finger. She trembled, pulling away from the finger, but he found her, pressing slowly until she allowed him in. She broke again as a fresh wave of sensations washed over her.

Two could play this game. She focused on the feel of his finger within her, imagining hers sliding deep within him, massaging the small knot of his prostate. While he might not be able to read her mind, exactly, his ability to feel her emotions seemed to give him a clear enough picture of what she was about. He stiffened within her for a moment, then began the dance again, his control clearly slipping as he plunged into her.

Her hands came free. She used them to clench at his hips, digging her nails in, pulling, pushing, urging him on. More. She wanted more. He gave it. Harder. Deeper. Faster. Faster. A glistening sheen of sweat stood out on his skin. She reached up to bite at his neck, bared to her now as he arched hard against her.

"Happy now?" he teased.

"Yes!" she laughed again.

He caught one of her heaving breasts in his mouth, sucking hard. She wrapped her legs around his waist, fighting to meet each stroke, pushing, demanding. She laughed in triumph as he tensed, his entire body stiffening, his quivering cock emptying his treasury into her for safekeeping. As the hot cum washed over her, she broke again, fisting around him, clenching hard, milking him of his seed.

The wracking shudders that bound them together seemed to go on forever, until at last he stilled within her, collapsing over her, spent and exhausted. "You shall be the death of me," he muttered against her damp skin.

"You are the life of me," she replied, wrapping her arms around him with what little strength she still possessed. "I love you, Cullaelon."

“As I love you. Forever and always, my love.”

“Forever and always.”

## Chapter Five

"Now isss not the time to be spreading rumorsss of armiesss of Dragonsss."

Calib stared at the angry Dragon who now held him trapped in their tiny room. He took a long, deep breath to steady his nerves. He must stay calm. Panic would gain him nothing. It wasn't as if he'd never had to fight his way out before. He could fight her if he had to. He knew how to take down a larger opponent. It didn't matter that he was unarmed. Three years in the arena had taught him more than he'd ever wanted to know about how to kill a man -- or anything else -- with or without weapons.

He didn't want to kill her. He'd rather meet his end than harm her. But he couldn't allow an angry Dragon to run amuck, either. He had to reach her on another level. This battle would be won with words, not with brute force. Once the first blow landed, he would already have lost. There had to be another way to reach her. The Dragon had him trapped, but the woman he loved was still there, trapped within the Dragon's fear and rage.

"Anika. The Dragon in your dreams, did she want to hurt people?"

"Yesss. She wanted to kill."

"Who? Who did she want to kill in the dreaming? Who were her enemies?"

The Dragon's focus shifted, looking back into the long ago. "Pain. Sssso much pain. The Dark Furiesss, they came for usss. Mussst kill. Mussst defend our peoplesss."

"Who were you in the dreaming, Anika? Who were you defending?"

The Dragon blinked slowly, an eyeball nearly as large as his hand disappearing and reappearing behind dark lashes and white scales. Thank the gods the room was so small. Had she materialized in proportions built to fit in a bigger room...

"The childrensss. The cubsss. They were after the cubsss."

"What cubs, Anika?"

"The babiesss! My babiesss. The cubsss of the House I was sworn to protect."

"What was the House, M'Lady? Whose House were you sworn to protect?"

She blinked again as she tried to remember. "The House my father assigned me to. The First House."

"The First House, Clan Bear."

"Yesss," she agreed reluctantly.

"I am of the Third House, Clan Bear. I am your friend and your ally, as my family was to yours that day. I have sworn an oath to defend you. I am a man of my word. I would not go back on that oath now."

The Dragon blinked again, slowly dissipating as if she had been but a thing of the mists. The woman who stood before him now looked shaken, but far from broken. "Even if my mother had planned to raise an army of Dragons, I think it would not have worked to her satisfaction. I never had my mother's full trust and support. I could not hide who I was, though I tried. I needed the light. I told myself I went to the sun for the effect it had on my skin, to hide my deformity, but the truth is I welcomed the sun's warmth."

Calib gathered her into his arms. "What you are is perfection, my love. The only true goodness to ever come out of that dark place."

She looked up at him, her deep violet eyes brimming with tears. "You see perfection where there is only failure, Calib. I could not be what my mother wanted me to be. I do not believe our kind was meant to live in the darkness. But I am not good, as you see me, either. I have killed. I will kill again. We are what we are. Such is my nature."

"I will never ask you to be aught but what you are, my love. I, too, have killed. I shall kill again. We are soldiers. Warriors trained to kill."

The tears broke loose to run silently down her cheeks. "Then let us pray only to fight on the side of right this time."

Calib kissed her, his arms around her the only promise he could make. He heard again Donovan's Prophecy in his mind. What was right? What was wrong? Was it right

to lead his woman into a battle that would surely pit her against her mother's people? Did her father's blood make so much difference? "We could avoid this war. We could take a ship out in the morning, in search of your father's people."

She shook her head. "I think that's what the dreams meant. The war is coming to us, and my father with it. Whatever happens, Calib, know that I have never regretted what we have found together. I love you, Calib. I love you as I never thought to love any male. I will face the dawn with you."

"Together," he agreed. "Side by side."

"Together."

\* \* \*

Donovan's song filtered through the soft light of dawn as they gathered. The rich, deep timbre of his voice reached straight into their souls. They listened, enchanted, as if they'd never really heard the Prophecy before.

*Come to me, my people,  
At the water's edge.  
Come to me, my Warriors.  
Let the blood flow.  
Come to me, my children.  
Let us cleanse the Earth.  
Let us sing the Song of the Bear.*

They listened together as they had dreamed together. The song had more meaning now. They were the people gathered at the water's edge. They were Warriors. They would make the blood flow. They would cleanse the earth. They would avenge their fathers. They would reclaim their children.

The voice chanted on, repeating the song, as weapons appeared from their stockpiles, and mail covered the ragtag assortment of tunics, until they began to look like an army. Soldiers lined the wharf, the army arranged like a mighty hand, its fingers jutting out into the water on piers that were barely fit to hold the weight of them all.



As the sun slipped above the horizon, the docks were still for the first time in a century. Onlookers watched from the hillside, spectators with only a passing interest in whatever had brought the day's labors to a close before they were even started.

And they waited. Warriors and merchants alike, they waited.

As the sun rose above the watery horizon, Donovan's voice grew quiet. The mists burned away with the full weight of the dawn, revealing what the night had hidden. A single ship sailed toward the City of Portsmouth -- a small, inauspicious ship that might otherwise have escaped notice.

"She comes."

Giselle watched him now from where she stood on the front porch of the inn. No more the drunkard slumped over her bar, he stood tall now, the wind that bore the ship to them spreading his hair out behind him like a pennant. He stood as the rest, outfitted in chainmail and battleaxe, and yet he stood apart, his voice the one that reached through the crowd, his song the one that had pulled them together.

His vision had built this army.

True, it was Braunnan and Cullaelon and Calib who had given the army form and weapons and armor, through their efforts and their organizational talents -- and with the help of Anika's fundraising capacities. But it was Donovan who gave them heart.

Giselle sighed. It would be easier if he wasn't so damnably handsome. No, it wouldn't. Because beyond that there was his voice. Her heart melted at the sound of his voice. It was all she could do to maintain her façade of indifference. She well knew who he fancied himself in love with. But when the General landed, when the army moved on, Giselle was the one who would be left here, alone once again. She had one fatherless child. She had no need of another.

\* \* \*

"What in the name of the nine hells is that?"

Tranorva lowered her glass without taking her eyes off the coastline.  
"Apparently, Mother, an army awaits us."

"An army." Evalayna's voice steadied. "Of course. I should have expected as much."

"Aye," Ayaila agreed. "Ye should have, Daughter. Ye know the prophecies. When Élahandara falls, she falls to an army. An army of Bears. Nafésti attempted to circumvent the Prophecy, but instead she only hastened her own demise."

Tranorva did spare her grandmother a glance, one eyebrow raised like a question mark. "Ye knew about this?"

It was Shammall, who stood at her side in the place of her consort, dressed in his finest blue silk robes, who answered. "The Prophecy has come down through the ages. I attempted to teach you these things when you were a child, M'Lady, but you had little time for history."

*Perhaps,* Tranorva thought to herself, *that was because it was not your words that interested me.* But she thought better than to say so aloud. The time for flirting with her lover was long past. Time now to be a general once again.

She had not counted on an army. Their party alone was enough to contend with in the cramped spaces of the halls of Élahandara. She had already separated the Bears from the Wolves, sending as many Bears as possible below, so that she might approach the front gates unnoticed. An army meant the loss of the element of surprise.

On the other hand, perhaps she could use that to her advantage. Obviously their original plan would no longer work. There was no such thing as the element of surprise when you had an army at your back. Already in her mind she rewrote her tactics, taking command as naturally as she donned her armor of a morning. The ground around the east gates of Élahandara was not suited to their mission. They would travel the most direct route. They would make their stand at the pass of St. Gregory.

"The pass of St. George."

Tranorva raised an eyebrow at her grandmother, unaware that she'd spoken her battle plans aloud. No. She hadn't. Grandmother was on a rant of her own.

"Our original tactics did not call for an army of well-armed bears. Those who await will be of no use in the tunnels. An army this size must have room to pass. The only way in is the pass of St. George."

"Who is Saint George?"

"According to *my* legends, it was Saint George who slew the Dragon."

Dahlai faced the old woman, anger shining in her lavender eyes. "They made him a Saint for this? And named a pass after him?"

"No," Tâkuri explained, reining in her daughter with a comforting hand on her shoulder. "The Pass was named for the Dragon, my dear. Saint Gregory was the Dragon. He was our father's father, your grandfather. He held back an army that threatened those he protected, though it cost him his life."

Ayaila's face wrinkled into a frown. "The Dragon? St. Gregory was the Dragon? Shammall, why didn't ye tell me this? All these years we have argued over the name of that damnable pass, and all ye had to do was explain it correctly!"

Shammall raised his shoulders and let them drop in an elegant show of unconcern. "Tâkuri is older than I am. She remembers much I did not learn in my histories."

Dahlai's troubled gaze traveled from her mother's face to that of her General. "Will we do the same? Will we die defending this pass?"

"I hope not," Tranorva told the young *Sidhe*. "I would no' lose any of those I love. Could it be done, I would see the whole of Élahandara fall without the loss of a single drop of blood. But such is no' the way of armies and wars, Dahlai."

Tranorva raised her head to look out over the small party that gathered on the ship's deck. "This may be the last time we are all together. Ye have been more than friends and family to me. Those of us who are gathered here on this ship are an army unto ourselves. The next few days will be hard. We shall find ourselves separated, husband from wife, mother from daughter, loved ones torn asunder. Such is the way of war. Wherever ye are, my faith is with all of ye. Ye are the best. No pack is stronger than the one we have forged."

Her father, the great Warrior Roahr VinDall, nodded once at her, pride apparent in his face as he watched her give her speech. Tranorva swallowed hard, fighting for her voice. When she spoke again, it was there, stronger than she'd expected, echoing off the water like the sea spray itself. "Know this. Before the sun sets tomorrow, Élahandara will fall. I have but one order for ye. Stand by this no matter what the cost. We will take no prisoners. We will leave no one behind."

\* \* \*

A Dragon. St. Gregory was the story of the last battle between a Mortal and a Dragon. The Dragons were the good guys in this story. Ayaila sighed. Sixty years in this strange and forbidding future, and she was still learning things a child should have known. She watched her granddaughter take charge, walking through the army of Bears that had gathered to await their arrival.

*You were right, Roanen. You were right to summon me. Our daughter has given birth to the future of this land. Evalayna tied us to the Prophecy when she ran off with that damnable Bear, Roahr VinDall, bless him. I tried to stop her, but never was there a more headstrong child.*

*Now the Prophecy comes full circle. We are tied to all the clans. I wish you had lived to see our grandson, Seanen. He is the image of you. My heart breaks when I look at him. He has allied us with the Elves of Talismar. Our youngest granddaughter, Cassadara, has allied our house once again with Yarishet and the Humans. And Tranorva. She is young and strong and so sure of herself. Everything we were not. She does not know the meaning of defeat. If she doubts, she hides it well. She is Clan Bear, Roahr's daughter. You would be so proud of her.*

Ayaila lowered her head that others might not see the tears that formed in her eyes. *I miss you so much, Roanen. Still, after all these years, I miss you so much. I have done the job you brought me here to do. The Prophecy is fulfilled. I need you, Roanen. I am ready to find you once again. Wait for me, Roanen. Wherever you are, wait for me.*

"Grandmother, ye will lead the Shamans at the attack on the gates. Ye --"

"No."

Tranorva blinked, in that slow, owlsh fashion of all Roanen's children. "No?"

Ayailla hid her smile. No one ever said no to Tranorva. The poor child looked a bit confounded. "This must end here, Granddaughter. Ye are the fulfillment of the Prophecy. The Élandra will fall. Under the dual onslaught of thy armies, the mountain itself will fall. Evalayna will lead the Shamans. I will go into the heart of the Élahandara. The best way to bring down a mountain is from within."

"Thy powers are legendary, Grandmother. Why waste them in a pile of rock that dampens magic?"

Ayailla sighed. "So ye say. I have had time to think on this since first we argued over this mission. Ye tell me there is a rock buried deep in the earth that makes my magic useless. What if I told ye this sand here on the beach will make thy axe blade dull? If I blow a handful in thy face will ye turn tail and run?"

There went that blink again. "I do not understand, Grandmother."

"The Élandra have told all who would listen that below the halls of Élahandara lies a rock so powerful that no magic may be used within its depths. I tell ye 'tis no' the rock that dampens the magic. Such a thing is no' possible. Were it so this rock would be quarried out of existence. Every fortification in the Northlands would bear evidence of such rock, a protection against attack by spell casters of every sort. Warriors would wear amulets of this ore about their necks as a ward against Shamans and Mages everywhere."

"We had no use of our magic below. We could not shift until we came into the sunlight. How can this be so if the rock has no power?" the one called Braunnnan demanded, her face a mixture of doubt and belief.

"'Tis not the rock that dampens the magic. 'Tis the *belief* in the rock. Should a wielder of magic doubt her ability for even a moment, her magic will falter. The rock has no power. Already the Élandra's hold begins to decay. Tâkuri was able to respond to Balthain's call from within the dungeons of Élahandara with Shammall's help. Thy mate, Cullaelon, had use of his gifts within the dungeon. The rock is a lie built on lies, used to keep Clan Bear from being a threat to those above."

"Then why do we mine the ore, if it has no magical properties? My people have mined this ore for decades. Where has it gone?"

"What color is the ore?"

"Color? Dark. Nearly black."

Ayailla laughed, knowing she was right. "Ye have all seen the gravel that covers the Pass of St. Gregory. Black gravel. Why is the gravel black when the cliffs above are granite gray?"

Braunnnan's face paled. "Gravel? For generations we have mined gravel?"

"According to Prophecy, Élahandara will fall to Clan Bear, and an army led by the She-Bear borne of the Wolf. Nafésti feared the Prophecy. When Tranorva was born, Nafésti set out to destroy Clan Bear. She did not know which child would wield the power, only that Roahr VinDall had mated with a She-Wolf. To thwart the Prophecy Nafésti tried to hold Clan Bear's magic captive. Ye have no' mined magical ore. Ye have but dug a hole in which to bury Clan Bear, lest Prophecy be fulfilled and Élahandara be brought to her knees. Another prophet named Mark foretold this day long ago. *'Whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea, and shall not doubt in his heart, whatsoever he saith shall come to pass.'*"

Or something like that. It had been at least sixty years since she'd read the Bible. She was an old woman, after all. God would just have to forgive her this rather liberal translation. And a good many other transgressions as well.

"Who would ye take with ye, Grandmother?"

Had she done that? Taken command of the party? Ayailla smiled. Some things did not change with time. So. She was to lead an army once again. "I would take a small party, made up only of volunteers. Our plans are changed. Many of ye who meant to go into the tunnels will be needed at Tranorva's side. We go no' for warfare, but to persuade the others within to come with us. Who will Clan Bear most trust?"

"I will go with you, M'Lady."

Balthain. She sensed his fear of the tunnels. She had tried to leave him a way out. "Ye are a good man, Balthain. I will welcome ye at my side."

"Where he goes I shall go," Tâkuri announced.

Well, that came as no surprise.

"We are with ye, M'Lady." Cullaelon and his woman, Braunnnan. "We are known to those below."

Shammall dropped to one knee before her, as he had those many years before, his face once again pale as death. "I live but to serve you, M'Lady. I will fight at your side this one last time."

*He knows.* Ayaila wrapped her arms around the Mage, hugging him tightly.

"I am with you." Roahr's voice, spoken softly, still held more power than she cared to contemplate. Evalayna had chosen the right man to father her cubs.

"We are with ye still, Grandmother."

Seanen. Dressed for battle, now, he wore Roanen's lost mail, and he carried the axe she had blessed so many years ago. He, and he alone, might dissuade her from her mission. "No. Thy place is with the army, Seanen. Ye and Yarwyn will be much needed there."

"Where ye go I will follow." Tyrell. "Mayhap ye are no' quite done with thy instruction of me, Grandmother. I would follow ye if only to see what mischief ye create this time."

Ayaila wanted to tell him no, that he should stay to fight with the other Shaman, but she knew better. She'd never won an argument with this one. She'd never been able to hide anything from him, either. He, more than any of the others, was her true protégé. "Very well. Four Bears, two *Sidhe*, and two of Clan Wolf. This is enough."

"One more." The Bard stepped forward. "The song was given to me. I should be the one to sing it."

"Aye. We are nine, then. So be it."

General Tranorva took command now. "'Twill take but a day to move the army to the pass of St. Gregory. The Sentinels of Élahandara will see us coming for miles. They will be focused on us. We will move slowly, marching as men once we are within range. We are strong, but we are not strong enough to take on all of Élahandara. We

will not engage the enemy until tomorrow's dawn. I will attempt a peaceful surrender, claiming my right as their Queen. If I fail we will fight all who come forth from the mountain, holding the pass as long as we can before we fall back, luring their forces out onto the plains beyond Yarishet. Once ye free the slaves, take them to the monastery of the Dwarves at the south end of the Élandra Mountains to be cared for. We will reform our line at the foot of the Monastery."

Braunna stepped forward, her voice strong and self-assured. "The slaves who work the mines of Élahandara are not prisoners, wasting away, waiting to be rescued from some forgotten dungeon. Clan Bear will fight."

Tranorva's brow raised in surprise. "We were led to believe the prisoners were in ill health, many dying."

Tákuri had the grace to blush as she spoke up. "Forgive me. I did not make myself clear. 'Tis their spirits that die, M'Lady, not their bodies. Many have given up believing in life beyond slavery. For them the above ground and the sunlight are myths, stories told by the old ones for the amusement of the children. I have tried to reach them through the dreaming, to keep the memories alive. Thanks to Shammall I have had the power to gift them with one last dream. Many will be ready, awaiting your rescue. Still, some will cling to what they have always known, believing the lies till the end. I fear you can only save those who will save themselves."

"My people will be ready," Braunna affirmed once again. "When they see that we have gone above, and returned, they will believe. We are seasoned miners, strong and well trained. Those from below will need time to adjust their eyes to the sunlight, but by the time we reach the Monastery you speak of we will be an army, not a wandering rabble of refugees. We will form the mortar against which you may grind the Élandra army to pieces."

"Very well. We will meet your army at the foot of the Élandras as the sun sets tomorrow."



She was to take her party in, then back out again, through tunnels that Balthain had expected to need at least two days to traverse, with an army to lead, in less than half that time? Ayaila looked to Balthain.

"We have found a way to travel the tunnels quickly, M'Lady." Balthain grinned at her as he shifted, not to the grizzly she'd come to recognize, but to a smallish brown bear, a miniature of his former self. She couldn't help herself. She covered her mouth with her hand, but the laughter leaked out.

Roahr VinDall made no attempt to hide his own great roar of laughter. His laughter turned into the song of a grizzled brown bear as he shifted smoothly to a form less than a third his usual size. The two males stood on their hind feet, pawing the air, reaching deadly claws into the morning sky. Braunnan and Cullaelon showed doubt on their faces, and managed but a small grizzly the first try, but by the second shifting they had achieved the new compact form as well.

Yes. Yes, this would work. The casters could maintain this form as an illusion. They could traverse the tunnels without pausing to duck or hunt for their way, their senses sharpened and their feet swift and sure on the rocks. Now all they had to do was figure out how to get Clan Bear out as quickly.

Ayaila turned to her daughter, the only child she'd ever given birth to, wrapping her arms around Evalayna in a brief hug. "I will see that thy Warrior returns to ye safely. Ye have done well. I love you, Evalayna." She turned away, her gesture including all her grandchildren. "Beware, Élahandara! The Northlanders unite! Thy day has come!"

The cheer taken up by those close enough to hear spread across the docks, a powerful wave of pent up aggression ready to be loosed. Tranorva turned, leading her party through the crowd that parted for her, her battleaxe raised high over her head. Ayaila held back, holding her party at the tail end of the marching army. Already too many knew of their plans. This was a mission best accomplished without the aid of banners and signposts. If the attention of the Élandra wavered...

It would not. There was a Prophecy to be fulfilled.

## Chapter Six

In a quiet town, on a peaceful evening, a party of nine such adventurers would have attracted a great deal of attention. Roahr. Balthain. Donovan. Cullaelon. Braunnnan. Five of Clan Bear's finest, well over six and a half feet tall each, weighing near eighteen stone, and bristling with weapons. Tâkuri and Shammall. Tall enough to dwarf the Humans, but overshadowed by the massive Clan Bear, yet still they stood out, fair and pale where the others were dark. These two shimmered with power barely concealed beneath their veil of humanity. Tyrell. Taller by half a head than the rest, long black hair streaked lightly with silver, he had inherited more of his mother's looks than his father's. There was little of Roahr to be seen in the man. Still, he had his father's eyes. Deadly. Determined.

Ayailla herself might not have attracted too much attention. Smaller than most in this land of giants, she walked now bent over her walking stick, as much a contrivance as a necessity. Still, she had not been born to this land where only the strong survived and a woman might expect to live past her hundred and thirtieth birthday. This body was feeling its age.

Yes, in any other place and time the nine would have been noticed, an exotic and deadly mix. However, with a small army amassed on the wharfs, they managed to blend into the crowd. 'Twas an easy enough thing to march with the others to the edge of town, past the Golden Eagle Gentlemen's Club, and then fade away from the main body of the army.

Balthain led them now, led them into the inn he had once frequented, stopping at the long bar to buy them all a mug of ale, chatting familiarly with the barkeep. Ayailla noted Donovan bristling at the attention the pretty young barkeep paid the Mercenary. They were barely out the back of the building and slinking along an alley that seemed

to lead nowhere before Donovan voiced the question they could all see on his face. "Have you an interest in her, Balthain?"

Balthain smiled, though his eyes narrowed. "Giselle? Naturally."

"Is not Tâkuri enough for you?"

Balthain turned to face the smaller man, crossing his thick forearms over his chest. "Exactly what is your interest in my daughter, Bard?"

Donovan paled. "Daughter?"

"Aye. Can you not see the family resemblance?"

Donovan looked the huge Mercenary over carefully, lending a dramatic effect to his answer. "Thank the gods, no."

Balthain tried to look fierce, but the look crumbled as laughter won over. He clamped a hand on the Bard's shoulder, lending a look of camaraderie to the group as they slipped out of town.

Ayailla lost track of the conversation as they reached the shoreline, remembering a beach she'd wandered long ago. She'd dreamed of a handsome Warrior that night, who waited for her in the shadows. Soon she would find him again. *Wait for me, Roanen. Wherever you are, wait for me.*

\* \* \*

*"We will travel for many miles underground through the storm drains, sometimes through brackish water waist high. A sudden storm in the mountains could sweep us away at any time. The sewage tunnels themselves are smaller, and foul, putrid with the smell of death and decay. And the tunnels are not empty. Dark things live there. Twisted things that belong to the perpetual night of the tunnels."*

Well, she couldn't say Balthain hadn't warned them. Ayailla's lips curled in disgust as she fought to keep her bear's head above the water. Fortunately when she'd shifted she'd pictured a young, powerful bear, ready to take on the dangers before them. Still, she didn't much care for the swimming part.

They didn't talk. Not that the bears couldn't communicate well enough, even those who but borrowed the forms. But they were too intent on their progress.

Shammall led now, setting a steady pace through the maze of tunnels, stopping only occasionally to test the air with his nose. If he felt any uncertainty over his choices, he did not allow it to show. Ayaila had placed a gentle charm over the party to protect them from attack, but it hardly seemed necessary. She'd felt no presence in the tunnels other than theirs. True, the tunnels were foul enough, but they hardly seemed deadly.

Which, of course, was precisely the wrong thought to think. As if she'd invoked the attack, the dark things sprang at them, almost the moment the nine dripping bears waded out of the water and into the smaller, dryer tunnel.

Small shrieks, like high-pitched whines, were the only warning they had as the foul things bounced off her shield. Whatever the attackers expected, were they even capable of thought, it could not have been that the shaggy, foul smelling things before them would turn out to be veteran Warriors.

Instinct and training took over. The party formed a phalanx, the Warriors taking the first line of defense, their teeth and claws at the ready. Within their perimeter the four magic users shed their Bear forms.

She'd never fought anything like this. It was like being attacked by the shadows. Ayaila reached for the first thought that came to her mind. Light. They needed light. The tunnel shaft began to glow as if the rock itself were luminescent.

Perhaps seeing what attacked them was not such a good idea. Large hairy bodies on spindly legs shuffled back a bit, their glittering eyes mirroring the glare of her light. Fangs dripping with venom clicked together as the attackers regrouped. Those of Clan Bear did not appear daunted by the sight of the giant spiders. Where Ayaila hesitated, the Warriors charged, their anger radiating as they ripped and sliced at the furry arachnids.

Evidently the Bears had some old scores to settle. The humor of the situation caught up with Ayaila as the Warriors attacked. She began to hum the tune to an old song, flinging fireballs over the heads of the bears, watching the spiders scatter.

"Ha! Take that, damn ye!" Three giant spiders went up in flames.

"Another one bites the dust. And another one gone, and another one gone. Another one bites the dust. And another one gone, and another one gone!"

"Grandmother? Are ye all right?"

The last of her song still echoed off the rock walls. Tyrell hunched beside her, his tall frame looking silly jammed in the small tunnel.

Oops. Ayaila laughed as the last of the spiders disappeared. "Queen's a bit before thy time, Tyrell, but I think ye would have liked them."

\* \* \*

"What are you making, Sandish?"

Sandish kept his eyes focused on his work, knowing better than to look up. Zañya was on the prowl again. He could smell her, already ripening. She'd be ready to mate soon enough. Well, he wasn't interested. Not this time. No matter how hard his cock twitched at the scent of her. "A tool."

"It doesn't look like a mining tool. What it is for?"

"'Tis a special punch, used to break rivets."

Had she cared enough to ask, he might have been fool enough to tell her what rivets, but Zañya did not ask. He had not expected her to. Her hand slid to his arm, headed straight for his crotch, he was sure. He swung the hammer again, making this strike harder than it needed to be. The reverberation echoed throughout the cavern. Zañya pulled back, fright flickering across her face for a quick moment.

She recovered all too quickly, her fear turning to predatory lust as she watched the muscles flex against his soot-darkened skin. He could read her like a template. Understood what she was thinking before she had puzzled the thoughts out for herself. He curled his upper lip in disgust. "I'm not interested, Zañya. Take what you're selling elsewhere."

Innocent protest lit her face. "I'm not selling anything! What would I have to sell? I came only to speak to you, Sandish. Is there offense in merely speaking to you?"

"Do not try your games with me, Zañya. Do you think me a fool, to be led about by the cock? I have no wish to fertilize your womb. Find yourself another sperm donor."

"You know the rules, Sandish. We are ordered by the Council to take every means possible to ensure the delivery of new cubs. Four of your last six matings have produced live cubs. I wish only to do my civic duty to the Clan."

His nostrils flared as he looked down at her, his hammer paused in mid swing. "'Tis the quality of the cubs that concerns me, Zañya, not the quantity."

"Am I not attractive to you? Men praise my beauty."

"You are quite beautiful, Zañya. You know that. That does not make me attracted to you."

Uh oh. He'd clearly exceeded her capacity for understanding. Her face screwed up in a parody of a frown, as though she wished to avoid wrinkling her brow prematurely. "I thought this was what a man desired in a mate."

How could he make her understand that he wanted more than the use of her body during mating season? That he had come to desire a relationship that might last for more than the span of days he could count on both hands? "I have a dream, Zañya. It comes to me in the night. A vision of Clan Bear as we once were, basking in the great light of the above. I want the things we once had. I want to not only father cubs, but to raise them to know freedom and responsibilities and family. I require in a mate that she share my vision for the future. Can you do that? Can you think beyond the mating to the life your cubs will live? Do you want them born into a life of slavery, where they will never see the light of day?"

The confusion on her face lifted slowly, to be replaced by a sardonic smile that argued with his view of reality. Her entire body language changed. Her left eyebrow tilted up as she folded her arms across her chest, gifting him with a view of a woman he had not seen before. "I would not be voicing these thoughts too loudly, Sandish. Someone might think you had been counting the days since Braunnnan and Cullaelon

disappeared, speculating on why they had not returned. Someone might wonder if your punch was not designed to loose the rivet from a torc, perhaps."

He drew his breath in sharply, his nostrils flaring wide at the scent of her. "If someone had such thoughts, why would someone wish to appear..."

"Vapid? Devoid of the sense the gods give a newborn cub? Such an act has been known to get a woman what she wants."

"I suppose such an act might work. Depending on what the woman in question wanted."

"If a woman wished to leave this place behind, to travel through the tunnels in search of the light, she might wish to learn all she could before she began her adventure. She might wish also to store away fertilized embryos, so that should she survive, only to find herself alone in a habitable world, her race might not die with her. She might also wish for a smith, with a mallet and a punch, who might remove the symbol of her subjugation from about her neck."

The smell of her was overpowering. Beauty. Brains. Enough of a sense of intrigue to have confounded him with her act for several seasons now. Sandish fought the urge to pull her into his arms, throwing her to the ground there in front of his forge. He forced himself to think with the head capable of reason. "A man might wonder, were he asked such a thing. To remove a prisoner's torc is to risk discovery and death."

Her eyes had darkened, showing large and liquid brown now, her breath coming in hard pulls that sent her breasts heaving as her chest expanded to draw in more air. She grinned, her teeth showing. "Then perhaps a man might pack his tools and carry them with him, so that this thing might be done where none would know. Or care."

His hammer dropped unnoticed to the ground. He caught her as she lunged at him, her legs settling around his waist as he pulled her against the hard bulge of his erection. The smell of her was driving him crazy. He had to have her. Had to have her now.

Evidently the feeling was mutual. Strong hands pulled at his clothing, ripping at the laces that held his leggings shut. Sharp teeth closed over his tunic, grazing the

nipple beneath. He reached for her tunic, anxious to find the soft skin that lay beneath it. Doing so allowed her to slide down his waist until his cock ground against her thrusting pelvis. Shit. This was never going to work. He needed more hands.

Next to his forge sat a water barrel, used for cooling molten metal pulled from the fire. Well, he knew of a few things that needed cooling right now. He sat her atop the barrel, freeing his hands to pull the tunic over her head. Beautifully sculpted breasts fell now at eye level, like ripe fruit ready to be picked. He grabbed one with his lips even as he fought with the ties on his leggings.

"Yes!" she gasped, shoving her nipple farther into his welcoming mouth. Her hands clawed at him as he lifted her down over his throbbing cock. What was left of his rational thought argued that this was wrong, taking her here like this where they could be discovered at any moment. His cock didn't care. She was already dripping with need as he shoved into her, pulling and clawing at him with the greed of her desire.

Sandish pushed her back against the forge's center beam, a massive chunk of oak that had been hauled in from above long before his birth. He had to curl his neck too far to maintain his hold on her breast, so he bit instead at whatever he could reach. His fingers dug into her hips, holding her hard and fast as he ground against her, seeking relief from the fast rising torment that touching her brought to him.

It didn't matter that just a few minutes before he'd thought her a vapid tramp looking for nothing more than the seed he could give her. He'd analyze his feelings later. For now, hot, dirty, gritty, sweaty need ruled all.

The harder he pounded his raging cock into her the more she demanded, clawing and scratching and biting as she pulled him even closer, her heels digging into his ass. "This won't take long," he gasped, reaching for her ear with his teeth.

"Good!" Her fingers found his nipple, sending a jolt through his system as she squeezed just a little too hard.

Too much! His cock surged within her, pounding furiously as he sought his relief. Her muscles clenched around him, her face contorting as she stiffened in his



arms, crying out as she clawed at him again. He grinned in satisfaction as he ground against her for a moment, giving her time to remember to breathe.

The flood of her orgasm washed over his cock, the bitter juices stinging slightly. He picked up the pace, feeling his balls draw up high and tight against the base of his cock, ready to explode. She wanted his seed? Who was he to deny her what was hers by right? Sweat stood out on his skin as he pistoned against her, shoving her back hard against the ancient oak beam. *Harder. Faster. Harder! Faster!* He lost all semblance of control as the final frantic thrusting took over, shaking his body with the strength of his urgency.

Dimly, somewhere in the back of his other brain, he felt the presence of others not far away. It mattered not. Let them see. Others might claim her later, but for this mating at least, he had been the first. He roared out his defiance as he broke, branding her with the heated flood of his seed, pumping into her with wave after wave of sweet release as he emptied himself into her greedy cunt. They clung together, gasping for breath, too limp and weak to even move.

At last Zañya stirred, reaching for something. She got as far as lifting a hand, then let it fall back to her side. "We have company," she panted against his ear.

Sandish saw what she was after, but he couldn't reach it either. Not without moving. He tried, and failed. "Give me a moment." Surely in a minute or two he'd have the strength to at least reach her tunic.

"We'll send a herald next time to make sure the timing's better," a voice from beyond the pavilion answered.

He knew that voice.

Braunnnan was back.

## Chapter Seven

"Do it again."

Sandish watched in disbelief as Braunnnan shifted smoothly from her own form to that of a thirty-stone female grizzly. Cullaelon followed. For a moment the massive giant stood pawing the air, his roar a warning to all who were nearby that Braunnnan was spoken for.

The message was clear enough. Sandish grinned. One woman was surely enough for him, at any case. "Keep the noise down. You'll be hard to explain to the guards."

The old woman -- some of them called her Grandmother -- tapped her walking stick on the ground authoritatively. "We have little time. General Tranorva's army awaits us above. They will hold the attention of the Élandra as long as they can, but the cost will be high. When do the guards change their posts?"

Sandish glanced at the lights on the wall of the great cavern. "The guards change shifts at the same times as the shift changes in the mines, so that for a short time there are four guards instead of two. We have just under an hour until the next shift change."

"There are but two guards?"

"At present, yes, Mistress."

Ayaila nodded her head thoughtfully. "We will need a diversion. We need someone to run to the guards for help, calling them away from their posts."

Zaňya volunteered immediately. "I'll get them. I'm a great actress!"

Sandish found that silly grin plastered to his face. He'd have a damn hard time arguing with her assessment. She was a fine actress. She tugged on his arm, pulling him toward the open side of the forge. "Lay here, where they can see you, as if you've been injured."

Sandish complied, stretching out beside the hammer he'd dropped earlier. Braunnan's party stepped behind the shelter of the forge, just out of sight. Zañya turned to run for help, then turned back, dropping to place a kiss on his forehead. "We're going to make it, Sandish. I know we will. Our cubs will be born in the sunlight."

"She's pregnant?"

Sandish couldn't suppress a wide grin, though he knew they could not see him. "Bit too soon to tell."

He could hear Braunnan start to snicker, then another sound, like her laughter being muffled by -- by something.

No. He wouldn't picture Cullaelon kissing the woman he'd once thought himself in love with. He was in too good a mood.

"Help! Help me!" Zañya's shrill scream echoed back across the great chamber. "Help me! Please, come quickly!"

Her voice faded away, but soon the sounds of running feet grew louder as the guards followed the hysterical woman back through the long chamber. "I found him like this! There's so much blood! I didn't know what to do. Please help him!"

"I don't see any blood."

"Look closer!"

Sandish wasn't sure what he was supposed to do, precisely, but he wasn't about to produce any blood for the guard who leaned down to poke at him, so he made a miraculous recovery, grabbing a guard under each arm as he regained his feet. "What do you want me to do with them now?"

The old woman stepped out of the shadows, her hand over her mouth as she tried to suppress her giggles. "Well, at this point we subdue them."

He looked down at the two flailing guards. "Then what?"

"Set them on their feet so we can get a good look at them."

Sandish did so, clamping a hand around the base of each one's neck.

"Ouch! Let go of me, damn it! You're pulling my hair!"

"Sorry, Darvon. Don't wiggle so much. Garrot, I'm really sorry about your uniform."

As if on cue, the two slim, pale ones from Braunnan's party shifted, but not to take on the form of the bears as they had first appeared. As they circled the guards he held, both of the pale beings became Élandra. Interestingly enough, they both appeared to be male now, their features rather bland and nondescript. After a few moments they became Darvon and Garrot.

"Ouch! Let go of me, damn it! You're pulling my hair!"

Sandish blinked. The voice was perfect, as well.

"Sandish? What's going on? Would you please put me down now?"

"Sorry, I can't. Much as I like the two of you, if I let go of you, you'll run upstairs and get me in big trouble."

"Sandish? What's going on? Would you please put me down now?"

Garrot with a woman's voice was just too funny. Sandish swallowed his laughter. "A little deeper."

"Sandish? What's going on? Would you please put me down now?"

Sandish nodded his approval. "That's perfect."

The two replacement guards nodded to one another. "When the shifts change we will send one guard back upstairs to tell the others we are remaining below. There seems to be trouble brewing."

Trouble would be putting it mildly.

"Clan meeting. Third shift's Great Hall. Pass the word." The message rumbled through the shift change like an echo of treason. "Clan meeting. Third shift's Great Hall. Pass the word." For the first time in decades the sounds of the pick axes fell silent. "Clan meeting. Third shift's Great Hall. Pass the word."

"When?"

"Now. Clan meeting. Third shift's Great Hall. Pass the word."

"Clan meeting. Third shift's Great Hall. Pass the word."

They stumbled in, some tired from hours of mining in the bowels of the earth, other roused prematurely from their sleep by the criers, yet others dressed and armed for work, their hammers in their hands and their clothes still free of the black dust that clung to everything.

Ayailla watched them find their places, like a choreographed performance, seated on the stone floor before her in straight lines, arranged, she was sure, by House and by rank.

Braunnnan spoke first, her voice loud enough to carry to the back of the gathering. "Many of you know me. I am Braunnnan, Third Shift Supervisor. I am also known as Mistress of the Fifth House, Clan Bear. For years I used this title merely to mock myself, and the legend of what we had once been. I have been on a long journey of self-discovery these past months. I stand before you now with no mockery in my heart today. I am Braunnnan, Mistress of the Fifth House, Clan Bear!"

A roar went up from the crowd, whether because they understood what she was trying to tell them, or because of the passion in her voice, Ayailla was not sure.

"These people you see here beside me believe in Clan Bear -- in what we once were, and what we shall be again. This is Cullaelon, my mate. Beside him stands Roahr VinDall, once an Élandra slave like us, who escaped to freedom these many years, and now Lord of House VinDall. Next is Donovan, the Bard, who also escaped, and has returned. Why would he come back? Why would any who finds life beyond these halls return? Because they believe in Clan Bear! Because they believe in what we will be once again!"

The crowd rose, roaring their support, their fists raised high.

Ayailla tapped her staff to the ground once, concentrating on the ceiling overhead. The room darkened, and the ceiling disappeared, a night sky filled with stars taking its place. The Bard stepped forward, his deep voice filling the silence as Clan Bear stared at the carpet of stars for the first time in over thirty years. As Donovan sang, Ayailla let the night sky fade into a fresh spring day, painting the scene the Bard sang on the stone walls.

*The Bear awakes in the spring.  
As the goddess she comes  
To rend the Earth.  
Hungry and powerful,  
Angry and desolate.  
Like the lone avenger she comes.*

*Come to me, my people,  
At the water's edge.  
Come to me, my Warriors.  
Let the blood flow.  
Come to me, my children.  
Let us cleanse the Earth.  
Let us sing the Song of the Bear.*

*She cries for her children,  
Ripped from her arms.  
She cries for her mate,  
But he is no more.  
She cries out for blood,  
In a voice that will not be still.*

*Come to me, my people,  
At the water's edge.  
Come to me, my Warriors.  
Let the blood flow.  
Come to me, my children.  
Let us cleanse the Earth.  
Let us sing the Song of the Bear.*

*Let us rend that which destroys.  
Let us maim that which defiles.  
Let us free all who are enslaved.  
Let us sing the song of sorrow in victory.  
Let us lament  
That which we must not forget.*

*Come to me, my people,  
At the water's edge.  
Come to me, my Warriors.  
Let the blood flow.  
Come to me, my children.  
Let us cleanse the Earth.*

*Let us sing the Song of the Bear.*

The room stayed silent, all staring in horror as the dreams Tâkuri had sent them played out across the ceiling, too real to escape. As the scene faded, with the final chorus, Ayaila focused in on Tranorva, General Tranorva now, her army standing ready at the gates of Élahandara, filling the pass of St. Gregory. Ayaila turned her General to face the crowd in the room, slowly raising her bloody battleaxe high over her head, her projection some twenty feet tall.

As Donovan's song faded and the lights came back to full, Roahr VinDall raised his battleaxe. "Tranorva!" he shouted. He shifted smoothly to his ursine form, a giant grizzly who nearly touched the ceiling when he rose to paw the air. His roar became a chant that echoed around the great hall. "Tranorva! Tranorva!" Following his lead, the others took up the chant before they shifted as well.

Ayaila leaned her head close against Tyrell's. "We will have to help them. We haven't got time for them to all run around fucking everything in sight until they shift for the first time. Take one from each rank. And think small. They won't all fit in here if they all turn into grizzlies!"

Tyrell merely nodded, the laughter she was so fond of lighting his eyes. He was not one of those Shamans who attracted attention to his work. He was subtle. Unobtrusive. Just as she'd taught him to be. He barely tapped his staff to the ground, and a middle-aged woman from the first shift assumed the form of a small brown bear.

She was faster, of course. Amidst the noise and confusion of the rallied masses, small brown bears started popping up all over her side of the room. After the first few they began appearing on their own as the battle lust took hold.

Even as the last of the bears shifted, the grunts and the growls still held the same message. "Tranorva! Tranorva!"

Clan Bear was ready for war.

\* \* \*

"What in the name of the gods is all that racket?"

Élandine/Darvon shrugged as if it were unimportant. "Games of some sort. Apparently today is some national holiday someone just remembered. Who knows? They don't seem to be causing any trouble. Just making a lot of noise."

The new pair shrugged, looking terminally bored. "Well, as long as we don't have to do anything about it."

"Maybe you better check it out."

"I'm not going. You go."

Darvon shook his head emphatically. "I'm not going down there."

Garrot sighed heavily. "Well, one of you better go. I've no desire to have some Priestess take a chunk out of my backside because she finds out there was a riot and we didn't report it."

One of the new ones gave a long, delicate shudder. "You know what happened to the Males who lost Mistress Anika. If it *is* a riot I'm out of here. I'll take my chances outside. I'll throw myself on the mercy of the Dwarves at the Monastery before I let myself be dismembered joint by joint to be eaten alive by a hungry Queen."

The second new guard, who had been quiet until now, shuddered more violently. "Good point. I'll go."

Tākuri turned to walk down the row of prisoner's cells as the other one disappeared. "Hey!" she called back after a moment. "Take a look at this!"

Élandine ran to her aide. The new guard was not far behind. As they moved aside to let him see into the small cell, Élandine snapped his neck.

The remaining guard came running back. "You won't believe this! They've all turned into bears!"

"Bears? You're kidding. I thought that was just a myth. Come take a look at this!"

As the last guard looked in on the bodies of his dead companions, Élandine added his corpse to the pile. "The Dwarves would have killed you on sight," he told the dead Élandra. "This death is more merciful than any the Priestesses above would have shown you."

\* \* \*



The woman Tyrell had changed first, the apparent leader of the First Shift, was the first one to change back to her human form. She came to the center of the small amphitheatre, her gaze determined as she met Ayaila and Tyrell head on. Had she somehow figured out that they'd helped her shift? Such did not seem possible.

"What about the cubs?"

"The cubs?"

"We cannot leave the cubs in the Élandra's possession."

Ayaila sifted through the picture of the party before her. There had been no one here much under the age of sixteen. Of course. How better to keep the slaves in check? The Élandra held the cubs. How had they missed that part? How had they not known?

Simple. Neither Braunnan nor any of the other Bears in their party had cubs.

She should have known things would not go this smoothly. "We will find the cubs. Tyrell goes to join Shammall and Tâkuri. Organize thy people. We have little time. Tell them to take only what they can carry easily in a pack on their shoulders. When ye shift, what ye wear will be bound to ye as if it were part of thy skin. But a bear has no hands to carry household goods."

"We have little enough. 'Twill not take us long to gather what we cannot live without."

"Tell thy people to reassemble here within the hour. We will be awaiting ye with the cubs."

Tyrell nodded once, understanding immediately what needed to be done. He shifted to wolf form to cross the Great Hall faster than he ever could have on foot. As unobtrusively as she could Ayaila gathered her party to her. One by one they shifted back to human form, immediately reading the worry she let show on her face.

"I want ye to think, all of ye. Remember everything ye know or have ever heard about this place. A passage that is no longer used. A tunnel that has been closed. A mineshaft that had to be sealed off suddenly for no explained reason. There must be something. If Shammall and Tâkuri encounter resistance, and I fear they may, we must

have another way out of here. We canna' retreat through the tunnels if we are under attack. The tunnels are too small. Those awaiting entrance would be too vulnerable."

The group fell silent. Braunnan answered first. "We could fight our way up, killing them as we go. Some would live to see daylight again."

Cullaelon nodded. "I will die before I let them put a torc back around my neck."

"A tunnel... There was... I think I remember..."

All eyes turned to Roahr VinDall. "My memories of this place are fractured, as you know. But many years ago, when I was cared for in the Monastery, I seem to remember the Dwarves discussing a tunnel. They were the ones who originally dug the mines of Élahandara, you know. That was not its name then of course. In any case, apparently when the Élandra were driven below ground, the Dwarves sealed off the entrance. When I was brought here, they became much concerned about Clan Bear. They gathered a council. I believe they thought to mount a rescue operation. Nothing ever came of the idea that I know of. I am not even sure the tunnel really exists."

"If it did, it would have to open somewhere near the Monastery," Ayailla reasoned. "We at least know what direction to look. Which halls or tunnels are closest to the southern tip of Élahandara?"

"This one is." Donovan gestured toward the back corner of the hall, where it narrowed into a darkened tunnel. "Only Third Shift has a great hall like this. That and the lake make this shift's chambers unique. No one ever goes down the tunnel at the other end. There was a rockslide there many years ago. It happened long before I was born. We were told the area was unstable."

Braunnan turned to face Ayailla, her face grim. "If there is another way out, that collapsed tunnel holds the key, M'Lady. We are miners. We can fix a tunnel. Give us enough time, and we can dig a tunnel through the mountain itself. We have food and water and all the tools we would ever need."

Braunnan gestured over their heads toward the arch of the roof where the other end of the Great Hall met with the shift change area leading to the mines and the tunnels. "For many years I have lain on this stone floor at night, studying this roof. That

which the Dwarves have constructed is perfectly symmetrical. This is not. There is a fissure, there, that runs through the far end of the chamber. With the right force and proper timing, we could seal ourselves off from the rest of Élahandara, just as the Dwarves must once have sealed themselves off from us."

Donovan stared up at the crack in fascination. "How did you plan to apply enough force? Have you calculated what it would take to blow that fissure?"

"Well, there was the flaw in my plan. We would have had to climb up there somehow and plant charges in the crack. And we don't have the charges. The guards give us those as we need them. I figured I might steal them one at a time over the course of a year. I did not think to have to manage such a feat in a few hours. Soon Cullaelon's powers may be strong enough to cause the fissure to collapse with his thoughts alone. He grows stronger every day. Yet I fear that day is not yet."

Ayailla stared up at the rock, and the hairline fracture that transected its highest point. So. This was how it was to be done. There was always logic behind magic. She had learned early on that one could not ask for what did not exist. There were no mirrors to be had in a land without glass. No huts could be built on a piece of the wind-swept tundra where no trees grew. But as long as the ingredients were at hand...

*"Whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea, and shall not doubt in his heart, whatsoever he saith shall come to pass."*

## Chapter Eight

"Halt!" General Tranorva raised her hand palm out. "Ye will show me proper respect! I have defeated High Priestess Géndalaine in combat. I have defeated First Chair Maelyn to defend my throne. I have defeated Nafésti, High Priestess of Talandar, in combat. By thy own laws I claim thy fealty. Know me! I am Tranorva, High Priestess of Élahandara! Put down thy weapons and kneel at my feet!"

By the gods. This was Tranorva's great plan?

While Tranorva's voice had the power to carry across the courtyard before the gates of Élahandara, Anika was too far away to hear the startled responses of the unfortunate guards. She could see, however, that the Sentinels held steadfast to their posts at the gate, as she would have herself. Anika resisted the urge to bury her face in Calibeth's arm.

"Who are ye?" General Tranorva demanded. "I would know thy names before I kill ye. How dare ye defy my divine right to thy fealty?"

It hadn't been so hard yesterday. She had marched with the army, at Calib's side, as they crossed the plains, heading directly for the pass of St. Gregory and the gates of Élahandara. She'd been caught up in the fever of Prophecy and war, as had the others. Those around them knew who she was, or who she pretended to be. It was easy enough to travel as Calib's slave, and she played her part well, well enough to keep suspicions and animosity at a minimum.

She'd even made a few friends. Calib's men trusted her. And there was Braunnan, and the woman at the bar, Giselle.

She'd never had friends before. She'd known and been known to many. Her mother's advisors and confidants, her classmates, the males who were always there to

serve her in any way she chose. But she'd never had friends. The concept of friendship was not part of the Élandra society.

Now General Tranorva stood at the gates to her home, demanding entrance. An army made up of her friends and acquaintances filled the pass, shadowing the meadows below. When Tranorva failed, and she would fail, when the gates of Élahandara opened to devour the enemy, Anika's friends would die.

If Tranorva's army prevailed, all that Anika had known before would be destroyed.

She had made her choice. She was not Élandra. She was -- whatever she was. She was Dragon. Somewhere she had a people of her own. Somewhere she had a family. A father. People who would love her as Calib loved her, not for her birth, or her social status, or the color of her skin, or for what she could do for them.

If they did not, even if she never found her own people, she had Calib. His love was unwavering. And Giselle, and Braunnan, and Donovan. She had already chosen. Now was not the time to question her own decisions.

'Twas not as if the Élandra would welcome her back. Once her secrets were discovered she would be set upon by the Circle of Eight and devoured.

She must be as ruthless as her mother's people would be. She must fight to defend her new clan as she defended herself. She called forth the dream, once again watching helplessly as the Élandra forces swooped down on Clan Bear, destroying all in their way. She felt again her anger and helplessness. No. Those who were capable of such destruction were not her family. Nafésti had never loved her as a daughter. Love was not known to the Élandra. Only power and fear. In the dream she had not been with the attackers. She had been at home, among friends and family.

The destruction had been so devastating. These were a people who loved their children, as every child should be loved. As Calib would love their children. Even if they had wings and coughed fire at him.

Maybe, just maybe, what Tranorva had in mind might work.

If it did not, could she stand by and watch her people, her charges, be slaughtered once again?

\* \* \*

"Take your army and go home, Tranorva. Had you managed to destroy the entire Council of Eight, still you cannot change the blood that flows in your veins. You are not Élandra. You shall never be Élandra. Only an Élandra High Priestess may sit on the council. The High Seat on the Council of Eight is mine by right of succession!"

"Ye are wrong. I have already been seated on the Council of Eight, Nellióne, and ye have sworn fealty to me. Ye did swear falsely then, or ye do now, one or the other. Ye have broken thy trust with the Council of Eight. I contest thy claim, Nellióne, and I challenge ye for the High Seat of Élahandara. I shall take back what is mine!"

Nellióne's laughter echoed through the pass. "I accept thy challenge! Ye shall not live to see the sun rise again. I lay claim to not only Géndalaine's trophy but all thy worldly possessions as well. Thy harem shall be mine to command as I drink thy blood!"

Géndalaine's trophy? Élandine? Surely Nellióne knew Élandine was dead. She had been present when he met Maelyn's knife, one of the few council members to have escaped with her life. Unless things had gone wrong below and he'd already been captured.

She could not, would not think of that. Not now. Élandine had been taking care of himself for centuries. Surely he could manage this one day alone. Tranorva fed on the anger that glimpses of Élandine's broken, battered body brought to her mind. She let her emotions show in a twisted, malicious grin. "Should ye, by some miracle, win, I fear ye shall be sadly disappointed. I do not have a harem just yet, Nellióne. I believe I shall have to take yours!"

Nellióne didn't waste time. She threw herself forward into a series of kicks that seemed to roll off her hips in rotation. The first kick caught Tranorva low on the ribs, sending her staggering back as she feigned injury. With the second she dropped to one knee, diving forward to come up hard under Nellióne's leg, yanking her off her feet.

Nellióne's grin told her she had miscalculated. While Tranorva's hands were still fisted tightly around Nellióne's ankle, the cat-like Sorceress twisted in midair to send fireballs flying at Tranorva's head.

The smell of burning hair filled her nostrils. Damn it. She was rather proud of her hair. Fortunately naught but a few recalcitrant wisps usually escaped her helmet. Still, it was her hair. Tranorva yanked upward, hard, on the ankle in her hands, throwing Nellióne off balance. As she released her grip on the smaller woman, Tranorva reached for the broad-bladed battleaxe strapped in the scabbard across her back. "I have had time to think about it, and I want neither thy chair nor thy harem, Nellióne. I only wish to watch ye die!"

Tranorva lunged as she spoke the words, her great axe springing into her hands as if the scabbard had been spring loaded. A single swing of the axe sent Nellióne's head tumbling across the courtyard, where it landed at the feet of the closest Sentinel. The Sentinel didn't hesitate. She screamed out a warning as she turned to run back through the gates. Both gates swung wide, now, making room for the soldiers within to spew forth.

Yes. This was as it was meant to be. Tranorva raised her bloody axe high over her head, screaming in defiance. Her army answered her call. The Élandra had let her come too close. The battleground was the courtyard, barely big enough to hold the advance guard of her army. There was not room for the Élandra to bring but a few units out of the gates before the courtyard was too full to allow further access. Those who fell were trampled under the feet of those attempting to rally the attack. Soon the courtyard was puddled with blood, and bodies began to pile up.

A battle, however, was rarely won by the foot soldiers alone. A blast of pure energy zapped by her head. Tranorva ducked, looking up in time to see the Élandra High Priestesses gathering on the balcony above the gates, their blasts now raining down on her troops. Well, she had some magic power of her own. The Shamans had already joined the battle, some deflecting the blows from above, some returning the attack.

One of the High Priestesses raised a horn to her lips, blowing three long, shrill blasts before one of the archers -- perhaps Yarwyn herself from the precision of the shot -- ended the call on a wavering note.

Too late. Somewhere high above them the ground began to tremble. The main body of the army turned to face the new attack. Tranorva looked over the headless body of her newest casualty to face the latest threat. Wonderful. Trolls. A fine way to spend the advancing morning. Trolls were huge, true enough, but the main danger one faced from them was being crushed beneath them as they fell. And of course there was the smell. An odor like rotting meat wafted off of them, even before they died. Tranorva's nose wrinkled at the thought.

Deep within the heart of Élahandara, the earth began to shake. All movement on the battlefield stilled for a moment as the seismic vibrations became stronger. Rocks began to rain down from the walls of the pass. If the pass collapsed...

"Retreat!" Tranorva ordered, her voice carrying across the stunned troops. "Sound the retreat!"

As the mountain trembled beneath their feet, the organized assault turned into chaos. Those who hadn't heard the order didn't need to be told. They turned to run. Boulders were raining down on the pass by the time she reached the relative safety of the plains below.

Tranorva rallied her troops, far enough from the pass to be safe from the onslaught of falling stone. Looking back she saw that stones were not all that funneled out of the mountains. Freed of the confines of their own limited space, the army of Dark Elves seemed to be growing at the base of the pass. There was no sign of the Trolls.

Very well. Bear against Dark Elf. Army to army. This was as it was meant to be. Tranorva waved her axe high above her head, welcoming the challenge.

Élahandara was not yet done. All eyes turned toward the mountain itself as the rocks began to emit a high-pitched scream. The noise grew in pitch and intensity. Far above them in the collapsing pass Tranorva could see Dark Elves pouring now from the mouth of the crumbling fortress. So be it. She would take them all on. She screamed out



her battle cry, a defiant challenge to end it all in one final battle. From somewhere behind her the cry echoed, taken up now by her army.

Another cry echoed across the battlefield -- the Dark Elves were regrouping at the opposite edge of what was to be their battlefield, ready to meet their attack. The enemy would be more dangerous now. They had no means of retreat. As the earth ceased her shaking, the last of the pass fell to the edges of the battlefield.

Tranorva glanced over her shoulder at the sound of a new, different cry. Hundreds of Bears with an old debt to settle came charging up from the direction of the City of Portsmouth, their enraged calls a demand for battle.

So. Their mission was accomplished. All that remained now was to destroy what was left of the enemy.

Tranorva led the assault, her army at her back. A wall of Sorcerers' fire blocked their way. Now Evalayna's power was displayed in an awe-inspiring blizzard. Shards of ice crystals quelled the flames, slowing the assault of their attackers. The Dark Elves battled the small stinging missiles with shields raised as they charged. The ground shook again as the two amassed armies flung themselves at each other's blades.

A shrill cry sounded, loud enough to be heard above the din of battle. Another wall of fire shot down between them, this one untouched by the Shamans' spells, the flames so intense both armies halted their attacks, scrambling back from the flames.

The sounds of battle faded into small whimpers of pain as the wounded clutched burnt skin or peeled out of glowing armor. The stench of raw power settled over them all. Battle lust still raging in her veins, Tranorva shielded her face with her arm, looking for the source of the fire. She had one mission. To kill. All who stood in her way would fall.

The source of the flames was not hard to locate. All she had to do was look up.

By the gods. Just what she needed. Another Dragon to contend with.

A giant white Dragon with a wingspan of more than forty feet hovered over the advanced lines of the armies. "No!" the shrill voice screamed, spraying more fire. "Enough!"

Blood still pounding in her ears, Tranorva slowly lowered her battleaxe. Obviously the charge was on hold for the moment.

The Dragon squelched her flames long enough to transform herself to the form of the Dark Elf slave who had traveled with one of the Clan bear. An Élandra? How could an Élandra Priestess take the form of a Dragon?

The Élandra Priestess, too, disappeared. Her ebony skin glowed, radiating an inner fire that spoke of immeasurable power as the Élandra Priestess took on the form of a Child of Light.

Another *Sidhe*. Lovely. Perhaps Pajja himself would show up soon to deliver some lecture about the sins of mankind.

This one looked just as incensed.

"What will this war accomplish? You will fight one another until one side or the other can no longer field enough soldiers to continue. For generations you have done this! With each new generation the hatred grows. If the Bears win, there are still the Trolls to be dealt with. And the Ogres. I hear the Orcs are already making a comeback. And if the Élandra win, the Wolves will still stand in your way. And the Elves. And the Dwarves. Will you continue until there are none left to fight? Sheath your blades, or do battle with me! I may be but one, but both armies may well perish before you destroy me!"

A second voice joined in, older, gentler, slightly amused. The great blue Dragon Tranorva had seen on shipboard appeared at the opposing end of the small space between the armies. "You are not alone, Sister. Too long have the Dragons stood by and watched as Mortals plotted the destruction of their races. There will be no great battle here today. In the future you may kill each other a few at a time if you escape our notice, but no longer will the Dragons stand by and do nothing as you lay waste to entire populations. This ends today!"

The great black Dragon swooped down now between the two, the downdraft from his wings nearly knocking Tranorva's helmet from her head. He circled, letting his power be felt, before he landed between the two armies. The Dragon faded, leaving the

Dark Elf known as Élandine in its place. Only he was not Élandine. The now familiar glow of power suffused his skin, until he stood between them, Élandine, but more. A dark-skinned Child of Light. The blue Dragon faded, leaving Tâkuri standing in her place, arms folded across her chest, an angry scowl on her beautiful face.

Élandine turned slowly, so that both armies could see what he was, his arms outstretched. "Has there not been enough death here today? With great power comes great responsibility. Too long have the *Sidhe* hidden in the shadows, leaving the affairs of men to be observed, but not interfered with. No longer will we be silent. As a people, each of you has a right to exist. No race has the right to commit genocide against its enemies. You must choose. Will you join forces to battle the *Sidhe* so that you may continue to slaughter each other? Or will you seek peace?"

Well, damn. The day had started off well enough. An entire army at her back, and an enemy to kill. Tranorva sighed. There was no point in trying to reason with one *Sidhe* on a mission, let alone three of them. She wiped her blade on the trampled grass and slid the great axe back into its scabbard.

From the opposing side, Maelyn's sister Analeas stepped forward. "Out of respect for the title you once claimed at the Circle of Eight, I grant you and your clan safe passage from these fields, Tranorva. Take your lover and go, before I change my mind."

Tranorva smiled. "I rather like this field. I thought perhaps we might rebuild the fabled great houses here. Take those of your kind who survive and leave whilst you can. We will not pursue our victory this date. It is enough that Élahandara lies in ruin."

"You are hopeless!" the one known as Anika shrieked. "Go! All of you! Take your armies and go before I lose what little patience I have and hunt you all down for the good of the earth!"

Élandine and Tâkuri exchanged glances. Tâkuri looked up at the newcomer speculatively. "I know where my children are. Besides, she has your temper."

Élandine shrugged. "She *could* be one of Father's get. She doesn't *have* to be mine."

"When was Pajja ever within the halls of the Élandra?" Tâkuri turned her attention to the two opposing leaders. "I'd hate to have to toast all of you, but I really can't stand by and watch while the fledgling does all the work. I suggest you go, while she's still willing to let you leave."

\* \* \*

Damn it. A perfectly good war, wasted. Tranorva stared at the Dragons in disbelief. "You wouldn't."

Flames licked at Tranorva's feet. The great black who was Élandine seemed to make her his personal mission, though his flames singed most of the front line of her army. Tranorva didn't have to sound the retreat. Analeas's remaining followers scrambled north, along the shattered base of the Élandra Mountains.

Tranorva led her army south. By the time they reached the Dwarven Monastery, the Dragons seemed to have given up pursuit. The Dwarves were waiting, their door open as the leaders gathered together within their great hall.

Tranorva gathered her injured dignity about her, taking stock of the situation. All in all, the day had been profitable, and the losses acceptably few. She took count as the leaders joined her. Her parents, Roahr VinDall and the lady Evalayna. Her brother Tyrell and her sister Cassadara, with her husband, Mâk. Seanen and Yarwyn. Braunnnan and Cullaelon. Balthain. Calibeth and the Bard, Donovan. And lastly, the three Dragons, now in their more familiar forms.

Tâkuri joined Balthain. Anika, the one who was apparently Élandine's daughter - - they would talk about that later -- went to join Calib. Shammall was the last to appear, crossing the hall slowly to her.

Well he might drag his feet. If he thought he was going to share her bed, after a performance like that, she'd...

Grief glittered in the handsome Mage's eyes as he approached her. Tranorva glanced around the room again, fear tingling down her spine. No. She was misreading his face. It was only that he feared her anger. Everyone was here. Everyone but...

No. That could not be right. Shammall did not cry. Not ever. No...

"I am sorry, Tranorva. I could not stop her. She said to tell you..." His voice wavered.

No. She was a little older perhaps, a little slower, but no less powerful. Nothing could ever stop her. No...

"What happened?" Was that her voice, sounding empty and hollow?

"She said Roanen had been waiting too long."

A thin, keening wail tore through the ancient hall as Shammall's arms closed around her, and then everything faded to black.

## Epilogue

She was positive that if she so much as blinked her eyes her head would explode. By the gods. What had she done? She knew well the price of expending too much energy. She knew where to draw the line. Had known since first Roanen called her to these lands.

*Roanen.*

Funny. She'd dreamed of him of late. Stupid, really. An old woman lusting after a man who had been dead half a century. But in her dreams she was young again, and he... he was as she'd first seen him. Young and handsome and virile, his skin bronzed and lightly oiled, his hands strong and sure as they stroked over her skin.

Nylanéfer's skin. Sennedjem's hands. A temple made of carved stone, much like the stone that surrounded her now.

She tried to turn her head to get a better look at the room, but the pain was too intense. She wanted to call out, ask some kind soul to bring her a damp, cool cloth to unglue her eyes, but she was afraid the sound of her own voice might shatter her brittle eyelids.

As if by magic, a cool cloth draped itself across her eyes.

Moving each muscle with care, she concentrated on slow, deep, even breathing. She could will the pain away. She'd done it before.

"Good morning, my love."

The voice was as it had ever been, smooth and low and charged with sex. With a word he could tell her that she was the center of his universe. With a touch she could feel the strength of his love. She laid her hand over his, experimenting with a smile. Her lips didn't break.

His fingers closed over hers, a gentle squeeze telling her all she needed to know. Who she was, where she was, no longer had any meaning. He was here. He loved her. "Kiss me, my love, and all that ails me shall be forgotten."

The long, silken waves of his hair brushed her chest as he bent, his kiss but a brush of a butterfly's wing, soft and sweet as a flower's nectar. She caught his lip with her own, sucking it gently until all that prime muscle melted beneath her touch. As he kissed her in earnest, she trusted herself to open her eyes at last.

She leaned back a little, getting a better look at him. So familiar, yet different. Skin bronzed by the sun. Dark, knowing eyes. Broad, powerful build. Long, dark hair that wrapped around her like a sensuous waterfall. The robe that hid the rest of his body from her might have been silk. It might have been nothing more than a housecoat. Or it might have been more...

You couldn't go back in time, could you? This had to be the future. Her future.

What was his name this time? What was hers?

Broad, blunt fingers traced her cheek with a gentle touch. "What troubles you, my love?"

"I -- nothing. It was but a dream."

He gathered her in his arms, cradling her head against his shoulder. "You dreamed of the past again."

"Aye."

"I'm sorry, Lydian. I know how the dreams distress you."

"It was so real. We were in the halls of Élahandara, leading Clan Bear to the surface. Shammall and Tâkuri found the cubs, but they were pursued. There was a weak place in the ceiling of the great hall. But it wasn't weak enough. It took all I had... the Dark Priestesses fled as the roof began to crumble. Shammall was calling to me, telling me to come, but it was already too late. They made it. They must have made it to the surface. The others had already found the tunnel that led to the Monastery..."

"They all made it out, my love. All of them."

"And Clan Bear?"

“Clan Bear flourishes, darling.”

“It was all over a long time ago.”

“A very long time ago. Later today, when you feel stronger, I shall send for Shammall, if you like. He loves talking about the old days with you.”

Yes. Of course. Shammall was Fey. He would still be here. Wherever, whenever here was. The past began to fade as she looked around the room at familiar surroundings. The bedroom. Her bedroom.

Her bedroom that she shared with her husband, Eireamon. Ayaila and Roanen had been long, long ago. Lydian swept her hand across Eireamon’s cheek, tracing her fingertips up to the tip of his long, pointed ear.

Elves. They were Elves. Death would not claim him this time. Not for more lifetimes than they’d already lived together. Laughter bubbled to her lips as Eireamon nuzzled his head into her touch. “Another time, another place, another world, it matters not. I love you, Sennedjem. As I have since the world was young. I shall love you still when our world begins to wither and die at the end of time.”

“As I love you, Nyla. For ever and always, my love.”

“Forever and always.”



## Glossary and brief history of Tir na nÓg and the *Sidhe*

*Tuatha Dé Danann*: the Irish Faeries. Long before the introduction of Christianity to Ireland, the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, who had perfected the use of magic, traveled on a cloud to the land that later would be called Ireland and settled there.

*Sidhe*: This term originally referred to the mounds in which Faeries lived, though it has now come to refer to the inhabitants of those mounds as well.

Tir na nÓg: The island of the *Sidhe*, or Faerie Folk. When the King's Court of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* left Ireland to separate themselves from Humankind, they isolated themselves on Tir na nÓg, a magical island unknown to mortals.

The King's and Queen's Courts: The *Tuatha Dé Danann* are divided into two courts. About three thousand years ago two factions arose within the Faerie nobility. Those of the Queen's Court felt that Humans, while flawed, showed promise, and should be given assistance through direct intervention and guidance. Those of the King's Court feared the destructive nature of the Humans would destroy the earth. They refused the Humans further aid. After the cataclysm restructured the earth, the King sent emissaries to the remaining Houses to try to guide the Humans away from their self-destructive ways. Although the two Courts now work toward the same goals, the King's and Queen's Courts have not yet reunited -- but that is a story for another day...

## **Shelby Morgen**

Shelby loves writing off-beat tales that defy as many rules as possible. She likes chocolate with her peanut butter, suspense with her romance, and kink with her sex. She's always had a hard time keeping science fiction, fantasy, and paranormal from mixing with her kink. Fortunately for Shelby, electronic publishing has opened many new doors for cross-genre authors and artists.

Visit Shelby's websites -- [www.MargaretRiley.com](http://www.MargaretRiley.com) to see what she's been up to as an editor, and [www.ShelbyMorgen.com](http://www.ShelbyMorgen.com) for her latest releases. For a head's up on new stuff, you're welcome to join her yahell group -- <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ShelbyMorgen/join>. When you can catch her awake and not buried up to her eyebrows in work, Shelby will assure you this is the best job in the world -- she's the keeper of dreams.