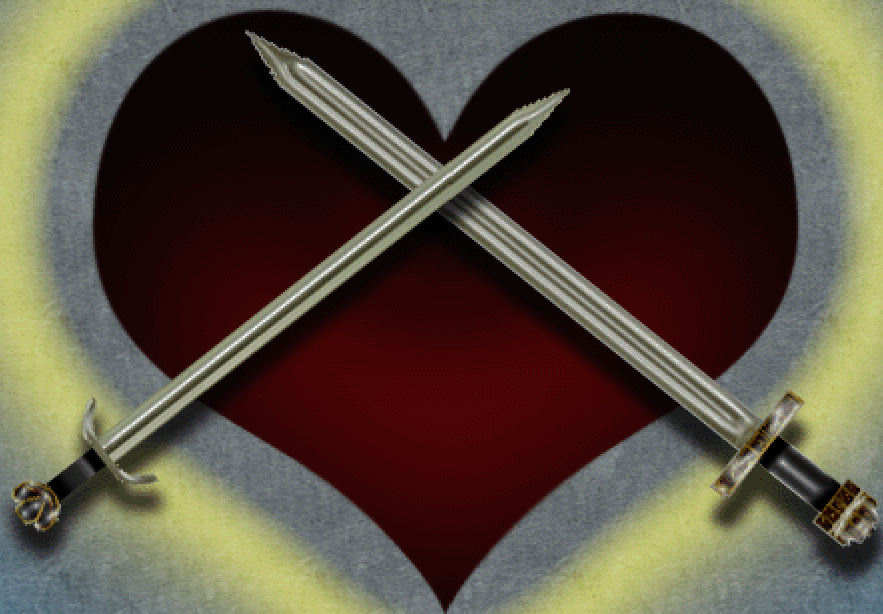


Love and Hate



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Love and Hate

Chapter One

Strong fingers massaged oil scented with vanilla, ginger and potent herbs into Aster's temples and toes and she closed her eyes, trying to relax as two of the servants, one at her head and one at her feet, applied the mixture in silence.

It was impossible.

The purpose of this ritual was not to soothe but to stimulate. It prepared her for a wedding night with a man she'd rather kill than bed.

As nimble fingers moved along her throat and across her ankles, lust and repulsion battled inside her. Attempting to keep her desires at bay, the stimulating oils rendered her helpless to the encroaching passion. As Aster breathed in the fragrant scents, her nipples tightened to sensitive peaks beneath the touch of soft, oiled thumbs. She resisted the urge to squirm her hips as the servants' palms caressed her arms and thighs, kneading closer to her heated feminine flesh, already aching for a lover's touch.

Or anyone's touch.

Aster closed her eyes and clenched her fists in helpless rage. Carnal need might be enveloping her body, but she was determined it would not touch her soul. Tonight she would give him, that murdering Harmonish bastard, her body.

And, because of the oils and herbs, she would *want* to.

It didn't matter whether or not she *slept* with her husband tonight, or any other night. Like the marriage itself, their bedding was simply a duty she must perform for Queen and kingdom. How had *she* managed to be thrust into this situation? She was a general in her Queen's army, one of her Queen's most trusted military advisors.

"Which is precisely why *you* have been chosen to marry this Harmonish man," the Queen had informed her the day before the union had been announced. "This war, between Subania and Harmony, has lasted for far too many years."

"After careful negotiations, we've sealed this alliance. As agreed, one of our generals will marry the Captain of the Harmony King's personal guard. Two respected military leaders, joined in matrimony, will prove our kingdoms have truly united and will bring peace to our lands." From the look on her Queen's face, this order was not to be argued with, but Aster had to try.

"But why can't General Berta marry him?"

"Berta is far too old. You are the best choice and it is my will that *you* marry Captain Symon, of the Steel."

Such a stupid name: Symon, of the Steel.

She'd met the man several times during their negotiations with Harmony. A tall bearded gargoyle, he had stood behind their king, silent and stony.

Symon might have a reputation as warrior without peer, but Aster was also known for her martial skills. Perhaps, after their marriage, she could tempt him into a sparring match, where they could kill each other and end their mutual misery. She didn't doubt he hated the idea of marrying a Subanian and much as she dreaded wedding a Harmonish.

It was common knowledge that his home had been destroyed by Subanian warriors, who had killed all that they found. Not that they didn't deserve it.

The village had been a secret military base; its inhabitants believed to be spies and warriors. Women, children, or the elderly; none could be trusted. Both sides had lost lives during the skirmish

that had left his village in smoldering ashes. It was human nature for Symon to hate Subanians for the deaths of those closest to him, even if they had all been murdering spies.

Aster was well acquainted with hate.

She despised Harmony for even beginning this war.

They had snuffed out the lives of countless Subanians - all in the name of avarice. Her younger sister and brother were just a few of the loved ones she had lost in Harmony's desperate attempt to rule their entire island.

"Please stand, General Aster. We must dress you for the ceremony," said one of the servants.

Aster stood naked in front of the window overlooking the courtyard where her marriage would take place. Below her dozens of servants scrambled preparing the grounds, decorating the cobbled walkways with fragrant flowers, and filling long wooden tables with inviting foods.

"Yes. Dress me for my funeral. This is the death of what may have been a happy life." Aster's belly tightened with anger as she raised her arms so the servants could cloth her in a floor-length tunic of shimmering green silk, sliding it over her well-muscled curves.

She wondered if Symon felt as miserable as she did.

By the Goddess, she hoped so.

Chapter Two

"I said leave me!" Symon of the Steel commanded, rising from the warm herb-scented water. Rivulets of moisture streamed down his lean, hard-muscled flesh as he swiped a fist at the two male servants fussing around him. The two men stepped back, fear gleaming in their eyes.

"As you command, Captain," the redheaded one stated. "However, we must return to anoint your flesh for your wedding night and, once that is done, you cannot be left alone."

"For fear that I'll satisfy my own urges? Even that would be better than bedding the Subanian whore I'm marrying."

The other servant lifted a defensive hand. "But, Captain--"

"I said get out! I'll be ready for the wedding just as I promised my King."

The servants scurried out of the chamber, closing the door behind them as Symon dropped back into his tub and shut his eyes. The warm water did nothing to soothe the anger raging in his soul.

The damned war against Subania had finally ended but, as part of the alliance, Symon was being forced to marry a Subanian General.

Aster. An ugly name for an ugly woman.

Though she was not physically abhorrent, she was, like all Subanians, wretched inside. Only a truly despicable people could slaughter as ruthlessly as the Subanians. When his village had been destroyed, they'd killed everyone, including his wife and children. His daughter had been three years old, his son only five. The Subanians claimed that everyone had been either a warrior or a spy. How could children so young be either?

Though his first marriage had been arranged, he'd liked his wife. Maybe he hadn't lusted after her, but she'd been a kind woman and a good mother to their children. She hadn't deserved such a horrible death.

Symon still felt ill when he recalled the sight of his loved ones' bodies pierced with arrows.

In a few hours, Symon's marriage to General Aster would seal their kingdoms' alliance as well as his own fate.

A life of misery, with no hope of finding love again.

Aster's body tingled from the oils and, beneath her silky dress, her breasts tightened with desire and her pussy throbbed. She was vaguely aware of the hundreds of guests who had assembled in the courtyard of the Subanian palace to watch this union.

Her Queen and the Harmonish King sat by the altar. Standing in front of the priestess, Aster and Symon listened to the ritual words that would bind them forever. The two adversaries had exchanged a single frigid glance before the ceremony began but hadn't looked at each other since.

Aster risked a sidelong glance to see if Symon appeared as unhappy as she felt. She knew he had received the same ceremonial preparations as she, smelling the warm scent of the sexually stimulating herbs emanating from his skin.

Her swift perusal revealed nothing.

Symon stood motionless, hands clasped behind his back, long legs braced apart. His mane of curly chestnut hair hung in wild tendrils down his broad back and his wiry beard had been neatly

trimmed. Dark blue eyes stared intently at the priestess from beneath a primitive forehead

Ape-like, Aster thought. I am wedding an oversized, hairy animal.

Most Harmonish men had blond or reddish hair, were of slim wiry build and average height. Why must she be bound to one of the rare dark giants from Harmony?

"Raise your hands," the priestess commanded. Aster rested her hand over Symon's.

"Do you, Symon, accept Aster as your woman until your life's end?"

"Yes." The word was growled through visibly clenched teeth.

"Do you, Aster, accept Symon as your man until your life's end?"

"Yes." Aster wondered if she sounded as angry as Symon.

"From this moment forward, you are bound in matrimony. Blessings to you and all your children."

Aster and Symon jerked their hands apart.

Children.

For a moment, Aster thought she might be sick.

To conclude their ceremony, the priestess instructed them to drink from the ritual chalice. As soon as the strong wine, laced with additional stimulating herbs, reached her belly Aster was struck by waves of desire rippling through her.

She willed her heartbeat to slow, resisting the urge to gasp out her overwhelming need. If she didn't receive some form of sexual release soon she might just humiliate herself by attempting self-gratification in the middle of the crowded courtyard. Looking into Symon's sapphire eyes, she saw the same aching passion reflected.

While the guests assembled around the tables to enjoy the wedding feast, Aster and Symon followed a servant into the palace. Winding through the great hall and climbing the ornate staircase, they were led to the specially prepared bridal chamber.

The vast, round chamber glowed with the light of dozens of candles. A large bed, covered in a mounds of quilts and pillows, and a bronze bath, roomy enough for two, were the only furnishings.

Symon and Aster stared at one another with contempt as the servant turned down their bedcovers.

He desired nothing more than for this night to end so that he could return to his homeland. She prayed the throbbing ache between her legs would disappear, and for her heart to cease pounding against her ribs.

But such wishes were to be denied.

The special herbs they had been anointed with, and ingested, ensured that they would fulfill their duty to their sovereignties.

As soon as the servant left them alone Symon began pacing the room. His chest heaving, his fists clenched and unclenched at his sides. Glaring at her, he actually snarled, frustrated by their situation.

"I'm no happier about this than you are!" Aster snapped, wrapping her arms around her middle as she trudged around the room. She stopped suddenly, gasping in the midst of her pleasure-pain. The simple motion of walking had almost been enough to push her to the verge of climax. "I can't stand this!"

"I'd almost say you can suffer, but I can't stand it either!" He crossed the room, grasping her shoulders and pulling her against him.

Her nipples, straining through the silk fabric of her dress, pressed against his chest as Aster tilted her face upward, staring into his hard, jewel-like eyes.

Grasping the front of her dress, he tore it in half and Aster shrugged her shoulders as the tattered fabric dropped to the stone floor.

Her heart throbbing, she walked naked to the bed and stretched out, watching Symon fling off his tunic, kick off his boots and yank off his trousers.

Aster licked her lips at the sight of him, enjoying the view.

His broad shoulders and chest tapered to a stomach sculpted with muscles. Powerful thighs and strong calves covered with dark hair, sent shivers of desire coursing through her. And his cock! Thick, ruddy and well veined, it beckoned her from a nest of wiry black hair.

She had little time to savor the emerging vision.

With a single stride, he reached the bed and his body covered hers. Aster gasped at the welcoming touch of his flesh.

By the Goddess, he is so big, hot, and hard!

Symon buried his face in her neck, his tongue lapping her flesh, his beard rough and tickling at the same time. His hands caressed her breasts, squeezing one, stroking the nipple of the other. Aster shifted her hips against him, enticing him to soothe her.

Finally, after so many hours of suffering with carnal need, she was going to experience relief.

His long, hair-roughened legs entangled hers for just a moment before one knee nudged her thighs apart. Normally she enjoyed a bit more touching and caressing before rutting, but not with him.

There was no affection between them, just desperation.

Panting, she spread her legs and welcomed the thick, steely length of his erection as it slid into her.

"Goddess!" Aster panted, her palms cupping his rock hard buttocks before sliding up his smooth, muscular back. His chest hairs felt surprisingly soft against her tender breasts.

How could she be enjoying this? Though it sickened her that her body was responding so avidly to this hateful male, she couldn't help herself. Her clit and pussy ached with her craving.

She needed him so, so badly!

Sinking short nails into his shoulders, she wrapped her legs around his lean waist, holding him with all her considerable strength. For the first time she thought it good that he was so large. With the chokehold she had on him, any of the smaller Harmonish men would surely have been crushed by her intense grasp.

His thrusts came so hard and fast that Aster climaxed in seconds. Closing her eyes tightly, she convulsed around him in waves of pleasure, swallowed by the most intense orgasm she'd ever experienced. She clung to him, expecting to feel the rush of his climax. His mouth found hers and she tasted the remnants of the ceremonial wine on his lips, felt the warmth of his tongue as it sought hers in a dance for power.

Stop him! Don't let him kiss you. Not this piece of Harmonish filth. Yet, she couldn't halt her responses to the stroking tongue and soft, moist lips.

His hips continued their rhythmic pounding, and she came again, gasping into his mouth since he refused to end the breath-stealing embrace. Adrift in sensation Aster ran her palms down his sweat-slicked spine then clutched his taut buttocks. She held him close as a third orgasm swept over her trembling body.

She could no longer see or think, could only revel in the wild pulsations coursing through her body. The herb-induced intensity of her climaxes was shattering, almost painful to endure, yet were a welcome relief from the past tormenting hours.

She wondered how Symon was able to hold back from indulging in his own passionate release. By the rasp of his breath, as well as the ripples running along his shoulders and back, she knew he too had to be suffering from his unrequited desire.

Aster's body convulsed a fourth time. Within the throes of her rapture, she felt him stiffen, ramming into her with one final thrust. He tore his mouth from hers, his breath coming in raw gasps as he collapsed on top of her, shuddering with his fulfillment.

She had betrayed herself. Aster's hands fell away from his back. She resisted the urge to stroke his damp skin, refusing to acknowledge any feeling for him other than hatred and disgust.

"Damn it," he muttered, rolling off her to the other side of the bed. He tugged the sheet up to his waist, turning his back to her and ignoring her existence.

She stared at him, wondering if she should be feeling insulted or relieved. She opted for the latter.

It made far more sense.

Jerking her own half of the sheet up to her breasts, she lay staring at the ceiling. At least this arrangement was only for one night. Now that the herbs had dissipated, they would never have to bed each other again.

No more would she be forced to endure the touch of this hairy, evil-eyed primate.

Chapter Three

Symon could only guess how long he lay on his side, listening to Aster's quiet breathing. Certain she was sleeping soundly, he brushed aside the sheet and knelt staring down at her in the waning candlelight.

Straight, dark blond hair spread on her pillow and thick eyelashes cast shadows on her cheeks. In peaceful repose on her back, eyes closed and rose-colored lips slightly parted, he saw that the sheet had slipped down, exposing blush-colored nipples. Her abdomen was firm and smooth, her navel pierced by a delicate gold ring. Desire stabbed him as he recalled the sensation the metal ring had created against his flesh when their bodies had been tightly joined.

Disgusted at his weakness in succumbing to the herbs, and this female's enticing athletic body, he continued his appraisal. She wasn't a bad looking woman; fairly attractive, though it galled him to admit it.

Still, she is a Subanian general, responsible for the deaths of my people, my children.

Symon's fists opened and he extended his hands toward her throat, knowing it would take only seconds to snap her neck. He'd probably be imprisoned for life, maybe even executed, but it might be worth it.

She sighed, apparently lost in a pleasant dream by the slight smile touching her full lips. Lying there, completely vulnerable to his whims, she didn't seem so horrible. Nor had she seemed horrible when they'd made love.

Made love!

They'd rutted like beasts, due to the herbal poisons the Subanian priestess had created for them.

Symon's hands encircled her neck, not quite touching the skin. His heartbeat quickened, echoing in his ears.

Seconds to kill her. Mere seconds...

He touched her throat, gently caressing the soft skin.

Aster's green eyes snapped open. *Had she sensed how close she'd come to death?*

"What do you want?" she asked, her voice soft yet stern.

"Not what you think." He turned away and covered himself with the sheet. Falling into a restless slumber, he dreamt of his village, as it had been before its destruction.

Except, instead of his first wife, Aster shared his home and his bed.

Symon awoke, exhausted from a night of disturbing dreams. Each time he had awakened and looked at Aster, who slept so peacefully, he hated her. How could she sleep so peacefully when he was in such utter torment over this farce of a marriage?

On the training field, he pushed himself and his men, attacking as if he was the God of War himself. Several times he realized he was venting his temper on his undeserving soldiers and forced himself to stop. Allowing his emotions to rule him could result in a deadly error, even on the training field. He buried thoughts of Aster and their consummated union, forgetting she even existed as he practiced maneuvers and weaponry with his men.

Instructing a foot soldier in how to better his swordplay, he was disturbed by several of his men shouting. As he followed the

pointing arms, he saw a Subanian warrior, in full armor, charging across the field on horseback. The warhorse galloped directly towards them and he shoved the foot soldier to safety.

Symon landed face first in the grass as the horse veered in an attempt to trample him. Face concealed by a metal visor, the rider quickly turned the horse and drew his sword, intent on attacking the Captain. Symon feinted, deflecting the blow with his drawn blade. When the horse made a third pass, Symon was able to unseat the determined warrior. The warrior recovered quickly, defending himself with a booted foot, kicking at Symon without success.

The war was supposed to be over, but it seemed that peace could not be forced; and Symon was almost grateful the bastard had attacked. Perhaps killing another Subanian pig would satisfy this fury at being forced to marry.

Symon's men closed in, their weapons drawn, but he shouted, "Stay back! This puny one's mine!" As he'd hoped, his words fed his opponent's anger, forcing him into attacking with ferocity.

The Subanian is damn good with a sword, Symon hated to admit to himself. Though persistent, the Subanian warrior lacked Symon's powerful strokes and was soon unseated. Driven to his knees by the fall he was disarmed and beaten.

Holding the point of his blade beneath the warrior's chin, Symon paused from delivering the killing blow. His pulse raced with the desire to finish this battle – once, and for all – but something stopped him.

His duty was no longer to slaughter the enemy but to promote peace between their people. His personal needs must remain secondary to the requirements of his liege, no matter the cost.

"Go ahead! Do it!" The Subanian lifted gloved hands and tore off the helmet, revealing a familiar feminine face.

"Aster." Symon pressed the blade closer to her exposed flesh. "I should cut your throat here and now."

Her eyes spat fiery rage at him. "Go on then. I'd do it to you."

Symon's grip tightened on the sword until his hand ached, his teeth grinding as he teetered on the edge of murder. Aster met his eyes without fear and he suddenly understood how she had earned her position as General in her Queen's army. Such calmness in the face of defeat was impressive.

It also enraged him.

"I'd rather be dead than married to you," she growled.

Her irate admission decided her fate and he sheathed his sword. When she reached for her discarded sword he stepped on it, holding it firmly to the ground. Cursing, his new bride glared at him.

Sparing her life is a better revenge than killing her.

Symon grasped her shoulders and yanked her to his chest, his mouth silencing her venomous words.

Stiffening in outrage, she lifted her knee and rammed it at his groin.

Turning his body, he grunted with the force of the blow striking against his hip. Wrapping her hair around one of his hands, he jerked her neck backwards, using his other arm to press her body close. Hatred filled him but, to his distress, acute desire also churned within, stiffening his cock and making his heart pound.

"The next time you decide to pick a fight with someone, General, you had better be sure you can win."

"Sparing an enemy's life is a mistake; don't you know that by now?" She glared. "If you ever want to sleep another peaceful night,

you'd better kill me now."

"Peace? How boring is that?" He shoved her towards her horse. As soon as she was securely settled on the horse's back, he vaulted behind her and took control of the reins. As her elbow rammed his immovable chest, he grunted, wondering if she'd succeeded in cracking a rib.

Damn, the bitch is strong!

Last night she had clung to him with more supple power than any other woman he'd ever known and, to his inner frustration, he'd *liked* it.

"I want to fuck you, Aster," he growled close to her ear. "If I'm going to be stuck in this marriage with you I'm planning to take what pleasure I can from it." He expected her to argue but, to his surprise, she stopped struggling and sat quietly.

Apprehension wound its way into his soul. Surely, she couldn't be cooperating?

She must be planning some kind of attack, especially after the way he'd embarrassed her on the field in front of his men. He glanced at her warily as they dismounted, without incident, in front of the palace. A stable boy took the reins as Symon grasped Aster by her arm and hauled her through the huge doors leading into the castle.

"Up to our chamber," he ordered. She led the way up the stairs, not glancing once at him.

Once in their chamber, Symon slammed the door and bolted it.

"I said I want to fuck you," he repeated.

As he approached the bed, she catapulted herself towards him, knocking him onto his back to the floor. Completely unprepared for her attack he was stunned when her hands grasped handfuls of his

hair and she jerked his head back, as he'd done hers earlier. As she leisurely licked his throat, Symon's pulse raced. The sensations of her warm, wet tongue, caressing his flesh, and the tight grip of her fingers wound in the locks of his hair excited him beyond comprehension.

Strength was something he admired and his woman obviously possessed it in plenty.

Releasing his hair, she dragged off his grass-stained shirt and tossed it far from his reach. Using her teeth, she yanked off her gloves, flinging them aside and running her hot hands over his heaving chest. An aroused, needy growl escaped her throat as she kneaded hard muscles, weaving her fingers through the mat of damp hair.

Damn, but her touch felt good!

She kissed him, her tongue slipping past his lips. Her chain mail dug into his flesh and, unfastening the poking armor, he removed it, along with her damp shirt.

A firm stomach and plump breasts were revealed, glistening with perspiration. Sharp little nipples rubbed against his chest as she rubbed herself along his torso. She kissed him from throat to waist, her tongue tracing the shape of his quivering navel. Beneath his trousers, his cock stiffened and ached.

How he longed to bury it deep inside her!

Aster pulled off their boots and trousers, returning to straddle his waist, her knees clasp firmly his sides as she guided his swollen cock into her drenched pussy. Unable to resist touching this temptation, he ran greedy hands over silken thighs, fascinated by the curving muscles hiding so much control. Cupping her buttocks he was delighted as the soft, fleshy globes spilled over his palms.

Soft, yet strong, she reminded him of a wild she-beast, momentarily tamed for his pleasure alone.

As one of his fingers pressed against the edge of her sphincter she gasped, her breath quickening and her belly becoming taut. The sight of her writhing atop him was almost too much for him to endure.

How could he continue hating her when he desired her so much that it was like a physical pain tearing through him?

He reached for her hands and their fingers entwined as she rode him hard, her head thrown back to reveal pale blue veins and straining tendons beneath her golden flesh. Her full breasts, their spiky nipples erect, jounced and heaved with every motion.

"By the Goddess," Symon breathed.

His head arched back as her speed increased, driving him to the edge of desire, her hot, wet sheath tightening around his pulsing cock. His heart was about to burst through his chest from the intense pleasure but he didn't care.

He craved it, needed it as he needed his next breath.

Her entire body rippled as her cries of fulfillment rang out, echoing in the bedchamber. Each throb dragged him deeper inside her molten pussy and his hips rammed upwards. Grasping her waist, his fingers tightened on her soft skin, marking her with his imprint as he climaxed.

Melting onto him, she draped one leg over his waist, resting her head against his chest.

"Why?" he panted.

"Because I wasn't going to let *you* fuck *me*."

"Huh?" He wrinkled his brow in confusion.

The woman is daft!

"Exactly what I said." She raked her fingernails across his chest. "You didn't fuck me, Captain. I fucked you. So, I won."

"Just the battle, General." In one swift motion he rolled her onto her back. Pinning her arms above her head, he spoke against her. "The war's not over yet."

Aster closed her eyes and sighed as Symon took one of her nipples between his teeth and ran his tongue over the tender tip. His beard brushed her sensitive flesh while one of his callused palms smoothed her hip.

Even without the additional help of stimulating herbs, the man aroused her like no one she'd ever met. Oversized and arrogant, he remained her enemy.

But her continued attraction to him mystified her.

They heard a pounding on the door. "General Aster! Captain Symon! You're wanted in the throne room right away!"

Growling, Symon licked Aster's nipple one last time before standing and pulling her to her feet. Tugging on his filthy clothes, he muttered his annoyance over the intrusion.

Aster, frustrated both from the interruption and from her lack of control with a man she should despise, turned her back so as not to watch him dress. She pulled on her discarded garments as quickly as she could.

They walked to the throne room where the two monarchs sat, glaring at their military leaders. Aster and Symon bowed, curious to the reasons behind their rulers' ire.

"It has come to our attention that the two of you attacked each other on the training field this morning." The Queen of Subania stated.

"Your Majesty," Aster began, "it was just—"

"Stupidity!" the King of Harmony bellowed. "Your marriage is to prove that the fighting is over between our people! What you've done is dangerous to our delicate alliance."

The Queen glared at the couple. "What were you thinking? Or were you?"

Aster waited for Symon to explain how he had been forced to defend himself against her assault but he remained silent.

Stony.

The warm, passionate man she'd been with only moments ago had once again become the gargoyle.

"I apologize for initiating the sparring match," Aster said.

Symon raised a querying eyebrow in her direction.

"Sparring match?" The King of Harmony snapped. "We heard tell you were trying to murder one another."

"Several people thought that when Captain Symon dragged you off the field, he meant to kill you and start another war."

"I assure you, that was not my intention," Symon stated.

The Queen sighed in obvious disappointment at her General's failure to cooperate with their royal indicts. "We'd hoped to make this marriage as easy on you both as possible, agreeing to allow you to live in your respective kingdoms and continue overseeing your individual responsibilities. But now, such an arrangement has been made impossible. At least for a time."

"I will be leaving for Harmony on the morrow," the King stated. "Captain Symon must, obviously, accompany me. And you will also be joining us, General Aster, in our return to my kingdom."

Aster's belly tightened with horror. "With all due respect, Your Majesty, I can't. My duties here--"

"Are no longer your concern," the Queen interrupted. "Colonel Miles has been promoted to your previous position of General and will assume your duties. You will travel to your new home. With your husband."

Aster's jaw tightened. "You're decommissioning me, Your Majesty?"

"Of course not. You're a fine asset to my army. You are simply being placed on leave of absence until your marriage has settled any further suspicions. In other words, General Aster, you are to make known how well you and your new husband are getting along. Is that clear?"

Aster nodded, angrily resigned to this temporary dismissal of her military responsibilities.

The entire arrangement made her sick.

Her lust for Captain Gargoyle enraged her.

Still duty was duty and she had no choice but to obey her Queen's commands.

"And the same 'happily married' arrangement applies to you as well, Captain." The King's gaze fixed harshly on Symon's unexpressive face. "Do you fully understand?"

Symon bowed from the neck. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Very well." The Queen folded her hands on her silk-clad lap. "No one expects either of you to actually *like* each other but we *do*

require that you *appear* to accept one another, and act accordingly. Now, you may go."

Turning on their heels, the couple left the throne room and, as they stomped to the nearby training field, Symon snapped at Aster, "See what your selfishness has done? If it hadn't been for your uncalled-for assault, we would have been rid of each other after today."

"Well, you certainly weren't acting like a man who wanted to get rid of me. Not killing me, when I offered you the perfect opportunity, you bedded me instead," she taunted.

"A mistake I don't intend to make again. I might have to live with you, playing the part of the loyal husband. Never again will I touch you with my body, and certainly never with my heart."

"You have a heart? I thought gargoyles were made of stone."

"No. Steel."

Fine. If he never wants to bed me again it's all the better for me.

Chapter Four

Two days later they arrived in Harmony. Their journey across the island had taken a day and a half, with Aster riding to the left of the King's coach while Symon had guarded the right. It was summer, so the weather had been pleasant. In a few months' time the snow would begin to fall, making travel between the kingdoms nearly impossible.

Aster hoped to be home long before then. Just as soon as she and Symon had everyone believing that their marriage was strong she would be able to leave.

Aster dismounted and passed her reins to a stable boy.

Symon motioned to a young maid, standing to one side of the entourage, to come closer. She curtsied to the King's entourage, scurrying over to meet Symon's demands.

"Escort my wife to my chambers." He turned to Aster. "Once his Majesty is settled, and I have seen to my men, I'll join you."

Aster returned his smile with a well-practiced false one of her own. They had been playing the part of happy newlyweds so well that she doubted any of the onlookers could sense the anger simmering between them.

She wasn't sure how long she would be able to continue this charade. While residing in Harmony, she had been ordered to abandon her warrior's ways, dressing as the royal court deemed appropriate for a woman. Her armor, trousers, and tunics had been exchanged for gowns and veils.

Her Queen *and* the Harmonish King had made it clear that she was not there for her military expertise, but to make herself known as Symon's 'wife'.

The war was over.

Long live peace.

Once satisfied that the King's chamber was secure Symon met with his troops, giving them instruction before heading for his rooms. Knowing that each step was taking him closer to Aster made his insides twist with fury.

I probably should have killed the bitch when I had the chance, he found himself muttering.

No. The war is over.

Wasting his life in this unbearable marriage meant little compared to the suffering of thousands, had the war continued. Pausing outside his chamber doors, Symon drew a deep, calming breath before stepping inside.

He did not know why he was surprised to see Aster reading. Seated at a round marble table by the windows, with a bowl of fruit and a goblet of wine at her side, she had obviously made herself at home. He watched as she raised a fat grape to her lips, pursing her lips and sucking the juice from beneath the skin.

Those soft, sensual lips that had felt like silk against mine. To feel those lips--

No! He would not think of her in that manner again.

"Made yourself comfortable, did you?" His voice dripped sarcasm.

"As best I could." She plucked another grape and popped it into her mouth. "The accommodations aren't bad. The view is good and I can see the training field from here."

Symon's fists clenched as he seethed. *She is such a controlled bitch, never letting me see what she is feeling.*

He strode the window and stared at the warriors training on the grass below them. He'd chosen these chambers for the exact reasons she had stated. Even when off duty he liked observing his troops.

"You have a fine weapons collection." As her words he glanced over his shoulder to where Aster stood gazing appreciatively at his collection of swords, daggers, and bows.

"I don't understand this, however." She strode to the mantle and picked up a wooden doll, wearing a tiny patchwork dress. "This is a strange thing for a man to keep."

"Not if it belonged to his daughter." Symon crossed the room and yanked the toy from her hand. He placed it back on the mantle.

A raw ache tore at his insides, and he wondered if he would ever recover from the loss of his family. If only he could think of them without so much pain. He shook his head, unwilling to risk revealing any weakness that Aster might use as ammunition.

"I didn't know you had children."

"Two. Slaughtered by your people when my village was destroyed," He retorted.

Unflinching, Aster met his furious gaze with a calm demeanor, at war with the turbulence writhing inside her. "I understand your bitterness. I have lost loved ones to Harmony as well."

"Children?" He was curious to know if she had experienced the pleasure, and pain, of having and losing a child.

"No. But, if you had been so concerned about your children, you shouldn't have taught them to be spies."

"Spies?" He clenched his teeth so hard he was surprised they didn't crack. "My daughter was three years old! How many three year old spies have you known?"

Aster's brow furrowed in confusion. "Our officers never mentioned that there had been such young children in your village. Their reports simply stated all were warriors, or spies."

"I guess your officers only reported what they wanted you to know. Nia was only three years old. Kiran, my son, had turned five."

"It seems that the young always suffer the most in any war. My sister was just fifteen when she died in battle."

"Old enough to hold a sword." Symon reminded her.

"Still too young to die." Aster couldn't stop the sigh escaping her lips.

Symon turned back to the window, running a hand through his hair. *She is right. Fifteen. Three. Sixty. No age was good to die needlessly in war.*

"Would you like something to eat?" Aster motioned towards the bowl of fruit.

Symon shook his head, casting a glance at the doll on the mantle, before striding out of the room.

As the door slammed behind Symon, Aster slumped in her chair at the table and glanced at the leather bound volume she had discarded earlier. She no longer felt like reading.

Though she'd heard Symon's village had been destroyed, she hadn't known about the children. The Subanian officer who had been in charge of the attack had reported back that the youngest child in the village had been seven years old, trained well in the use of weapons and poisons. She had never liked the idea of killing

children, but she realized innocent people often became the casualties of war.

Many of her people had died as well, innocents caught by the actions of the factions warring around them.

She couldn't help being moved by Symon's loss. The sad expression that had come over the gargoyle's face as he'd gazed at the doll still surprised her. The urge to comfort him had been almost overpowering and, for the first time in her life, Aster hadn't been sure what to do or what to say.

"Stop! I will not feel for him. I won't!" She slammed her fist into her palm, reminding herself of her promise.

Walking to the window she gazed out and immediately spotted Symon practicing on the field below. As she watched him fend and parry with his men she remembered how he had bested her during their skirmish. No easy task, since she was known for her skill with a blade.

She admired his technique as he moved gracefully, fighting several of his men at once. *It seems that the Captain trains himself as tirelessly as his men, working alongside his soldiers, bettering their fighting skills.*

The desire to join in their training made Aster fidgety, but she was resigned to remain trapped in 'womanly attire' for her stay in Harmony. Having no intentions of allowing her weaponry skills to rot while she acted the part of the happy loving wife, she would need to find some way to practice unobserved. In the meantime, Symon's chamber housed several shelves filled with books and the young servant girl had given her directions to the King's library.

At least she wouldn't be completely bored.

Aster spent the remainder of the day reading, walking in the

courtyard, and familiarizing herself with winding corridors of the palace. Stopping to take the time to speak with the guests staying at the Royal court and palace servants she found that, though most seemed wary at first, after a time they soon opened up, telling her about their kingdom and the sites she should take the time to visit.

Aster was surprised to find herself enjoying the Harmonish people's company. They weren't that much different from Subanians in their love of land and country.

It was dusk when she returned to Symon's chamber and was surprised to find that he was not there. Looking out the window she saw a familiar figure on the training field, practicing with a fighting staff.

Didn't the man ever stop?

Her stomach growling, Aster walked down to the kitchen and grabbed a piece of fruit and some bread for a quick dinner before taking a quiet stroll thru the peaceful courtyard. *Perhaps this will not be so unpleasant a prison.*

Back in their chamber, she undressed down to her gauze shift and slipped into bed. Lying there, she watched the flames dance in the fireplace.

The door opened. A weary looking Symon stepped inside. Dirt and sweat plastered the white linen shirt to his body. His trousers were grass stained and his boots muddy. Running a hand through his matted hair he walked to the window, closing his eyes for a moment.

"Long day?" She tried to sound disinterested.

He glanced at her. "I thought you would be asleep."

"No. I still have excess energy. I'm accustomed to training as well, you know."

"The field is at your disposal."

"Thank you, but no. I'm stuck in a *dress*, by order of my Queen."

She sounds just like a sulky child.

He couldn't help reminding her, "Your Queen is back in Subania and can't see what you're wearing, or not."

Aster smiled, beginning to like his attitude. "Have you eaten?"

He shook his head peeling off his shirt to reveal his sinfully gorgeous body. His boots and trousers soon followed and, naked, he walked over to the bed, flopping stomach-down as far from her as possible.

She saw a dark blue bruise marring his side and touched a fingertip to the black and blue flesh. "Got a little clumsy during training?"

He flinched away from her touch. "No. That's a gift from you from a few days ago." Aster suddenly remembered driving her elbow into his ribs during that ride after their skirmish.

She had been so angry!

She wanted him again. Against her very soul, she craved his taste with a passion. Just thinking about the last time they had made love had her insides fluttering and her pussy drenched. Hating herself for her weakness, she began massaging his tense muscles.

Rolling onto his back, he grasped her wrists and glared at her. "Don't do that. I said I'd never touch you again." He tossed her hands away from his body.

"So, you're planning to stick by that stupid oath for the rest of our natural lives? We're married, Symon, like it or not. So it's either me, or no one."

"It's either you, or any mistress I might choose to bed."

Rage struck Aster like the sharpest of sword thrusts. "In Subania, taking a lover is the highest insult one can pay a spouse. It is grounds for death."

"Not death again." He raised his eyes in apparent disgust. "Haven't you and your kind caused enough death?"

"My kind! It's you Harmonish bastards who want the entire island to yourselves!"

"We never wanted any such thing! Only our half! We've always been willing to live in peace!" he roared, sitting up to face her on more equal ground.

"You started this war!"

"No, you did!" Snarling, he flung her onto her back.

She shoved at him but he merely grasped her hands, pulling them to his hair-roughened chest, his heart slamming against her palms while fierce fury glistened in his eyes.

"The war is over now, so it doesn't matter who started it! We're bound to this marriage. As you once said, why not get what pleasure we can out of this mess we are in?"

"Because I don't want to take pleasure in you! Your people murdered my family and slaughtered my children!"

Staring into his tormented eyes, her heart ached for him - her enemy.

The man she'd wanted nothing more, at one time, but to kill.

"I'm sorry!" To her shock she actually meant it. Her fingers tightened on his chest as she tried to make him understand. "I know that's not nearly enough, but I *am* sorry. I can't bring back your children, any more than you could bring back my brother and sister. Neither of us has the power to resurrect the dead. We need to accept that it happened and move on."

"It was all so useless, so senseless." He shook his head, releasing her hands. "Neither side gained anything. We all lost."

Aster lay beside him, staring at the stone ceiling. "We *were* so foolish. Each believing that we were the only ones who were right."

They were both quiet in their contemplation.

Symon was the first to move in the silence.

Turning onto his side, one hand reached out to caress her rounded hip while the other cupped one of her plump breasts, kneading it gently. Using the roughened pad of his thumb, he stroked her nipple.

Aster sighed with desire; small bumps of pleasure rising on her areola as he continued fondling her nipple. Craving his touch, she arched closer to him. In a swift motion he sat up, placing his hands under her arms and moving her to the center of the bed. Spreading her thighs he knelt between them, his jewel-like eyes gleamed with his increasing desire as he stroked her abdomen and hips.

Aster's pulse quickened. *Keep touching me. Oh, please, please keep touching me, Symon!* She gasped as his thumb stroked the wiry curls between her legs, rubbing her swollen clit. His fingers inched lower, gathering the wetness from her slick passage. He stroked her rose-colored folds of flesh until she shuddered with delight, burrowing her fingers tightly in his hair. Closing her eyes, she became lost in sensation.

Touching him felt marvelous, yet so did being touched *by* him.

Every muscle in her body tensed with anticipation as he pressed moist kisses down her stomach and thighs. When his hot, wet mouth covered her clit she didn't stop herself, crying out, "Ah! Oh, Symon!" as her body throbbed in grateful release and her breath came in raw pants.

Moaning, she clutched his head closer. Beneath his probing tongue her body quaked and quivered as he licked her sensitive bud over and over. She cried out in dismay at the loss when his mouth left her clit.

Seconds later, he filled her aching pussy with his cock. He was so thick and hard yet at the same time velvet soft.

Yes, yes, yes!

His hips thrust in a steady rhythm that drove her towards another climax and Aster gripped his shoulders. Twice more her body convulsed with glorious release before he pumped into her hard, moving faster in search of his own fulfillment.

"Aster!" he panted, every muscle in his body rigid with need.

Beneath her palms, his flesh was burning. She clung harder, wrapping her legs around him and squeezing him with her inner muscles, pumping him with returned fervor. With a savage cry, he exploded and, for several moments, they lay entwined in each other's arms, listening as the other's breath slowed to a more relaxed rate.

Aster brushed aside his long, thick hair, using her fingertips to caress his bare nape. She laughed softly as a low, contented moan escaped his throat.

"Maybe we can get along after all," Aster teased. "For the sake of our people."

"For our people." His arms tightened around her.

Chapter Five

Aster and Symon locked swords, their gazes fixed. With a swift motion he shoved at her, using his superior strength in an attempt to knock her off her feet. Aster spun, the tip of her blade almost slicing the edge of his ear. Stepping apart they lowered their weapons and Symon offered her a curt nod at his close call.

"Good." Aster smiled, sheathing her sword. "I think I'm starting to enjoy these little practice sessions of ours."

The Captain grunted in reply, falling into step alongside his wife. Glancing at the men busy training, he shouted for one to hold his sword higher and another to look where he was striking.

"At least now that they've seen us practicing together, for the past few weeks, people realize we're not trying to kill each other. Anymore," Aster continued.

"Then we're doing our job well."

"Yes. Better than I thought we could." Getting along with Symon was no longer a dreaded duty. She was beginning to enjoy his company, particularly since he'd arranged for her to train with his guards.

"I'm going to archery practice. Join me?"

Symon shook his head. "I'd rather you come with me."

"Where?"

"I think you'll like it." His lips curved upward in the slightest of smiles, white teeth gleaming against his chestnut beard.

Should she trust him? Apprehension wound its way through her belly before she shunned her foolish thoughts. What did she have to lose? With ample opportunity to inflict harm on each other they had, like their two countries, formed a tentative truce.

They rode over the hills behind the palace and into the forest. Slowing their mounts, they followed a winding path through the trees until they reached a field. A cascading fall poured over rocks; the clear rushing water emptying into a round pool, surrounded by rocks worn smooth by the elements.

"I felt like swimming." Symon dismounted and began undressing. "And thought you might want to join me."

Aster grinned, slipping from her mount and tugging off her boots, trousers and shirt. She'd bound her hair above her head that morning but released it from its clip, allowing the thick tendrils to tumble down her bared back.

Symon gazed in her direction, lust gleaming in his eyes, as he watched her step naked into the lake.

Walking over to climb one of the tall, thick rocks, the sunlight streaked his body in shimmers of golden hues. His manhood, thick even in its flaccid state, dangled from a nest of kinky dark hair and Aster's pulse raced simply from looking at him.

His chest and abdomen flexing with his deeply indrawn breath, he dove off the high rock and into the center of the pool. Surfacing directly in front of her, he shook his hair from his eyes, cool water spraying her flushed face.

"Nice place," she murmured as he reached for her and dragged her against his chest. It felt marvelous being pressed this close to his body and her clit tingled with the thought of making love with him.

"Its one of my favorites. After my family was killed, I came here often to think. Trying to find peace."

Aster held his gaze with hers. "I hope you found it."

"Sometimes. I guess I blame myself for not being there to protect them."

"You were guarding the King?" Symon nodded.

"You're Captain of the Guard. You shouldn't feel guilty for performing your duty."

Symon shook his head, staring toward the distant trees, regretting the choices he made so long ago. Aster slipped her arms around him in an affectionate embrace.

When had she stopped hating him? The exact moment eluded her.

"Sometimes I wonder why my brother and sister were killed in battle, while I survived so many."

Symon cupped her cheek tenderly with his hand, brushing her forehead with a kiss. "There are no answers to such questions. And, if you dwell on them, you'll soon go mad."

"This whole war has been madness." Aster muttered.

"It has been a waste."

"But now it's over. And we just need to see that it stays that way. Doing our part and getting along as instructed." Aster felt her comforting touch turning to heated ardor.

Symon covered her mouth with his, crushing her close.

His cool, wet skin felt wonderful against her heated flesh. Their legs became entangled as they kicked to keep afloat. Aster wove her fingers through the thick hair at his nape while they avidly explored each other's mouths. Their tongues stroked and teeth clicked as Symon's body pressed Aster's against the smooth rocks in the shallow water.

Drawing a deep breath, she shivered with desire. Water lapped at her body while he kissed her mouth and stroked her belly, rolling

her nipples between calloused thumb and forefinger. Dipping his head he licked between her breasts and a shiver darted through her at the contrast of sensations; fiery touch combined with the cool water.

Shifting position, he loomed above her, muscles bulging in his water-beaded arms as he entered her with a long, slow thrust. Aster tugged herself upward, her legs slipping around his narrow waist as she clenched her arms around his neck.

"We really can't blame this desire we have for one another on the priestess' herbs any longer," she said breathlessly.

A growl rumbled deep in his chest. "Our orders are to get along with each other."

"And we both take our duties so seriously." She gasped, closing her eyes as her heartbeat quickened with each of his powerful thrusts.

"Very seriously," he panted in agreement.

Aster shrieked with laughter when he tickled her neck with his beard and covered her breasts with nipping kisses.

When he slowly withdrew from her, he licked her belly. The tip of his tongue swirled in her navel before he took her clit between his lips and sucked gently.

"Oh, yes!" she breathed as he used long strokes of his tongue. Slipping his hands beneath her bottom, he lifted her slightly and buried his face between her thighs. Her ankles crossed over his shoulders and she moaned, tossing her hair into the water, as he licked the ultra-sensitive flesh between her pussy and nether hole.

Feeling her legs tremble, he changed positions, not stopping his delicious torment. Looming above her, he locked her eyes with a clear, brilliant gaze. Heat flooded her from head to toe as, inch by

marvelous inch, his cock slid into her. Wrapping her legs forcefully around him, she pulled him in as close as she was able.

"You're so magnificent, Aster." He arched his head back. Bearing most of his weight on his hands, he was able to pump into her deeper, harder.

"Take me, Symon. Fast and hard."

He kissed her and she gently bit his lower lip, encouraging him to release his passion. Growling, he thrust his hips with savage need while his tongue plundered her waiting mouth. Aster matched him thrust for thrust.

Here was a man! Big, bold, and ready to please a woman.

How could she ever have imagined anyone but him in her bed?

Aster had been in Harmony for nearly two months when a messenger from Subania arrived, with instruction for her to return home immediately, per order of the Queen. The pang of disappointment at the command shot through her with the strength of a poison dart.

Her relationship with Symon had blossomed after the night they had spent discussing their families, their losses and the war. The wall of hatred between them had been breached and she had been enjoying their peaceful existence.

They trained together each day and spent their free time exploring the countryside behind the palace, swimming in their personal waterfall hide-away and walking in the courtyard. Their nights were spent in quiet dinners and passionate sex

Aster had come to realize there were depths to Symon, that he was more than a stone gargoyle, a silent, emotionless guard for his

king. He was a warm, caring, intelligent man with strengths and weaknesses; who was compassionate, with the ability to love as powerfully as he hated. She wasn't sure when she began to respect him, or when that respect began to turn to genuine caring.

That no longer mattered.

Their 'duty' marriage had become much more personal and, for the first time since that fateful day, Aster realized her life hadn't ended when she'd agreed to wed Symon, but had just begun.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," she promised, the Queen's messenger impatiently waiting beside her.

Symon placed an affectionate hand on her knee. "I could come with you," he offered.

"No. Your place is here. I doubt I'll be long in Subania." Aster assured, leaning down and kissing him with all the pent up longing she knew she would be feeling in the next few days. His tongue parted her lips while his hand warmed the back of her neck.

Already she missed him and she hadn't even left the courtyard.

When the kiss broke, both were slightly breathless.

"Take care, Aster."

"You as well." She kicked her horse forward, glancing back just once as she rode through the palace gate.

Chapter Six

As soon as Aster arrived in Subania, she went straight to the Queen's private chambers.

"General Aster, it's so good to have you home," the Queen said, once they were alone.

"It's good to be home." She had to admit the statement was only the partial truth. Yes, she was glad to see Subania again. But she was discovering that she missed Symon more than she desired to see her homeland.

"I thought you'd be happy to get away from those filthy Harmonish swine."

Aster's brow furrowed. "Your Majesty?"

"You know the piece of land that, according to the treaty, would remain neutral? Well, it seems they've built a village on it. I should have known better than to trust them. And to think I forced you to endure marriage with that giant ape."

Aster wasn't sure she liked the direction the conversation seemed to be going.

"You don't need to concern yourself with him any longer. If Harmony wants our war to continue, we will be happy to accommodate them. They deceived us with their lies and we will act in kind."

"What do you mean, Your Majesty?" Aster stomach dropped.

"As we speak two of my best assassins are on their way to Harmony. They left here with strict orders to kill the Harmonish King and dispose of whomever stands in their way. Since Captain Symon is usually by his side, it is more than likely that he will perish with

his master. If not, we'll be sure he dies during the upcoming war. One way or the other, you'll be rid of him."

"I see." Aster forced herself to appear calm even as her heart raced madly.

Symon, killed! Over an insignificant piece of land that these greedy monarch desire for themselves?

The thought of him injured, or dying, was unbearable.

"I'm sure you're happy with this information."

"Thrilled, Your Majesty."

Lying was Aster's best recourse, until she could come up with a more feasible plan of action.

"I want you here, as my chief advisor. General Miles has been preparing the troops and can lead them from the front lines. But, since I will need my best close at hand and advising me on strategy, you will be staying here at the palace."

"I will be honored." Aster bowed from the neck. "If I may be excused to freshen myself after my journey?"

"Of course." The Queen waved her hand. "Rest and we will speak more of this on the morrow."

Aster nodded in agreement and swiftly left the bedchamber, racing straight to the stables and saddling one of the Queen's fastest horses. Accustomed to Aster borrowing the royal horses, none of the stable hands thought to question her departure so soon after her arrival.

Praying she hadn't been watched or followed, Aster set off on the quickest route back to Harmony. Planning to change horses as often as possible, she would ride through the night if need be. To warn Symon, she would need to arrive long before the assassins.

She had lost too many loved ones in this war between Subania and Harmony.

She would not lose her husband as well.

"Where is Captain Symon?" Aster demanded from the two men standing guard at the palace gates. They stared at her disheveled state and she knew she must make quite a sight, filthy with dirt and sweat from her swift travels. She hadn't bothered stopping to rest, too anxious to return to Symon's side to experience fatigue.

Her heart pounded with the fear that she'd arrived too late; that he was already dead.

The King she could care less about, just as she no longer had any interest in her Queen. Neither ruler had been serious about keeping the peace between their lands and she was not going to allow Symon, or herself, to suffer further for their monarchs' greed.

"He's riding in the northern field with the King. Why?" replied one of the guards.

"Gather some men and meet me there. I have reason to believe there may be an attempt made on the King's life." She kicked her exhausted horse into a gallop. The animal snorted and raced forward.

Aster wondered how much heart remained in the beast. She'd changed horses often along her journey but she'd been pushing this one for miles. The creature's coat was lathered and she had no desire to cause the animal further pain, but she needed to reach Symon as soon as possible. About a mile from the palace, she caught sight of Symon's tall war stallion plodding alongside the King's riding horse. Her mount stumbled but she kneed him on.

"Symon!"

"What's wrong?" Her husband stared at her, his brow furrowed as their horses stopped alongside one another.

"The Queen has sent two assassins to kill your King"

The King glanced over his shoulder, panic in his eyes. "By the Goddess, I never should have trusted you bastards!"

Aster glared at him. "Any more than we should trust a man who's building a village on what had been designated as neutral ground!" The King's lip curled at her accusation but he did not deny her claim.

"Is that true?" Symon demanded. "Have we broken the treaty?"

"I demand you see to my safety! Do your duty and see that I'm protected from these assassins!"

Seeing two guards galloping from the palace, Aster shouted, "I told you to bring reinforcements. Where are they?"

"We don't need any."

One of the guards drew his dagger and flung it towards the King, while the other shot an arrow in Symon's direction. Symon leapt off his horse, knocking the King to the ground as Aster dove at her husband, in an attempt to shove him out of the arrow's path. The bowman missed his intended target, finding another as the arrow struck her instead.

The cutthroat harshly kicked his horse in an attempt to trample Symon and the King. Symon lunged, grabbing the man's ankle and dragging him out of his saddle, while the archer, seeing he had missed his target, strung his second arrow. Before the bowman could take his shot, Aster yanked her dagger from its sheath at her waist, burying it into the archer's chest.

The man dropped his bow, clutching the dagger's handle as he fell dead to the ground. Grimacing as the pain spread through her

shoulder, Aster dismounted, watching as Symon snapped their attacker's neck.

The King sat on the ground gasping. "You've both done well and Harmony owes you its thanks. As you have betrayed your Queen, General Aster, you are free to remain here. You can join my staff of advisors."

Aster's lip curled in distaste. "No. Thank you."

"Surely, if you return to Subania, you will face execution?"

"You can't go back," Symon agreed, inspecting her wound. "The arrow went through. It looks clean but it will need to be tended."

"I want to know how those spies infiltrated the palace guard!" snarled the King. "How could this have happened, Captain Symon?" He glared at Symon accusingly as soldiers reached their position.

"We found two guards dead near the bushes alongside the palace gates," their leader reported. "We thought there might be trouble."

"The Queen said she'd sent the spies," Aster explained. "They must have gotten here just before I did."

"Double the guards around the palace," Symon ordered. "And summon the healer. General Aster has been wounded." Two soldiers rushed to carry out his orders while the rest escorted the King to safety.

Symon began gathering sticks to build a small fire. Placing one dagger in the flames, he used another to slice open Aster's shirt.

Aster willed her breathing to slow and her body to remain stationary as she steeled herself for the agony that was coming. She'd endured such injuries before. The removal of the weapon was often more painful than the wound itself. She clenched her teeth as Symon snapped off the arrow's tail but couldn't halt her groans as he shoved the remainder of the shaft through her torn flesh.

Binding the wound, with a strip of clean cloth, he tugged her against his chest, holding her close and kissing her damp forehead. "Are you all right?"

"Just marvelous," she said sarcastically. "You know you can't go back to Subania."

"I don't plan to. I'm sick of the lies and manipulation between both of our kingdoms."

"So am I."

Aster gazed at him in utter astonishment, raising her good arm to stroke his curls off his forehead, "What are you saying?"

"For most of my life, I've served in the King's personal guard. I've commanded it for over a decade and my first instinct has always been to protect him. I have always believed that Harmony had done all it could to end the war. But I was wrong. You've shown me that my King is not to be admired. He has deliberately broken the peace treaty, and I have recently discovered that he *did* have spies living in my village. I didn't bother asking then, but I have been making inquiries of late.

I've been rethinking the war as well. I can't stand knowing that you've been wounded, defending him against assassins as if he were--"

"I didn't come for his sake," Aster interrupted. "I came for yours. For ours. I didn't want to see you killed, or hurt." His lips whispered as his mouth gently touched hers. "I love you, Aster."

"I love you, as well."

Tilting her face for a more passionate kiss, they were interrupted by approaching hoof beats.

The healer had finally arrived.

Chapter Seven

Symon sat on a chair, placed near to the bed, watching the healer bandage Aster's wound.

With all that had happened he didn't trust anyone.

Only after the healer had left them alone did Aster speak.

"I'll stay in Harmony with you...if you want me to."

"I can't stay here. Not after today. I'm finished serving the King."

Aster's heartbeat quickened for, during her ride to Harmony, she'd mulled over the possibilities of a new life for them.

Together.

Of course, at the time, she had thought it had been simply a fantasy since she never once believed he'd actually be willing to leave Harmony.

"Symon, I have a friend who comes from a land west of here. She and her husband rule the kingdom of Moss Hill. Though it's small, they care very much for their people." Aster watched his face, curious to see his reaction to her words.

Symon's lips curved in an amused half smile. "Are you suggesting we go there?"

"I know we're both accustomed to larger cities, as well court life, so it will be *quite* a change." She had her arguments ready if he said no.

"I've never really liked court life. I want to live in a safer place, build a house, raise a family and watch them grow. I want to spend that time with you."

Aster's skin tingled at his heated look and his telling words. "Alana, and her husband Argos, always said I was welcome to go

live there. They could probably use the expertise of a seasoned general when it comes to planning their defenses."

"I wonder if they would have any use for a former Captain of the King's Guard?"

Aster reached for his hand and squeezed it. "Perhaps we could go visit and find out?"

In reply, Symon moved from the chair to the bed, taking her face in his hands and kissing her.

Six months later

Aster's sword touched Symon's briefly before they stepped apart, facing each other in the field behind their cottage in Moss Hill.

"That was a good match." Symon sheathed his weapon and approached her, wrapping an arm around her waist and tugging her close.

"A very good match." Aster pressed a kiss on his bare, sweaty chest. She shivered, loving the sensation of soft hair over hard muscle, the taste of salty flesh. His sensual, musky scent enveloped her senses, inciting her deepest desires.

"But now I'd like to practice another type of sparring... in the bedroom." She grinned, knowing that her husband was always ready to match her in their play.

His growl was a deep, lusty sound.

Burying his hot lips against her shoulder, he licked and nipped, sending ripples of desire coursing through her body. "I'm more than ready for additional training exercises."

"Good. Because, in a few months, it won't be so easy to find much free time for all this frivolity."

His brow furrowed in puzzlement as he gazed into her eyes. "Why?"

Aster flung him a coquettish grin and stroked his cheek. "Give you one guess."

"Agos wants us to take extra guard duty?"

Sighing at his often one-track mind, she shook her head. "Get your mind off defenses for once, my love."

She took his hand and placed it over her belly. There would soon be an addition to their loving home.

"Aster!" He stopped, lifting her up in his arms. A joyful kiss smacked her mouth. "I love you."

"I love you, too." She slid down his body, grasping the front of his trousers with determined fingers. Beneath the rough fabric his cock leapt, filling her hand.

"Symon, of the Steel. Once I thought your name was ridiculous but that thought only lasted until I got to truly know you. And your steel." He grinned, draping a long arm around her shoulders as they walked back into the house. "Speaking of names, what do you want to call this child?"

"I'm not sure. Let's discuss this later... in bed."

"A wonderful idea."

As they walked arm in arm, Aster's head rested against Symon's shoulder. Smiling she thought back on what her life had been like a year earlier.

She had thought that nothing would ever match the hatred she had felt for her husband, but had discovered that her love for him was far more powerful than any emotion she'd ever dreamed of.

Together they had come to find peace, sharing more than physical passion, more than friendship.

Their souls were forever entwined.

The End