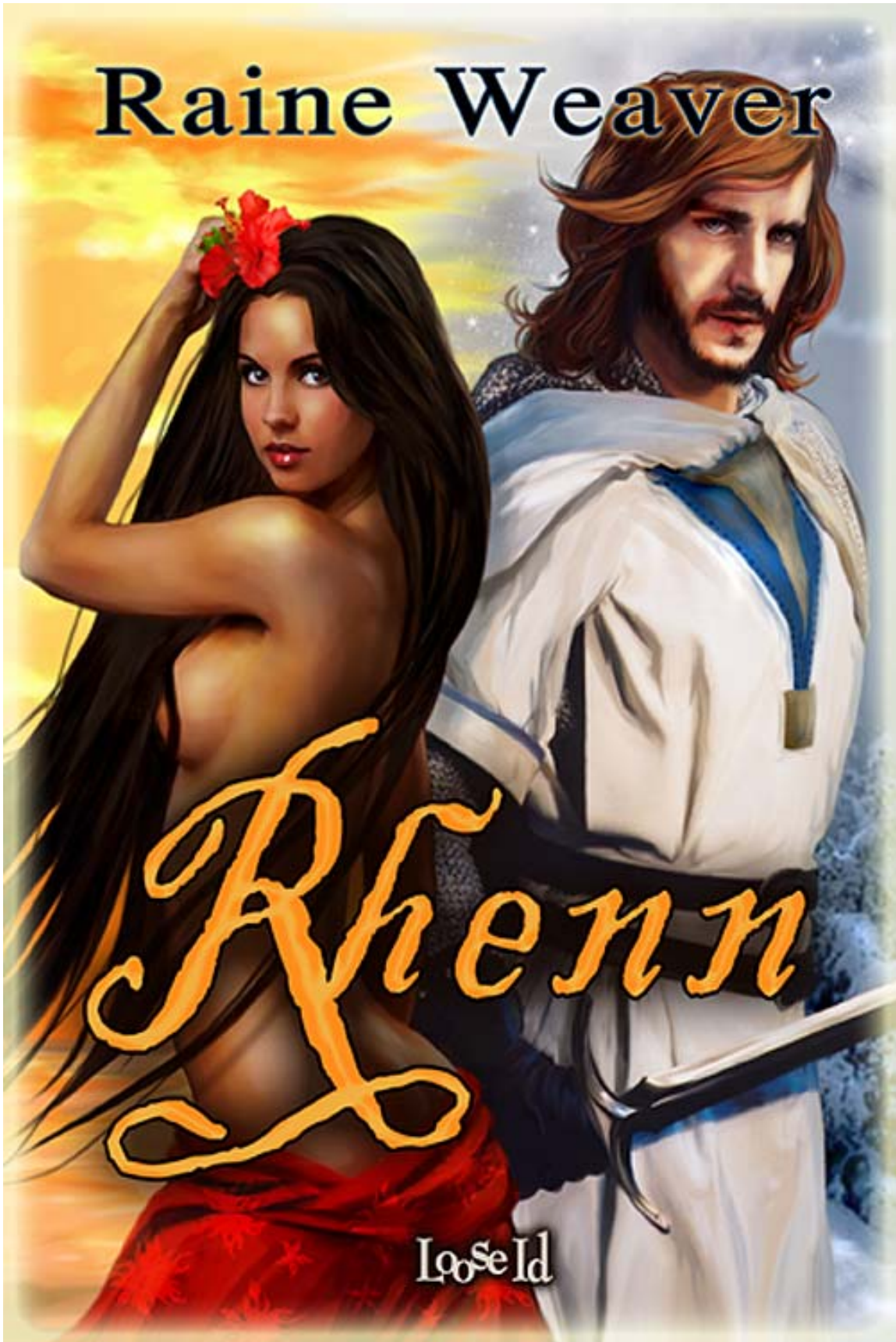


Raine Weaver



Rheinn

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Praise for the writing of Raine Weaver

Incubus

Incubus will make you wish you had dreams this hot! You can picture this little fishing cabin and the little backwoods town nearby the eccentric people living there. Raine Weaver has written a lovely, sensuous tale of dreams and following their path to make them your reality.

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Wow, this one is a real page-turner and will keep readers up late into the night to finish it... Intense love scenes and mythical plots are staples of this story. Raine Weaver has woven a story of passion and love that will have readers looking for more of her work.

-- Angel Brewer, *The Romance Studio*

The sense of mystery kept me glued to the book. *Incubus* is a good start for Ms. Weaver and I hope to read more from her in the future.

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Incubus is a dreamy tale of awakened desire and sensuality. Resigned to her lot in life, Sera is a woman who wants the fairy tale romance but has settled for Steve. That is, until Gabriel enters the picture... For a novella about love and passion that is worthy of its Hot rating, surf over to Loose Id for a copy of *Incubus*.

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Incubus is a captivating story from the start... Ms. Weaver brings a fresh new voice to the erotica genre; this is her first published e-book and I look forward to reading more of her work.

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Incubus is now available from Loose Id.

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Raine Weaver

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This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content and graphic language.

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Raine Weaver

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Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-29
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

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ISBN 1-59632-024-9

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Ansley Velarde

Cover Artist: Christine M. Griffin

Dedication

To B.K., aka 'Uhura', aka "Cuz"

Chapter One

It was his imagination, of course, that a seductively cool breeze seeped through the dark film cloaking the windows just as she entered. By Baltha's balls, it had been nearly eight circuits of the second moon since he'd been alone with a woman, so busy had he been in the service of his king.

Yet, here she was. A gift to him.

The diplomatic nature of this arrangement grated against his warrior's instinct. Oh, he'd accepted coin, jewels, and position from his own sovereign. But when he bedded a woman it was because he'd won her, conquered her -- not accepted her as a reward.

At least, he *assumed* this was a woman. Large, dark eyes stared at him above the veiled face and shapeless white shift that covered her figure. But even across the length of the room he could make out one slender, well-turned ankle and a deliciously musky scent, a tantalizing taste of things to come.

Lord Drey took a few steps forward, uncomfortable with the awkward situation. He had been told very little. Was she meant to be servant or companion? Was he to do as he pleased with her? What did a man say at a time like this? "You are the woman I have been gifted with?"

She closed her eyes and barely nodded, maintaining her stance near the doorway.

A slave. At best, an uneducated concubine. Somehow, it made him feel more at ease, despite the room that seemed to radiate heat. Wiping the ever-present sweat from his brow, he took a few steps closer and softened his tone lest he frighten her. “May I offer you anything?”

She mutely shook her head.

He cursed the position as emissary to this God-forsaken place that required him to do this. There were numerous women readily available to him in his own country, women waiting for his return. The kind of women he preferred, of ivory-blue skin and strong bones, and pale eyes that rivaled the changeable skies. Why bother with such games? “May I know your name?”

She smoothly removed the veil from her face. “Aryenne.”

Drey’s heart went still and silent in his chest, his mouth too dry to voice his astonishment.

Not one of the numerous battles he’d led as Premier Horseman for his king, nor the frigid nights in the field, nor even the threat of death had ever had such an effect on him.

Staggering. Devastating.

She took his breath away.

She was smaller in stature than the women of his country, women accustomed to hauling, hard work, and long, frigid winters that seemed without end. And her skin was darker, rich and glowing with the sun of this tropical land. But this was no slave. Her eyes were bright black and unafraid, meeting his without qualm. Her hair, perfectly coiled about her head, reflected the dark fire of the tall torches that lined the walls. Her cheekbones were high and haughty, and she spoke through the fullest, most enticing lips he’d ever seen.

Such exotic beauty brought on a new kind of discomfort, as he already felt a restless stirring below his sash. Too long. Too long without the heady heat of a female. He was eager now, ready to dispense with formalities. “Aryenne. A lovely name for a beautiful woman.”

He moved closer, close enough to touch her. How generous had the Makharian chieftains been? Already he was imagining unveiling her body, stripping away their differences. A woman was just a woman, after all. “May I see you, Aryenne? Will you remove your shift, or ...” He lightly fingered one of the many folds of material. “Or would you prefer that I do that for you?”

Her eyes slid to the shadows that danced on the walls behind her, where two large Makharian guards tended their posts outside the door. Only the tips of their spears were visible, but it seemed enough to unnerve her. She eased away from his fingers, demurely smoothing her gown. “I cannot, my lord.”

“You cannot what?”

“I cannot disrobe for you.”

“You cannot ...” He scratched the scrub on his face in confusion. Cursed awkward, this was! Had he misunderstood the arrangement? “I was led to believe ... I mean, I thought I was to ... we were to ... if you’re not to take your clothes off, then what, by my faith, are you doing here?!”

She moved toward him for the first time, her bare feet gliding smoothly across the floor. Her body flowed with the grace of a dream. “I am sorry, my Lord, that no one has made you aware of our customs. And you seem to be suffering from the heat. If you’ll sit, I will remove your boots for you. The shava stone is very cooling to the skin.”

He sat in the nearest woven chair and she immediately knelt before him, undoing the straps of his boots. The sweet scent of her filled his nostrils as he watched the long, tapered fingers at work. He quickly decided he enjoyed having her on her knees.

“It is forbidden for a priestess of the Hashier to completely disrobe before a man unless he declares himself her master and claims all of her favors,” she murmured. Setting the boots aside, she easily massaged his feet. “It is considered unseemly and distasteful. And since you are here for such a short time, there would be little point.”

Distasteful? To admire the body of a beautiful woman? No wonder their two countries had been at war for centuries. Their men were mad.

True, he was to be here only long enough to ensure that his king’s royal horses, a gift to the Makharian sovereign, would adapt to this new land. But he was, at heart, a soldier, a man of passion, not an ambassador. Surely they did not expect him to admire the girl from afar! “If you can’t ... if you are not allowed to ... then how are we to ...”

“Rise, sir, and see if that’s not better.”

He took a quick walk about the room, and grinned in boyish delight. The pocked black stone was springy beneath his feet, cool with the collected humidity of the day. He felt invigorated, his irritation with her quickly vanishing. The insufferable heat of the place had plagued him since his arrival days before; but he couldn’t bring himself to surrender his honored uniform for the bare loincloths of the male inhabitants. “Amazing! Surely a gift of the lesser gods! I had thought to perish by perspiration before my time here ended. We must deport some of this stone to my own land. It would be a welcome change from our cold, rock-hewn floors.”

“When the feet are at ease, the body responds in kind.” She casually reached for the sash at his waist. “Allow me to make you *more* comfortable, my lord.”

A jolt of disbelief turned his body to stone, even as she smiled. The mere touch of her slight fingers was enough to stiffen his desire. He could feel the heat of his excitement flush his face with embarrassment, and he grabbed her wrists, amazed at her audacity. Was the whore really brazen enough to make the first approach? “Woman -- what has possessed you?!”

“Sire?”

“Have you no sense of shame?” He dragged her to her feet with little effort. “A female never makes overtures to a man. It is one of the first rules of civilized behavior! She waits until he ... he ...”

Her dark, haunted eyes bored into his, forcing him to pause. To think. Idiot that he was -- how had he managed to forget this was not his home? These people were primitive, ignorant of the most basic social rules. They were even incapable of waging a proper war.

His king had made a mistake. His temperament was not suited to the post of ambassador. “I beg pardon, Aryenne. As you said -- I am ignorant of your ways. My own people frown on such aggressive behavior.”

“Yes, of course. Your non-aggressive nature is renowned.” She spoke quietly but clearly, her eyes never leaving his face. “Then it is my imagination, Lord Drey, that you are hurting my arms.”

Startled, he released her immediately, painfully aware of the imprint of his grip on her wrists. Such a delicate creature! Her bones were as fragile as kindling in his hands. He must be more careful with her. “We are very different people, I fear.”

She rose, bowing her head slightly, making him feel even guiltier by ignoring the marks left by his anger. “I only wished to please, m’lord. ’Twas meant to be a gift of gladness, not a torture.” A tiny smile played upon her full lips. “If you wish, sire, I shall await your pleasure by being very submissive and still.”

Was the witch mocking him? As if he wasn’t man enough to persuade her to submit?!

He had no illusions about himself. Although he’d been a soldier nearly all his life, he had no great liking for riches, or land, or the taste of death. It was the *victory* that spurred him on. The *challenge* that made him nearly as hard as he was right now, facing this small, feisty woman.

She stood arrow-straight, her tone quietly sincere, but her eyes -- those hauntingly beautiful eyes -- would not be intimidated. His blood, however, still boiled. He wanted her on her knees again, her moist mouth ready and waiting for him to spur her into responsiveness.

But on *his* terms, according to *his* beliefs.

Drey inhaled deeply, suddenly dizzy, as if he'd had too much wine. She smelled of the sea and sex, of fertile earth and flowers that bloomed at night. Her mouth was too generous to hide her bemused smile, and even the multi-layered gown could not disguise the curves of her hips, the sway of lush, full breasts beneath the gown.

The surrender behind that smile -- aye. There was the challenge. Here was a woman worth conquering.

Diplomacy be damned -- he would not leave this land before hearing her cry out his name as he took her. "Then I may assume that your duty *is* to warm my bed?"

"I am here for whatever you need, Lord Drey."

She spoke without hesitation, almost with ... pride? He took several deep breaths before speaking. The idea, just the *imagined* sensation of burying himself inside of her clouded his mind with fire. "You serve men at the bidding of your king? You would give pleasure to a total stranger without hesitation, without preliminaries?"

"Preliminaries?"

He silently swore to be patient. Perhaps he might do the poor backward creature some good. "In civilized society, it is a man's duty to ... to ..." He stammered, searching for words, "To prepare a woman to receive him favorably. She should require soft, suggestive words. She must be stroked and persuaded and --"

"Why?"

"Why?" He frowned. "Why, to make the ... the *act* more pleasant for the female."

"But there's no need of that in this case, sire."

“I can hardly be expected to simply mount a woman and have at it!” he cried. “You did not even welcome my touch!”

She blinked, confused. “My lord?”

“You would not let me touch you. Even the paid women of my land tolerate the caresses of their customers.”

She lifted her chin, eyeing him squarely. “You do not understand our ways, Lord Drey. I am a priestess of the Hashier -- not a whore. It isn’t necessary for you to touch me. My sole purpose is to please *you*.”

He nearly laughed at that. Was there some difference in her simple mind? “Then you would be content to simply lift your skirts and let me take you, without a word?”

Drey gasped, appalled, as the woman playfully bit her lip, lifting her shift slightly to bare her slender ankles. “Would my lord prefer front or back? Bush or bare?”

Drey’s sex swelled painfully, desperately seeking freedom as he attempted a feeble laugh. The shava stone seemed to lose its power. The room became unbearably hot again. “Few things are as pleasing as *sharing* pleasure, Aryenne! You do not enjoy your -- er, profession?”

“Enjoy?”

He grunted in frustration. “Aryenne, I am a soldier. I may not haunt the chambers of the Brigian noblewomen as many do, waiting until they see fit to toss me a spare morsel. But I’ve had many a woman. Never have I seen anyone remain so unaffected by the prospect.”

She shook her head slightly, bewildered. “But, my lord ... it is my *duty* to remain unaffected.”

’Twas difficult to tell which of them was more confused. “Duty? I don’t understand.”

“A Hashier priestess is privileged. Special. She is considered above the average woman, whose sole purpose is to marry and bear children. A priestess is selected at a very tender age.

Educated by the finest tutors. Taught to bring out her personal beauty. And schooled in the fine art of pleasing a man.”

She gracefully folded her hands before her. “But never, never is she permitted to feel or display any sign of her *own* pleasure. It is the most unpardonable sin, punishable by expulsion from the Sisterhood and the severest of penalties allowed by our laws.”

Drey shook his head in amazement. He could not imagine the women of Brigia not *insisting* upon satisfaction. “Responding to pleasure, a *sin*? Why would a woman submit to such a life?”

“Submit?” She smiled fully for the first time, and he felt a curious stirring in the muscles of his heart. Brilliant white teeth gleamed behind terra-rose lips, sloe-black eyes melding into lush fringes of lashes. She was stunning, the embodiment of temptation. He wanted that smile to be *for* him, not *at* him, to see it as he roused her to pleasure. Another moment and he would take her as an animal, just as she’d offered. “You still don’t understand, Lord Drey. I am descended from one of the oldest families in the land. It was an honor for me to be chosen for these duties. There are no servants in Makharia. There’s no submission. A woman chooses her place. If your men think of themselves as masters of your women, that is their privilege. But it gives you no right to mock our traditions.”

She had succinctly put him in his place without raising her voice above a whisper. “I meant no offense --”

“Tell me, Lord Drey -- who is more the master? The men who lose a little of themselves to us each time we serve them, or the women who serve yet maintain control?”

He was suddenly irritated with her again. How dare she remain so logical and impassive while his rod still raged behind its lacings? Quickly standing, he marched to the window. Had he thought her an “uneducated concubine?” A “fragile little thing?” She-devil!

Her voice sounded behind him, sweet and without guile. “Will you want my favors this night, Lord Drey? I’ve been trained to be passive, if need be.”

He pulled the netting away from the opening and swallowed great gulps of the perfumed evening air. "No."

There was a slight hesitation before she spoke again. "If I have offended in some way, sire, or if you find me undesirable, or would prefer another woman ..."

'Twas quite a gift, this. A woman he could have his way with, but who was not allowed to enjoy the pleasures of *his* body?

He would have to think on it. He was, of course, inherently superior, both as a Brigian and a male. But Drey, master soldier and horseman of the king's army -- unable to arouse a woman? It would not do. "You may leave me now."

"I ... I have angered you, lord?"

"Go!" He paused, then spoke without turning. "Aryenne."

"M'lord?"

"I hereby declare myself your master. Leave me with my thoughts tonight. But see that you attend me tomorrow, and every day thereafter -- until I tire of you."

"As you wish, Lord Drey."

* * * * *

Aryenne quickly washed her dress in the large bathing basin and spread it upon the window ledge to dry. A soft, lilting breeze made its way from the great ocean this night, soothing and fresh, and she stretched from toe to fingertip in its lush caress, ready for sleep. Her new master did not strike her as the most tolerant of men, and she thought it best to be clear of mind come the morrow.

She pounced naked upon her new bed and rolled around in delight. He had, at least, done well by her. The mattress was plump with the thick wool of the mountain sheep, the sheeting spun of the finest webs of the rare blue arachne that inhabited the dense interior of

their land. The room was fragrant with cut flowers of every color, the walls painted with realistic waterfalls bordered by ferns and tiny, beckoning winged creatures.

She curled into the softness of the bedding and smiled to herself. The room was far superior to her previous quarters, and the master much different than old Gesherom. Oh, he'd been kind enough to her, and his demands had certainly been few. He'd even become fond of her, shielding her from the jealousies of his wife and only sharing her with one other -- his own son. He'd trusted her to initiate the youth into the rites of manhood, and the boy had been so eager it was over as soon as it had begun.

But Lord Drey would not be so easily dealt with. She laughed to herself at his formality and his insistence upon continuing to wear the hot, heavy garments of his country. He who wore fur-lined boots in the stifling heat of Makharia had the arrogance of most of the Brigians. He assumed they were all simple-minded savages, blessed to be acknowledged by a superior race.

Yet, he had tried to be kind and gentle with her. No doubt he fancied himself master of the situation. He was a strong, proud man, not at all the monster she'd feared. It had been wicked of her to imply otherwise. She'd rectify that error hereafter. If she performed her duties well enough, perhaps the High Council might grant her early freedom from the Sisterhood.

And spending the next two weeks with Lord Drey might not be so unpleasant a task as she'd feared.

She allowed herself a moment to imagine him as more than a duty, away from the watchful eyes of her Sisters and prying ears of the ever-present Honor Guard. He was larger than the Makharian men, tall and broad-shouldered, with a carefully groomed beard and a shock of unruly hair the color of burnished copper, carelessly confined by a thin strand of some animal's hide. And the eyes, those vague, smoke-colored eyes that sharpened to flint when she said something unexpected ... there was both sensitivity and intelligence there. A

body to be admired, along with a warrior's spirit that had become legend, even among her own people.

He was surely twice as well-equipped as old Gersherom and a fraction of his age. She pressed her hand against the peculiar fluttering in her stomach. Remembering the massive size of his bulge, apparent even beneath the thick clothing, she imagined taking all of it inside as he impressed himself further and deeper. Instinctively, she flexed the secret muscles of womanhood, recalling the numerous exercises she had been taught. Her new charge would be vigorous and hungry. Good. A challenge and welcome experience for her. She would be able to give him much pleasure in their short time together, if she could persuade the stern-faced soldier to accept it.

And no matter if her mind drifted to forbidden thoughts as she gave herself to sleep. Even the Hashier acknowledged the superiority of the mysterious Mistress of Dreams in taking away one's sanity. And if she dreamed of lying safely in the strong arms of a gentle, pale giant who whispered of a forbidden forever, she would surely be forgiven.

Chapter Two

Drey approached the bathing house with long, energetic strides. Despite the shava stone and finally, sensibly, shedding his clothing, he'd spent a fitful night upon his sumptuous bedding.

The alien woman had planted a burr under his saddle and gone merrily about her business.

Now he was anxious, and far more tightly wound than he had been before her beauty had reminded him of his abstinence. And despite his order that she should attend him, he'd been unable to find her at dawn. Even the honor guard, following discreetly behind him, had no idea where she was.

He should have dismissed her immediately. She was too proud, too rebellious. Their two countries had just resolved a centuries-old conflict. What need of another? And what need had he of a cold-blooded female in such a tropical clime? The women of Brigia were warm enough, and eager to compete for the prestige of his favors when he returned.

But not yet. Not until he had settled matters here.

She was waiting for him in the bathhouse. He heard the splash as he entered, saw her slim figure cut through the water like a blade. A strange humming noise sounded in his head

as she covered the distance between them quickly. Massive frond-laden trees, growing through the open roof of the long building, moved restlessly above him, their branches shivering in welcome.

He nearly slipped upon the smooth, wet stone surrounding the pool, gaping like a stunned fish as she half-rose from the water to greet him. The metamorphosis was incredible. Gone were the discreet wrappings and demure demeanor of the night before. Her smile was wide with pleasure as she smoothed her long black hair away from her face, advancing toward him.

Drey watched Aryenne slowly climb the lapis-blue stairs cut into the floor of the pool, the thick, shining veil of hair clinging lovingly to her buttocks. She wore a short, rainbow-hued wrap rendered translucent by the water. The revealing garment made his heart hammer violently against his ribs. She was full of hip, her legs long and firm, and her waist so tiny as to put the most rigidly-corseted Brigian to shame. And such breasts! Large and full-formed, the pert nipples protruded through the scanty material, making his dry mouth water.

Her body was shining, glistening with some kind of oil, the smell producing a tart-like puckering of his mouth. He wanted to taste her, to run his tongue along every curve of her body, to thoroughly investigate every orifice. The oil was yet another one of their very interesting customs he'd have to learn about.

But not right now. His mind was occupied with other matters.

"A blessed dawn to you, m'lord." She remained two steps below him with a welcoming expression. The water ringed around her ankles, expanding into ever-widening circles in the pool and generating a muted, bell-like hum. "I hope you rested well. The night was very cool, but the day promises to be fair."

"Cool!" Her smile eliminated all anger, all irritation. Only the hunger remained. "I've yet to find a cool spot on your cursed peninsula, or know a single moment when a drop of

sweat was not coursing down my ... but no matter. How do you do it, witch? Is there magic in this place? The water *sings!*

She laughed at his incredulity, and he thought it the sweetest sound he'd ever heard. The water rang in response, as if liquid bells shuddered beneath the surface, and the pale blue color deepened to dark. "All life is part of life," she said softly. "Perhaps the reason Brigia is so barren is that its inhabitants have forgotten this. I am happy. The minute life-forms that inhabit the water sense the vibrations of my spirit and respond in kind, and the water, alive with them, is moved by the spirit of the organisms."

"Incredible." There was little life in the frigid oceans surrounding his land. Only the presence and promise of death.

This girl somehow made him forget all that.

She made *his* spirit sing. "You're different today, Aryenne. Open. More free. And far more beautiful than any goddess ever imagined by man." His voice melded into the surging song of the water as it hurried forward to greet him. Drey gently pushed aside a stray strand of wet hair that waved across her brow. "And am I permitted to touch you today, m'lady?"

"Permitted and welcome, sire. You are my master, for as long as your tenure here allows it."

There *was* a magic to the place. Swells of cool air wafted through the open roof and whispered through the trees, inciting the fronds to produce the sharp scent that discouraged the intrusion of insects. The pool was deep and perfumed with the fragrance of floating flowers drifting across its surface, and the water lightened or darkened according to the timbre of his voice. Even the tip of his finger, which had barely grazed her forehead, tingled with a strange, vibrating warmth. "But you are still not permitted to respond?"

"Will you sit, Lord Drey, and remove your robe? I believe I can chase away some of the chill of the night."

“Chill?” He laughed at the idea, and the water pulsed in lavender, radiating ripples. He had no doubt she could warm him, and without much effort. “And what makes you so happy this morning, Aryenne?”

She slid her hands inside the opening of his robe, spreading her fingers across the wall of his chest. “Having another chance to please you, m’lord.” He inhaled sharply as her hands lightly grazed his nipples, sending a bolt of desire through him. Detecting the knotted muscles in his shoulders, she began to rub them out. Leaning forward, she half-closed her eyes and lightly touched her lips to his.

Incredibly, his heart was already tripping at twice its normal speed. His tongue flicked tentatively against her lips, needing to taste her. There was a wild innocence there, a girlish ignorance of propriety that made his blood boil. She did not respond, but the softness of her body was enough to spur him on. He ran his thumb across the fullness of her lower lip, delighted that she did not resist, amazed at her failure to react. How could his caress mean nothing when his own skin burned everywhere she had touched him?

Drey skimmed her slender arms with his hands, and she did not shiver; encircled her tiny waist as he returned her kiss, but her mouth did not open to him. She smelled of some exotic spice, and his palms tingled with the substance he had lifted from her skin. “Your culture intrigues me. What is this oily coating you wear, sorceress? Something to keep the skin supple?”

Her teeth were bright white against her dusky skin. “I would rather show than tell you, master. Am I permitted?”

As if he could deny her anything right now! Working her way between his thighs, she slid the robe from his shoulders, grinning at the badly-wrapped loincloth he wore beneath, already pouched with his lust. Pressing her body against his, she forced him backward onto the robe, nibbling at his earlobe, then his throat, her nipples grazing his chest. Her fingernails raked the rack of his abdomen, prompting his erection to lunge at her, seeking her wet heat. He could not contain himself. His need clawed at his insides, ripping his

resolve to shreds. Cupping her firm buttocks, he pulled her against him, hips instinctively gyrating. By all the blood shed upon the Black Sea -- she wore nothing beneath the flimsy cloth.

Stifling a groan, he watched as she rose, turning her back to him. Twisting her hips in such a way that he feared his heart would stop, Aryenne peeled the wet frock from her body, walked back into the pool, and tossed it among the flowers. Half-submerged, her breasts blooming above the waterline, she faced him and beckoned. "Will you come, m'lord?"

Would he come? As hard as he could, as often as he could. In her delicious mouth, all over that tawny, satin skin, between those sleek thighs, and as deeply inside as he could drive himself. He tore the loincloth from his body and boldly walked toward her, his painful erection preceding him by considerable inches.

"Here, at the edge of the pool, sire."

Aryenne waited until he had seated himself, his pale skin flush with eagerness, before climbing two more steps and softly taking his straining shaft into her grasp. "The oil is squeezed from the stem of the *quazola* plant. We use it on our bodies to dispel the chill of an exceptionally cool night, or for the aches that sometime come with age, or in preparation for war or strenuous duty." She lightly rubbed his swollen cock with both hands, and he gasped. Her fingers were hot, as if burning with fever. He felt himself grow thicker, the veins expanding and protruding as if ready to burst.

"The *quazola* oil increases circulation to whatever part of the body it is applied to. Shall I demonstrate, Lord Drey?"

His glance flickered to the honor guard, standing at the entrance to the pool, who watched them with some interest. "Perhaps we should do something about the men," he gasped, his hunger surging between her fingers with its own single-minded purpose.

She glanced casually upward at the guardsmen. "Would you like to have them join us, sire?"

“*No!*” he shouted, his voice echoing about the walls, startling the tiny red birds that nestled in the branch-roofing. Curse the witch, he had no doubt she could handle them all, leave them wanting more. It was tempting, the thought of watching her with other men -- but no. He was too famished to share. He would have her to himself, and she would exorcise this deliciously excruciating ache she had prompted within him.

“Another time, then. You wished to learn something of our culture, m’lord? Perhaps you will see why we feel no need to wage war. There are better ways to stir the blood.”

She hovered just before him and gently held his throbbing cock to her heart. The gesture seemed surprisingly tender -- until he realized that the bulk of the oil had settled there, in the valley between her breasts. He leaned backward, on fire, speechless. The intense heat seeped beneath his skin, stimulating, torturing, and the lower half of his body lurched upward, demanding more.

Aryenne quickly released her hold and, pressing her ample breasts together, captured his tortured rod between the fiery mounds of her flesh.

“*Daemon!*” he ground out as she held him there, fire feeding fire. The irresistible softness of her held him captive, and he cursed her in his native tongue as he drove deeper between, his sacs tingling now, urging his molten semen upward. All thought of propriety or power was lost as she moved upon him, slowly at first, buoyed by the water, then faster, faster, matching him thrust for thrust. The silken stocks embraced him, pumping the very life force from him, urging him on.

The oil seared into his skin, mingling with his sweat, the water, his pre-cum, the heat of her body. An increasing tide surged within the confines of the pool, the water darkening to crimson, lapping against Aryenne’s body as he held onto the ledge for dear life. Somewhere in the distance he heard the vague sounds of the guards’ casual conversation, fading as his body’s hunger roared in his ears. Everything before his eyes turned red and he closed them with what he was sure was his death-groan. Time was lost, eons of cultivated behavior abandoned. He was a beast, his only need to take, to release. With an intensity that

drove him to madness, his liquid spirit erupted in forceful, sporadic streams until he lay limp and spent, floating in the storm-gray skies of Brigia, warmed by the white-hot sun of Makharia.

* * * * *

“Come, Lord Drey. The water will invigorate you.”

The great soldier appeared to stagger to his feet and fall, rather than jump, into the pool. Immediately the thick water transformed itself into a mass of miniscule bubbles. Aryenne watched as his leaden body seemed to lighten and cool, and he slowly managed to make his way toward her. Breaking through the surface, he hoisted himself onto the surrounding ledge, landing right beside her.

Her eyes wide with mock innocence, she patiently wrung the water from her hair. “What think you of our primitive society, Lord Drey?”

He coughed, stifling a laugh, and waved to the smiling guards at the opposite end. “There is definitely something to be said for cultural exchange.”

Aryenne watched him shake himself like a dog, dangling his legs lazily in the pool. She liked him this way, loose and relaxed -- and without clothing.

He was a huge, magnificent figure of a man.

He'd loosened his mane for the swim, and it fell in layered waves to his shoulders, dripping water onto the thick thatch of hair covering his chest. He was well-muscled, his buttocks firm and taut as he perched wide-legged upon the ledge, as if sitting a horse. The instrument between his hard thighs was the largest she'd ever seen, still semi-strong from its vigorous exercise. He was certainly not lacking in *saphear*, the primary male sex drive. Once *quazola* oil was applied, most men were done within seconds of the first strategic stroke. The Brigian had impressed even the honor guard. He had the stamina of the stallions he tamed, and enjoyed the journey as much as the climax.

However, his expression was indecipherable. She wasn't sure whether she had pleased or simply satisfied him. And for some reason, she was determined to make this man happy.

Pride in her craft. Yes, that was it.

"Now I understand why your king was so generous." His chest was still heaving, but a sparkle of male appreciation gleamed in his eyes. "Your real mission is to drain me of life."

"The throes of death seem to agree with my lord."

Drey sniffed, allowing his feet to float in the water, which did not react to him. It had become flat and smoke-gray. Trouble lurked below the surface. "Despite your inappropriate behavior, I believe we should talk."

"Talk?"

"You are permitted to converse?"

"Permitted and trained to do so, on any subject, sire."

"You excel in your craft, Aryenne."

Aryenne gave her hair a strong, sharp twist. "I'm not certain you mean that as a compliment, Lord Drey."

"Have you practiced your art on many men?"

"I perform my duty, sire, just as you do."

"You avoid the question."

"Also part of the training, sire."

"Damn your training. Answer!"

"Men? More than one, less than a legion." Her lips twitched with mischief, despite her best efforts. "But I am still young. There's still time."

She watched his jaw lock, his eyes turn cold. She did not amuse him. Nothing she did, apparently, was good enough to please the man.

"And will you be allowed to marry one day?"

“If I wish. And if the High Council releases me from my charge, and my father consents to the union.”

“And then will you allow yourself to experience pleasure at the hands of your husband?”

She sighed dramatically. “Twill be difficult, m’lord, after having a man so generously endowed as yourself.”

“Ha! More of your art. And how many men have you said *that* to?”

She slipped her hand between his thighs, slowly working her way upward. If there was ever a man who could stir her passions, liberate any feeling locked inside her frigid body, this was the man. “Not a one. Until now, Lord Drey.”

* * * * *

Her voice was sincere, and her gaze held a wistfulness he’d never seen there. Already he was reacting to her hand as it inched higher in slow, teasing circles. His sex surged forward, upward, ready to engage this delicious enemy again. Small beads of water, repelled by the *quazola* oil, slipped in tempting trails down the slick surface of her body. He wanted to taste every drop with his tongue, bury his sword to the hilt inside her ...

No. Not this time. He was determined to remain in charge this time.

“Although you’ve told me what your customs are, I confess to not *understanding* them.” He placed his hand on hers, staying its wandering. “This ‘Hashier’ you speak of -- ’tis a strange concept to me. I certainly approve of females eager to please their men. But isn’t a woman who receives pleasure more loving, more devoted?”

“No doubt.” Her eyes were glued to his lower torso as if fascinated, making him even stiffer. “She is also more demanding, sometimes dependent. A man who is forced to see to the needs of his woman has less time for himself. Makharia has many important men in

important positions, men with little time to spare. We serve them without needing to be served in return. Hashier are highly valued in our society.”

“Hmmp! Position and duty are poor excuses for misusing the body of a woman,” he muttered.

Aryenne’s hand stiffened on his thigh. “I have heard stories about your country. Your king claims what is called the ‘Royal Right,’ does he not? The right to claim any woman for a moment’s pleasure, whether she be maiden or married? You consider that civilized, m’lord?”

He could not, in good conscience, argue with her logic. Her training had been thorough indeed. “And have you never felt the desire to question your rules, to wonder how life might be otherwise, among other people, other places?”

“Other places? There is only Brigia, a cold, barren land. And Verdin, of course, the small chain of islands that bind the center of Rhenn.” She made small circles in the water with her toe. “My father visited there as a youth. He said it was a peculiar place of lost tribes and strange contrasts. Their seasons range from unbearably cold to extremes of heat, and the inhabitants must work the land to simply survive. But I, as a woman, would never be allowed to journey there alone.”

“Brigia is not as formidable as you might think. It is cold. Often brutal. But it has a beauty of its own. Frozen lakes, silver-smooth. Small continents of blue ice that roam the Great Sea. Phantom lights of dancing color, like painted patterns in the night sky.” He peered through the open roof, squinting at the azure sky veined with pink that never completely darkened here. He missed the cold stars that shone so brightly in Brigia. “Our skygazers tell us that Rhenn is a relatively small place, and that some of the lights in the sky are actually nearby worlds, dwarfing our own by comparison. We hope to be able to travel to them one day.”

“Your people, I hear, are very fond of exploration. Conquest.”

“Conquest? Have we not signed a treaty with your people?”

“Indeed, m’lord. After centuries of being unable to defeat us. You came to our shores, and we greeted you. You tried to claim land that can never be possessed, and we laughed at you. Only when you attacked did we defend ourselves -- and even that was done by retreating to our dense Interior region until the yearly rains forced your ships to return to your own land. And still you came again and again, to threaten and steal our provisions. What might you do to some less able world, sire?”

“You can hardly expect me to apologize for my people being superior. The strong will survive. We needed your building materials, your food.” His glance fell upon her hand, still resting on his thigh. “You have such an unflattering opinion of us, Aryenne. Why, then, are you so anxious to please the enemy?”

Aryenne shifted uncomfortably beside him. “I could spend much time, m’lord, defending my people’s behavior. But I am as caught in the politics of this situation as you are. And, as a priestess, it would be improper for me to even express anger. I have my assigned duty, Lord Drey, just as you do, and my own sense of pride in it. And there is, after all, no longer any war.”

“Isn’t there?”

* * * * *

He slipped from the ledge into the water, sidling forward until he stood between her legs, which she readily opened to him. Taut, dark nipples beckoned to him, and the silky hair of her mons glistened with glittering drops of water. “We are a conquering people. Yes,” he murmured, absently stroking the flesh of her inner thigh. His hands were rough and harness-hardened, but they knew softness when they felt it. There was only one thing he was interested in capturing at this moment. “Kiss me, Aryenne.”

She leaned obediently forward, lightly brushing his lips with hers.

“No, no, I mean *kiss* me. Open your mouth for me.”

Aryenne placed her hands on his shoulders, melting into him, opening her mouth to capture his searching tongue. By the Most High, she was sweet to the taste. So sweet that he struggled to silence a groan as her tongue expertly dueled with his. He abruptly withdrew, stepping back away from her. “Now. Quickly. Tell me what you felt.”

“Felt?” He heard a twinge of disappointment in her tone. “I have already explained to you, m’lord ...”

“... That you are not allowed to feel or display *pleasure*. Yes, I know. Then tell me what you *do* feel.”

She bowed her head slightly, avoiding the stares of the ever-present guardsmen. “I ... I felt your lips warm against mine. The hard beating of your heart upon my breasts. And the question in your tongue, as if you wondered whether I would welcome further advances.”

Very good, he thought dimly. There was hope. His hands slid upward from her waist, skimming the fullness of her bosom until he lightly thumbed the peaks. His mouth went dry as he watched the nipples tighten and darken beneath his touch. The girl’s mind had been skewed by the savages, but her body was *made* for pleasure. He bent his head to her, lightly flicking one nipple, then the other. The oil remaining there burned the tip of his tongue. It only made him want more. “And now?” he whispered, carefully encompassing one within his teeth, gently nibbling.

She arched backward, giving him fuller access to her breasts, but her voice remained unchanged. “What do I feel, sire? That you like women, and that you enjoy the taste and feel of a woman’s body.”

He raised his head, speaking sharply, irritated with her again. “Not what *I* feel, curse it! *You*. You must feel *something!*”

“I feel your mouth upon my breasts, m’lord. Nothing more.”

Drey silently fumed in exasperation, his lips beginning to burn with the power of the cursed *quazola* she had baptized herself in. Curse the woman, he would *win* this battle. The

filly had not been *born* that he couldn't break. His hand slipped between the impossible softness of her thighs and she obligingly opened wider, inviting him to touch her. Cupping the mound of her pubis in his hand, he lightly traced a finger along her moist cleft until he found the entrance to her treasure, and slowly, determinedly, inserted one rough finger as far inside as it would penetrate. She was wet and warm inside, and tight, good Gynesus, as tight around his finger as a maiden untouched.

But there was something missing. The subtle scent of surrendering sex. Yes, that was it ...

Gritting his teeth against his own reviving urge, he withdrew his finger and quickly, roughly, claimed her again. "And now?" His voice was gruff as he ground his palm against her in small, suggestive circles. "Tell me you feel nothing now, Aryenne, that I might call you a liar; for the wetness of your sheath betrays you."

She stared at him, puzzled. "The body behaves as necessary for the process, m'lord. We also have scented oils and ointments to make penetration easier for ... for ... You are angry with me, Lord Drey?"

Drey spluttered in frustration.

"Surely you are not having trouble expressing your emotions, eminence?" she cooed, eyelids drooping.

"I am not *angry*, just ... just ..."

"But tell me what you *feel*, sire!"

He nearly choked in his effort to hold back his laughter. She had mimicked him perfectly with a twisted half-smile. A most ridiculous situation. No one in Brigia would believe him. Both of them naked before two armed, curious men, and here he was, waist-deep in water, with his skin on fire and his hand coaxing the most willing, beautiful woman he had ever known to waste time with words ...

Her smile bloomed full with happiness at the sight of his own. “Would it be so hard, sire, to simply enjoy whatever response I might provoke in *you?*”

She began to move against him, and he gasped as he felt her moist heat close tighter around his finger, the womanly muscles pulsing in an inviting rhythm. Purring softly, she masturbated herself against his hand, leaning back in invitation. “Purely physical activity is an excellent cure for frustration, m’lord.”

Drey closed his eyes, unable to halt the excitement her movements inspired. He had heard legends of such women among these people; exotic, highly-prized creatures able to bring one to madness with barely a movement that could be seen. They had inner muscles so practiced that they could milk the seed from a man while sitting perfectly still upon his lap.

Just a few steps forward, his hot, quivering head urged. A few steps and one long, piercing thrust into that soft scabbard to experience the purest of pleasures, to feel that grasping, rippling motion up and down his hot shaft as he planted himself firmly inside and allowed her spell to work its magic on him.

His eyes flared open as he abruptly withdrew his hand. His cock trembled in protest as he walked backward to the middle of the pool. No. Not this way. He knew what he wanted and he would have it. Have her. When he wanted, and exactly the way he wanted.

“Lord Drey?” She sat straight up on the ledge, eyes clouded with confusion and alarm. “Are you ... have I done something to upset you?”

There was a slight quaver in her voice. At last, some hint of true emotion. Drey fisted his hands until they hurt. His actions were for the best. He had to teach her to behave properly. Still, there was little victory in usurping the confidence of one who only wished to please him. “I ... I am tired, Aryenne.”

“But my lord, you were just ...”

“Enough!” he snapped. “Leave me!”

She wordlessly stood and walked away from the bathhouse, not bothering to retrieve her garment from the pool. He watched the trim figure walk proudly away, past the gaping guardsmen, unconcerned. This woman was no whore. She walked with the grace and pride of a goddess. And he wanted her so badly he ached.

He swam to the other side of the pool and clumsily donned his discarded loincloth. “Don’t you men have better things to do?” he growled at the guards as they quietly whispered among themselves.

The largest of the men stepped forward, awkwardly attempting the Brigian language. “She is Hashier, Lord Drey. Even with the threat of death, she would not succumb. She cannot be moved. But there are many beautiful women here. No need to be troubled by this one.”

“No one else!” he shouted, as the water gathered itself into one large wave and retreated from his anger, swamping the opposite side of the pool. “This one! *This* woman. I will have no other! I may never *want* another! Did I come here for peace?? Let us resume the war! *Death* was simpler!”

Chapter Three

Bonnareen sat cross-legged upon the sumptuous bed, watching as Aryenne carefully folded her few garments. Kneading the uncommonly soft mattress with one hand, she spoke in a subdued, understanding voice. “You can’t be serious about leaving.”

“I can and I am.”

“Aryenne --”

“How long since you were joined with your husbandman, Bonnareen?”

“Seven circuits of the moon. Why?”

“You’re a wife, and soon to be mother. You know nothing of these matters. Don’t scold me.”

Bonnareen smilingly massaged her pouting belly, but continued. “I need not be a High Priestess to understand this. What has the man done to anger you so?!”

“Never have I known the like. He is the most maddening creature! There’s no satisfying him.”

“I know little of the Brigians. He does not enjoy the pleasure you bring him?”

“He enjoys the pleasure very much. But it’s not enough for him. He must have more!” Aryenne waved her arms wildly in the air. “He seeks the one thing I cannot offer him, rather than all that I do give. He wants me to behave like some kind of ... of ...”

“Woman?”

“There! I knew you wouldn’t understand.”

“Aryenne. I won’t lie to you. I have always felt there to be something unnatural about the Hashier. You didn’t choose to become who you are, I know. Just as I know that, because you agreed to become a Priestess, we, your younger sisters, were made free to live as women should.”

Aryenne carelessly tossed a handful of small colored gourds containing coveted fluids into her bag. She rarely saw her sibling, and usually appreciated what little time they had together. But she was not in the mood to be soothed or reproached. Talking about her anger only seemed to make her even angrier. “And *you* are to decide how a woman should or shouldn’t live?”

Bonnareen snorted. “I’ve always wanted to see you happy. Joined with a man who wants you to be happy. Is that a sin among the almighty Hashier?”

Aryenne spared her sister a cold glance as she continued her packing. “You have no right to be disrespectful. Your tongue is far too free. For all your arrogance, how do you know that your own mate might not also choose a Priestess some day, should his diving ventures continue to prosper?”

Bonnareen recoiled as if slapped, and Aryenne immediately regretted her words. Collapsing onto the bed, she grabbed her sister’s hand and held it to her cheek, perilously close to tears. “Forgive me, little one,” she whispered. “It is my own misery which speaks. Your husband will never have need of another. How could he possibly resist loving you forever?”

“You never need apologize to me. We are sisters. Your pain is mine,” the younger woman soothed. “Aryenne. The brightest, most clever, most beautiful of all. If you were only as gentle to yourself as you are with others!”

“I know the contempt you feel for the Hashier. It is the age-old story.” She squeezed her sister’s hand affectionately and released it. “Young girls envy them. Married women fear them. And older women praise the Most High that the Priestesses relieve them of their burdens.”

“My only concern is you. If you are not content in your position --”

“I am ashamed. Ashamed of what I’ve just said to you, and of failing in my duties. No High Priestess has ever been given such an important honor. To please the envoy of the foreign king! And I’ve failed miserably in my simple task.”

“You haven’t failed, because you will not leave,” Bonnareen said firmly. “Tell me -- is the Brigian so terrible? I’ve heard so many wonderful lies about him in the past few days! Is he really a giant of a man, with eyes that might turn a body to ice, a voice that dwarfs the sound of a Great Wave, and a male’s prod as long and large as my very arm?”

“You have been talking to Mother.”

“And every other envious woman in Makharia. Tell me!”

Aryenne grinned, hugging her knees to her chest, comfortable with speaking to her blood sister as she never would to her adoptive clan. “He’s a big man, yes, with a wide chest as hard as rock, and rippling muscles beneath taut, pale skin. His eyes are like the ore mined in the caves of the Interior; silver-dark and changeable. His prod is ... you will be silent about what I say? Yes, it is *monstrously* huge! I’ve never seen the like -- and so quick to recover and thirst for more! He would not leave a woman wanting. Such a hunger I have never known. But I don’t know if all Brigian men share that quality.”

“If so, many Makharian women will be traveling to the other land very soon.”

Bonnareen giggled.

Aryenne wagged a warning finger. “Our women had best keep to themselves. Intermarriage is still forbidden by both Brigian and Makharian law. No peace treaty will change that.”

“He sounds very exciting. And you had no trouble ‘accommodating’ this monstrous spear of his? Mother says that a woman might perch atop and still not be able to take in the half of it!”

“Mother misses her youth, and needs attention from her husband.”

“But how *did* it feel?”

“I ... we have not ...” Aryenne resumed her packing with a huff. “Why do people keep asking me that?!”

“Aryenne. If you have not had him inside you, what have you been doing? Don’t they procreate as we do? Doesn’t he enjoy mating?”

“I haven’t asked him.”

“Why not?”

Aryenne opened her mouth to speak, to defend herself -- and found that she couldn’t. Her sister was right. Her task was to please the ambassador, not to prove herself. Pride. Her pride had always been her greatest weakness. She’d completely forgotten her primary duty. Her feelings had no place in the matter. “Bonnareen. I am a fool!”

Bonnareen laughed at her sister’s dismay, casually removing some of the articles from the bag. “The two of you have been waging your own little War of Rhenn. If he’s as gifted as you say, surrender sounds like a pleasing prospect. Consider peace, sister.”

“Easy to say, my girl. The man is stubborn, single-minded, rude and --”

“Pardon the intrusion, my ladies.”

* * * * *

Aryenne leaped to her feet, her face flaming red. Bonnareen rose more slowly, her eyes quickly taking in every detail of the great warrior in the doorway. She immediately agreed that Aryenne was, indeed, a fool. The raw masculinity of the man filled the room like an overpowering scent. Even she, devoted to her man and with child, could feel a lilting response to it.

“My Lord Drey.” Aryenne bowed her head.

“My apologies, Aryenne. I thought you would be alone.” His eyes narrowed, sharpened. “This must be your sister. The resemblance is marked.”

Bonnareen held her hand out, smiling as he gallantly held it to his forehead in respect. He was huge, as her sister had said. But Aryenne had failed to mention how handsome he was. She sensed the intensity of a strong male beast beneath the many layers of loose clothing, held in check by intellect and immense strength. His hands were enormous. She imagined he would have little trouble snapping a man’s neck -- or mastering a woman’s body. And the eyes -- those cold, pale eyes. Distant and dispassionate, she’d wager they became molten metal when aroused.

It was a potent combination. “I am Bonnareen. This is an honor, Lord Drey. I’ve heard a great deal about you.”

He grinned, still holding her hand. “I had not thought it possible that two such beautiful women could exist. The honor, my lady, is all mine.”

Blinking at Aryenne in surprise, Bonnareen returned his smile. Was this the sulking taskmaster her sister had described? She glanced at his crotch. “Aryenne told me you were blessedly endowed, m’lord. We are all quite envious. But why do you refuse to share your cock with my sister?”

* * * * *

Drey stammered, stuttered, then chuckled as Aryenne paled, grabbed her sister by her arm, and hurriedly pushed her toward the doorway. "Pardon, sire, my sister's sudden departure. Her husband is waiting for her."

After a grinning Bonnareen had been unceremoniously escorted from the room, Aryenne returned, her cheeks still flushed. "I am honored by your visit, sire. Was there some reason --"

"Are you comfortable here?" He was walking around the room, inspecting her quarters. It was a fraction of the size of his own, and his bulk took up half of it.

"It's the grandest room I've ever lived in, m'lord."

"That's obviously not saying much." He scowled as his eyes fell on the bag half full of her belongings. "You are going somewhere?"

She did not shirk from the sternness of his gaze, but spoke frankly and crisply. "I believe you would be happier with another woman during your stay here, sire. I intend to recommend to the High Council --"

"No need. I came here to apologize to you."

"Apologize? To me? Oh, no, sire, it is I who should --"

"If you would please sit down and listen to me?"

Aryenne sat, and watched in horror as he knelt at her feet. "Oh no, Lord Drey! 'Tis most unseemly --"

"-- That I deliver my apology on my knees?" His eyes crinkled with his smile. "No one need ever know. As far as your people are concerned, the Brigian pride remains intact. I reveal my true self only to you."

"But --"

"I don't want you to leave. I won't let you. If necessary, I'll make a personal request to your Council. If desperate, I'll threaten to take the gift of the horses back, and return them to Brigia."

The man was mad! Such a slight might well mean a return to war! “You can’t! Our king would be so upset ...”

“Then you must stay. And accept my apology.” He took her bare foot in his hand and slowly began to massage it. “You’re still upset. I hear that, when the feet are at ease, the rest of the body is more inclined to relax.” He gave her a broad smile. “Your duty is to give me pleasure, yes? It pleases me to touch you, Aryenne.”

She stared at him in disbelief. Never in the history of the Hashier had any man bowed at the feet of a Priestess. To have the premiere horseman of the Brigians do so was unthinkable!

“I had no right,” he continued, “to become so upset with you simply because your ways are different from my own. You are an exquisitely beautiful woman, Aryenne, and any man would count himself fortunate to possess your favors in any way. I will allow you to perform your duties -- if you will agree to allow me whatever pleasure I desire.”

She gently touched his cheek. An intriguing, complex man. A strong, understanding man. A man she was very tempted to kiss right now. “My pleasure is to serve you, sire.”

Without warning, he slipped a thin, shiny metal band upon her smallest toe. “My people pride themselves on their craftsmanship. We are master forgers and engravers. There is little else to do when the cold is beyond bearing. I was to deliver a pair of these rings, one large and one small, to the king’s wife as a gift. One, I think, will do for her. I give the other to my own willful, lovely queen. And I beg that, until I depart, you will share my quarters and warm my bed each night.”

He stood, his powerful body towering over her, and she shivered at the loss of the brief warmth of his hands. “Stay here tonight. I have business to attend to just after dawn, and then I would like to see your mysterious ‘Interior.’ It would please me to have you beside me.” He gently kissed the top of her head and left the room.

She sat still for long moments after he left, her mind churning uncontrollably. He had ignored his superior station and apologized on bended knee. He wanted her to sleep with him, not merely service his needs. And he had given her a gift. The *queen's* gift. It was all quite unbelievable.

Excitedly wriggling her toes, she fell back upon the bed and squealed in happiness before jumping up to pack for the move to his quarters.

* * * * *

“I wonder, your lordship, if I may discuss a matter of some importance with you.”

King Phaelle, reigning sovereign of the Makharian empire, gently stroked the muzzle of the enormous chestnut stallion. It moved nervously beneath the currying combs of the four men who brushed away large clumps of thick hair. A small multitude of women and boys along the walls waved huge, dried water-flower pads to cool the five other horses in the makeshift stable. “You need not concern yourself, my friend,” the king murmured, affectionately nuzzling the prized animal. “The sons and daughters of Makharia will take exceptional care of your handsome creatures. You are certain, however, that the shedding of the hair does not indicate some kind of illness?”

“Quite certain, your lordship. Merely a sensible reaction to a new environment. On Brigia, they needed the dense hair to survive. The new coats will be sleek and shiny, I assure you.”

“Then your gracious gift is appreciated, as was the ring you gave me for my wife. She was uncommonly pleased. Said it glowed like a sliver of the moon. And since the treaty is already in effect, there can be no other significant concerns.”

“I ...” Drey shifted his feet uncomfortably in the fine soil. “I’m having some difficulty with the woman you gifted me with.”

King Phaelle was suddenly all attention. “One of our daughters has displeased you?”

“No, no, your grace,” Drey answered hastily. “Everyone here has been most kind and receptive. She hasn’t displeased me at all. Quite the contrary. That is the problem I speak of.”

The Makharian monarch allowed a grin to spread slowly across his face, and planted a kiss on the great stallion’s nose. “Ah. I begin to see. It’s nearly time for our morning meal. Come. Walk with me.”

He led the Brigian soldier along a newly-created path, molded and smoothed for the comfort of the horses he already dearly loved. They were a cherished gift, these animals, one he had long coveted. There were no such creatures native to this land, and the ones he had been presented with would make handsome breeding stock.

Lord Drey, however, was another matter. King Phaelle was warrior enough to grudgingly admire the broad shoulders and powerful build of the man who had once been the enemy. He was obviously strong of body, yet he was also adaptable. He had shed most of the dark, ludicrously-layered clothing of his own tribe, and now sported the loose, light-colored garments of the wealthy men of Makharian society. And his skin, fish-belly white when he’d first arrived, had taken on a darker, healthier tone from time spent in their sun.

But the king was also a very wary man. This stranger, this foreigner, could be a formidable opponent. He’d observed his own people admiring the stature of the younger man, had watched carefully as he’d put the horses through their paces in order to instruct the king. He sat them with a most regal bearing, and commanded them masterfully. They obeyed him without question. Phaelle had presented him with the girl in hopes that the sexual distraction would preoccupy him during his short but necessary visit. Apparently, she’d done the job far too well. “Did you know, Lord Drey, that Makharia was, long ago, a matriarchal society?”

He looked stunned for a moment. “No, your grace.”

“Hard to believe, no? Considering the benign role our women *seem* to play now. The exact circumstances of the change in power are long lost in the mists of time. Countless years

of peace we had under our queens; strong, intelligent women they were. They had the knowledge of the land, the healing power of the plants, and the spirit of the Most High, which dwells in all things. My forefathers claimed that only when the Brigians began their efforts to invade our land did the women willingly relinquish their power. They were no physical match for the men. But our women still retain their strength, their dignity. Their power.”

“I begin to see. Yes. It explains a great deal.”

“Aryenne is a very special woman.”

Drey looked at him in some surprise. “You know of whom I speak?”

Phaelle smiled kindly. “You didn’t think I bothered with such trivial matters. But the girl is, as I said, very special.”

“You know her well, then?”

“Quite well. Intimately. For many, many years.”

King Phaelle watched the revealing flush of jealousy color the younger man’s face and stifled a laugh. Foolish creatures, these Brigians. Some things, he observed, were universal and never-changing. “Among our people, she is said to be the most beautiful woman in the world. In *our* world, at least.”

“I would not dispute that, your lordship.”

Smitten he was, and barely a step or two away from actually loving the girl. The king furrowed his brow as his pace increased. He had not foreseen this problem. “Then you do find her aspect pleasing?”

“Pleasing, King Phaelle? Spellbinding. Overwhelming.”

“She has refused to satisfy the appetite of your hungry head, then?”

“She’s done everything she could.”

“Then what --”

Drey stopped abruptly and faced the older man, seeming to choose his words carefully. “May I take the liberty of speaking to you man to man, your eminence?”

“As we are.”

“I ... I must confess that the girl captivates me. I’ve never known anyone like her. But I must also admit that this, this ‘unfeeling’ credo of this clan of hers is unfathomable to me. And unacceptable.”

“Unacceptable? You have no voice in the matter, young man.”

“I intend no offense, King Phaelle. This cursed assignment that forces me to behave as some sort of diplomat is ... is as foreign to me as I am to you. If I could speak my heart, I would tell you that it is a crime against nature to deny passion to such a passionate woman.”

“There are many who would disagree with you, Lord Drey.” He studied the taut muscles of the jaw, the jeweled sharpness of the eye, and determined, once again, that he would not be unhappy to see this man return to his own country. “Men in positions of authority here have important matters to deal with. They have no time for courtship. They take what pleasure they can when they can. Some of them have exacting wives and scores of children to consider. They’d hardly consider the attention of a beautiful, undemanding woman a ‘crime against nature.’ I’ve been told that your own countrymen often ‘keep’ extra women without even doing them the honor of acknowledging them. Do you see this behavior as more honorable than our own?”

“I do not. Nor have I ever engaged in it. I don’t expect you to change your beliefs, your grace. I merely wondered if it was possible to ...”

Phaelle assumed his most imperious posture. “Yes?”

Drey cursed softly under his breath and stared off into the distance. “Is it absolutely necessary for the guards to be with us every moment? I would wish to spend some time alone with the girl.”

“Impossible. The guards are there for your protection. There are those among us who would wish the treaty undone.”

“I assure you, I can protect both myself and the girl.”

The king had no doubt of that. “Possibly. But my position as your host demands --”

“Might we make an agreement?”

“Such as?”

“What if I were to promise you my own sovereign’s finest mare, to breed or do with as you please -- in exchange for time alone with Aryenne?”

Phaelle’s lip curled with scorn. The Brigians were the beasts he’d always thought they were. “Do you think we barter our women, Lord Drey?”

“I mean the girl no harm. We’d be together anyway. I will trust you with my prize. Will you trust me with yours?”

“And how would you get the animal, as your king has already presented me with these?”

“The mare already belongs to me. A gift for services rendered. My most prized possession. She’s yours, if you wish. I’ll personally deliver her to you, after your season of rains has ended.”

“Your greatest possession. Just for time alone with the girl?”

“My word upon it.”

The monarch gazed back toward his stable, wetting his lips. “Your ship has been stationed near one of the small islands of Verdin, I believe, and is to return for you shortly. After your return from the Interior, they will remain moored here for two days, stocking supplies for the journey home. Since you will not be my responsibility during that time, I’ll allow you those two days alone with Aryenne. Just remember, young prince, that you *will* be leaving. But Aryenne’s heart remains here in Makharia.”

Chapter Four

Captain Meyard, officer of the King's Royal Seamen, shook his head disparagingly. "I hope you've considered this carefully, my friend. You may be placing yourself in danger."

Drey grinned as he carefully sealed another bladder of water for the journey. Meyard was the only man on this voyage he would have called "friend." Nearly as tall as Drey, he was thinner, more sinewy than bulky. But the icy gleam of his pale green eyes was as dangerous as the daggers he hid in both furred boots. A man who moved with the fluid motion of the sea he embraced, he had a healthy black beard and long, braided hair that framed the gaunt outline of his face.

Drey respected him more than any man he'd ever known. "I've given it much thought. My decision is firm."

"But why? I see no need for this trip into the interior. The war is over. Our business here is nearly done." He easily caught the water-filled skin that Drey tossed, a frown creasing his face. "Would you really go to so much trouble for a mere woman?"

"Not for a mere woman, no. But for ... ah, here she is now. Captain Meyard, I would like you to meet Aryenne."

Drey watched his comrade's face with a twinge of jealousy and a satisfied smirk. Meyard was unmarried and frequently at sea. When he dropped the bladder to stare, open-mouthed, at Aryenne, Drey was hardly surprised. "Aryenne, this is the man who captains the Brigian ship that brought me here. My friend."

"Captain Meyard." Her smile was just bright enough to welcome him, Drey thought, but with none of the gladness he often saw in her eyes for him. Her dress consisted of a single swathe of material that matched the color of the sky at twilight, her head crowned with a tiara of tiny red rosettes. And the ring that had been forged for a queen gleamed brightly upon her foot.

"Will you be staying long enough to enjoy the hospitality of my people, Captain?"

Meyard rolled gracefully toward her, bowing slightly as he touched her hand to his forehead. And held onto it far longer than necessary, staring straight into her eyes. "I fear not, m'lady. We leave very shortly. I should be returning to my ship immediately, in fact. The sight of your women lining the shores has made my men inexplicably restless." His voice hoarsened as he lightly kissed her hand. "And a single glimpse of you would leave me without a crew to man my ship."

"The captain must be on his way." Drey cleared his throat of anger, amazed at the surge of jealousy that suddenly possessed him. He had no right. She was a thing, a possession. She might just as easily have been handed to the captain as a gift instead of him.

The thought made him angrier still. "Meyard is only here to --"

"To meet the woman who has captured my lord's fancy." The seaman relinquished her hand with obvious reluctance, smiling briefly as he passed Drey on his way out. "And to wish you well on your journey."

Aryenne leaned forward, playfully watching his departure. "A very handsome man! I have several younger sisters who --"

"Meyard will not be staying. And neither will I."

She winced, immediately returning to an erect posture, like an admonished soldier to attention. Damn him, he always seemed to be hurting her, one way or another. Gently taking her hand, he lightly squeezed her fingers and smiled. "We will not concern ourselves with the future. Let's enjoy our journey and what time we have together."

* * * * *

He had been a fool.

Lord Drey watched her, her lips slightly parted, relaxed in sleep. Her face seemed that of a small child now, and her arm looped trustingly about his waist. But the body was still that of a very desirable woman, her voluptuous breasts pillowed against his chest. It had required all of his willpower not to take possession of her thus far, and the most difficult trials were still to come.

But he would have her.

He had not, however, been able to disguise his dismay when she revealed that this was the first time in her life she'd been permitted to sleep with *anyone*.

He'd laughed softly, watching their guards build a small fire to roast their dinner for the day. "And is it a Makharian tradition to tell tales before retiring for the evening?"

"Oh, no, m'lord. 'Tis truth."

He'd felt the smile sag from his face as he went very still. "Please tell me you're joking."

Aryenne had shrugged as she coiled her hair behind her head. "I was claimed by the Hashier at birth. There was only as much physical contact as necessary for nurturing."

His legs had gone bloodless beneath him as he sat on the mossy forest floor. "That is ... that's one of the most monstrous things I've ever heard. What about your mother? Your younger siblings?"

"They were allowed to visit, of course, but only for short periods of time. Only Hashier were permitted to stay in the temple." She smiled, tucking the final strands into place. "You

needn't look so horrified, Lord Drey. I was trained to tolerate the touch of others. I simply don't *need* it."

He'd frowned, *furious*, and unable to think of exactly who to blame for it. "What about your old master? Surely he --"

"Was married." She'd completed his sentence gently, her eyes wide, as if begging him to understand. "As are most of the men served by Hashier. My master honored his wife by sleeping only with her. I respected him for that."

He'd remained speechless for a time. Thinking. Imagining a small child without love, without the comfort of touch, denied even the right of emotional release. To have never known the comfort of dreaming in the arms of a warm, caring being ... it was an abomination.

Somehow, he would make it up to her. If only for a moment or two -- he could show her some semblance of love.

Aryenne had lightly touched his knee, drawing him back to her. "Have you changed your mind about wanting me in your bed, sire?" she whispered.

He'd wrapped himself around her, as he did now. Even though she was asleep and wouldn't know of it. *He* would know she'd been held and cared for, just this once -- at least, until his departure.

Day one of their journey into the Interior had been fairly uneventful. He now understood, however, their success in staving off attacks. A ridge of foothills, so treacherous no horse could manage them, ringed the entire continent many miles from its shorelines. He considered himself a strong man, but even he had struggled with the climb, more than once needing the assistance of the honor guards. Yet, Aryenne had managed them with the agility of a goat. Dense forests lay before them, still to be navigated before they came to their destination. There lay the caves, where an entire populace could live until safety was again assured.

His hand skimmed the swell of her hips, and she edged closer to him in sleep. For a moment he thought of parting her thighs and driving in, quickly, forcefully, before she was awake enough to even remember her “training.” He could plant himself inside of her, see the surprise in her dark eyes, ride her until she *had* to respond, until her body demanded satisfaction.

He quickly dismissed the idea. He, the renowned master horseman, had forgotten that a fine horse must be broken gradually. The horse must be comfortable in your presence. Having her stay in his quarters would see to that. The horse must accept, and then come to expect rewards. The ring was just the beginning. The pleasure he would bring her would constitute the rest. Then the bridle, the lead -- and only after all else was prepared should an attempt be made to mount. He closed his eyes to the vivid vision of himself mounting her, probing hard and deep, pounding himself inside of her until she screamed for him to stop, and refusing to do so ...

Propping himself up on one arm, he barely touched her breast. Soft, so soft, and oh, he had to taste her. He lightly circled her nipple with his tongue, smiling as he observed the response in sleep she would not offer in wakefulness. He carefully flicked the sensitive bud, and it hardened delightfully for him as she began to stir in her dreams. Her nipples were large and inviting, irresistible, and he continued his attentions to them until he noticed that her eyes were wide open, watching him.

He knew what she would do an instant before she reached for him, and he quickly moved over her, pinning her arms beneath him and slowly, lazily, continued his subtle tasting of her.

“Lord Drey.” Her voice was drowsily seductive and, despite his best efforts, his arousal grew upon contact with the soft, springy hair at the apex of her thighs. “Let me ...”

“No.” He drew back only long enough to speak. “Your duty is to give me pleasure, is it not?”

“Yes.”

“Then I tell you that it gives me pleasure to touch you this way. Will you deny me?”

She immediately relaxed beneath him. “Take your pleasure of me, m’lord.”

He made intoxicatingly slow circles around each nipple, using his finger on one as he tongued the other. He slipped between her long legs, fully aware that she anticipated his joining with her.

He made no move to do so.

Continuing his ministrations for some time, he licked and suckled to his heart’s content, ignoring the demands of his own body, until she shifted uncomfortably beneath him. She showed no obvious response, but he could feel her heart beating faster. It was a small sign of success, but it proved she wasn’t immune to him.

How long could her will outlast the natural needs of her body?

Taking the firm fullness of both breasts into his hands, he absently massaged them as he began a casual conversation. “I was dreaming of a young lady I was once quite taken with, Aryenne. She was a court musician, rather too well-fed, and not considered a beautiful girl -- but she knew the way to a man’s heart.” Her eyes, suddenly wide with interest, made him smile. “I remembered the liking I had for suckling her, and when I awakened, your nipples beckoned to me nearly as strongly as hers. Nearly.” He felt her stiffen ever so slightly.

Jealousy?

“And did you love her, sire?”

“I loved the way she made me feel. With barely a kiss, she would become so wet with wanting that a man might take her almost immediately, sure in the knowledge that she desired him. I assure you that no oil or potion could be a better aphrodisiac.” She was proud. The idea of a commoner besting her at anything would not sit well, he wagered.

He gently kissed her. “She once told me that having her breasts caressed was like having her body played like a musical instrument. At first there was just a gentle stirring, as

of a string being lightly strummed.” Bending to her, he took one breast in his mouth and gently nursed, lightly raking the other with his blunt nails. “And then the pressure and tempo would increase, and a sort of restless, hungry heat would begin to spread throughout her entire body, demanding more.” He suckled harder now, squeezing the fullness of her other breast in tandem. So soft, so sweet ... his engorged penis strained against his pants, begging for relief. “She had the idea that stimulating the bosom would magically stir the desires of the nether regions, as if they shared some common cord. She could actually come, simply by having enough attention lavished on her breasts, growing hotter and wilder with each passing minute ...”

He alternately licked and sucked, rougher now, determined, and was rewarded by noting that her breathing had gotten heavier, her breasts fuller as the nipples darkened delightfully for him. She was Hashier. The Makharian men she’d known had probably never bothered trying to stimulate her, since it was considered forbidden anyway. With him, she would not escape so easily. He would wear away her body’s resolve, inch by creamy inch.

And now that she knew how a *rival* had responded to his touch ...

He captured her nipple between his teeth and nibbled teasingly, and she inhaled sharply, her eyes big with something like alarm. Encouraged, he pressed on furiously now, not allowing her a moment’s respite. She couldn’t ask him to stop, couldn’t turn away to gather herself. He could smell the scent of the arousal she would not allow mingling with the smell of the damp, soft richness of the earth that bedded them. And then, for the briefest of moments, she closed her eyes and ran her tongue across her bottom lip, as if allowing herself to taste the delicious sensation.

Lord Drey immediately stopped.

Rolling over, he lay on his side, pulling her back against his chest and placing a leaden hand across her bosom. “Rest, Aryenne. We have a long way to travel tomorrow.”

* * * * *

But he did not let her rest. Rest would result in strength, and he would weaken her resolve. Twice during the night he woke her, once to carry out the same ritual, and once again to knead her breasts for an even longer period, with his bulge pressing firmly against her buttocks.

His actions made no obvious difference. She was as still and accommodating as ever. But he had the satisfaction of feeling her bosom flush with heat against his cheek, and the tempo of her heart nearly doubled what it had been in sleep.

They continued their journey early the next morning, making their way through the dense inner forests. They'd been forced to bring extra garments for their trek over the hills, to shield them from the glaring heat of the sun on the rocks. Now they needed to shed every spare item, reduced to essentials by the thick humidity that drenched the air and foliage, making even breathing difficult. Drey kept a close eye on his guides, even when only the guards' spears were visible to lead him through the thick brush. But he kept an even closer eye on Aryenne, always before him, wearing only a bit of cloth, tied high upon one side, her bosom bare and the long, lovely line of her back anchoring her swaying hips.

It nearly drove him mad.

It was almost dusk before they reached their final destination. Aryenne beamed at Drey as they stood on the edge of a great gorge, cut out of the surrounding rock by a massive river which raged at the bottom to points far beyond his mortal vision. They began their descent, a gradual one this time, but more than once he had to reach out to help a stumbling Aryenne, the sure-footed one no longer so sure. She looked tired from lack of sleep and seemed distracted, but more eager than any of them to continue.

"Why are we traveling so far down into the canyon?" he asked at one point. "I've seen entrances to numerous caves already. Why not rest in one of them?"

She was breathless, and leaned toward him to answer. "There's no real danger, but certain caves are forbidden to us."

“Forbidden?”

“They are inhabited by those who have been exiled from our society for various reasons.”

“Exiled? Here? In paradise?”

Her face became troubled. “It’s not a laughing matter among us, sire. Here, away from the unvarnished glow of the sun, dwell those cursed with contagious sickness that cannot be cured, and those who rebel against the few laws of the tribe. They are forbidden to interact with us in any way, but ’tis best not to trouble them. However, there’s one special cave I wish you to see, very close to the bottom. It isn’t popular as a hiding place among my people, but I believe you might find it interesting.”

The cave was, indeed, close to the river. It was wide-mouthed and dark, with a lip-like projection at the entrance, constantly slick with spray from the river that roared between the monumental boulders below. The sky was pale purple with night, and Drey proceeded to make a place near the opening for them as the guards were doing. She stopped him, placing a gentle hand on his arm.

“Not yet,” she whispered. “Come with me.”

She led him into the depths of the cave as he carried a lone torch to light their way. A slender, single line of steps had been carved into the floor of the cave, the only way he could tell they were descending. But it was cooler here, so much more pleasant than the stifling forest that he felt his energy returning. “I begin to see your plan, sorceress.” He smirked. “You were ordered to bring me here, use sex to drain me of all life, and leave my poor sperm-depleted body to rot away. Even the guards have not accompanied us!”

She laughed, now sprinting down the narrow stairs well ahead of him. “No one comes to this place. The guards will consider us safe for a few minutes, at least, and then they will come if we do not reappear. The chamber should be just ... yes! We are here!”

He paused as she danced with nervous excitement before him. "I've been hoping to bring you here since our first meeting. Isn't it magnificent?"

Drey held the torch aloft and gaped at his surroundings, stunned. She was hugging herself for warmth and laughing, as if unable to disguise her happiness at finally pleasing him.

He touched the walls in disbelief. Ice! There was ice here, oozing through crevices in the ground, ice crystals glistening upon the primitive wall paintings, huge towers of bright blue ice connecting the floor to the ceiling, some seeming to assume the shape of grotesque, gigantic men. He howled in dazzled amazement as he circled the room, pausing in the middle to listen to the thunderous sounds that rumbled through the chamber, and looking at her questioningly.

"It is the river," she said simply. "It runs beneath this cavern, and on all sides. Eventually it will eat away the walls and the chamber will collapse. But I wanted you to see it. You are the only man in Makharia who would appreciate this kind of cold!"

Carefully inserting the torch in a small, dry crack in the wall, he turned and swept her off her feet, kissing her deeply as she clung to him, until she couldn't catch her breath and, chuckling, pushed him away. "The cold reminds you of home, yes? And you find the ice so exciting?"

"I find *you* exciting. You did all of this for me?" The stabbing sense of guilt he momentarily tasted was quickly overcome by the stirring sensation of having her in his arms. He was as determined now to please her, in his way, as she was to please him. If his plan suddenly seemed cruel or calculating, it would be worth it, he assured himself -- for both of them. "I can't believe this is part of your 'duty' toward a man you care nothing about."

"Never enough," she grumbled, shoulders slumping. "Nothing I do is enough. Everything need not be complicated, m'lord. I simply thought the surroundings would make you happy."

“They are pleasing. Yes.” He glanced around the chamber at the primitive wall paintings, his body heating despite the cool temperatures. The dancing figures were faded and crumbling, but some of them unmistakably depicted human forms in various sexual postures. “An agreeable way to spend eternity! How long, I wonder, have these fortunate creatures been locked in passion?”

“A problem we need never worry about, as you are determined that we not be joined,” she quipped. “And now that you have seen it, may we return to the warmth above?”

“No. Not yet.”

* * * * *

There was an ominous tone to his voice, deep and suggestive, and she shoved against the hard wall of his chest, forcing him to put her down. Her breasts were already tingling, anticipating the attentions he had lavished upon them yesterday, and refusing to obey the silent orders of her well-trained mind. She had to put a stop to these forbidden reactions immediately. She would pay no attention to the memory of the heat that had coursed through her body at his touch, the urge she'd felt to grind her buttocks against the fullness of his erection. No one could shake her resolve once she'd firmly made up her mind. Not even this man; this man she was beginning to want so desperately.

He quickly stripped himself of his clothing as she watched, fascinated by the undulating muscles of his upper body and the swelling hardness of his formidable totem. Resolved or not, she found herself retreating before him, backing away until she tripped on the first step.

He caught her, easing her back on the stairway beneath him, smiling with confidence. And for the first time in her life, Aryenne felt fear. Fear that her lifetime of training would fail before the fervent determination in the eyes of the Brigian.

* * * * *

“The stone is cold, Lord Drey.”

“Then I am forced to warm you, Aryenne.” He hovered over her for a moment, massive as the rock formations, then dropped to his knees on the step before her. She smiled, reaching out to embrace him, and again he stilled her hands. “My pleasure is to touch you,” he murmured, nuzzling her neck with his rough growth of beard. He felt her bow beneath him, as if offering him her breasts.

And, with much difficulty, he ignored her offer.

He untied the knot at the side of her hip, exposing her body completely, and she shivered slightly. But it was not the chill of the air that caused it; he was certain of that. He ran the flat of his hand across the fine hair of her pubis as he gently nibbled her lip, avoiding her advance when she tried to kiss him. “Be still, Aryenne. Your movements distract me. If you will allow me to please myself, we may return before the guards become concerned.” He slowly parted her thighs, kissing and sucking the tender flesh between them, gradually working his way upward. Her legs widened, prepared to receive him, as if sure he intended, at last to enter her.

And then he abruptly stopped, only to begin between her knees again.

With just the tips of his fingers, he ever so gently stroked the soft, thin tissue secreted beneath her already damp mound of hair, over and over and over. And he watched her, every emotion, every fleeting expression of her gleaming black eyes; watched her swallow more often than should have been necessary, watched her thighs slowly, unconsciously, open wider, like a flower at dawn, allowing him the access he refused to take; watched her eyes shift to the ceiling, the walls, anywhere and everywhere except at him, as if she feared to let him see into her soul.

“I wish I could thank you properly for bringing me here,” he murmured seductively. “You can understand, perhaps, why the men and women of Brigia cling to each other, warm each other’s flesh; why, for those moments together, there is no thought of the brutal chill,

of aloofness, of aloneness ... only hunger. And *need*. You're trembling, Aryenne. Are you still cold?"

* * * * *

He was going to force her to lie. It was not against the law of the Hashier, but it was contrary to her nature. "I am, your lordship. If we could just return to the surface ..."

"You have the loveliest skin." He slid his massive body over hers and kissed her navel, then gently ran the tip of his tongue inside. "Soft, and sweet as nectar to the taste."

She could feel the scratchiness of his beard as he inched lower, and instantly went rigid. He was going to taste her. It meant nothing, of course, but old Gersherom had never bothered, and she had always wondered ... and would she lie to *herself* now, and fail to admit that she had not wanted to know the touch of her master's mouth? She grasped the edge of the step firmly. He was not going to best her at this. She would not be conquered.

Her hips convulsed upward as he skillfully flicked his tongue across the tiny button at the apex of her cleft that sent a jolt of sensations throughout her body, and she unintentionally gasped. She quickly closed her eyes, willing herself to be still, to endure until this trial was over.

Trial? Aryenne felt her secretions gather and condense as he sweetly tongued, then gently sucked her clitoris, seeming to revel in the taste of her. Her traitorous body squirmed beneath her, trying to inch away without offending, but he would not relinquish his hold on her hips, drawing her closer, savoring the flavor of her sex, lifting her hips to delve deeper, his tongue playing about the entrance to her vagina, and then sliding back to circle her nub.

She was unable to think, moving mindlessly with the rhythm he established, her hands now clutching at his shoulders. Something was being born in her, a sweet, hungry torment that she could not subdue. But it was not enough. She wanted more. She needed something, anything, to fill the void that she had, until now, been unaware of. She clamped her teeth

together to resist screaming at him, begging him to stop or to finish, to end the madness. If he did not join with her soon, she was sure she would kill him.

With the skill of a master, he slowly slid one finger inside her, and her body claimed it, abandoning all pretenses as she raised her hips in a feverish agony. He immediately withdrew, and she heard a wordless whimper escape her throat. Before she could protest, he quickly inserted two fingers. She arched toward him in wordless welcome, throwing her head back, waiting, silently entreating. More. She needed more. He resumed flicking her clit with his tongue as his fingers filled her.

But he would not move his hand. He kept his fingers still and leaden inside of her, promising, refusing.

She moaned. There was no hope of lying now. His fingers were wet with her, her breathing irregular and harsh, and a small sheen of perspiration had broken out all over her body. Had she been cold? No matter now. Nothing else mattered now, except that a tide of desire was slowly building inside of her, and that he must move his fingers, to softly stroke, or to violently tear her apart -- no matter, as long as they brought relief from the teasing torment.

“Aryenne.”

Dear God, he couldn't stop now! Her eyes flew open. He was staring down at her, his expression unreadable, his lips wet with her.

“Aryenne. I hear the honor guards.”

She was immediately alert. And ashamed. He helped her to her feet as she quickly dressed and recovered herself. Overriding the desire she still felt for him was fear. A High Priestess, flushed, out of breath, mouthing strange noises and sweating in such a cold environment? They would surely know, and there could be no acceptable explanation.

Lord Drey snatched up his clothes and donned them as he took the stairs two at a time, intercepting the guards before they could reach her. After several deep, steady breaths,

Aryenne slowly followed him, sparing a last, melancholy glance back at the faded figures that would forever dance below the surface.

Chapter Five

Aryenne lay still in the arms of her lover in the thin, quiet hours before dawn, eyes wide open. He stirred slightly in his sleep and she automatically adjusted her position to his, spoon within spoon. For he was no longer the Brigian, or Lord Drey, or even her master. He was her lover, in thought if not in deed, and she feared that she would think of him as such for the rest of her life.

Their return from the Interior had been hurried and without incident. It seemed that, once he had assured himself there was, indeed, no way the Brigians could ever have conquered the caves, he was eager to return to the village. That endearing pride of his needed to be satisfied, to know he'd never failed in his duties as a soldier.

If only he'd permitted her to satisfy him in other ways, they might both be happy now.

He had not allowed her to perform her duty since their second day together; yet, he took every opportunity to touch her in any way he could. Wherever they walked together, his arm possessed her waist. After every shared meal he took her upon his lap and they exchanged the stories of their people. And at night he would crush her to him, inevitably placing his hand strategically upon her breasts or buttocks before sinking into sleep.

And she'd grown accustomed to his touch, to the comforting warmth of his body, to the rhythm of his breathing. Having never been allowed access to the bed of old Gesherom, it was a wonderful new sensation.

One that she would miss dreadfully when he was gone, and never even be able to tell him so.

She slipped deftly from beneath his arm and padded quietly over to the window. Halos of streaming colors surrounded the twin moons as they circled each other high overhead. The rains would come soon, along with innumerable days and nights of gray skies blurring one into the other. By then she would be given to another, and resume her solitary slumber. And she would lie awake at night and remember what it had felt like to be held, to pretend there was a lover who wanted and cherished her -- and then to remind herself that he was gone, probably to the arms of another, and would never return to her. They would be the longest, loneliest nights of her life, filled with useless wishes and empty dreams. A heaviness settled upon her chest at the thought, and she hurried from the room, afraid that the tears forming in her eyes would force the sob wedged in her throat to surface.

She turned her steps toward her own lodgings, deserted since she'd agreed to stay with him. She didn't know why he had requested that the guards be removed, but she was glad. She needn't answer questions. She would stay in her own room for the rest of this night. He wouldn't miss her, didn't want her, hadn't even allowed her to touch him since their return from the Interior. And after tomorrow he would be gone.

Better to get accustomed to sleeping alone again now.

Aryenne took one of the small burning oil pots that lit the hallway with her, and quickly made her way through the deserted corridors. The wind was whipping itself into a storm now, and the thin branches of the surrounding trees thrashed the compound with a fury. Upon entering her room she nearly dropped the pot, startled by the sharp flashes of light that scored the walls upon her entrance. Was there a fire? The small flame seemed

amplified many times, bouncing around the room in a liquid fashion that nearly made her run for safety.

Upon closer examination, she discovered that large, polished pieces of silvered glass had been hung upon each wall, even upon the ceiling. Setting the oil pot down, she dropped to her knees upon the bed and peered about the room in confusion. Who in the world had done such a thing to an abandoned room, and why? The glass was an extravagance reserved only for the very wealthy. She stared at her reflection multiplied five times, and five times five, in stunned silence.

“You’ve ruined my surprise.”

Her eyes drank in the shadowy figure of the man who had come up behind her. She couldn’t see his face, but she didn’t need to turn around to know him. She knew the feeling of his presence by now, knew the deep resonance of his voice, recognized it in the marketplace among a thousand others, knew that it haunted even her dreams. The muscles of his naked body gleamed red in the light of the oil as he stood behind her, lightly running the tip of his finger down her bare shoulder. “I had planned the use of the room for tomorrow. It is my last day in Makharia.”

“I know, m’lord.” Even to her own ears her voice sounded leaden, hopeless. “I went down to the shore to watch your ship sail into the harbor. All of the women twittered like frightened birds about how striking the Brigian sailors were. I suppose all people find the forbidden most attractive. And not a single one of them could compare to you, Lord Drey.”

It was a heartfelt compliment. There was no reason for dishonesty between them in this, the end.

“But you’re mistaken. I am not who you think I am.”

She nearly turned, but his hands at the sides of her head kept her focus on the glass. “I don’t understand.”

“I am a stranger from a far land, a guest here in your master’s household. We’ve never been introduced. I noticed you as you served our dinner, girl. You are quite pleasing to the eye. I realize that you don’t know me, or anything about me, but I couldn’t resist following you here. I intend no disrespect to my host, but the sight of you has aroused such a thirst in me that, by God, I cannot leave this place without having you.”

A game. He wanted to play a game. “Master, I don’t think ...”

“You needn’t worry about being caught. There’s no one here to see us. No one need know.” He lifted her long hair and spread soft, slow kisses upon the back of her neck until she closed her eyes, shivering.

“It could be most intriguing, little one,” he whispered into the shell of her ear, his strong arm snaking around her waist. “Love in the shadows, between complete strangers. We needn’t pretend to be people we are not. I am a simple horse trader, and you are a serving girl who has captured my fancy.” His hardness pulsed suggestively against her. “Let me pleasure you. I can make you feel as you never have before.”

The Hashier did not occupy this room. There were no guards, no prying eyes, no duties, no rules. It was only a game, after all. And she was so tired, so very tired of being strong, of fighting against what she really wanted. It could be the first and last time in her life she might permit herself to feel like a woman. A woman in love with a man.

Aryenne rocked gently back and forth against him, and wordlessly sighed her consent.

Turning and tilting her head back toward him, he kissed her hard and long, devouring her lips as she finally, finally felt free to return his embrace with equal fervor. As she captured his searching tongue, a deep, rumbling noise sounded in the back of his throat. “I knew it was there all along,” he groaned. “I knew it ...”

He turned her back toward the glass. “Observe, little one. This is what a beautiful, passionate woman looks like.”

She stared in wonder at the reflection before her. Her lips were swollen and red, eager to be taken again, and she touched them, amazed that they radiated heat. She watched through heavy-lidded eyes as he pulled the curtain of black hair behind her shoulders, as his huge hands covered her breasts. The strong fingers which belonged to the shadowy face began a slow, sensuous massage, kneading them into full ripeness, and she watched, fascinated, as the nipples puckered and hardened, begging to be suckled. A warm simmering began between her legs, and she threw her head back against his shoulder, smiling at the flushed, smiling woman in the glass overhead.

One huge hand continued its relentless stimulation of one breast, occasionally flicking the pebbled nipple with an index finger, as the other slid along the curve of her hip, making its way toward the center of her heat with excruciating slowness. She spread her thighs as his hand played in the hair of her pubis, gasped as the large, rough index finger delicately parted the sensitive folds of tissue, and finally, gladly, cried out as she watched it disappear inside of her.

Everywhere she looked, she was being stroked, the titillating finger moving in and out of her, gleaming with her cream. And just as she thought she couldn't bear it any longer, the one finger became two, and she thought her heart would burst. There was one Aryenne being filled five times, and five Aryennes being filled times five, and she wantonly moved against the fingers that probed her, her nails digging into the thick thighs of the figure behind her.

Another hand abandoned her breast to seek the clit beneath the thatch of hair, and gently played her as the other hand moved in and out just behind. She was dimly aware that she was groaning, that her knees barely seemed able to support her. His breath on her back was heavy and harsh, rough whisperings of the Brigian language that urged her to abandon herself to him. She couldn't think, could barely breathe. She knew only that, if he didn't end this delicious torture soon, she would most surely die.

A small vibration began inside her, growing in heat and intensity, and her muscles instinctively tightened around his fingers. She had never known this, never needed this, but her body greedily demanded it. The glass dimmed and wavered before her and she shut her eyes, lost to all else save the rippling contractions that now possessed her completely, surprising her, then slowly fading into a limpness that forced her to fall back against her tormentor.

He slowly withdrew his fingers, leaning into her. “No, girl. Your task is not yet ended. You would not leave a guest of the house indisposed, would you?”

Grabbing her by the waist, he gently urged her forward until she was on all fours. Still dazed, she felt him pressing against her, his hands gliding over the roundness of her rump. Wrapping her hair around his wrist like the mane of a horse, he propped her bottom up, pulling her back against him. “I’ve no wish to wound you, but I have wanted you thus since the moment I saw you, m’lady,” he muttered. “I fear that I cannot be patient ...”

She had imagined the moment, dreamt of the moment she would have him inside of her, and how she would exercise all of her skills to bring him to ecstasy. And now that the moment had arrived, she was almost afraid. He looked even larger than she’d remembered in the glow of the oil pot, twenty-five enormous rods poised at the hungry entrance to her body. Her sheath still pulsed with the mild orgasm she’d just experienced; surely he would allow her a few moments to rest? She opened her mouth to speak, felt her words become a throaty gasp as he paused, pulled her hair tight with his fist, and forced her head up and back.

“Look.” The words seethed from between clinched teeth. “Look into the glass. I want you to see me take you.”

He pushed quickly, almost violently into her, a growl of satisfaction tearing from his throat. Aryenne felt herself stretched, widened, and shuddered with the delicious, pulsing heat. Before she could react, before she could think, he had withdrawn fully and thrust into her again, deeper this time, grinding hard against her as he cursed in his own tongue. She

clenched the sheeting of the bed in a weak fist, sure that he had split her open, that the length of him had reached all the way up into her womb. The hot sensation of being filled with him immediately gave way to piercing pleasure as he penetrated her, again and again, in a mad rush for satisfaction.

Just as she trembled on the verge of climax, he slowed, grinding so hard she could feel his huge, heavy testicles against her backside, hard and boiling hot. He delved as deeply as he could, as if he couldn't get enough of her. One hand held her hips fast as the other gently flicked her clit until she moaned. Immediately pulling away, he forcefully drove home again, returning to a frantic pace that left her panting with need.

She watched him drive mercilessly in and out of her in the mirror overhead which reflected only the agonizing need on her own face and the tight, frenzied movement of his hips. Nothing she had ever read or studied had prepared her for this. Old Gesherom, her former master, liked to come as quickly as possible. This "horse trader" was enjoying the ride, intent on taking her with him, and making it last as long as possible. She began to move with him, straining with desire, opening and tightening her muscles to maximize the pleasure for them both, until she felt the beginning of the spasms again, far greater than last time, and whimpered in helpless surrender.

And then she felt herself lifted out of her body, shuddering into another state of being where her only physical reality consisted of the violent contractions of her body around his, and his roaring shout of triumphant climax as he released himself into her.

She pitched forward, gasping for air as he fell beside her. The space behind her eyes was bright with light, and only very slowly did sensation return to the rest of her body. She felt weightless and serene, and incapable of responding when she felt a light, tender kiss on the back of her shoulder. Several moments passed before her breathing returned to normal, and still she remained limp and incapable of movement.

Finally, she glanced up at the overhead glass, not surprised to find herself alone. The stranger who had kept his promise to make her feel had come and gone. He'd gotten what he wanted. She'd expected nothing more.

Smiling in luxuriant bliss she stretched, more relaxed than she had ever felt in her life. The scent of him still clung to the sheeting, and she inhaled deeply, wanting to remember it forever. Tomorrow would be a different day. Tomorrow the serving girl and the horse trader would wear their other masks. But for now her lips still tingled from his kiss, and she was wonderfully sore from the delectable onslaught.

And, just for tonight, she could continue the only fantasy she'd ever allow herself -- that he'd made love to her because he loved her.

Wrapping herself in the remnants of him, she drifted off into dreamless sleep, vaguely wishing the sun would never rise so that the stranger might come to her again and again, that they might continue to pretend to be the lovers they could never be.

Chapter Six

Drey stared at the beautiful woman before him in complete consternation. She wore her best ceremonial outfit for the occasion, laced with the lustrous beads that were the fruit of the shellfish. Her dark, glossy hair was studded with minute, star-like gems, and set so that it framed her lovely, delicate face in long, luxurious waves. Smiling pleasantly at him, she picked through the small, sweet fruits that concluded their evening meal, saying nothing of importance. And she was absolutely stunning.

And he'd never been so angry with anyone in his life.

"Everyone is talking about King Phaelle's love for his new horses." She squeezed the juice from the sliced nukaki fruit and set the pulp delicately aside. "He has actually had new trails created just for the comfort and safety of the animals. There's not a rock to be found anywhere on the paths. They say he lavishes more affection upon them than he ever did upon his own wife and children."

Lord Drey sat silently, his own food untouched.

He'd been unable to spend the day with her, this, his last day on Makharia. Making certain that the horses were healthy before he left and tending to the preparations aboard

ship had occupied all of his time. But he'd set aside this last evening for them, without business and without the honor guards. And here she was, prattling away about nonsense.

"The tapestry my people are sending your king is said to be the most majestic ever. Dozens of women, working for days and days, have woven the history of Makharia into its threads ..."

He studied her, wondering what had become of the luscious, passionate stranger he had bedded. What had possessed the girl since then? How could she waste their invaluable time together after last night?

"... and Bonnareen has had one of the Old Mistresses assure her that her child is a boy. It is considered a blessing of the Most High for the eldest to be born a male. Shall I prepare something else, sire? The fruit doesn't seem to appeal to you."

He continued to stare at her beneath a brow thickened with anger, unmoving.

She cleared her throat uncomfortably and set her own platter aside. "I understand that your land is at its warmest during our season of rain. It should be pleasant for you to return home to ..."

"Aryenne. What are you doing?"

"Doing, Lord Drey? Just trying to distract you a little. The idea of leaving your prized horses in such uncertain circumstances must be difficult for you, and the prospect of your long journey back --"

He heaved an impatient sigh. "Aryenne. What are you doing?!"

She primly folded her hands upon the table. "I'll be quiet if you wish, m'lord. Or I can leave, if my presence is unwanted."

"Unwanted?" He furiously cleared the table before him with one great sweep of his arm, scattering platters, food, and wine across the floor. "You can speak that word to me after last night?"

"Last night?"

“Last night. In your bedroom, witch.”

“Ah ... you wish to know why I preferred to sleep in my own quarters last night.”

“Don’t play the fool with me, Aryenne.” He took a deep breath and told himself to be reasonable. She was, after all, unaccustomed to such intimacy, and probably embarrassed.

“This dinner is ended. Come. Sit with me.”

She silently took her customary seat in his lap, sliding one arm loosely around his neck. Her face seemed without expression, her eyes without their usual luster. As if he was now the stranger he’d pretended to be.

He calmed himself, trying to be patient. She didn’t understand, didn’t know, of course, that he had set aside these last precious moments alone to cherish. And to tell her how desperately he had fallen in love with her. “You will certainly not try to tell me you’ve somehow forgotten last night?”

“Forgotten? Oh no, my Lord Drey. Did you enjoy it?”

“Did I ...” He frowned. What new game was this? “I believe you were present at the festivities, little serving girl. Could you not tell?”

She offered him a light, dismissive kiss. “Then the play went well. I am glad.”

“Play?”

“The brief sport we acted out in my bedroom.” She stretched out her long legs, seemingly focused on the ring that gleamed on her little toe. “I wasn’t sure I could carry off the pretense. Our training does involve some play-acting instruction for certain extreme cases, but it had been so long since I --”

“Pretense?” He laughed incredulously, but noted that she carefully removed her arm from his neck. “You don’t seriously expect me to believe that was some kind of show, staged for my benefit!”

“You needn’t continue pretending, sire. If you enjoyed the game, I am content.”

Astonishment gave way to barely-contained fury on his flushed face. “Are you trying to tell me ...” She knew him well by now and scrambled, trying to escape before he could grab her, but failed. Lifting her by the waist as if she weighed nothing, he placed her roughly on the table before him and pushed her onto her back. Standing between her legs, he pinned her arms up over her head. His voice was a hoarse, dangerous whisper. “Are you trying to tell me it was all a lie?”

She was as coolly composed as ever, not even bothering to struggle. “It was a game, Premier Horseman Lord Drey. And well you know it. *You* proposed the game. Why be angry now?”

“I proposed the *premise* for the game,” he hissed. “I thought the pretext would allow you to feel free to behave like a *woman!*”

“And I behaved just so,” she responded quietly. “In exactly the way I thought would please you. As my duty has always dictated.”

She was struggling for breath beneath his weight, her arms limp and cold in his hands. “You will never convince me it was an act!! It *meant* something. It was *real*. Admit it!”

Her black eyes stared vacantly back at him. “It was a farce, m’lord. You knew it. Only total surrender would satisfy you, and my task has ever been but to please. I gave the horse trader what he wanted, and he left immediately after mounting his latest conquest.”

“Ridiculous! The horse trader left -- *I* left -- because ... because ...”

He couldn’t do it. *Would* not do it. He would not confess to this shallow, soulless creature that he’d *needed* to get away from her, that it was at that moment he’d realized that she possessed him, that his heart was no longer his own. He’d realized that he was ready to give up his career, his country -- everything of the life he knew to stay with her if only she’d love him in return. The emotions she now made light of had touched the core of his soul. And now ... now he might die in the agony of needing her. But he would never let this -- this *thing* know how much he loved her.

Cursing, he released her, grimacing at the sight of the marks his hands had left on her. “Why did you trouble yourself? Why not just lie down and spread your legs?”

She sat up, gingerly rubbing her arms. “I tried that too, your lordship. More than once. It didn’t appeal to you. This did.”

Giving the nearest chair a violent kick, he retreated to the window and stared out, unable to look at her. “Then you’ve done your cursed duty. Leave me.”

He felt the touch of her hand on his arm, and refused to turn, afraid of his own anger. Afraid he might hurt her as she had injured him. “I am sorry our time together must end this way, Lord Drey. I’ve tried to please you as well as I could. From the beginning, I have accepted the fact that you were forced into this role, and that your people’s ways were very different than our own. I have admired your strength, your love of life -- even your passion. I am only sorry you could not accept me for what I am. I am Hashier. I never deceived you about that.”

“You are a lying little whore who has effectively made a fool of me. Now, get out of this room before I forget what *I* am.”

* * * * *

“Aryenne. What have you done?”

Aryenne peered at her sister through bleary eyes, trying to force a sip of tart wine past the lump in her throat. Her body felt shrunken and frail, as if a good stiff breeze could blow her all to pieces. She didn’t expect Bonnareen to understand. She had virtually become a stranger to herself. “I’ve done my duty. Exactly as I am required to do. Don’t worry, I’ll not trouble you for long. I plan to return to The Temple tomorrow and rest there, once I’m more composed.” She was being unrealistically optimistic, of course. She didn’t believe she’d find rest at The Temple or anywhere else.

“I heard you crying all night.” Bonnareen smoothed her older sister’s hair, cooing in sympathy. “In all the years I’ve known you, I’ve never heard you cry. You must love him very much.”

Aryenne tried to shrug away from her sister’s touch. “I hear that the tapestry meant for the King of Brigia is finished. You and mother are to add the family’s name, I believe.”

“Do you believe you can simply deny your feelings and have them go away? Is this the price of being privileged? If so, I’m happy to do without. You’ve lied to him, haven’t you? He doesn’t know how much you really care.”

Aryenne nearly laughed, pushing the drinking cup away. “Oh, I couldn’t just lie to him, Bonnareen. I had to shield myself, to protect my pride, to excuse my lack of control. I robbed him of his manhood. I told him that I’d only *pretended* to enjoy his favors.”

Her sister covered her mouth as if appalled. “You didn’t! Oh, Aryenne, even a first-year bride knows better! Are these the teachings of the Hashier?”

“No. No, quite the contrary. But it was my last act of self-defense, don’t you see?” Her eyes were filling with tears again, and she stubbornly blinked them away. “It was all a game to him. He was enacting a miniature war of Rhenn, just between the two of us. The fact that I tried so desperately to please ... that I wanted to make him feel ...” She sniffed, resolutely straightening her spine. “I meant nothing to him. He merely wanted to prove to himself that he could conquer this last stronghold. I could not let him leave thinking that I was so foolish and weak that he’d won.”

Bonnareen knelt before her, taking her hand. Her eyes, too, were glossy with tears. “You’re more the child than I am. Don’t you know that it’s *all* a war? Male-female, Brigia-Makharia ... even *sex*. Approach-retreat, give-take, push-pull ... it’s all the same. Ah, but the rewards of reconciliation, of surrender!” She gently shook her, carefully avoiding the deep bruises on her arms. “You must tell him! Tell him what’s true in your heart of hearts.

Quickly, before it's too late, and you're forced to spend the rest of your life regretting what you've done!"

"Too late." Aryenne shook her head, her spirit defeated, her brain numb. "He has no use for me. It was only the challenge that interested him. He returns to Brigia this afternoon, and that is for the best."

"Sister! Would you have him leave thinking that he means nothing to you, that you've made a fool of him? How can you speak of your pride while you rob him of his? Run! Go to him as fast as you can, and bring peace to both of you. Go, or, in the name of the Most High, I will go and tell him myself!"

Chapter Seven

Lord Drey gave his room a last, thorough once-over. There must be nothing of value left behind, for he would never step foot on this cursed soil again.

Oh, he'd keep his promise to King Phaelle and bring the mare; but he'd have his men deliver it, then immediately set sail for home. He could not repress a grim smile as he remembered his determination to buy, kidnap, or promise anything to King Phaelle to have the wretched girl as his own.

The silver-white mare. His greatest possession. Gone. For nothing.

He secured his red sash about his waist, grateful to be back in his own clothing, devoid of Makharian finery. Already he was sweating, but no matter; the good Captain Meyard had seen that all of his belongings were already loaded. Drey, unfortunately, had to endure a ceremonial escort to the ship by the king's honor guard, due to arrive any moment.

"Master."

He stiffened, then turned to face her, his mouth going dry. The night had been horrendous, never-ending. He'd tossed and twisted, his body one feverish, agonizing ache, hungry to have her again. His only comfort had come in knowing that the afternoon would bring his escape from this place, that he would never need see her again.

But here she was before him. The loveliest torture he'd ever endured.

She entered hesitantly, shrouded in a gossamer-like garment that gleamed like moonlight on water when she moved.

He clenched his fists, angry with himself. His desire for her remained unquenched, the need to touch her, to taste her. He had to get away from this woman. "It wasn't necessary for you to say goodbye."

"I haven't come to say goodbye. I've come to tell you a story."

His jaw dropped and he burst into a bitter laugh. "The farce is ended, witch. Allow me to leave with what dignity I have left."

"I will not detain you, sire. I know *much* of your pride." She stood directly before him now, and he was shaken to see how pale she looked, how swollen and red her eyes were from ... crying?

"It was your pride that led you to try to break my resolve," she continued. "Your pride that made you feel superior, that convinced you I was some kind of animal in need of proper training, that would not allow you to accept me, to love me --" She gently touched his mouth with one slight, trembling finger. "-- as I have come to love you."

She gave him a tremulous kiss and his heart wrenched within its cavity. But he would not yield.

"It wasn't easy for me to come. I am Hashier. I am also proud. But I'm also truthful and, therefore, stronger than even you, m'lord." He watched as she clenched her hands at her sides. "You have only silence to offer? Even in these final moments, you cannot confess the love I have sensed in you? You still will not admit that you care for me, though you will never see me again?" There was desperation in her eyes, despair in her voice.

But he would not yield.

No more. He would not allow her to hurt him again. Drey forced one corner of his mouth to lift into a brutal half-smile. "You now ask *me* to confess something I do not feel. I

care nothing for you, Aryenne. I admit that I enjoyed having your body, however briefly. Let that bring you the solace you would not give me.”

She flinched as if he had struck her, bowing her head. “Then will you at least allow me the telling of my tale, your lordship? A last request. I’ve asked nothing else of you.”

’Twas truth. She’d never asked him for anything. And he could not deny the overwhelming compulsion to be near her still. “Very well, Aryenne. Tell me your little story.”

He sat, watching her carefully as she seemed to make an effort to compose herself. She knelt gracefully before him, the thin, shimmering robe molding itself to her breasts, and carefully eased her body between his legs. He hardened immediately, and silently cursed the way his body betrayed him. But when she reached for the lacings at his crotch, he grabbed her hand with a threatening growl.

“It is a necessary part of the story, sire,” she said simply. “You have observed time and time again that we are a barbaric people. The story I have to tell will verify your belief. I only wish to reenact a short history for you. If it becomes unpleasant in any way, or you wish me to stop at any time, one word will suffice.”

What was she doing? Did she think he’d just forget all that had happened between them? Yet he stilled his hand, silently allowing her to continue with his lacings. Why not squeeze one last bit of pleasure out of her, he reasoned. She was easily the most beautiful woman he’d ever known. He could use her body one more time, and express his indifference to her in a purely physical way.

Drey observed her face carefully as she freed his hard heat of its restraints, and assured himself that the glad glint in her eyes was only his imagination.

“There was a time in Makharian history, when our men first came to power, that the women who had ruled so wisely and well for so long were reduced to nothing. It was a dark time in our past, something rarely recalled, and recounted only in whispers, for it was a time

of human sacrifice. You shudder, Lord Drey, but 'tis truth. The origins of the Hashier have their roots in this dark era, although it is much changed since.

“Young women of great beauty and bearing were chosen at that time for sacrifice. All of the small shrines to the one god of spirit and nature were swept away, and one mammoth deity, hewn from the brute rock, was worshipped. It was a new god. A god of fertility. It was the statue of a massive man at the height of arousal.”

She spoke plainly enough, quietly enough; yet, Drey felt the blood rush unaccountably to his loins. The picture she painted was primitively pagan, but her words stirred some ancient, repressed excitement within him.

“My people tell of three festival days. Three days a year of sacrifice. The young women were kept pure until they reached the proper age, and one was especially chosen for each festival day. The Idol has long since disappeared, dismantled by more enlightened rulers, and even the location is forgotten. But the ceremony is remembered.”

She spread her arms wide. “This was the type of robe worn by the virgin, as it was -- and still is -- by any woman who has sinned against her people. The maiden was paraded through the city, honors were bestowed upon her, and every villager followed her to the site. Once there, she knelt before her divine husband, and sought to arouse the man of stone even more.”

He inhaled sharply as she slipped the head of his rod between her lips and sucked softly. A current of heated hunger swept through his body, and he was hers before he could even imagine saying “no.” Mesmerized by her tale, he had never expected her to play out the particulars. He could feel himself grow thick and rock hard in her mouth and closed his eyes, feeding on the feeling, dying inside as she fed upon him. Gripping the arms of the chair as her tongue lolled about the length of him, he fought for control -- and surrendered it all as she took him fully into her mouth, sliding up and down his rigid shaft until his breath was hoarse and ragged.

She withdrew her lips from him. Using the tip of one finger to tickle the underside of his reddened ridge, she kept the scintillating stimulation steady. “She would suck on the great stone priapus for some time, to the delight of the huge audience, many of whom felt free to engage in similar activity -- and were encouraged to do so. He was, after all, a fertility god. It was a religiously-sanctioned orgy. Wine flowed freely and great drums were beaten to a deafening crescendo, driving the people to a frenzy, thrusting bodies and howling voices cheering the girl on to her destiny.”

Aryenne stood before him. With a graceful movement, she parted the robe and let it fall into a glistening pool at her feet. Pure, undeniably hot lust slammed into his gut at the sight of her, and a fresh sheen of sweat surfaced on his face as he struggled to maintain some measure of control.

She slowly sidled toward him and tasted his lips. He could feel the soft wood of the chair’s arm cracking in his desperate grip.

“She would divest herself of her bridal gown and freely offer herself to her divine bridegroom. And, since he was unable to tend to the matter, she was expected to stimulate *herself*, to prepare for him.” Closing her eyes, Aryenne hummed a strange, sensuous melody to herself, squeezing her breasts until they plumped and peaked before him, the roseate nub mere inches away from his mouth. One slim, graceful hand slipped between her thighs, making its way through the lush covering of her pubis and moving in slow, seductive circles. His jaw slackened and he nearly drooled, hungering to taste her again. The hot fluid of his sacs boiled up into his loins, making all intelligible thought impossible. He was desperate to have her now under any circumstances. It was erotic agony to see her do this in his stead, and he could not take his eyes away.

Drey watched as she fondled her breasts, envying the soft, sensuous way her hands moved. When she hooked one finger into her mouth to wet it and slid it lovingly around one puckered nipple, he bit his lip. And when she slipped the same long, slim finger between her lower lips and groaned, he nearly drew blood.

She straddled him, still standing, her arms about his neck, her eyes drowsy with desire. “By then the crowd was wild, surging forward toward the great god, ready to kill for a better view. And if there were rapes and abductions, if the innocent were trampled, no one cared. It was time for the great Idol to take his new wife.”

Positioning herself above the hot head of him, she slid down with one long, quivering inhalation, wrapping her legs around his waist to allow him deeper access. With a shudder, Drey slid forward, grasping her buttocks and burying himself inside of her. Taking the hardened nipple before him into his mouth and growling in satisfaction, he drove deep.

Her voice became a whisper as she clung to him. “The girl would impale herself upon the huge stone penis of her bridegroom to the delighted shouts of the onlookers. She was expected to pay no heed to the pain, the blood, or the fact that this public spectacle was to be the only intimacy she was ever to know. There were no oils, no potions, no spells permitted. She was to give herself completely. And the people screamed in ecstasy, and mimicked the ceremony amongst themselves as she joined with him.”

She moved slowly at first, withdrawing completely from him and then melding with him again, her eyes locked upon his own. He allowed her to take the initiative, nearly exploding every time she took him inside. She was tight, so wet and warm and tight he wanted to scream; but there was no voice left in his throat, no reason in his mind.

It was a dance, slow, measured and perfectly timed. She had been created for him, as surely as his own arm or leg.

There was satisfaction in the simple movements at first, the sensations he'd feared lost forever, feeling the friction and heat his swollen cock craved, her secret muscles clasp and releasing, his purpled head probing deeper with each thrust. But it was not enough, never enough. His entire being became focused on the simmering urgency rising within his distended shaft, cutting in and out of her, faster now, and still faster.

“Look at me,” she murmured breathlessly. “I want to see *your* face this time. I want to see you come as you fuck the life out of me.”

He could stand no more. Squeezing her hips with something like a snarl, he plunged deeper, lingering there, grinding against her until she groaned.

This time he was not mistaken. There was passion in her eyes, and he could feel her quickened heartbeat warring with his own.

Driven by madness, he pulled her closer, his teeth scoring her breast. He couldn't get enough of her, the feeling of her hot and tight and wet around him. She was moaning loudly now, riding the rhythm of his thrusts erratically, all control relinquished.

He felt her body pulse, squeezing him as she came, and it excited him all the more. She was gasping for air, clinging to him for dear life, one pulsating wave beginning just as another ended, and she was pleading with him to stop and never to stop.

And still he continued, holding her by her waist and relentlessly pounding her hips against his own, loath to end the delicious sensations, until he felt the strongest spasms yet building within her sheath. They rippled and gripped his rod, hotter and growing in strength. Until she threw her head back in a paroxysm of passion, screaming loudly, all pretense and sanity abandoned.

“DREY!”

Her desperate scream of surrender pushed him over the edge. He stiffened, made one last, great drive, and burst inside her, his whole body jerking as he poured into her.

Completely exhausted, he fell to the floor, carrying her with him and cradling her in his arms as she trembled, her body still wracked by the power of her orgasm.

Drey recovered somewhat more quickly.

He was content, for the moment, to hold her, to comfort her until she too recovered. And then he would tell her his plans. He knew the truth now, and nothing could keep him from her.

No, they could never marry; but he was favored by the King of Brigia, and no one could deny him his choice of concubine.

He would have her, all to himself, and keep her for the rest of his days.

She gradually relaxed on top of him and he smiled, remembering the wanton way she had cried out his name. "Drey!" There was no title attached to it this time -- fitting, since he was no longer her "lord" and "master," but her mate.

This was the time, he was sure. This was the time to tell her that he loved her, and always would. He raised himself slightly to taste the sweetness of her lips once more before baring his heart.

The buzzing sound of deep, whispered voices captured his attention, and the gleam of metal-tipped spears, disappearing from the doorway, caught his eye.

Quickly rolling away from Aryenne, he was on his feet in a second and racing for the opening. Bouncing off the opposite wall of the doorway in his haste, he glanced in both directions.

There was no one in sight.

Drey sped toward the exit of the compound and stumbled outside, blinking in the glare of the full noon sun and circling the building, his heart thundering in his ears. He had come to like the intrusive duo that comprised his honor guard. But he must find them -- kill them, if necessary -- before they betrayed Aryenne.

He ran half the length of each of four connecting paths that led to the compound, attracting the attention of several onlookers before remembering that the lacings of his pants were still widely undone. Turning away from a group of gawking women he bent at the waist, massaging the cramp in his side. He was out of breath and panic-stricken.

They'd heard her. She'd screamed his name so loudly the guards must have heard her.

She'd submitted to passion -- just as he'd always wanted her to. By all that was holy, if any harm came to her now because of it ...

He charged back to his quarters. He had to get her to safety, perhaps aboard ship if he could manage it without being seen ...

The room was completely empty.

Chapter Eight

“Pray pardon the intrusion. But I must speak to you.”

Bonnareen barred her doorway, glaring at the large, bedraggled man who sought entry. “It is unwise for you to be here, Lord Drey. Return to Brigia and leave us in peace.”

“The fact that I have not sailed for Brigia as scheduled yesterday should tell you how important this is, my lady. I ask your permission to enter.” He stood before her for a few moments, studying the set of her jaw. “If you do not give me leave to enter, Bonnareen, I’ll plant myself here in the mud before your house. And when your husband returns home, I will tell him that you and I have had a lover’s quarrel, and --”

The door immediately swung open.

Drey wandered into the house in a daze, trying to clear his muddled mind enough to choose his words carefully. It was small but pleasant enough, barely more than a hut very close to the shore, with a floor of finely crushed seashells and walls dramatically draped with colorful cloth. An older woman, very erect and still striking to the eye, paused in her task of attaching a final row of tassels to the edging of the largest tapestry he had ever seen, occupying most of the floor before her.

He bowed slightly at the gaping matron. "My apologies, madam. But I must speak to the girl." He paced the perimeter of the room, unable to stand still. Time. He was running out of time. He had to get answers, and quickly.

Bonnareen watched him through sharp, suspicious eyes. "We heard your voyage had been delayed. It did, at least, allow us another day to finish the tapestry."

"Captain Meyard is a good man." He slowed his pace to halting steps, watching the doorway warily. He hadn't obtained *royal* permission to stay, and suspected that someone might come to take him at any time. "He is also an understanding friend. He's jeopardized his career, maybe even his crew, to delay the trip at my request. If the rains should come now, and the rough seas that accompany the change of seasons ..."

Backing against the nearest wall he slid limply to the floor and roughly rubbed his tired face.

"How did you find me, Lord Drey?"

He ran his hand over his head. Only now did it occur to him what a sight he must look. His hair was wild, its leather restraint gone. He had not bathed, had not eaten, had not cared.

But now he was sorry, simply because he was obviously distressing her, and she was Aryenne's sister.

She was smaller, younger, and her bearing less regal. But she had the same smooth skin, the long, thick hair, the same bottomless, beautiful eyes.

"I have been wandering the peculiar pathways of your village for an entire day. I tried to convince myself that the guards might not betray us. But they have." His arms were limp across his knees, but his hands tightened into fists. "I've watched the dark clouds slowly moving in from the northwest, signaling the end of my time here. I've pursued people who whispered among themselves and ran from me. I've tried to get an audience with King Phaelle, and been refused." He spread his hands helplessly. "No one will talk to me. No one

will listen. How did I find you? I bribed a drunken fisherman with my Medallion of Honor, the only thing I had of any value. He told me where you lived. Where is she?"

"Oh, now you worry, eh?" Bonnareen snapped. "Did you worry as she sat here in my house crying for you? Did you worry when you left bruises on her body? Did you worry when you knew the honor guard was due at any moment, but thought you could 'come' before *they* did? She told you what she was. Did you worry when she warned you that there were penalties --"

"Enough!" He released his anger in a violent outburst that made her jump. "I will not defend myself. And I haven't time to quarrel. I have a duty to my own king, and the ship must leave this day. I must know that she is safe or, at least, well. I cannot ..." He buried his face in his hands for a moment before standing, squaring his shoulders. "I cannot survive without knowing her fate."

The older woman spoke for the first time. "Why did you seek an audience with King Phaelle?"

"I wanted to explain --"

"He will not listen."

"But there is a reason --"

"He will not care."

"Then he must, at least, know what is to become of her."

"He will not tell you."

Drey roared in frustration, nearly putting his fist through the wall. "What kind of savages are you people?! Aryenne told me. She told me about the bloodied bride, about the gruesome public display in which the girl was forced to perform upon the stone giant while your people ... need I continue? She even wore the garment."

The older woman's eyes widened in surprise. "The robe? Aryenne showed you the gossamer robe -- the shroud of those doomed to die?"

“Shroud?” Drey felt the blood leave his face. A sickening feeling clawed at the inside of his stomach. “To die?”

Aryenne had spoken of punishment. Penalties. Women who had sinned against their people. The rigorous rules of the Hashier.

He had thought of the garment as some sort of wedding dress. But there was something else -- something about women who had sinned against their people?

And she had worn that robe, as if deliberately offering herself for death.

No, no; it was impossible, inconceivable that Aryenne might have been relating the fate that awaited *her!* “Aryenne never finished her story. I want you to tell me, m’lady. Tell me what became of the sacrificial bride after the ‘marriage’ was consummated.”

“This is not for you to know. Aryenne had no right to tell an outsider.”

“Damn you and your history, and everyone else on this isle of insanity!” he seethed. “Tell me how the girl was condemned to be sacrificed!”

“Her heart was cut out.” Her voice was cool and reasonable. “When she could no longer bear the pain, or she weakened from loss of blood and fell from her stone perch, her heart was cut out and planted in the soil at the feet of the fertility god.”

His blood slowed to creeping ice, like the frozen rivers of his home. Huge. Relentless. Unfeeling. The giant. Aryenne had sacrificed herself to the stone giant.

Nodding slowly, Drey moved toward the door.

“Where are you going?” Bonnareen cried after him.

“I am going, my lady, to kill your king.”

“No! You cannot!” She blocked the doorway with her swollen body, holding out one arm before him. “You don’t understand. Wait. There may be a way. Mother?”

Her mother stood, treading carelessly upon the folds and waves of the tapestry, as if walking on water, to stand before him. “King Phaelle is holding court over a special meeting of the High Council at this moment. I have some influence with the royal one. Since

Aryenne cared for you, I would not wish to see you harmed. If I arrange for you to have a brief audience with him, will you then swear to board your ship and leave this land?"

"You have my word."

"Then clean yourself up, man, and go quickly to the Temple. I will send a messenger ahead of you."

He could find Aryenne. He could take her away from this place yet. Breathing deeply for the first time that day, he offered her a stiff bow. "I am forever in your debt, madam."

Her feet. They were like Aryenne's; smooth, dainty, still shapely. And on the big toe of her foot she wore the large, elaborately engraved ring he had brought from Brigia. The ring that glowed like the moon. The ring he had presented to King Phaelle -- for his wife.

God grant him grace, for he was a fool.

He reached for her hand, pressing it against his forehead and respectfully kissing it. "I am forever in your debt, Your Highness."

* * * * *

"We have heard a great deal about the courage of the infamous Lord Drey. It is said that the King of Brigia would not have attained the throne without your support. You are held in the highest esteem in both lands. But you're a foolish young man to interrupt a meeting of the High Council. I could have you killed for less."

Lord Drey stood tall among the massive columns of the Sacrarium, facing the thirteen men before him. They sat in a half-circle of tiers above him, not unlike the Arc of the Lesser Gods of Brigian legend, and no less imperious. "I have no desire to be here, King Phaelle, nor will I disturb you for long. I have a feeling that I have something to do with the reason this assembly was called, and therefore have a right to be present." He was hard-pressed to keep the contempt out of his voice. "However, if you'll just tell me where the girl is, I will gladly leave you to your petty judgments."

“Petty judgments? You dare speak to me in that way!” King Phaelle rose, pounding the podium before him in fury. “I will have you sent back to your cold-blooded king in *pieces*, along with your useless treaty!”

Drey sighed wearily. They were no doubt very important men, sitting upon highly-polished, intricately carved thrones, looking down on him in disapproval. He was being stupid, of course. Offending them would not get him what he wanted. “I no longer have any interest in your treaty. Or your politics, your history, or your customs. All I want to know is whether Aryenne is well.”

“Board your ship, Brigian, and leave Makharia,” said the King with a flourish of his right hand. “It is too late for Aryenne.”

“Too late?” Drey repeated the words woodenly, quietly, as he gazed upon the hard, clean faces of each of the men. “Too late? What do you mean, ‘too late?’”

“Her case has already been discussed and resolved. There’s nothing you can do for her. She has been judged and punished.”

Drey stiffly turned in a slow circle. The Sacrarium was practically empty. There were ten, maybe twelve honor guards spread throughout the interior, more decorative than threatening. And King Phaelle sat at the head of the tier of honored men, dead center, just behind the podium.

Casually lifting his hand to his heart as if he were in pain, Drey felt for the hilt of the dagger he carried in the inner folds of his shirt. He had the element of surprise in his favor. He could surely kill the king before the guards managed to slay him in kind. “Then everyone here knows and approves of your actions?”

“Everyone.”

“But our activities were condoned by all of you -- as long as we abided by your rules. You think you can control the way a person *feels?*!”

“Aryenne knew well what was required of her. She has broken the most sacred of vows. She’s sinned against her people.”

“She did nothing wrong! *I* am responsible.”

“You are very *irresponsible*, Lord Drey,” Phaelle said coolly. “That is what caused the transgression.”

“All the more reason not to punish *her!* It was all my doing. My pride wouldn’t allow me to accept her disinterest. I pushed, goaded, tempted -- I would not leave her in peace until --”

He paused, his head drooping, “Until the surrender was absolute. And I am ashamed of that.”

A murmur wafted among the High Council as the King raised one eyebrow in surprise. “Your honesty does you credit, Brigian. But it changes nothing. Aryenne has already been banished. The sentence has been carried out.”

Drey’s arm fell out of his shirt. “Banished? You mean -- you mean she’s *alive?*”

“Of course she’s alive! What do you think we are -- savages?”

Then she lived. She *lived!* He stilled his trembling hand. Killing the king now would not be justified.

But banished! Into that maze of a jungle, to live the rest of her life among the diseased and outcast?

He would never be able to get through the Interior without guidance, would never be able to find her. He remembered the haunted look on her face as she spoke of those living “away from the unvarnished glow of the sun.” Was such a fate any better than death to her? “There must be something I can say or do!”

“Nothing.”

Drey pulled himself up to his full height and purposefully approached the steps leading to the podium. “As a political favor then, in the name of the Brigian King --”

“And well you might ask in his name,” King Phaelle interrupted. “We have learned much from the Brigian sailors in our midst these past two days. They speak your name with a reverence I’ve never encountered. They say you tell only a fraction of the truth. You have been the power behind the king’s throne. You secured all of his lands for him, defeated every enemy, maintained his control. It was you who convinced him that it was time for peace with Makharia. I believe all of those things, Lord Drey, and probably many more that you would think it dishonorable to concede. ’Tis a powerful man who feels no need to reveal his power. We now understand your sense of pride.”

“Then you will believe my sincerity in this.”

Lord Drey, Premiere Horseman of Brigia, fell heavily to his knees before the assembled company, bowing his head to kiss the hem of the robe of the King of Makharia.

“I ask -- no. I *beg* of you, King Phaelle, that you forgive her transgression. I beg it as one honorable man to another. I beg it as a representative of the King of Brigia. And I beg it as a proud man who has never begged for anything in life, but as one who loves Aryenne more than life itself.”

A concerted gasp of shock rippled throughout the room as King Phaelle stood, gazing down at him in disbelief. Drey knew their thoughts. Never in all the history of Rhenn had a Brigian bowed down before a Makharian. And for a man of his stature to do so to plead the case of a *woman was unthinkable!*

King Phaelle lightly touched Drey’s shoulder, his tone gentle. “Rise, young prince. Be it known that I am most impressed with your gesture. But it is still useless. The sentence has been passed.”

With the speed of a striking snake, Drey grabbed the arm on his shoulder and pulled the king down to his knees beside him. “You cannot do this if you love her. You *must* love her. It’s impossible not to. How can you refuse me? She is your own *daughter!*”

Holding up one hand to stave off the charging guards, King Phaelle shook his head sadly. “Don’t you see?” he whispered. “I cannot forgive her *because* she is my daughter. My position requires that I establish rules for all of my people to live by. I’d be a very poor sovereign if I disobeyed those laws myself to suit my own purposes. You would not respect such a ruler, and neither would my people. And neither would I.”

For the briefest of moments, Drey considered killing him anyway. He cared nothing about his own death. Fury had replaced all reason in his eyes.

Slowly releasing the richly-woven material of the king’s robe, Drey reluctantly set him free. All interest in his surroundings, his fate, deserted him, and he turned to face the guards without wielding his dagger.

King Phaelle motioned to his men. “You will escort Lord Drey of Brigia to his ship, and see that it safely leaves our waters with all the honor due our visiting dignitary.” He lowered his voice to a tone akin to reverence. “And show your respect to a man I shall honor until the end of my days.”

Chapter Nine

“You are unwell, my friend. You should go below and rest.”

Drey watched the shores of Makharia melt into the ocean and chuckled softly. “You have a generous heart and a well-tamed tongue, my friend. But don’t worry on my account. I’ve had neither food nor sleep in two days and have not missed either.”

Captain Meyard frowned in concern. “We have a long journey ahead of us, Lord Drey. You’ll not serve the king by being too ill to complete your work.”

“Yes. My damnable work.” The two men leaned over the ship’s railing for a time, watching the swells. The gray-green sea lapped rhythmically against the side of the ship, as if trying to lull the occupants into forgetfulness.

“*The ice cave*,” Drey finally murmured.

“What?”

“I’m sure she’ll go to the ice cave! She said it was not frequented by others, and we ... we have a special memory of being there. Yes, that’s it! I’ve got to go back. Meyard, you must turn the ship --”

“This ship will stay its course.” The Captain’s voice was firm but compassionate. “I’m sorry, my friend, for all your trouble. I do understand. But I cannot put the lives of my men

or this mission in further jeopardy. If this vessel should be destroyed, the treaty would not be confirmed.”

“Yes, yes, I know, but --”

“And even if the girl has retreated to this cave you speak of, you’ll never make your way through the Interior alone to find it. And no one there will help you. You are a man who understands duty. Pray allow me to do mine.”

Drey gripped the railing with white knuckles. “Right. You’re quite right. We’ve barely avoided the onset of the storms. And I am forever in your debt for helping me thus far. I know, at least, that she is alive -- for now. I can return to Brigia, report to the king, and wait for the rainy season to end.”

“You intend to return to this place?!”

“If I sell everything I own, I can afford my own ship and passage back here. Surely she can survive one season. She *must*. And I will find her, and take her away from there, if possible. If not, I will share her exile. No matter to me.”

“Let the future take care of itself, as it will, Lord Drey. There is only this moment. Look to yourself.”

“I cannot, my friend. She gave up everything for me. How can I do less?”

Meyard shook his head sadly. His words would have no effect on this ghost of a man. “Take my cabin for now. There is, at least, a comfortable bed there, if not much room. As if the caskets of jewels and stores of seeds weren’t enough, that cursed tapestry burst its bindings once hauled on board, and now takes up much of the space; but I dare not put it elsewhere, considering its value. Go below, my lord, and rest as long as you wish. I’ll see to it that you’re not disturbed.”

Drey made his way slowly below deck. He was having difficulty adjusting to the darkened conditions. His eyes were tired, screaming for sleep. And his strength seemed to have all but deserted him.

Stumbling to the captain's quarters, he entered, inhaled the cool, damp air and nearly tripped over the stiff, undulating fabric of the loosened tapestry that now covered most of the floor. A small, square casement in the hull had been left slightly ajar, allowing the evening air to enter, and he eagerly peeled off his uniform, still reeking with the stench of Makharia, and hurled himself upon the captain's bed.

It was a good, stiff Brigian mattress, a luxury to his weary body, and he flung his arm across his eyes, too tired to pull the thick shade meant to block the light. He would certainly not sleep. Just rest. He must rest his eyes, his mind, or he would lose his sanity.

But already he could feel himself drifting away, soothed by the motion of the ship.

Aryenne. Aryenne.

She had given herself completely, and lost everything she valued in return. He wouldn't be able to live with himself until he found her again, tasted the sweet freedom of her, held her to his heart. He would not rest ...

"Pardon the intrusion, your lordship."

Jerking his arm away from his face, Drey tried to blink himself awake. The setting sun streamed through the casement, directly into his eyes, and he squinted, irritated by the intrusion and his temporary blindness. "Mistress of Mercy, who is it? Meyard? Mr. Acton? I understood that I was not to be disturbed."

"I am a stranger from a far land, a guest aboard your ship. I watched you sleeping. You are quite pleasing to the eye, and I couldn't resist following you here."

"Dear God!" He reached out blindly, arms flailing, as he tried to take hold of the dark figure before him. "Who are you? Speak!"

"I intend no disrespect to my host, but the sight of you has aroused such a thirst in me that, by God, I cannot leave this place without having you."

Drey sprang forward, lurching across the bed and snaring the slim arm. "Aryenne! Have I gone mad? Is it really you?"

She threw her arms around his neck and he clutched her to him, murmuring her name again and again. She was real. Dear God, he was holding her, touching her, and she was real. Her flesh was warm, her scent as sweet as he remembered. He pulled away just enough to devour her mouth with his own, to consume her, and to feast on her now uninhibited response.

She laughed and withdrew from him, desperately inhaling a deep breath. "M'lord, I've come a long way to be killed by your kiss! You are squeezing the life out of me. Just allow me to --"

He pulled her into the bed and easily tossed her upon her back, wordlessly ripping her simple black shift from top to bottom, baring her flesh to his touch.

"Master!" she gasped. "If you will just wait -- I have no other clothing!"

"You will be needing none." He covered her body with his and kissed her deeply, shuddering as she automatically wrapped her legs around him.

"But don't you want to hear how I --"

"I care not. You are here. I have you now, and you will never leave my side again."

"It was the tapestry," she persisted. "It was my vehicle. Once I realized what the guards had overheard, I hurried to my father and told him what had happened. I made it clear that I was perfectly willing to be sentenced to exile, but begged that, instead of the Interior, I might be 'banished' to the arms of the man I loved so deeply. He immediately arranged for my 'trial' and publicly agreed to my punishment. It will not seem unusual to my people if I am never seen again."

Her breath came in short, deep gasps as he kissed her eyes, her mouth, bit into her neck, and slowly worked his way down to her breasts, capturing one and suckling loudly. "His personal, most trusted guards led me from the Sacrarium to my place of secret 'exile' -- Bonnareen's home, fortunately by the sea. There, I was rolled into the tapestry and carried

aboard ship by the Brigians themselves. And your Captain Meyard was more than happy to secretly help ‘the greatest man he has ever known.’”

She lifted his head to gaze into his smoldering eyes. “But not before my mother told me how you humbled yourself before the High Council, trying to save me. The only reason you’d ever relinquish your stubborn pride would be if you truly loved me, m’lord. And so I am yours.”

He tenderly touched his lips to hers -- but only for a moment. The fever for her was upon him, and he could not wait. He entered her, slowly and smoothly, smiling at the expression on her face as he filled her as deeply as he could, his hot flesh pulsing eagerly in her warmth. “All words can wait. We’ll tell these stories to our children. But I will perish if I don’t have you immediately, and hear you call out my name once more, in ecstasy, without titles. I hereby declare myself your lover and husbandman. You will attend me now, tomorrow, and always. And I will keep you in my heart for the rest of my days, and *never* tire of you.”

She sighed and closed her eyes, moving as one with him.

“*Drey ...*”

Epilogue

“It would seem we’re leaving the foul weather behind, Cap’n. ’Tis a fair enough evening.”

Captain Meyard slanted a glance at his first mate before returning his gaze to the endless open sea. “Something on your mind, Mr. Acton?”

“Oh no, sir. It’s just -- well, sir, it’s the men, sir. They was wonderin’ just how long they’d be required to stay on deck, sir.”

“Problem, Mr. Acton?”

“Problem? Oh no, sir. Not on *my* ship, sir. It’s just that -- well, they don’t quite understand the order that nobody go below, and some of the men have been on duty all day, sir, and they’re eager to get a bit o’ rest, sir.”

Meyard peered up at the sky. “Yes. It’s been a while. Getting dark. Shouldn’t be much longer, Mr. Acton. I expect we’ll all be tired soon.”

“A good idea, sailing back toward the islands, sir. Helps us miss the storm. Pity Lord Drey isn’t feeling well, and that he won’t have a chance to see Verdin.”

“As a matter of fact, we will be making a short stop in Verdin, Mr. Acton. Lord Drey will be disembarking there.”

“Will he now!” the first mate exclaimed. “He’ll find it queer enough, sir. Weather extremes they have, and both beauty and harshness enough to challenge any man. And the *horses*, sir! Wild and fast, they are. They say no man’s ever been able to tame them.”

Captain Meyard’s mouth twitched. “So they say.”

Mr. Acton loudly cleared his throat. “There is a small matter I’d like to bring to the Captain’s attention, if I may.”

“Yes?”

“It’s the men been worrying, sir, or I’d never even mention it; but there are whisperings that we may be carrying some sort of animal back to Brigia, as a gift to the King.”

“Animal?”

“Yes, sir. There are men aboard who swear they’ve heard it, sir, below deck with some of the cargo stashed in your cabin, Cap’n. They say it sort of whispers and mews, sir, and even laughs. Why, one of the boys swears he heard it shriek, sir, in a high-pitched voice, like a woman in ...”

Captain Meyard spit into the ocean. “A woman in what, Mr. Acton?”

“Um ... like a woman enjoying the attentions of a man, sir. The men think there might be *two* animals down there, mating, or some such nonsense.”

Captain Meyard turned a stern eye upon his subordinate. “You may tell the men that we brought horses to Makharia for the King. But we take no animals back with us. And this other nonsense -- you know full well, Mr. Acton, that no woman has ever been allowed to board this ship before.”

“Yessir. Never before, and that’s a fact, sir.”

“Lord Drey, the King’s representative, has all of the precious cargo on board under scrupulous care and control. I think we may consider all valuables safe in his capable hands. That will set the men’s minds at ease. Any more questions, Mr. Acton?”

Mr. Acton grinned as if pleased, as if all were right with the world. “No, sir. Not a one.”

They stood silently, watching dusk descend as the moons danced in the western sky. At the vague sound of a haunting, throaty scream, both men coughed, shuffled their feet for a moment, and resumed their watching of the horizon.

“Strange how the gale comes in sudden gusts here,” Captain Meyard observed. “She blows by the masts like the wail of a woman. But I must admit that I found that land to be intriguing. I believe I’ll seek to captain the next voyage to Makharia. I like the way the wind sings in the night.”

Mr. Acton scratched an indefinable itch, gazing longingly at the speck of fertile, receding land. “I believe I’ll sign on to join you, sir.”

 THE END 

Raine Weaver

Raine Weaver loves the art of creation.

Having dabbled in music, photography, and painting, she's found pleasure in them all.

But writing was always her truest love.

When life didn't seem to go the way it should, she could make up stories that ended the way she wanted. Create her own worlds.

After all-that was the way things should be.

Now living in her own little cottage on her own piece of land, complete with a wide assortment of four-legged creatures, she writes, paints, and plans her future.

And she's SURE she was meant to be a top-selling novelist, writing at home in her jammies, still creating her own reality.

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* * * * *

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Slaves of Love

Less than a half-hour ago, he'd watched this lovely woman bathing in the sparkling water, carefree as a creature of nature in her glorious nakedness. He'd felt a little guilty spying on her, but how could he resist? Her beauty surpassed that of any woman he'd ever seen. He could almost believe her to be a mythical being straight from one of the storybooks his mother used to read him when he was a boy.

She gazed up at him, her blue eyes soft and dewy.

“Thank you.”

The words, like delicate petals, drifted from her lips. She looked like a woman wanting to be kissed. He slid his other arm around her and drew her body close to his. The memory of her pressed against him earlier, naked and dripping wet, tightened his body in arousal. He couldn't help remembering that she was still naked beneath his black cloak.

“Why don't you thank me with a kiss?” he murmured.

Shena wanted to grant him more than a kiss. She'd never felt this way with a man before. Safe. Protected. She wanted to burrow into his arms and stay there forever.

At her hesitation, he smiled encouragingly. “Surely you can grant me one kiss?”

One kiss. Yes, at least that. She drew her tongue around her lips to moisten them, then parted them slightly as she raised her hands to hold his face. His cheeks scratched slightly with the new growth of his beard, but she didn't mind. The very masculinity of it stimulated her, made her feel more feminine. His eyes, the color of sun-gilt bronze, darkened as he watched her. She pushed herself onto her tiptoes to reach him, and he waited for her. When her lips touched his, she felt as if she would faint, the feeling was so painfully exciting. As though he sensed her weakness, his hands slid up her back and he pulled her closer to his

body. She moved her lips on his, and he followed her lead, though she sensed he carefully controlled his movements.

She felt the tip of his tongue slip across the seam of her mouth, then nudge with a delicate pressure. She opened, granting him access. His tongue slid inside her mouth, then caressed the inside of her lips. The delicate yet powerful sensation caught her breath. He pulled her tighter to him. Her breasts, crushed against the hardness of his well-muscled chest, swelled, the nipples tightening to hard buds. She longed to feel bare skin against hers.

As though reading her mind, he skimmed his hand over her, then slipped it inside the cloak to cup her breast, and a choked sound of pleasure escaped her. His other hand pushed her cloak aside and cupped her bottom. He pulled her pelvis close to his body, and she felt the bulge of his arousal. She tensed, and he immediately loosened his hold, but his hand remained on her breast, warm, exciting, her nipple thrusting into his palm. As he parted from their kiss to gaze down at her, his hand shifted slightly on her breast, sending arrows of pleasure shimmering through her body. She knew she should pull away, should be frightened of him touching her, but his warm bronze eyes, filled with compassion and kindness, soothed her frazzled spirit.

“I won't do anything you don't want me to.”

She couldn't utter a word under the primal need raging through her, so she just nodded, then slipped her arms around his neck and pulled him into another kiss. His hands danced the length of her body as he eased her onto the soft grass beneath their feet. He untied the cloak and slowly peeled it back, holding her gaze the whole time. He smiled as he looked at her naked body, his gaze like liquid fire across the length of her.

“My God, you're beautiful.”

She smiled back at him. No one had ever told her that.

He kissed her lips, dipping his tongue inside her mouth, then moved to the crook of her neck. Slowly, he kissed down her chest and over the swell of her breast. She melted as

his mouth captured her rigid nipple. Her eyelids fell closed as his hand found her other nipple and nurtured it to heightened arousal. Both her breasts wanted more. She wanted more. Had she said it out loud? She didn't know or care.

All that existed for her was the rise and fall of her breathing, the rigid need of her breasts, the overwhelming desire for something more. She just didn't know what. He stroked her breasts, and she undulated to press more firmly into his hands. The rhythm of her labored breathing, the odd, whimpering sounds she made, only skimmed the edges of her consciousness.

“It's all right, sweetheart.”

His calming words sluiced through the heated fever overtaking her. His hands fell away from her breasts, but his lips claimed hers, capturing the tiny sound of disappointment. Their only contact now was his mouth on hers, but his tongue sweeping across hers, and the ardent pressure of his lips, demanded her full attention. Her heated body longed for more, and an instant later she felt his body return. Naked now. She opened her eyes to look at him. His arms, thick and corded with muscle, settled on either side of her, suspending him over her. Her nipples peaked as the light coating of coarse hair sprinkled across his tanned chest stimulated those sensitized nubs. She dragged her hands across his strong, broad shoulders, awed by the feel of his steel-hard muscles rippling under her fingertips.

Then, with a flash of frigid water through her veins, she froze at the feel of his hard shaft falling across her belly. Her eyes shot wide open. He eased his pelvis away from her and placed the tip of his cock against the moist opening of her vagina.

* * * * *

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Elizabeth Batten-Carew

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-- Patti Fischer, *Romance Reviews Today*