



THE WYNDMASTER'S SON

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Dedication

To Mary Shutts: Let's have lunch, kiddo.

Chapter One

"He's where?"

The enraged shout reverberated through the fortress, bounced off the thick stone walls and echoed down the long, winding corridors to send servants and warriors alike scampering for safety.

"Now, Your Grace..." the Minister of Information began in a calming, rational voice.

"Don't Your Grace me, Wilfred!"

The second shout was louder than the first.

Three warriors stood with Lord Wilfred Mattingly, their hands on the hilts of their very serviceable swords. Accustomed to the wrath of their liege lord, they stared straight ahead, allowing Lord Wilfred to soothe the Prince if it was at all possible.

"How long have they been holding him?" Prince Thiessen Allen, Duke of Northumberton, Laird of Dragonmoor asked between his teeth, striving for composure.

"We're not sure, Your Grace, but it seems he has been missing from Zykanthos for nigh on two weeks," Lord Wilfred replied.

"And someone is just now getting around to letting me know my addle-headed brother went missing?"

One of the three warriors put up a hand to clear his throat, garnering his liege lord's attention.

"What, Vargas?" Thiessen snapped.

"Morgan is hardly ever at *Vista del Mar*, Your Grace," Captain Vargas DuMond told the Prince. "The little bastard flits around wherever it pleases him with no one to tell him yeah or nay."

Thiessen narrowed his eyes at the man who was old enough to be his grandfather, a man who had served with his father, King Sierran, and who had now been assigned to the regency fortress at Windemere where Thiessen ruled. To Thiessen's way of thinking, the old warrior and his companions had been put out to pasture, placed where the King thought they could do no harm and live out the remaining years of their lives in relative comfort.

"Are you condemning me for not keeping a closer eye and firmer rein on Morgan, Vargas?" the Prince growled.

"If the boot fits," Vargas said, his emerald eyes as bright as those of a man half his age. "Your father warned you about Morgan."

Sighing savagely, Thiessen began pacing the cold stone floors. When the second of the two warriors started to speak, the Prince held up a hand to stay his words. "I'm thinking," he told the warrior.

MacDougal exchanged a look with Vargas then rolled his eyes. The two men were about the same age while the third warrior and younger brother to Vargas, Seth DuMond, continued to stare straight ahead of him. Though Seth was in his early sixties both Vargas and Mac considered him a youngster and rarely asked for his counsel.

Furious that once again his half-brother had caused him trouble, Thiessen glared at the grout lines in the stone floor and silently cursed Morgan Summerall. From the time they'd met as

boys, neither had cared for the other and Morgan had shown nothing but disdain for the royal side of his family. He thought back on the day they had been introduced

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“His mother is a nun at St. Carolus Convent,” Thiessen’s mother explained as the carriage rolled along the road leading to Haverton Hall.

“A nun?” Thiessen asked, eyes wide. “But Mama, how can that be?”

“It’s a long story and one you’re not quite old enough to hear as yet,” his mother, Queen Celeste, replied. “Let it suffice to say that Lady Beatrice bore a son by your father and that son is your half-brother, Lord Morgan Summerall.”

Thiessen frowned. “Why isn’t his name Allen, Mama?”

“Because that is his mother’s name, dearling.”

“Oh.” Thiessen thought about that for a moment. “So he’s not royal like me?”

Queen Celeste gave him a warning look. “What did we discuss about thinking of yourself in that light, Thie?”

He shrugged. “I meant he’s not of the royal house of Justonia.”

“Well, not technically, no, although he is the son of its King.”

* * * *

It had been hate at first sight when the two ten year old boys met. Only a few days separated them in age with Morgan being the elder but from the way he acted, he made Thiessen feel much the younger.

“I’m a bastard,” Morgan had proclaimed. “And I’m don’t have to take shit from you, you little fop!”

“Morgan!” Lord Edward Gillespie, Earl of Haverton, had hissed, reaching out to box the boy’s ear. “What did I tell you? You show respect for Prince Thiessen.”

“Prince my hairy ass! He ain’t nothing to me!” Morgan had snarled. “I’m my mother’s son and not just his father’s by-blow!”

Thinking back upon learning that their father had been forced into validating a Joining to Lady Beatrice Summerall just so he could be given title to her late husband’s estate at Patterly—land Sierran Morgan’s father desperately wanted to extend the family’s estate at Argonne—Thiessen had never considered Morgan to be a by-blow. After all, his half-brother had been conceived from that single union and the impregnation had occurred when Lady Beatrice was legally married to Sierran. It was only later that the Joining had been annulled by King Edmond and Thiessen’s parents were married.

It had not taken long until the two boys were scuffling in the dirt, pummeling each other with blows that it took grown men to put a stop to, physically jerking the combatants apart. Black eyes, split lips, bruised cheeks and egos had been the outcome that had necessitated a second carriage following the Queen’s as Morgan was taken to the harbor to board the ship sailing for his new home in Emardia.

It had been to the palace at Dullwitch where Morgan had been brought but it was soon apparent the boy could not be around his younger brother without trouble brewing so Morgan had been sent to his father’s estate at *Vista del Mar* on the island of Zykanthos and it was there he grew up, later to become laird of that beautiful hillside mansion. Now twenty-five years later, the two men were virtual strangers, having seen one another no more than a dozen times in the intervening years. The last time they’d seen one another was when they were in their mid twenties and had attended the state funeral of the man who had adopted their father and made Sierran his heir, King Edmond of Emardia.

Running a hand through his thick brown hair, the Prince finally halted and turned to give the trio of warriors a tired look. "What do you suggest I do, Vargas?" Thiessen asked the elderly warrior.

"We can have a team of men assembled in two hours if you're of a mind to have me go after the little bastard, Your Grace," Vargas answered. "If it was me, I'd leave him to rot in Ambergast, myself, but I don't imagine your father would be too happy about it."

Thiessen put up his hand to nibble on his thumbnail, a habit he'd had since childhood whenever his mind was in turmoil. "Does he know?"

Vargas shook his head. "Not yet, but he'll find out soon enough."

"There's no love lost between him and Morgan," Thiessen commented and glanced at Mac whose snort was loud in the still room.

"That was the Lady Beatrice's doing," Mac reminded his liege lord. "She started right off the bat poisoning Summerall's mind, feeble as it is."

The Justonian prince smiled slightly. "He's not known for his mental acuity, is he?"

"No, Your Grace," Mac responded.

Thiessen looked at Seth. "What do you think?"

Seth took a deep breath. "We're not at war with Solaria and I'd just as soon keep it that way. I've no idea why the King would order Summerall taken unless it is as leverage."

"What kind of leverage would that be?" Vargas asked his brother.

When Seth didn't answer, the others turned their gazes to MacDougal. The warrior hailed from that mountainous region.

"Don't look at me," Mac said. "I haven't been home since I was knee-high to a grasshopper. I've no idea what King Robert was thinking or if he had a hand in the abduction at all. It's well known his men often act before clearing things with him."

"I can't see any advantage for them to take Morgan," Thiessen said.

"Ransom maybe?" Lord Wilfred asked. "Solarians are a thieving, larcenous bunch." He gave Mac a short nod. "Present company excluded, of course."

"Of course," Mac agreed.

"Could be," Thiessen acknowledged. "But if that's the case, why haven't they sent us a ransom demand?"

"They could have sent it to the King," Lord Wilfred replied.

"Possible but not likely," Vargas said. "Dullwitch is farther away. We're right down the coast from the sneaking bastards."

"You're sure he's being held at Ambergast?" Thiessen queried.

"In chains in the dungeon if my spy got the right of it," Vargas answered. "Where he could stay if it was my decision to make."

"The keep is the winter home of the royal family, is it not?" Thiessen asked.

"It is but the King and his new Queen are in residence at the palace in Rexford. As far as I know Princes Malcolm and Guilford are still at the war college in Danvers and the young Princess is in boarding school near Cunnolian."

"Then who the hell is holding Morgan at Ambergast?" Thiessen demanded.

"Some of King Robert's more enterprising warriors is my guess," Vargas replied.

"Well, assemble your team of men, Captain, and let's go spoil their fucking weekend," the Prince said with clenched jaw.

Vargas blinked. "You're coming with us?"

“I’m of a mind to slap my blade across the rump of whoever instigated this mess and, if truth be told, I wouldn’t mind seeing Morgan languishing in a filthy cell,” Thiessen told his men.

It had been a while since Thiessen had been out with his troops and though he had trained at the prestigious Citadel of Emardia and been bestowed the illustrious designation of WyndMaster, he had yet to join in any campaign. With his country at peace, there had been no enemies with whom to fight. He was his father’s personal champion but had done nothing as yet to earn the title.

Vargas and Mac frowned at their liege lord’s words but both knew him to be an excellent warrior even if he had yet to shed an opponent’s blood on a field of battle. They knew he was a skilled swordsman and possessed a level head though his temper left a lot to be desired. Each had added to their Prince’s training and felt him to be accomplished if not experienced. Neither saw any reason to deny his going with them even if they had the authority to do so.

“Is this wise?” Seth asked as he watched the young Prince walking quickly from the room, calling a servant to ready his weapons for him.

“I guess we’ll find out,” Vargas replied.

“He’s physically fit,” Mac said. “In better shape than the three of us, that’s a certainty.”

“Aye, but my gut tells me we’re doing the wrong thing here,” Seth stated. “I’d just as soon leave him behind.”

Vargas grunted. “And you think he’d simply stay ‘cause we told him to?”

“No, but” Seth cocked a shoulder. “Mayhap things will turn out all right.”

“They’d better or Sierran will have our hides,” Vargas declared.

“No,” Mac said emphatically. “Celeste will!”

* * * *

At that moment at the palace in Dullwitch, Queen Celeste was annoyed with her husband of thirty-six years and wasn’t speaking to him. She sat in the big overstuffed chair across from him drumming her fingers on the arm. Her right foot was tapping on the floor in rhythm, her blue eyes blazing.

“I said it will be done, wench, and I meant it,” King Sierran said with clenched teeth. He wasn’t looking at his lady-wife but down at the book he was clutching fiercely in his hands.

Celeste made a chuffing sound and crossed her legs, her foot pumping up and down with her agitation. Turning her face away, she stared into the leaping flames in the hearth, consigning her husband to the fiery pit.

Brenton LeMoyné—the Chief Lawgiver of the Federation—sat on the settee across from the couple, his lips twitching. They were not only his monarchs but very dear friends and when they fought—which wasn’t often—they amused him vastly. Folding his arms across his chest, he waited for what he knew was going to happen.

He didn’t have long to wait.

“Oh, for the love of the gods, Celeste!” Sierran snapped, shutting his book with a loud snap. “Why can’t you be reasonable about this?”

Celeste slowly turned her pretty face toward her husband and stared at him, one shapely blonde brow raised in challenge.

“He needs a wife!” Sierran insisted.

“Of. His. Own. Choosing,” Celeste stated, emphasizing each word.

“Princess Marguerite of Ulnia is a lovely girl and she”

“Of. His. Own. Choosing,” the Queen repeated, eyes narrowed now.

As though he hadn't heard her, Sierran slammed the book on the table beside him. "She brings with her a vast estate and"

"Of his own choosing!" his wife shouted at him.

Brent's eyebrows shot upward in surprise. He'd never heard Celeste raise her voice. Apparently Sierran had not experienced such anger, either, for the King's mouth had dropped open and he was staring at his wife with undisguised shock.

"Of his own choosing, warrior," Celeste declared. "Or have you forgotten what it was like to have a woman you neither loved nor wanted foisted off on you?"

Sierran flinched. "No, wench, I've not forgotten but"

"Then let Thiessen find his own mate," she said, uncrossing her legs and standing up. "And I mean it!"

That said the Queen strode from the room with a toss of her lovely blonde hair. To her, the matter was settled. For a moment the room was silent then Sierran let out a long, heavy sigh. "The woman can be taxing at times," he said.

"But she's rarely wrong and this time isn't any different," Brent said softly.

Sierran raised his chin. "Thiessen is nearly forty and he needs a lady-wife."

"I agree, he does," Brent—a confirmed bachelor—agreed. "But you shouldn't be the one to provide her for him. He needs to find her for himself else he'll be an unhappy WyndMaster."

"Lady Marguerite....," Sierran began but Brent held up a hand.

"Is lovely and meek and would make a horrible future Queen for this land. The lady is afraid of her own shadow and I doubt she'd do else but lay stiffly beneath Thiessen in their marriage bed, either staring at the ceiling or twiddling her thumbs until he was finished."

The King sighed again. "You're probably right."

"Thiessen is like his father," Brent said with a bawdy grin. "He needs a lusty wench who'll keep him on his toes."

"And just where am I to find such a treasure for him?" Sierran asked.

"You aren't," Brent replied firmly. "Let the man find his own wench."

"And another thing, warrior," Celeste said as she came back into the room. "What are you planning to do about Morgan?"

A muscle ground in Sierran's lean jaw. "Well I don't suppose I'll be looking for a wife for him, either," he answered.

"See that you don't," she said and spun on her heel to storm off again.

His shoulders slumping, Sierran buried his head in his hands. "Sometimes I think I'll never understand women."

Chapter Two

“Sometimes I think I’ll never understand women,” Thiessen told Vargas. The two of them were facing a very angry woman warrior whose sword was bigger than she was.

“It’s all that equal opportunity bullshit. Women warriors. What’s the world coming to?” Vargas asked as he patted Thiessen’s shoulder and moved into the general melee with their men.

Entry into the winter keep of the Solarian royal family hadn’t been all that hard. In fact to Thiessen’s way of thinking it had been much too easy. The guards had been lax—seemingly looking the other way as Thiessen’s men overran them. It was almost as though the defenders at Ambergast wanted the Prince’s men within the walls of the fortress and had put out a welcome mat for them. The real resistance had been inside where Thiessen and his men had met with heavily armed warriors intent on capturing them.

He’d been a bit shocked to find this woman blocking his and Vargas’ path. Not only was she wielding what looked to be a very serviceable blade, but she was clad in leather pants that fit her just a bit too snugly for his comfort. The white billowing blouse tucked into those black leather pants did nothing to hide the thrust of her very shapely bosom and the folded back sleeves only emphasized the delicate hands gripping her sword. She presented a sensuous picture that would not be dismissed easily from his mind’s eye.

“I don’t want to hurt you, wench,” Thiessen told the woman who was slowly circling to the Prince’s right, her weapon held in such a way it was obvious she’d been trained in its use.

“Don’t worry, warrior,” the young woman replied with a smirk. “You won’t.” She struck out at him but he met her attack easily, blocking it with a casual flick of his wrist. The sound of the metal edges meeting was barely heard amidst the grunting and clashing blades further down the corridor.

Thiessen smiled and parried another of her thrusts. His gaze shifted down her for a split second before she lunged at him and he had to step back to keep from getting nicked. His smile wavered as he countered another lunge, batting away her blade with a bit more force.

“Did you think I wasn’t serious, warrior?” she challenged him, sliding to his left this time. “Keep looking at my tits and I’ll skewer you yet!”

The smile slipped from his lips. “You have tits? You couldn’t prove it by me. I see nothing on your flat little chest that”

His words seemed to infuriate his opponent and she lashed out at him, forcing him back with powerful blows he certainly had not expected or for which he was prepared. As he blocked her—now with some effort as she tore into him with a steely vengeance—he took note of the lips drawn back over her very white teeth, the fire sparking in her green eyes and the determination evident on her face.

Though it took concentration to meet her lightning quick lunges one part of Thiessen’s mind made note that all sound except for that of his blade meeting hers had ceased. The clang and scrape of metal as he blocked her attack was the only sound he was hearing and that concerned him.

“I believe your men have been taken, warrior,” she taunted him.

“I think not, wench,” Thiessen said, noticing that she was panting heavily and that her blocks weren’t as strong as before. She was tiring. “It’s your men who have been defeated.”

Her smile was victorious as she lunged just a bit too close to him and that was the opportunity for which he’d been looking. He reacted quickly by batting her sword aside and forcefully plowing into her, driving her back and against the tapestry-clad wall, her wrist pinned beneath his free hand as he pressed his body tightly against her.

“Drop your weapon, sweeting,” he drawled and thrust his leg between hers to keep her from kneeling him. His sword laid crosswise her throat, the edge just touching her ivory skin.

Her pale green eyes flared with indignation but there was no defeat in the glower she aimed his way. He could feel her hand tighten on the handle of her sword.

“Drop it or I might be forced to mar the perfection of your lovely little neck,” he told her. He increased the pressure of his blade just a hair, striving not to smile at her slow intake of breath.

“Bastard,” she hissed from between clenched teeth. “I can still beat you in a fair fight.”

He grinned at that. “Oh, you’re good, baby,” he said. “I’ll grant you that but you aren’t good enough to best me. Now, open your hand and drop the weapon.”

She pursed her lips, telegraphing her next move but before she could act upon such recklessness, he moved his face close to hers.

“Don’t do it, wench,” he warned. “You spit in my face and I swear before the guards you will regret it.”

Her eyes suddenly shifted from his to some place just over his shoulder then a slow, pleased smile stretched over coral lips he thought were begging to be tasted. When her gaze returned to him, she gave him a gloating look, her chin lifted.

“Oh, I’m not falling for that trick, wench,” he said with a snort. “There’s no one standing”

The tip of a very sharp blade touched the right side of Thiessen’s neck just enough to draw blood, the trickle of which was quick to run down beneath the collar of his shirt.

“Let her go,” a voice said softly but those three words were filled with a world of menace.

It was a minor thing but the wound stung just the same. The pain was nothing, however, compared to the humiliation the Prince felt. His fingers flexed around the grip of his sword.

“Let her go while I’m still in a halfway amicable mood, Thie.”

Thiessen’s lips parted in surprise. “Morgan?” he asked, his tone filled with disbelief.

“You remember me,” the droll voice said from behind him. “I am touched, little brother.” A heavy hand clamped down on his left shoulder. “Now, move away from her.”

The Prince was staring into the eyes of the woman. He didn’t like the look of satisfaction and triumph that was looking back at him. It grated and it ran rough shod over his ego but there was nothing he could do about it. Easing the blade from her neck he moved back, his gaze hard as nails as he glared at her.

“I do believe he’s pissed, Morgan,” she said as Thiessen’s hand left her wrist and he was pulled back by the man holding him captive.

“Take his sword, Lanelle, before his opinion of himself gets any lower and he does something foolish,” Morgan Summerall suggested.

“Lanelle?” Thiessen repeated, then realization set in. He had to dig his fingernails into his palm to keep from groaning. “The Princess Lanelle?”

She plucked the weapon from his hand with a wide grin that was so smug Thiessen ached to slap it from her face. He barely noticed as a Solarian guard walked up to him with a set of iron shackles.

“Link your fingers behind your neck,” Morgan ordered him. “I don’t want you getting any ideas.”

“Where are my men?” Thiessen asked as he did as he was told. He growled when with the cold restriction of the shackle cuff was slipped around his left wrist, locked, then his arm brought behind him.

“Where they can’t do us any harm or you any good,” his half-brother replied. He stepped out of the way while the guard pulled Thiessen’s other hand down and behind him to shackle that wrist, as well. He chafed under the tight hold the guard placed on his right arm just above the elbow, wondering where the bastard thought he could run shackled like a convict.

“It was so nice of you to drop in on us, Prince Thiessen,” Lanelle said as she moved over to a table and laid down her weapon and Thiessen’s. “Our doors are always open to you.”

“Your trap, you mean,” Thiessen grated, feeling the embarrassment of his predicament deepen. “Why ransom the bastard when you can ransom the heir?”

Morgan’s blade dug a tad deeper into his half-brother’s neck. “Careful, my Prince,” he warned. “I don’t take insults lightly as you recall.”

“Ransom?” Lanelle echoed as a crease formed in her smooth forehead. “What ransom does he mean, Morgan?”

“The idjit believes we drew him here to ransom him to our father,” Morgan explained.

“Oh,” she said, her face brightening. “There’s a thought that never occurred to us.”

“Oh, it occurred to me but our original plan is a much better fit, I think,” Morgan said.

Lanelle swept her gaze from Thiessen’s head to his boots. “Aye, you might be right,” she said and dared to wink at the Prince.

Gritting his teeth, Thiessen squared his shoulders, though the pull of the heavy shackles dragged at his arms. “If you don’t want ransom, what the hell do you want?” he demanded. He paid scant attention to the second guard who appeared to flank him on his left. When that man took hold of his arm, he practically hissed at him.

Morgan stepped in front of Thiessen and for the first time in fourteen years the brothers saw one another. It was a surprise for each of them.

“My, my, my, my, my,” Morgan said. “You look just like the old man, don’t you, little brother.”

“And you look like what you are,” Thiessen snapped. “A lying, thieving . . .”

The savage fist that plowed into the Prince’s gut doubled him over despite the hard hold the guards had on his upper arms. Morgan had put his full weight behind the jab and a harsh rush of air left Thiessen’s lungs as the brutal pain of the hit made his knees buckle. When his knees hit the stone floor, he gasped for breath even as a rough hand grasped his hair and jerked his head back.

“Be careful what you say, little brother,” Morgan told him, tugging on the thick dark curls. “I am *not* a forgiving man.”

“Pray don’t incapacitate him too much,” Lanelle said. “I do want him to be aware when the priest arrives.”

Thiessen’s eyes were watering from the fiery pull on his scalp and he was having trouble drawing breath but he managed to repeat the word priest in a strangled voice.

“Aye,” Lanelle said. She squatted down before him much as a man might, one knee on the floor, the other bracing her wrist. “The man who is going to bind us together as man and wife.”

“Hell, no!” Thiessen was able to get out.

“Hell, yes!” she said with a laugh. “I’ve no desire to be forced into marrying Prince Egg Fart of Ulnia so if I must be chained to a man I want one of my own choosing.”

“Egbert, darling,” Morgan said with a chuckle. “The man’s name is Egbert.” He let go of Thiessen’s hair and told the guards to get him to his feet.”

“Won’t,” Thiessen snarled, still having trouble forcing air into his depleted lungs.

“You don’t have a choice,” Morgan said.

“Won’t do it.”

“You’re going to hurt my feelings if you keep protesting, Thiessen,” Lanelle said. She reached out to cup his chin and anchor his face so he was looking at her. “All you need do is say ‘aye’ in the right place then you can go back to” She looked up at Morgan. “What is the name of his fortress?”

“Windemere,” Morgan provided. He stood there with his legs apart, arms folded, and a slightly amused smirk on his handsome face.

“Oh, aye,” she said with a thoughtful nod. “I like that name.” She returned her gaze to Thiessen. “You’ll have a wife. I’ll have a husband. We can both go on as though this unpleasant interlude never happened and live our lives without the constraints of interfering parents.” Once more she looked up at Morgan. “Did you tell him about his betrothal to Maggie?”

“Not yet,” Morgan answered.

Thiessen’s eyebrows drew together. “What betrothal?”

Morgan laughed. “The old man went and signed an alliance with King Stanislaus of Ulnia who’s”

“Egg Fart’s father,” Lanelle injected.

“Oldest daughter, Marguerite, you are to wed next month,” Morgan finished as though Lanelle hadn’t interrupted.

Horror spread over Thiessen’s face. He had no doubt his father would do something like that and just thinking of the insipid girl who had spent the entire summer five years earlier tagging along behind him, shadowing every move he made until he was forced to hide from her, leached the blood from the Prince’s face.

“Seeing that look pinching your face now makes me the lesser of two evils, eh?” Lanelle asked with a grin.

Thiessen shook his head furiously, wishing he hadn’t for his lack of air plus the pain riddling his gut caused a queasiness he could ill afford right then. “I won’t marry either of you,” he stated.

“Oh, but you will,” Lanelle said. “And here comes the priest now!”

* * * *

It had not been a ceremony in Thiessen’s estimation. It had been a travesty of coercion and duress, performed with the Prince on his knees with the guards clutching his upper arms tightly and the bride standing with one hip cocked as though nothing out of the ordinary was taking place.

As soon as he’d seen the priest hurrying toward them, Thiessen had opened his mouth to complain to the priest, but Morgan had simply forced a thick gag between Thiessen’s teeth and when it came time to say ‘aye’ had gripped a handful of Thiessen’s hair and bobbed the Prince’s

head up and down in agreement, holding that head steady so Thiessen could not shake it in denial.

“Behave and it will all be over with before you know it,” Morgan hissed in his half-brother’s ear.

Staring into the priest’s eyes with pleading, Thiessen soon began to realize the man was paying no heed to that beseeching look. He was there to perform a formal procedure that apparently meant no more to him than it did to the bride and reluctant groom. As soon as the blessing was bestowed and gold coins were dropped into the priest’s outstretched hand, it was all over but the growling that was coming from Thiessen in wave after wave of fury.

“All done,” Lanelle said, dusting her hands together. She turned her back and started off as though finished with a distasteful chore and with no care in the world. “You can send him on his way now, Morgan.”

“Not quite,” Morgan told her. “There’s the matter of the consummation.”

Thiessen’s growling was cut off in mid-vibration as his amber eyes went wide. A single grunt of shock pushed from his straining throat.

“Oh, aye,” Lanelle said, tucking her lower lip between her teeth. “There’s that, I suppose.”

“Without it, the marriage won’t be valid in the eyes of the Federation though still legal and binding in Solaria,” Morgan said. “Although the old man will most likely do what his predecessor did and annul the Joining as he did with my mother.”

“That is of little importance,” Lanelle said. “I have no intention of living with him. Let them annul away. I’ll pretend brokenhearted agony and be inconsolable at his loss, unable to ever marry again since I can’t have Thiessen, the one true love of my life.”

Another grunt of disbelief came from Thiessen. He stared at the woman with complete incredulity at her brazenness and nerve though reluctantly admiring her male way of thinking. As plans went, it was a work of art.

“Take His Grace upstairs and strip him,” Morgan ordered the guards.

Fury erupted from Thiessen and he started bucking and twisting in the grip of his captors. He was hissing and growling like a trapped animal as they hauled him to his feet and started dragging him backward toward the winding stairs at the far end of the corridor, striving with all his might to dig his feet into the hard stone to keep from being pulled along.

“Spread-eagle him to the bed,” Morgan called out. “Her Grace will be along shortly.”

Lanelle watched the struggling Prince for a moment with an amused look then a shadow flitted through her pale gaze.

“Don’t think about it,” Morgan said softly. “Just go up there, do it and then put it out of your mind.”

She looked up at him, worry tugging at her pretty features. “Its rape no matter how you look at it, Morgan.”

He nodded. “Aye, but you can’t think that way, dearling. He’s legally your husband.” He put a palm to her cheek. “Consider it foreplay.”

“I suppose,” she said.

“Listen,” Morgan said as he slid his hand to her shoulder and cupped the other one, as well. “When you asked for my help, I warned you what would need to be done. Remember?” At her slow nod, he shook her gently. “Did I not warn you that it was a dirty trick in which we were about to engage?” After another slow nod, he pulled her against him, his arms sliding around her gently. “Go up and get it over with. As soon as the deed has been done, we’ll send

him and his men back to Windemere. He might be pissed but there's nothing he can do. The old man will annul the Joining and send a formal protest to your father who will ignore it since neither man wants war, Thie will be forced to wed Maggie anyway, and you will be free to go to that little keep of yours at Serch Bythol, and that will be the end of it."

"You're a good friend, Morgan," she said.

"Aye, well, you make being a friend easy, dearling," he told her, giving her one final squeeze before pushing her tenderly away.

Lanelle hesitated for a moment longer then squared her shoulders. She gave Morgan one last tremulous smile then started down the corridor.

Morgan watched her go with mixed emotions. While his desires led him in a different direction, he had great affection for the young woman he'd met long ago on the Cliffs of Creyr. He had been twenty-five; she was sixteen but already a raving beauty whose face and budding figure caught the eye of every man.

There to watch the yachts as they sailed in the impressive regatta held each year in Solaria, he had spied the young Princess sitting forlornly on a rock, staring out to sea, tears streaking down her cheeks. His heart had gone out to her and he had hunkered down beside her, asking if there was anything he could do.

"Make my father let me sail one of the sloops?" she asked with heat.

"I think only boys can do that," he'd said without the same amusement every other male had given her at the suggestion.

"I'm just as good as the boys!" she'd proclaimed, her bottom lip trembling.

"Mayhap but rules are rules, Milady," he stated. "Unfair though they might sometimes be."

She'd regarded him with a sweet face tilted to one side. "You're King Sierran's son, aren't you?" she asked. At his surprised look, she smiled shyly. "I asked someone about you."

"Ah," he'd said, turning to look at the race.

"You prefer boys, I'm told."

It had been that simple statement—spoken without censure or condemnation—that had fired the friendship between them and Morgan had become her confidant, a boon companion with whom her parents could find no fault.

Seeing her climb the stairs to complete her marriage to his brother, Morgan felt a momentary quirk of conscience. While he held no love for Thiessen, he had deep and abiding feelings for Lanelle. He knew things about her she'd told no other and this act in which she was about to engage would be an exacting chore for her. She would need his shoulder to cry on when it was done. Troubled by his own concerns, he turned away, intent on getting Thiessen's men beyond the walls of Ambergast quickly as soon as the vile deed was accomplished and Thiessen out of Lanelle's life.

* * * *

Straining against the ropes that bound him to the vast oaken bed, Thiessen grunted and yowled beneath the constriction of the gag but there was no one in the room to hear him. The bed beneath him was shaking from his concerted efforts to get free but the ropes held fast. As soon as the guards had manhandled him into the room, practically torn his clothing from him and hoisted him flailing like an eel onto the turned down bed, they'd made quick work of binding him, one flinging a corner of the sheet over the struggling Prince's groin before departing with smirking grins.

When the door opened and his bride came in, he stilled, eyes narrowed into thin slits of pure rage. A low, vicious growl came from the very core of him.

“Oh, stop it, Thiessen,” Lanelle said as though she were supremely tired and the day had been trying. “It’s going to happen whether you like it or not.”

He saw a strange look pass over her face and a tremor seemed to run down her tall frame before she shook her head as though riding it of unpleasant memories.

Lanelle glanced at the fireplace—seemed to be mesmerized by the flames for a moment—then turned away, her hand going to her waist to tug the shirt from her leather pants.

“I’ll make it as quick as I can,” she said, ignoring his throaty snort of derision.

Practically quivering with outrage, Thiessen watched her unbuckle her belt then work the buttons loose at the fly. As she sat down on the edge of the bed to pull off her boots, he could not help but admire the shapeliness of her rump.

“Just so you know,” she said as one boot came off and hit the floor with a dull thud, “this was my idea, not Morgan’s.”

Had he been able, Thiessen would have told her that didn’t matter. His brother was a dead man for his part in this farce. He tensed when the other boot was dropped and she stood to push the pants down her lean hips.

There was just a brief glimpse of sleek white thighs as she leaned over to divest herself of the leather. The flesh looked firm and satiny soft and he ached to run the palm of his hand over that long length. He lifted his head in the hopes of getting a look under the tail of her shirt but that was not to be. She straightened up and turned, giving him an odd look when he slammed his head back into the soft pillow beneath it.

“Were you trying to ogle me, Thiessen?” she asked. When he only glared at her, she put a knee to the mattress and climbed atop it, the mattress dipping beneath her slight weight. That action made the sheet covering him so precariously slip and he saw her gaze lower. Despite every ounce of control he could garner, he could not keep his cock from leaping and he saw her begin to smile. Her attention shifted to his face and held.

Despite the intolerableness of his position, the humiliation of being at her mercy, Thiessen could not but admire the simple perfection of her face. From the unbound tresses of her sleek blond hair that framed a slightly oval face with eyes the color of pale jade and lips a soft shade of coral, to the thrust of her breasts against the loose folds of her shirt, she was as lovely a woman as any he could ever remember seeing. Long, dark eyelashes seemed strange beneath delicately arched blonde brows bracketed above a straight, slender nose. There was a deep rose color to her cheeks that he thought more from embarrassment than any stroke of nature’s brush. High and perfectly formed, those cheeks grew deeper in color as he stared back at her until he saw her head lower, her eyes cast down to his chest.

Lanelle watched her hand move of its own accord to flatten against the dark crisp hair that spread across his pectoral muscles and angled down in a tapering V to beneath the edge of the sheet. The wiry growth beneath her palm felt good and she rubbed her hand over it, feeling the sudden heavy beat of his heart through the chest wall.

“Nice,” she heard herself say and her attention was once more claimed by the shifting of the sheet.

If he lived to be a hundred, Thiessen would never forget the moment her hand moved lower to slowly tug aside the sheet to see what had caused it to tent. His entire body clenched when she rolled her upper lip over her lower—wetting it—as her gaze beheld his cock.

“Very nice,” she whispered.

The sound he made was more groan than growl and his treacherous shaft did its little dance again, growing with every breath he took. When her hand closed around him, his eyes grew wide and he stopped taking in air altogether.

There would never be any way for him to explain what happened next. He was unable to move as she swung a long, bare leg over him while she kept his cock imprisoned in the soft heat of her hand. Her delicious little rump settled on his thighs for just a moment before she pushed up to her knees, positioned his wayward weapon at her sheath then with grace and gentleness, slid him within her, taking him to the hilt, her eyes closing as her slick walls enfolded him. Her hands went to his waist.

“Aye,” she breathed then opened her eyes and stared at the wall behind the bed. “That wasn’t so bad.”

He was very aware there had been no barrier to breach when she’d impaled herself upon him. The woman whose body had taken his was no virgin though she was as tight as one. It seemed to him he filled her completely, stretching her fully, and she was paused, waiting for the pain to come. When it did not, she looked down at him.

“Thiessen,” she whispered, just that one word and nothing else as she began to move on him.

The hot channel surrounding him slid wetly up and down his hard cock, tightening around him, caressing him with such sweet pleasure he could hear the blood drumming in his ears. His hands pulled against the bonds holding them—not to get free his captivity but to grasp the hips riding his. He longed to lift her higher and slam her down upon him and was unaware that he was arching his hips upward in rhythm to her downward strokes, his taut buttocks leaving the mattress.

Lanelle began to twist her body on his, feeling an itch building deep inside her that made her want to scratch herself upon his shaft. She swiveled her hips in little circles, her inner muscles squeezing him of their own accord. A ripple of pleasure undulated through her lower belly and she clutched at his waist, digging her short fingernails into his flesh as she rode him.

Thiessen was staring up at the underside of her chin for her head had fallen back, the long sweep of her tawny hair tickling his knees. Though she was in complete control of the situation, her body claiming his, he was determined to take charge and bucked upward brutally, making her lower her head to look down at him. He held her gaze, narrowing his as he thrust hard upward again.

She half-smiled at him and shook her head slowly, denying him. He knew she was not going to allow him to get the upper hand. She leaned forward, her hands moving up his chest, her legs stretching out alongside his and she pressed her sex down on him then began to slide up and down his shaft, her belly rubbing his.

The torment was so sweet, so lustful that Thiessen stilled. His cock was harder than he could ever remember it being even when he was just learning how to pull it to pleasure. Heat was building in his groin and along with it the most intense feeling of rapture hovering just beyond his reach. He knew if he wanted to gain that wondrous release, he had to let her do with him what she would. He relaxed the tension on his arms and legs, forced his hips up only a fraction to accommodate her stroke better, then laid there and waited for her to bring pleasure to them both.

Lanelle turned her head so her cheek was lying on his shoulder. Her hands went under his tight ass to pull him to her and she felt a tremor ripple down his muscular frame. The itch had become a nearly unbearable tickle boring deep into her belly and she pushed harder against his cock, sliding down him more forcefully until that tickle became a full-blown tingle of nerve

endings crying out for relief. When her muscles began to contract around him, she cried out, experiencing wave after wave of the most glorious sensations surging through her.

Thiessen squeezed his eyes shut as her climax came, the tight little vibrations rolling along his cock, the sweet flexing of her muscles milking him, the heated flow of her juices surrounding him combined to be the most torturous pleasures he'd ever known. His cock hardened then leapt once, twice, three, four times, his cum shooting deep inside her, his body quivering as he pulsed one last time then shivered uncontrollably as every muscle in his body went lax.

"Great gods almighty. What was that?" he heard Lanelle declare and could not help but wonder if she had given herself the first orgasm she'd ever had. She was breathing heavily, her heart pounding erratically against his, her body slick with sweat as she lay there collapsed atop him, her fingernails digging into his ass. In some alien part of him, just the thought that he had been the cause of her first climax gave him almost as much enjoyment as she had bestowed upon him with her sweet cunt. He growled against the restriction of the gag.

Lanelle felt boneless, limp as a wet dishrag, almost numb. What she had just experienced was so outside the realm of her knowledge that she wondered if it had been some strange anomaly, some alien occurrence that would never claim her again. She could barely breathe for the sensation that had rushed through her, had overtaken her, had been so intense, so powerful all she wanted to do was crawl into a fetal position and go over and over it again in her mind.

Or better yet, experience it again.

She pushed up, gathering strength from that notion, and looked down at Thiessen, searching his amber gaze. "Is it always that way?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Always?" she pressed.

For some reason he didn't want to lie to her for he doubted it was always that way with anyone but since he couldn't speak because of the gag, all he could do was shrug. He felt keen disappointment when his limp cock slid out of her.

Frustrated with that reaction she sat up, her bare rump digging into his belly as she leaned forward to untie the gag. It took some doing for Morgan had tied the thing tightly but she managed to pluck the knot free then drag the wet material from between Thiessen's teeth.

Working his jaw, licking his lips, Thiessen tried to gather enough saliva in his mouth to swallow against the dryness that had invaded his throat.

"Is it always that way?" she wanted to know.

"It can be," he told her.

"What will insure that it is?"

He narrowed his eyes at her demand. "The right man with the right woman for one," he snapped. "Him giving and her receiving. That's the way it was meant to be."

She cocked her head to one side. "Yet, I was the one giving and you were the one"

"No, you took," he cut her off, his voice hard.

She shook her head. "No. I gave and"

"What's that running down your thigh if not what I gave you, wench?" he queried. He pressed his head back against the pillow, looking down his nose at her. "What you took into your body was my cock, baby. You took it. You didn't give anything."

Lanelle didn't believe that for a moment. She had felt him tremble. She had heard his grunt of pleasure. She had given and he had taken.

And she wanted to give again but not with the man glaring at her with such hostile eyes. With a snort of hurt, she lifted her leg from over his body and scrambled out of the bed, flinching slightly as his juices ran down her thigh. She headed for the water closet beyond a massive carved wooden screen.

“Come back here and untie me, wench! You got what you wanted,” he yelled then under his breath said, “More than you expected, I’ll wager.”

Lanelle came back into the room after having cleaned herself and bent down to snatch up her leather pants. She plopped down on the bed and bent forward to thrust her foot into the pant leg. “The Joining is consummated and you can go now,” she told him as she put her other foot into the pants.

“Not until you untie my fucking ass, I can’t!” he spat at her, jerking against the bonds.

She glanced over her shoulder at him. “Morgan can do that,” she said, coming to her feet to tug the pants over her hips.

Thiessen was so enraged at that he nearly pulled his arm out of the socket straining against the ropes. “The gods-be-damn it, untie me!”

Lanelle scooped up her boots and without another look at him hurried to the door.

“Wench!” he bellowed but she had the portal open and was through it before he could say anything else. “Come back here!”

Hurrying down the hallway, Lanelle could hear him cursing her, hear the thumps of the bed against the floor as he struggled to break free. She wanted to put as much distance between them as possible and she wanted him out of her keep as quickly as could be arranged. She never even knew the tears were cascading down her cheeks until she felt one fall from her chin.

Chapter Three

Vargas was the most vocal and the loudest with his complaint when he saw his liege lord being brought out of the keep with his hands shackled behind him. His old eyes shifted quickly over the Prince's face but he saw no bruises, no dark splatters on his clothing that would suggest a wound or that Thiessen had been maltreated in any way although the young man's shirt was torn at one shoulder and several buttons had come off along the front. "Are you all right?" he demanded of Thiessen.

"Aye," Thiessen mumbled as he limped along between his escorts.

"What's wrong with your leg?" Vargas wanted to know.

"My boot's not on all the way," Thiessen complained.

"What?" Vargas asked, his expression confused.

"Up you go, Your Grace," one of the guards said as he and his partner hefted Thiessen between them and catapulted him onto the back of the Prince's mount.

Vargas and the rest of the men were similarly shackled but their hands were bound in front of them, allowing them a modicum of control and balance as they sat on their animals.

"Unlock them damned manacles. He's not a fucking criminal. He's a Prince of the Realm," Mac snarled, his thick legs clamping down hard on his horse for the animal had shied at the loud tone.

"Ain't the Prince of *our* realm," the guard said with a sniff. "And ain't likely to ever be." He came over to Mac and thrust the key to the shackles into his cupped hand. "Unlock them yourself when you're free of our walls," he ordered then brought his palm down hard on the rump of Mac's roan stallion.

Mac's horse charged forward and galloped across the drawbridge, the other horses following suit as the guards shooed and slapped at the animals' rear ends. The last two to leave the environs of Ambergast were Vargas and Thiessen, the reins of both men's horses being held by other guards.

"Don't come back, little brother," Morgan called from the steps of the keep. "You don't want the trouble I will hand you if you do."

Vargas looked from one brother to the other, not having seen Morgan before now. He'd had no idea Morgan was behind their capture and was curious to know what had occurred between the two men that would make Thiessen look so savage and Morgan so determined.

"This isn't over, Summerall," Thiessen vowed. "I can promise you that."

"You come back here and I promise *you* I will install your ass in the darkest, dankest, dampest, dirtiest cell to be found in this kingdom," Morgan warned. "One from which you will never leave." He nodded and the guards holding the reins of the two horses released them and stepped back. "Give Maggie a kiss for me!"

"Maggie?" Vargas questioned but didn't get an answer as his horse was driven forward, Thiessen's close on its heels.

* * * *

"*She did what?*" Vargas roared.

Thiessen and his men were stopped on the coastal road, taking refuge in a cave along the base of a cliff. It was pouring rain, the deluge coming down in thick sideways sheets. Lightning ripped through the night skies and thunder echoed through the cave to a deafening degree. The noise was so loud it was unlikely anyone had heard Vargas' shout.

"You heard me," Thiessen growled.

Vargas had been given the news of what had transpired at Ambergast simply because he kept insisting Thiessen tell him what had brought on the violent surge of temper he saw leaping in the young man's hard gaze. Swearing the older man to secrecy, Thiessen had warned him no one was to know of the forced marriage. He had not told the warrior about what else had occurred in the bedroom.

"Well, it will be annulled!" Vargas stated.

"Aye," Thiessen said. "It would if Papa ever hears about it." He gave the older man a sharp look. "But he's not going to hear about it."

"Why the hell not?" Vargas demanded.

"Because it suits me that he doesn't," Thiessen snapped and stood up to go to the cave entrance. The cool waves of misted air blew into his face, cooling the heat of fury that was boiling in his blood.

Vargas joined his Prince. "You'd best explain that to me."

It was on the tip of Thiessen's tongue to tell Vargas he had no right to an explanation, but he'd known the man all his life, and he knew Vargas was as loyal to him as the old man had been to Thiessen's father. Vargas considered Thiessen like a son, and he knew the warrior wanted what was best for him.

"I want her." It was all the explanation he planned on handing out.

"For what?" When Thiessen turned and, in the sudden flare of a lightning bolt, gave Vargas a hard look, the old soldier flinched. "Well, other than for that."

"That's the only reason I want her," Thiessen said. "Now let it drop."

"But Thiessen"

"Let. It. Drop."

Vargas snapped his mouth shut. He knew when the little brat had his dander up and at the moment Thiessen Dane Allen was hopping mad. If that hadn't been apparent with the way the young man kept clenching and unclenching his fists, the set of his mouth, the glint in his eyes, and the muscle grinding in his jaw would have told the tale just as well.

"We'll go back with an army next time around," Thiessen swore as he turned back to looking at the downpour silvering the darkness. "Get some rest. We'll move out at first light."

"Are we going to war with Solaria, then?" Vargas asked.

"Not with the King and his realm, no," Thiessen said. "Just with that smug little daughter of his and that bastard brother of mine. I'll have that keep down to the bedrock by the time I'm finished."

Vargas had no doubt of that. There was battle fury leaping from the Prince's fevered gaze and he didn't want to be Morgan Summerall when the WyndMaster in Prince Thiessen was unleashed.

* * * *

Lanelle had never liked bad weather. The boom of thunder made her uneasy but the shriek and flare of lightning set her to trembling and she was burrowed beneath the covers, hiding from the onslaught of the storm. It was raining so hard that it drowned out all other sound, the plink of it hitting her windows with unrestrained fury as the wind pushed violently against

the panes. Lying on her right side in a fetal position with her knees drawn up, toes curled and her hands holding the pillow over her head for added protection, she felt she was cocooned in safety. When the mattress dipped beside her, she thought it was Morgan coming to calm her as he usually did.

“Hold me, Milord” she asked and felt a heavy arm drape over her shoulder. In the darkness, she tossed the pillow aside and started to turn into the comfort of that embrace when a wet, cold hand shot up to her mouth and slapped across it, a hard thumb digging into the softness beneath her chin.

“Surprise!” The single word was a nasty explosion as her eyes flew open and in the sudden flash of lightning she saw the face of her worst nightmare leaning over her. His hair was dripping wet—dangling over his high forehead—his stony face pebbled with water, and she became aware of the sodden state of his clothing as he pressed against her. She clawed at the hand over her mouth, gouging the flesh with her fingernails, but there was superior strength battling hers and her wrists were grabbed and pushed down, quickly wound up into the voluminous sweep of her nightgown’s skirt. Kicking furiously, she was frustrated when her legs became entangled in the sheets and she couldn’t get free.

She was like a lioness as she fought him but Thiessen managed to wrap her up in the sheet and coverlet from her bed using sheer brute strength, clamping her limbs together with a leg thrown over hers, tying the bundle with drapery cords he’d cut from the window. Thankfully her curses and shouts were muffled by not only being rolled up like a carpet but by the violence of the storm outside that seemed to have grown in power. He pulled her from the bed and tossed her upon his shoulder, not even hearing the oomph of breath leaving her lungs as her belly slammed hard into the bony ridge. She squirmed like a beached eel but he held on to her, one arm clamped tightly around her legs. Carrying her quickly out of the bedroom it had taken him over an hour to locate, he hurried down the hall and to the room that contained the window he’d jimmied open after having scaled the rain-slick wall. It took some doing and a few near misses but he was able to keep hold of her thrashing body with one hand while lowering them down the rope he’d tied off around the footboard of the same bed where he’d been raped. That it had been the window to that particular room to which he’d been drawn had not slipped his notice. It was as though fate had led him where it wanted him to go.

By the time his booted feet squished into the mud at the base of the keep’s wall, the burden he carried was as soaked through as he was. The smell of wet satin from the coverlet was not all that pleasant as he jogged to the place where he’d easily scaled the walls of Ambergast’s battlements despite carrying two coils of rope. He was relieved to see the first rope he’d used to gain entrance to the keep still dangling where he’d left it. Going back up the wall—especially carrying a struggling woman—was harder than having come down it and he would have the blisters to prove it as his toes dug into the grout between the stones and he pulled them up the wall. The back of his left hand was stinging from where Lanelle had so viciously scratched him and that only added to his discomfort. He was grunting, his sweat mixing with the water streaming down his face, the salt of it stinging his eyes, blurring his vision. His arms felt as though they were being pulled out of the sockets, still wrenched from earlier in the night when he’d fought the ropes that had bound him to the bed. Struggling to reach the top, gasping for breath, every muscle in his body, every bone aching with fiery protest, he flung a leg over the high wall and straddled it, hauling the rope up to fling it down the outside wall. While it had been extremely difficult climbing up the outside wall in the pouring rain and with the coils of heavy rope slung over his shoulder at that, he knew it was going to be sheer hell going back

down. But he was a WyndMaster and part of his complex warrior training had been in learning to scale nearly impassable walls and he had the scars on his knees and shins to prove it. Already he could feel the blood slick in his palms where the flesh was now raw and he almost lost his balance with the fatigue that was setting in as Lanelle bucked violently against him.

“I’m sitting on the top of the fucking outer wall and if you do that again, we’re gonna fall to our deaths, wench!” he hissed at her, hoping no one had heard. He was relieved when she instantly stilled in his grasp.

After several long intakes of breath, Thiessen clamped his teeth together and swung over the wall, snarling with pain as the rope dug into his ravaged flesh. Repelling was easy unless you were carrying dead weight on your shoulder and the skin in your palms was peeling off layer by layer. It was all he could do to keep as steady a grip on the rope as he could, every fiber of his being screaming in agony as he dropped foot by foot down the slippery stone wall. When he reached the bottom, he sagged against the wall—his head to the wet stone—and endured the burning that throbbed in his palms, barely able to flex his fingers.

Sensing they were on solid ground, Lanelle began her violent wiggling again and was rewarded with a hard jolt that nearly drove the wind from her as he bounced her on his shoulder. She felt him spinning around and then he was apparently running with her being jiggled brutally with each step he took. She knew her belly would hurt for days to come.

Staying close to the deep shadow cast by the high wall, Thiessen thought it unlikely any guard would be out and about on the battlements to see him but he was taking no chances. He had tied his horse in the forest that led up into the mountains behind the keep and had a way to go to reach it. Shifting her weight on his aching shoulder, he felt the burn of exhaustion stabbing into his thighs, his every step made more difficult by the sucking grab of his boots by the pulpy mud through which he ran. Wheezing by the time he got to his mount, his clothing sticking to him, his teeth chattering from the cold, he almost dropped Lanelle when he slid her from his shoulder to the ground so he could change his grip on her and toss her over the saddle. Her curses were very inventive and made him laugh at the brutal things she was going to do to him once she was free.

It took the last of his waning energy to pull himself up into the saddle and kick the horse into motion, sawing on the reins to direct the animal toward the roadway. With every jolt of the stallion’s hooves, the prince felt it down to the very marrow of his bones.

* * * *

Cloaked in a hooded oil skin duster that covered him from head to ankle, Lord Morgan Summerall watched the roadway that curved past the base of the mountain and ran along the coastline, spiraling south to the Ewardian border. Though the rain had lessened to a degree, it was still dark as pitch and he had to strain during the frequent flashes of lightning to make out the rider racing his mount recklessly through the night.

A slow, satisfied smile crept over Morgan’s face. The trap had been laid and twice now Thiessen had blundered into it.

* * * *

Vargas had awakened at the sharp report of a bolt of lightning that had no doubt struck close by. The fire his men had kindled was almost down to the embers and it had grown cold as a witch’s teat as the old warrior got up to throw a few gathered branches onto the glowing coals. Out of habit, he glanced toward the spot where he’d seen his liege lord lie down to sleep. He frowned when he saw the bedroll was empty. Glancing around the men crammed like sardines in the small space, he did not spy the prince among them.

“You didn’t,” Vargas growled, his jaw flexing. He strode purposefully to the cave entrance and tried to peer out in the onslaught. So angry he forgot himself, he yelled, “Thiessen? You’d best be out there pissing, boy!”

Mac opened his eyes and craned his head around to look at the man who had awakened them all. “What’s up?” he asked.

“Is his horse back there?” Vargas questioned.

“I don’t see it,” Seth answered.

“I think that addle-headed brat went back to fetch the princess!” Vargas snarled as the men began rousing.

Sighing heavily, Mac tossed off his blanket and sat up. “How long’s he been gone?” he asked as he reached for his boots.

“How the hell would I know?” Vargas demanded.

“You weren’t watching him?” Seth queried. He was already up and tucking his shirt into his pants.

“No, I wasn’t watching him!” the old warrior stated. “Who the hell would have thought he’d go traipsing out in that fucking muck?”

“The real question is how did he walk a horse right by you and you didn’t even notice, Vargas?” Seth asked his brother.

“I guess I was bone tired from fighting the Solarians and getting my ass whipped just like you!” Vargas threw at him.

On their feet, the men were gathering up their bedrolls, preparing to ride back to Ambergast in search of their prince when Vargas held up a hand. “Quiet!” he roared.

The sound of horse hooves pounding toward the cave came during a slight lull in the storm. Vargas poked his head out into the rain, squinting to sight the rider. As soon as he recognized Thiessen, he moved away from the entrance, his shaggy hair plastered to his beefy face. “He’s got the bitch slung over his fucking saddle,” he said with disgust.

“Could be Morgan he’s got,” Mac said.

“It’s the woman I tell you!” Vargas snapped. “That’s who he went after!”

The prince’s horse walked into the cave, crowding Vargas and Mac, who were the closest to the opening. The beast was snorting, steam rolling from its flaring nostrils.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Vargas challenged as Thiessen dismounted, staggering a bit as his feet touched the rocky ground.

“Get that fire built up higher,” the prince ordered. He was chilled to the bone and barely able to control the shivers that were rippling through him. “And brew a pot of coffee.

“Are they after you?” Vargas asked him.

“They don’t even know I have her yet,” Thiessen replied and reached for the woman squirming on his saddle. He faltered, his knees nearly buckling and Mac had to reach out to steady him.

“Let me!” Vargas grumbled and pushed his liege lord aside. “You need to get outta them wet clothes before you catch lung fever, you stupid little shit!”

Mac grinned, thinking Vargas had to be exceedingly angry to forget to whom it was he was speaking. He was treating the prince no differently than he’d treated the boy’s father back when they were in the same regiment together.

“Be careful with her. She’s as wet as I am,” Thiessen said. “Seth, fetch us some dry blankets.”

Seth hurried to do his prince's bidding, taking a couple of blankets from the men who had snatched them from the ground.

"Stop it!" Vargas bellowed as he carried his wriggling bundle to a large rock and sat it down. "I'll have none of that, wench, princess or not!"

Thiessen could no longer control his shivering even with his teeth tightly locked together. He was stripping out of his shirt, grateful there were dry clothes being rounded up for him from among the warrior's saddlebags.

Vargas knelt down to undo the cords tied around the sodden coverlet, his arthritic fingers protesting the tight knots. By the time he got the top one undone and the sheet folded back to reveal a young woman shuddering violently with the cold he felt a moment of contrition. "I'm hurrying as fast as I can, lass," he told her.

Lanelle's eyes shifted warily from the older man to the man who had sat down to pull off his boots beside the fire. He was trembling, his flesh mottled blue with cold, and for that she was supremely glad for he had to be as frozen as she was, more so since he'd been out in the storm longer than her. Her teeth were chattering so fiercely she couldn't speak, couldn't curse him as she longed to do.

Peeling the wet coverlet and sheets from her, Vargas immediately lowered his eyes for he had gotten a glimpse of her nipples pressed against the wet material of her lawn nightgown.

Thiessen had seen them as well and snatched a blanket from Seth to get up and stride barefoot toward her, holding the blanket in his outstretched arms to shield from his men's curious eyes. "Get over to the fire and take that gown off, Nell," he ordered her.

"D...don't c...call m...me th...that!" she spat at him.

"I'll call you whatever the fuck I want to," he returned. "Now get your ass over to the fire!"

So cold she could feel it in her bones, Lanelle got up and stomped over to the fire, striving not to wince as the rocks over which she walked bruised the soles of her bare feet. With Thiessen walking behind her holding up the barrier of the blanket, she got as close to the fire as she dared and pulled the sodden nightgown over her head, tossing it aside where it landed with a wet splat.

"Give her a blanket, Seth," Thiessen told the warrior and Seth reached over the top of the one the prince was holding to hand the other blanket to her.

Gratefully wrapping her shivering body in the scratchy warmth of the coarse wool blanket, Lanelle could feel her knees knocking together. She barely flinched as Thiessen came toward her and swung the first blanket around her, drawing her to him to wrap it her up securely.

"Sit by the fire until you thaw out," he told her.

Too cold and too miserable to balk at his command, she did as he said, one bare foot atop the other for her feet felt encased in blocks of ice.

Thiessen noticed that, too, and dropped to a squat before her, reaching for her cold feet to begin rubbing them vigorously between his palms although the movement hurt his rope-burned palms. He twisted his head around, demanding to know what was keeping the coffee.

"You need to dry off, Your Grace," Seth told him and draped another blanket around Thiessen's shoulders.

"Find me some clothes for her to wear," Thiessen said. "William is about her size."

Mac glanced at the smallest of the warriors. "You heard the man, Willie. You got something she can wear?"

"Just some britches," William admitted. "My shirt's too dirty for her to wear."

“I have a shirt that’ll do her,” another of the men spoke up. “It might be a tad big on her but its clean.”

“She needs some socks,” Thiessen said as he continued to chaff her feet. “A couple of pair since she has no boots.”

Lanelle was beginning to get warm but she could see her abductor wasn’t despite the fact that he was hunkered so close to the fire. His flesh was pebbled with gooseflesh and his hair was dripping water into his face. She noticed his palms looked raw and were bleeding, leaving little smears of red on the top of her feet.

“Leave off, warrior,” she said. “My feet are warm enough. Shuck off those pants before you catch your death of cold.”

He looked up into her frowning face and grinned. “Anxious to get my pants off again, Nell?” he asked.

She stiffened at both his use of the nickname she abhorred and the suggestion that had the men giving her even more curious looks. She lifted her chin. “I’m only seeing to my husband’s welfare, that’s all.”

A gasp ran through the men and she could tell from Thiessen’s expression he had not told his warriors what had transpired at Ambergast. A gloating smile tugged at her lips. The rain had stopped so she did not need to raise her voice to make sure she’d be heard.

“Take off the pants, Thie, or do you need a couple of your men to strip you as my men did at the keep?”

Another gasp loud enough to spook the horses at the back of the cave came from the warriors. This time, their gazes fell to their liege lord and held.

Thiessen ground his teeth—not from the cold he was trying to ignore but the fury that she had said such a thing in his men’s hearing. He narrowed his eyes at her in warning but made no comment to her words. Her slight snort of laughter only added fuel to his growing temper.

With every eye—and most especially hers—on him, he got to his feet, unbuckled his belt, unbuttoned his pants and pushed them down his hips and legs. Since he disdained the use of linen braies or underwear of any kind there was nothing to hide his sizeable shaft from the view of those around him.

Lanelle was amused that his men hastily averted their gazes from his nudity, yet she boldly stared at him with one eyebrow cocked. She could tell that disconcerted him but that made her all the more determined to annoy him by ogling him unabashedly.

“You like looking at my cock, don’t you?” he asked, hoping to turn the tables on her.

She was keenly aware of the held breaths awaiting her answer and knew she’d best come up with one that would put the prince in his place. She shrugged carelessly. “Not especially. As cocks go, I suppose it will do until something larger comes along.”

Thiessen lunged at her, mindless of his nudity and grabbed her by the upper arms, dragging her up and slamming her blanket-clad body against his with such furious strength, she saw stars. “You’ve seen the last cock you’ll ever see!” he shouted in her face. “Do you hear me, Nell?”

She stared into his outraged face and for a flicker of a moment believed she saw rampant jealousy in his hateful glower. Her slow smile and refusal to answer seemed to infuriate him even more and he shoved her away from him, hardly satisfied when she sat back down on the stone with a slight grunt of pain.

Mac had set about making the coffee so he was squatted down on the opposite side of the fire from the battling couple. His attention shifted from the prince to the princess and back again

and he, too, saw what he recognized not only as jealousy but possessiveness in his liege lord's dark glower. He smiled to himself thinking Thiessen Allen had met his match in the pretty woman taunting him. That she was Solarian of royal blood pleased the warrior all the more.

"Where the fuck are those clothes for her?" Thiessen bellowed as he grabbed the dry ones extended to him and began jerking them on with angry movements that left no doubt of his state of mind.

William hurried forward with the britches he was providing and the shirt from his fellow warrior. He bowed clumsily to Lanelle and held them out to her as though they were an offering. He laid them beside her on the stone and backed away.

"Thank you—William is it?" she asked.

The young warrior blushed to the roots of his ill-cropped dirty blond hair. "Aye, Your Grace. Most just call me Willie and ..."

"She's doesn't give a rat's ass what we call you!" Thiessen interrupted. "Step back and let her get dressed!"

Lanelle got to her feet, the blankets wrapped securely around her with only her slender fingers and bare toes showing. "On the contrary, husband, I do care what his name is. I like to get to know those who extend their help to me and I shall call him Willie just as everyone else does." She gave William a pretty smile. "Thank you, Willie, and...?" She made the last word a question as she looked at the man who had loaned her his shirt.

"Stafford, Your Grace," the warrior provided.

"Thank you, as well, Stafford," she said then turned her steady stare to Thiessen. "Well, am I to drop these blankets and put on the clothing or are you going to provide me a curtain behind which to dress?"

Thiessen narrowed his eyes. "As much as it would amuse me to see you standing there in all your glory, I doubt you'd find it as entertaining."

"Oh, I don't know," she countered. "I'm told I have a rather nice body."

The low growl of warning that erupted from the prince's throat made Lanelle blink and she would have moved back as he advanced on her had there been anywhere for her to go. As it was she stood her ground trying not to tremble as he snatched the top blanket from her and snapped it open with a loud crack as he hid her from his men's view. "Hurry up," he ordered. His palms were bleeding from the rope burns and gripping the blanket was absolute agony.

Though no one behind the blanket could see her and the man who had been preparing the coffee had moved away, Lanelle knew Thiessen would ogle her as soon as she dropped her blanket. Whereas before when she'd taken off her nightgown he had stared straight ahead at the rock wall behind her, his eyes were now directed down at her, a faint smirk of challenge on his full lips. He was, after all, her legal husband and entitled to view her at his leisure if he so desired. As much as she would have liked to do so, she could not deny him that right for she was afraid if she tried, he'd turn even more pigheaded on her and make even more demands. She strove not to think of the intimacy they had likewise shared. Rather than give him the satisfaction of seeing her blush, hear her plead maidenly modesty, she boldly dropped the blanket to the ground, her gaze riveted on his face.

Thiessen felt the tightening in his groin as her body was revealed to him. Never in his wildest imagination would he have believed the woman could be as beautiful as she was. Aye, he thought as he feasted on the long shapely legs, moved up to the crisp triangle of curls at the apex of her firm thighs, over the curvaceous hips and flat belly, and up to the rounded globes of her lush breasts with large, dark nipples created to be suckled, this was no mere woman he beheld

but a heavenly creation designed to drive a man to his knees with desire. Slowly his scrutiny lifted to her knowing eyes and he stared into those pale jade green orbs and became lost.

“May I dress now that you’ve inspected your possession, warrior?” she asked in a goading tone that broke the enthrallment that had claimed him.

“It seems a sacrilege to cover such perfection,” he heard himself say and could have bitten off his tongue. Her eyes had flared with surprise a second before she half-lowered her lids and twisted around to take up the dark chambray shirt Stafford had given her to wear.

He watched her breasts jiggle as she thrust her arms into the sleeves of the shirt and the sight made his mouth water. Unconsciously he licked his lips, feeling the burning of lust settling in his balls. Disappointment shifted through him when the shirt settled into place almost to her knees, hiding her from his view. He found himself staring at her pretty little toes instead.

“I have to pee, Thiessen,” she said and his eyes snapped back up to hers.

“What?” he asked, the words having no meaning to him at that moment.

She hissed with irritation. “I have to pee and it would be easier without the britches.”

“Pee?” he repeated.

“Aye, warrior! Pee! Make water! Urinate!” Her eyes narrowed. “Or as you men say, piss!”

The men snickered at her words and when Thiessen twisted around to glare at them, they shuffled like errant school boys, striving to hide their laughter behind hastily drawn up hands. Even Vargas was biting his lower lip to keep from chuckling.

“It’s stopped raining, Your Grace,” Seth said. “Perhaps you could take the princess outside to give her some privacy?”

Almost of a mind to make the bold temptress relieve herself there in the cave, Thiessen nevertheless dropped the blanket to snake out a hand, grasping her wrist in a punishing hold before pulling her toward him.

“Ouch!” she cried out, the rocks cutting into her bare feet. She jerked against his grip and shrieked even louder when he leaned forward to put his shoulder to her belly and once more hoisted her up in that fashion. He strode with her to the entrance and out into the night.

Lanelle would have protested his manhandling of her but she saw the wisdom of him carrying her since she had no footwear. It was just the notion of him slinging her about like a sack of salt that annoyed her and she slapped the palm of her hand heavily on his rump.

“Stop mauling me, warrior!” she snapped at him.

He came to a halt. “You want to walk into the forest?” He waited for her answer that took a moment in coming.

“No,” she said quietly.

“All right then,” he stated and continued on into the line of brush that hid them from view. When he found a place that looked relatively free of debris to hurt her feet, he set her down.

Lanelle grimaced at the mud squishing through her toes and hated to squat down, but her bladder was aching. “You go over there,” she said, pointing.

“And give you a chance to run off?” he countered. “I think not.”

She glared at him through the darkness, not sure if he could see her angry face or not. “Where would I run to with no boots and nothing on my bare ass, warrior?”

“There’s no telling,” he said, folding his arms. “Squat and do your business or I’m gonna pick you up and take you back to the cave. I’m freezing out here.”

So was she but she wouldn’t admit it to him. “At least turn your head,” she said.

“No.”

Furious with him, she dropped like a rock and would have toppled over backward had he not reached out for her, going to one knee in the mud to keep her from falling. Her bottom touched the cold earth and her water came before she could stop it. She groaned, humiliated that he was kneeling there with her, his hand wrapped around her upper arm, no doubt hearing and smelling what she was doing. She hid her face against her shoulder.

“It’s a natural thing to piss, wench,” he said gruffly, sensing her embarrassment.

“Oh, shut up,” she whimpered.

He chuckled and looked away from her averted face. If she’d said nothing more, nothing else would have happened but her next words went through him like a dull, rusted knife.

“Morgan wouldn’t treat me like this.”

He turned back to her and glared at her, his grip tightening. “You don’t have to worry about your fucking lover ever doing anything for you again,” he told her.

She met his look, barely able to see his angry face in the darkness. “Morgan is not my lover,” she said and winced as his grip tightened even more.

“Then who were you welcoming into your bed tonight?” he demanded. “Who were you asking to hold you?”

Her eyes rolled. “Morgan but”

“You were no virgin when you straddled me and shoved my cock up inside you,” he insisted. “Some other rod was sheathed in you before mine!”

She tried to snatch her arm from his hold but he would not allow it.

“Whose cock slithered into you before mine?” he demanded. “What bastard did you welcome into your bed before me?”

She tried to pry his hand from her arm. “I welcomed no man to my bed, not even you!” His fingers weren’t budging.

“Who fucked you, Nell?” he yelled at her.

“I was raped!” she shouted back at him. “You want his name?”

Thiessen felt a cold shaft of rage pierce his heart. “Aye, I want the bastard’s name.”

“Emilio Silva,” she supplied. “He was a Toscalian raider.”

Toscalian raiders were known throughout the region and feared wherever they went. They were bloodthirsty pirates who plied their trade on merchant ships along the coast from Emardia all the way to Orule. Women were no safer with them than the goods they pilfered and many a woman had been sold into slavery along the Rishulon Coast when her Toscalian abductor was finished with her.

“How did this happen?” Thiessen asked. His anger was like a burning ember inside him and he had to know.

“I was on my way to the schooner that was to take me home from boarding school,” she reluctantly told him, realizing he’d not allow her to get up until she’d told him the tale. “My carriage was attacked and I was taken by Silva. He didn’t even know who it was he had then for he was so drunk he could barely stand.” She clenched her jaw. “But not drunk enough not to brutally violate me.”

“Such men rarely are,” he observed. “How old were you?”

“Seventeen,” she answered and saw him flinch.

“You managed to escape him,” he said.

“When he passed out. He had taken me to a hovel off the main road.” She hung her head. “My driver and footmen died at his hands and I believed that would be my fate as well when he was finished with me.”

“Or worse.”

“No one but Morgan knows of this,” she said. “Not even my father.”

At the mention of that detested name, Thiessen stiffened. “How is it he knows?” he grated.

“He is my friend!” she snapped. “We tell each other everything.”

That bit of information angered him even more. “Are you finished?”

“What more is there to say?”

“Peeing,” he stressed through gritted teeth. “Are you finished peeing?”

“Aye, you insensitive jackass!” She looked around her.

“What the hell are you looking for?” he asked.

“Something to hit you with, you moron!” she replied and when his grip became a fierce band of agony on her arm, she slapped at his hand. “Stop hurting me! I need something to wipe my...”

She got no further for he leaned closer to her and thrust his hand between her spread legs, cupping her wet sex in the palm of his hand. He rubbed her folds lewdly, his face only inches from hers.

“How’s that?” he barked nastily.

Lanelle could not move. Not only was she mortified that he was touching her in such a private place but that the coarseness of his sword-calloused hand was creating a friction she both enjoyed and feared for it was eliciting a reaction she certainly had not expected to experience with this man again.

When she said nothing, just kept squatting there with her shocked lips dropped open, Thiessen’s vigorous rubbing slowed to an almost sensuous stroke, his middle finger moving along her heated opening as he listened to her drawing in a breath and realizing she was holding it.

“How’s that?” he repeated, his voice lower, his tone caressing, not quite seductive but bordering on enticement. Despite the wicked pain in his palm, he rubbed her firmly.

The heat of his flesh seemed to sear Lanelle’s privates. There was authority in what he was doing, ownership, and a proprietary right that held her captive, unable to push his hand away. It thrilled her as nothing ever had and to her amazement she realized she did not want him to cease touching her so intimately.

“Relax,” he whispered. “Let me pleasure you.”

It wasn’t as though she had a choice, she thought. Her body had taken over control of her mind and her eyelids fluttered shut, her forehead crinkling with the concentration that allowed her to focus entirely on that part of her the warrior was stroking. The moment his thumb slid over some part of her that she’d never known existed, some alien part of her anatomy that sent shivers of pure delight racing through her loins, her lids flew open and she snapped her head around to face him.

“Thiessen?” she questioned.

“Aye, baby,” he said in that husky voice that robbed of her good sense. “I’m right here.”

His thumb ran little circles around whatever wondrous place it was that brought such anticipatory excitement to her. He pressed hard for a moment, held that pressure then added his index finger to lightly pinch her.

Lanelle could not stop from bearing down on his fingers and when she did, he slipped his middle finger inside her, cooing to her as she whimpered low in her throat. He was working that one long digit in and out of her wetly while he rolled her pleasure point around and around between his thumb and index finger.

“Come for me, Nell,” he said. “Let go and come for me.”

The building pressure inside her body was surging downward at an incredible rate of speed. She found herself rocking her hips on his hand, her inner muscles involuntarily clutching him.

“That’s it. Squeeze me harder, baby,” he instructed and when she did, he inserted his index finger inside her as well, then a third. “Tighten around me.”

“Thiessen!” she gasped and slapped her free hand around his hand that was holding her right arm to keep her steady. She clutched at his hand until he opened his fingers to take hers and hold them tightly. Her eyelids fluttered. Her eyes rolled back in her head.

His fingers were slick with her juices and his cock rock-hard as he thrust them in and out, his thumb stretching up to graze her clit. The moment he felt that initial pulse that signaled her coming, he pushed deep inside her and held his fingers still.

She came hard upon his fingers, the sweet twitchings inside her body punctuated by the groans and the helpless little moan that escaped her parted lips. She rocked against his hand, pushed down on it, glorying in the heat that spread from his flesh. The stunning pleasure he had wrung from her left her knees weak and her blood pounding in her ears.

“There you go,” he said softly and slowly eased his fingers from her. “That’s what you needed.”

Lanelle was mortally ashamed of what had just happened. She turned her face from him, unable to bear his gloating look. Tears formed in her eyes and ran heedlessly down her cheek.

“Are you happy now that you’ve shamed me?” she asked in a choked voice.

“I wasn’t shaming you, Nell.”

“What would you call it, then?” When he didn’t answer, she forced herself to look around at him. “Tell me, Thiessen. What would you call it?”

After a long moment, he shook his head. “I don’t know what I’d call it, Nell. I don’t know why I did it.”

“To humiliate me,” she accused.

“No. No.” He held her stare. “I wanted to give you pleasure. I wanted to wipe out the memory of what that other man did to you.”

Before she could say anything else to him, he let go of her arm to slide one hand behind her back, the other under her knees and he lifted her into his arms—high against his chest and careful to make sure the long tail of the borrowed shirt covered her modestly—then turned to carry her back to the cave.

Chapter Four

Lanelle's first view of Windemere as she rode behind Thiessen with her arms circling his lean waist was just after dawn's rosy rays had chased away the gloom of the previous night's storm. The high walls were covered with white-washed plaster, making them a solid expanse without mortar lines.

"So no one can get a toe hold to scale them," Thiessen had explained.

The vast fortress with its crenulated walls was crowned with rippling iron tiles layered on the conical roofs of the twelve towers soaring high above the battlements. The merlons and embrasures along the defensive walls were decorated with a waving line of striking mosaic tiles in varying shades of blue that glinted in the early morning light. The barbican that sat beyond the wide moat was bracketed by two large guard towers connected to an even taller gatehouse with a massive portcullis now raised for the prince and his men.

Clipping loudly over the heavy drawbridge that spanned the moat, the horses bobbed their heads and nickered, apparently glad to be home and headed for the warmer confines of the stable. The animals picked up their gait as their riders crossed over the fixed bridge and beneath the archway through the curtain wall that led to the lower bailey.

Glancing up at the pennant that was being hoisted to the largest tower, Lanelle recognized the personal standard of the Prince Regent of Emardia, Thiessen's own private emblem of status and birth. The raising of the flag signaled the prince was now in residence.

"The walls are fifty feet in height and thirty in depth," Thiessen told her. "The timbers on the portcullis grille are each twenty inches thick and made from petrified wood harvested from the forest at Auboneree. Each timber is then reinforced with ten layers of forged iron. It takes four sturdy draft horses to raise and lower the portcullis."

Once inside the lower bailey, a servant hurried forward to help the princess from his liege lord's mount. Thiessen took his boot from the stirrup so Lanelle could put her sock-clad foot there in order to step down. He held his left arm stiff so she could hold onto him as she dismounted.

Standing beside her husband's horse, Lanelle looked up at the square keep beyond the large stonework well and was surprised to see many windows of the family residence enclosed with iron grillwork.

"It would take a cannon blast to take out one of those grills," the prince told her as he swung a leg over his mount's head and slid to the ground. "The grillwork keeps out intruders."

"And the inhabitants inside," she said. "What would happen should there be a fire, warrior? How would . . ."

"The grillwork can be unlocked from inside and each room has a chain ladder that can be dropped down the walls to carry you to safety. There is no need for you to worry on that account."

She looked back at the forbidding windows and frowned. She'd never been one for enclosed places—even the cave in which she'd just passed a few hours had wore on her nerves—so she feared living in the fortress was going to be a chore. She liked open, airy spaces, windows she could lean out of to sniff the morning air, where she could walk beyond the keep's walls and

into the forests, ride pell-mell over the grasslands and splash amongst the breakwater rolling in from the sea. She likened herself to a bird—free-flying and able to go when and wherever she pleased in solitary peace. Sweeping her gaze around the perimeter of the soaring walls, she saw armed guards everywhere, thinking it would not be easy to enter or escape the citadel. Eyes were watching every move the inhabitants made. The protection of Windemere obviously was not something Thiessen took lightly but it reinforced her sense of claustrophobia even more.

“Nell?”

Gritting her teeth at the nickname, she turned to face Thiessen. “No one calls me that. Please don’t”

“Would you care to break your morning fast now or would you prefer to take a hot bath first?” her husband interrupted.

The thought of bathing made her face light up. “Aye, I would like to soak awhile. I feel as though my pores are packed with grit.”

He half-smiled then looked at a servant standing nearby. “Chausen, would you see the princess to the solar?”

“Aye, Your Grace!” Chausen agreed, covertly stealing a look at Lanelle.

“And tell Thomas to assign her a lady’s maid and ready the chamber beside mine for her use.”

Lanelle saw the other servants eyeing her and she knew they were wondering about her status at Windemere. It irritated her that Thiessen had yet to introduce her to his people so she reached out to place her hand on his shoulder.

“That is so typical of your thoughtfulness, husband. Thank you,” she said with a bat of her eye. It was difficult not to chortle when Thiessen narrowed his eyes at her careless use of the title but before he could say something hateful, she started toward the keep. “And Chausen, His Grace needs a bath, as well. He was gallivanting in all that rain last eve.”

A muscle ticked in the prince’s lean jaw. “Thank you for thinking of my comfort, *wife*,” he stressed then looked at Chausen. “I’ll have my bath at the usual time.”

“Aye, Your Grace,” Chausen said and stepped back to allow Lanelle to proceed him to the steps of the keep.

Thiessen watched his bride walking just ahead of Chausen, carrying on a conversation with the servant as though they’d known one another for years. Chausen was grinning widely at whatever Lanelle was saying and as she walked, the people of his keep were curtsying and bowing to her like puppets on a string. He saw her greet each one, smiling graciously.

“The news will travel fast, now,” Vargas said as he strolled over to Thiessen.

“They’re staring at her like they’ve never seen a woman before,” Thiessen complained.

“Well, Your Grace, you’ve never brought a woman home to Windemere before. That’s part of the reason. The other is that it isn’t every day the servants see a lady dressed in men’s clothing.”

Thiessen grimaced. “Not the best way to introduce them to their future queen, is it?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” the old warrior said, folding his arms over his chest, swiveling his head around to his liege lord. “It depends on how you explain what transpired at Ambergast.”

The prince groaned. “How do you tell them you were forced against your will into joining with a woman you’d never met then stripped and hogtied...?” He stopped, his face flaming with color, eyes wide at what he’d almost said.

Vargas cocked a brow.

“Never mind,” Thiessen mumbled, looking away from the probing gaze of the older warrior. “I’m hungry.”

With that statement, the prince hurried toward the keep, barely acknowledging the greetings of his people as he passed.

“Stripped and hogtied, eh?” Vargas repeated. He sighed and shook his head at what he’d inadvertently learned.

* * * *

The solar of Prince Thiessen was a spacious, well-appointed room with an extra large bed so high off the carpeted floor it required a small set of steps to climb atop it. A dark maroon coverlet was spread over the bed and the curtains at the window were in the same dark fabric. Two tall armoires flanked a low chest upon which sat a collection of carved wooden soldiers, many looking decades old. There was a sitting area with a long maroon and gray stripped settee and two overstuffed dark gray chairs in front of a massive fireplace of polished gray fieldstone. An oversized desk and a black leather chair had been placed before floor to ceiling bookcases in one corner of the room. In the opposite corner stood the largest cheval mirror she’d ever seen, framed in gray and black parquetry that was a marvel to behold. Before the long bank of gridded windows was two comfortable looking chairs and a table holding an intricately carved chess set.

“The bathing chamber is through that door, Your Grace,” Chausen told her, pointing.

Lanelle nodded. “And through that one?” she asked, indicating a door on the other side of the massive bed with its towering four-posters.

“Your personal chamber, Your Grace.”

“Ah,” she said as a brigade of servants entered the room carrying buckets of steaming water. She smiled. “That was quick.”

“Prince Thiessen had a large cauldron commissioned many years back. The fires beneath it are kept stoked all during the day.”

“A wise idea,” she observed.

A tall, cadaverous man entered the room and bowed deeply to Lanelle. “I am Thomas, Your Grace, Prince Thiessen’s seneschal,” he introduced himself with a dignified air. “My deepest apologies for not being there to greet when you arrived. I was inspecting the wine cellar with the butler and”

She sensed the man was surprised at her attire as his gaze shifted over her fleetingly. She saw him flinch when he noticed she was wearing muddy socks and no boots.

“There’s no need to apologize, Thomas,” Lanelle said. “You were not expecting me.”

“You are most gracious, Milady,” Thomas replied with a polite inclination of his head, seemingly having difficulty looking away from her feet.

“His Grace wants you to give the princess a maid,” Chausen said.

Thomas’ eyes snapped up and he flicked a disdainful look to the servant. “I shall handle things now, Chausen. Your services will no longer be required.”

Chausen put a forefinger to his temple. “Aye, Sir.” He looked at Lanelle and bobbed his head. “Welcome to Windemere, Your Grace. I hope you’ll be happy in your new home.”

Thomas’ pinched face filled with surprise but he was too well trained to question his new mistress. He simply gave her an expectant look, awaiting her clarification of Chausen’s words.

“His Grace and I were married in my keep at Ambergast,” Lanelle explained.

The news obviously stunned the seneschal, but he recovered quickly, once more inclining his head. “Then may I extend my congratulations to you?”

Lanelle watched the contingent of servants with their now-empty buckets departing the room and knew each of them had their ears primed for her answer. She smiled graciously.

“His Grace and I are well-met, Thomas,” she said and left the spindly man to make his own conclusion regarding the answer.

“Indeed.” Thomas’ lips twitched—the closest thing she would ever see of the man’s smile. “I believe your bath is ready. With your leave, I will make haste to assign a maid to assist you.”

“I would appreciate that, Thomas,” she said. “And might have a carafe of fresh water? I fear I am fair to parched.”

“Of course, Your Grace!” he agreed. “Straight away!” Bowing, the seneschal left the chamber with his back ramrod straight and shoulders back.

Glancing around the opulent room once more, she walked to one of the chairs and sat down. She could hear the murmur of low voices in the bathing chamber and knew there were at least two remaining servants seeing to her bath. She knew they were curious about her and especially in the way she had arrived at Windemere. She was loath to tell the truth of it—and hoped Thiessen wouldn’t, either. Her agile mind came up with a plausible explanation and she was going over it for possible error when a discreet cough at the door drew her attention.

A young woman was standing just inside the chamber, nervously wringing her hands. She bobbed a quick curtsy as she chewed on her bottom lip.

Lanelle smiled to put the girl at ease. “Hello,” she greeted her.

“Good morn, Your Grace,” the girl said and curtsied again. She came forward hesitantly. “Thomas asked me to be your maid. Would you like me to help you undress?”

“I would but is it possible there might be ladies’ clothing about that I could wear?” Lanelle plucked at the britches she was wearing. “I fear I took a tumble from my horse.” She sighed loudly. “The wretched beast ran off with my boots still in the stirrups.” She forced a woebegone expression to her face. “And my poor gown was ruined beyond cleaning.”

The girl nodded. “I overheard His Grace telling Lord Wilfred, the Minister of Information, what happened. Thank the gods you weren’t hurt.”

Lanelle’s eyebrows shot up into her tawny hair. She was so stunned she couldn’t speak.

“His Grace also told us about the wagon carrying your baggage,” the young woman said with a sad shake of her head. “But he’s ordered the seamstresses to come take your measurements this afternoon.” The girl smiled broadly. “A terrible thing having the wagon tumble off the mountain pathway but at least you’ll get a new wardrobe from it, won’t you, Milady?”

“Aye,” Lanelle mumbled, thinking she was going to have to be very careful around her new husband for it seemed Thiessen could wield lies with the best of them. “It looks as though I will.”

“Mistress Nan has been sent to fetch one of the gowns Queen Celeste left here when she and the King came to visit last spring. She should be here by the time you are finished with your bath.”

The servants who had been dawdling in the bathing chamber came out, curtsied then scurried out, closing the door behind them.

“Well,” Lanelle said, slapping her palms on her knees. “That hot water is calling my name.” She winked. “Can you hear it...?” She tilted her head to one side. “What am I to call you?”

“Oh, your pardon, Your Grace!” the girl said, her face red. “I am Tara.”

“All right, then, Tara,” Lanelle said as she stood. “Let’s get to it.”

* * * *

Thiessen knew Vargas would swear the men who had gone with them to Ambergast to secrecy concerning what had happened at the fortress. The explanation the prince had come up with for the lack of proper clothing and baggage had come to him on the ride to Windemere from the cave. It seemed a logical account and the only concern he had was that Lanelle would tell the truth of the matter. He rather doubted she would but he knew he would have to speak with her as soon as he was finished with what he was doing at the moment.

“Pitiful, Your Grace,” the Healer commented. “Just pitiful. It must hurt something fierce.”

“Not so much now,” Thiessen admitted.

“This salve should help.”

As he sat in the Healer’s chamber having his injured hands doctored, he looked down at his right palm and remembered where he’d put it the night before. A smug smile spread over his face as he thought of the slickness and heat of Lanelle’s privates. His fingers ached terribly but even so he flexed them, thinking of the place he had put them and what he had wrought in the doing.

“It’s good that you are working them,” the Healer said. “It will keep them from getting stiff.”

“Aye, but not something else,” Thiessen mumbled and when the Healer looked up at him, the prince cocked a shoulder. “I was just woolgathering.”

After smearing the salve over Thiessen’s palms, the Healer wrapped them with strips of gauze.

“There. Just be careful of them for a day or two and they’ll heal just fine,” the Healer assured his liege lord. The man shook a warning finger at Thiessen. “No sparring for a few days, now. Understood?”

“I doubt I could hold a sword much less wield one at the moment,” the prince replied. “What I need is a hot bath to soak my aching muscles.”

“Try not to get your hands wet,” the Healer advised. “Have one of the servants bathe you.” He grinned. “Or better yet, your new wife.”

Thiessen stared at the man for a moment then a slow grin took possession of the young man’s handsome face. “Now that is a prescription I will gladly have filled,” he said and got to his feet. “Thank you, Daniel.”

* * * *

Her eyes were closed as Lanelle lay comfortably in the oversized marble fixture that had made her squeal with delight when she saw it.

“His Grace had it commissioned last year,” Tara told her new mistress.

“I can’t wait to get in!” Lanelle said, hurrying to take off her clothing.

The bathing pool—as Tara said the prince called it—had been built up from the floor a little over two feet and required climbing three steps to climb inside. Easily able to accommodate four strapping warriors, the four foot by eight foot bathing pool was paved with dark gray, light gray, black and maroon tiles all along the inside and outside with a twelve inch wide rim for sitting all around it. A sloped back on two sides allowed the bather to recline in the lapping water with a pillow at their head.

“You like that?”

Lanelle's eyes flew open and she turned to find Thiessen leaning against the door jamb. She hastily drew her legs up, although she didn't think he could see her over the high rim of the pool. "Have you no manners, warrior?" she snapped at him.

"Very few, I'm afraid," he replied. "You didn't answer me. Do you like it?"

"It's all right," she said then lifted a hand to shoo him out of the chamber. "Go away so I can get out."

"Why don't I join you instead?" he asked.

Her mouth dropped open and she made an odd little sound like that of a cornered chipmunk. "You can't be serious!"

He pushed away from the door, amused at her reaction. "Why wouldn't I be?" he inquired. "We're married."

"In name only," she reminded him with a lift of her chin and a narrowing of her eyes.

"It was consummated," he reminded her as he fumbled with the buttons of his shirt. "As I recall, you made gods-be-damned sure of that, wench."

That was all too true and he had every right to expect her to behave as a wife should but she had no intention of doing so. She heard him suck in a breath and knew his hands must be bothering him.

She frowned. "Should you be doing that?"

He looked up after tugging the tail of his shirt from his pants. "Doing what?"

With exasperation she stared pointedly at his bandaged hands.

"Oh, these," he said, holding his hands up. "The Healer didn't want them to get infected. I'm not supposed to get them wet."

"Then how do you think you are going to" She stopped as his gaze wandered to hers and he wagged his thick brows. She shook her head. "Oh, no. I am *so* not going to bathe you, warrior!"

"You're the reason my hands were maimed in the first place, Nell. It's the least you can do," he countered.

"No one told you to come slithering up my walls!" she threw at him.

He shrugged as he continued trying to unbutton his shirt, grimacing, his attention on the recalcitrant buttons. "I'd think a fairy tale ending to the evening would have appealed to your sense of adventure."

One fine blonde blow lifted. "What fairy tale is that, warrior? The Princess and the Warthog?"

He glanced over at her. "The Handsome Prince and the Helpless Damsel locked in her cold, dark tower by the Ugly Ogre."

Lanelle pressed her lips tightly together to keep from laughing. "Morgan is not an ogre, my room is warm and light, and as you noticed when we were fighting, I am most assuredly not helpless." She snorted. "And you are certainly not handsome."

"I'd beg to differ," he countered. He gave up trying to undo the buttons and his shoulders slumped. "Take pity on me, wench if for no other reason than I saved you from having to marry Egg Fart."

She glared at him for a moment then drew in a long breath, exhaled forcefully. "Well, there's that," she admitted. "Just as I saved you from being chained to Maggie the Maggot."

Thiessen's head came up. "Is that what you women call her?"

Lanelle held up a hand, thumb extended. "She's roly-poly," she said. Her index finger flicked from her fist. "She's as white as a sheet." A third finger was added. "She sucks the blood

out of every fun thing she encounters.” Tucking her thumb into her palm, four fingers popped up and she gave him the final reason she and her friends had given the poor girl her nickname. “And she wallows around in her chair like one of those ghastly insects.”

Thiessen chuckled. “Well, *thank* you for saving me from having all the enjoyment drawn out of my life, Nell. That was very noble of you.”

Grinding her teeth at his continued use of that name, she picked up her soaking wet washcloth and threw it at him. “Stop calling me that god-awful name!” she ordered, unaware she had risen up in the tub and her naked breasts could be seen above the rim of the bathing pool.

Thiessen didn’t have a chance to duck the flying missile and it landed with a splat on the shoulder of his shirt then slid down his arm to drape over his wrist, water cascading from the edges. He looked down at the washcloth, frowned then swiveled his attention to her. What he saw made his cock go instantly hard.

With the water running down her bare shoulders and onto the sweet perfection of her breasts, her golden hair piled carelessly atop her head with damp little tendrils hanging to either side of her exquisite face, Lanelle looked like a goddess rising from the depths of a mountain lake. Her light green eyes had a slight almond shape to them that he had noticed before, her coral lips looked kiss-swollen and he ached to taste their plumpness. He wasn’t even aware he’d moved to the pool and dropped to his knees as if in homage to her until she scooted back against the far side, her arms and hands crossed over her nakedness.

For a long moment they stared at one another until she became aware that his hands were cupped on the rim of the pool and that the bandages were streaked with pale pink striations.

“You’re bleeding,” she said softly.

He shook his head. “I am dying here, wench.” He dropped down until his rump was resting on his heels, his head lowering to the cool, wet surface of the pool’s rim. “Dying to soak the tiredness from my body.”

“Aye, right,” she said with pique and when he lifted his head, she sent him a damning look. “Get up and turn around so I can get out of the tub.”

He brightened. “You’ll bathe me?”

Her teeth were grinding against one another. “Against my better judgment and my wishes, aye, warrior. I will bathe you.”

Thiessen got to his feet and reluctantly turned his back, the sound of her standing up—water sliding off her shapely frame—made his cock even harder.

“Well, move away from the pool so I can get out!”

He obeyed immediately. “Be careful,” he warned. “The steps can get slippery.”

No sooner had he said it than he heard a gasp from her and he spun around, his arms going up just in time to catch her as she started to fall. His reaction time was so swift it stunned her for he had thrust his arms under her knees and behind her back so quickly she never had a chance of hitting the sharp corners of the steam-slick steps. Of their own accord her arms had gone around his neck and he was cradling her like an infant against his chest.

“I told Simpson those steps needed a banister,” he muttered, staring down into her beautiful eyes.

Lanelle had to admit the man holding her was more than any woman’s fantasy of a handsome Prince. This man had thick dark hair that was curling slightly around his chiseled face because of the humidity in the chamber. His amber eyes were bright and curtained by the longest, blackest lashes she’d ever seen on a man. His nose was straight and perfectly fashioned for his face as were his full lips and the intriguing deep cleft in his firm chin. With skin kissed

passionately by the sun and with teeth so white they sparkled, he was the perfect knight from the most romantic fairy tale.

Thiessen was completely unaware of anything save the mesmerizing beauty of Lanelle's face. He had gone astray in the verdant depths of her gaze, misplaced himself totally in the greensward of those compelling orbs. Mindless of the water sheeting down his body from her wetness, he couldn't move—just stared at her like the lost man he felt himself to be. It was she who broke the silence and inactivity of the moment.

"Put me down, Thie," she said in a husky tone that made his shaft leap with undeniable need.

His grip tightened around her.

"Please?"

It was that one word spoken with such sweetness, such regret, that broke him and he slid his left arm from under her knees and let her feet touch the floor, though his right arm was wrapped around her back.

"Turn around," she said, feeling the touch of him from breast to hip to knee.

His gaze dipped between them for just a split second then he released her, turning away, his breathing heavy and labored. As she moved around behind him—doing whatever beautiful naked women do—he had to squeeze his eyes shut and swallow convulsively, his battered fists clenching at his sides despite the agony such an action caused.

"You can turn around now."

When he did, Thiessen had to laugh.

"What?" she demanded.

She was standing there with his silk robe belted around her. It swallowed her so that only her head, hands, and the tips of her toes could be seen behind the dark maroon covering.

"You look so cute," he replied with a chuckle.

She rolled her eyes and moved over to him. She hesitated only a moment before lifting her hands toward the buttons of his shirt and yet still she seemed reluctant to touch them, her hands paused before her.

"I won't bite," he said quietly.

One upward glance into his face was all she made before she put her hands to the buttons and undid the last three. Since his cuffs were rolled to his elbows, she didn't need to undo them. Taking the edges in her hands, she pushed the shirt over his brawny shoulders, so close to his naked chest she got a good glimpse of the dark curly hair growing there. That chest begged to have kisses rained upon it. The hard little nipples needed to be suckled.

Lanelle jumped back as though she'd been prodded by a hot iron. Her face flamed. Where the hell had such a notion come from, she wondered?

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Her gaze leapt to his and she saw hunger lurking in the golden depths. At that moment, she wanted to push him to the floor and straddle him as she'd done in the bed chamber at Ambergast. How could that be?

"Wench?" he prompted.

She took her confusion out on him but speaking to him in a harsher tone than was required. "Sit down and let me pull your damned boots off, warrior!" she snapped, eyes blazing.

"Well, don't bite my head off," he grumbled and backed up to the pool to perch on the rim. He started to say something else but she stepped in front of him with her back to him and reached down to lift his leg between hers, her perfectly rounded little rump almost touching his

belly as she tugged at the boot. He put his bandaged hands up, intending to cup that delectable temptation but she went as still as death, not even bothering to look around at him though her head had come up like that of a deer caught in lantern light.

“Don’t you dare,” she growled low in her throat.

He dropped his hands and let out a tired breath, flinching as the first boot dropped heavily to the floor, his sock came off, and she moved over to the other. As soon as she had that boot and sock off, she turned around, nudging his boots out of the way with her bare toes.

She was all business when she told him to stand up so she could unbuckle his belt.

Once more Thiessen’s cock leapt and it was like forged iron in his britches. All she had to do was glance down to see it pressing against his fly, but she was staring straight ahead of her.

He stood, knowing she was now staring at his bare chest. He wanted to crush her against him, feel her lips on his hot flesh. That brought a drop of moisture from the tip of his cock and he felt it spread over the fabric of his pants.

Lanelle’s hands were trembling as she took hold of the strap of his belt and pulled it through its keeper, tugging it to the side to disengage the prong from the buckle. She slid the leather free then with great care drew it from the belt loops at his waist. Without even thinking she let the belt fall to the floor, her fingers going as with a mind of their own to the hook at his waist and thumbing it open. Unconsciously running the tip of her tongue over her upper lip, she gently peeled back the two sides of the waistband and began to unbutton his fly.

Thiessen could feel the blood pounding in his head and he experienced a moment of lightheadedness, a slight wavering of his senses that made him draw in his breath and hold it as the lovely woman before him worked his fly free of its bindings. He swallowed hard and she must have heard it for she looked up from her slow work. When their eyes met, it was as though Morgan had once again slammed a fist into his belly.

“Nell,” he whispered, allowing the pent-up air in his burning lungs to release.

She nodded in a way that let him know she understood then slipped her hands beneath the waistband of his pants to push them down his hips. The feel of her warm fingers on his flesh sent chills down his back and it was all he could do not to grab her, throw her down and impale her on the rigidity of the shaft that sprang free of its confinement.

“Oh,” he heard her say. She was staring at that part of his anatomy that craved her touch. He ached to have her wrap her fingers around him, to stroke him, to ease her thumb over the throbbing head.

But Lanelle sensed the danger of what she was doing and hastily pushed the pants all the way down his legs. “Step out,” she said in a husky voice. She turned her back and ordered him into the pool.

For just a moment he didn’t move but he saw her shoulders go back as she stared across the room and he let out a tremulous breath, sat down on the rim of the pool and swung his legs up and over the side, sliding down into the cooling water to drown his heavy erection.

Lanelle heard him settle in the water and began rolling up the sleeves of the silk robe. With efficiency and with apparently no concern, businesslike, she took a sponge from the marble shelf at the foot of the pool and came back to sit on the edge. Taking up the soap in the little dish nearby, she ran the sponge over it until suds bubbled up.

Thiessen leaned back in the pool with his arms stretched out to either side of him along the back, feeling anything but relaxed but his strained and aching muscles cried out to be eased—especially the one standing at full staff between his thighs. He closed his eyes, not wanting to see if Lanelle would look down at the treacherous rod straining up through the water.

Lanelle ran the sponge over his right arm briskly and across his neck, down his chest, striving not to let her gaze wander to the juncture of his powerful thighs. As the suds spread over the wide expanse of his pectoral muscles her scrubbing took on a softer, more circular motion as she laved the wiry curls growing there. Her hand dipped down along the tiger line—that sensuous pathway that traveled from between his breastbones, past his navel, and into that mysterious triangle lurking at the apex of his legs.

Gently she ran the sponge down his sides—having to bend and stretch to reach his left side. Her hand moved beneath the water to wash the hip on that side of his body. She crab walked her way to the foot of the pool on her knees to cleanse the outside of his thigh and leg.

“Give me your foot, warrior,” she asked.

He kept his eyes shut and lifted his leg. The moment her hands closed on his foot he felt a tremor wriggle its way through his lower abdomen.

What a beautiful foot he had, she thought, as she soaped him. His toes were fashioned perfectly with clean nails that were healthy and clipped neatly. His instep was high and the broad plane of his arch revealed a wicked scar.

“How did you get this?” she asked, running her soapy thumb over the wide scar.

Thiessen didn’t need to look to know what she meant. “I got my foot caught in a fox trap,” he replied. “Hurt like hell.”

“I imagine so,” she said. “How did you manage to do that?”

He lifted one shoulder in dismissal of the event. “I was walking in the forest and stepped on it. Spent most of the day howling at the top of my lungs for someone to find me.”

She smoothed the scar, feeling where it was deeper at three points and realized that was where the teeth of the trap had bitten into his flesh.

“Ruined a perfectly good pair of boots, too,” he added.

At that she smiled and moved the sponge up the inside of his leg, stopping mid thigh before leaning back. “Your other foot.”

Obediently he lifted his right leg. He had tensed as her hand neared his groin and was bitterly disappointed she hadn’t touched him where he longed to be caressed.

“I got caught in a weretiger trap once.”

He opened his eyes and looked down at her as she was bathing his right leg. “How did you do that?”

She giggled. “I crawled inside it, silly.” Her hands were on his right knee. She glanced at him. “I was a very precocious five year old and I wanted to see if I’d fit.”

“It was a humane trap I take it,” he said.

She nodded as she moved up to his thigh. “My father hates killing the beasts and so he has his hunters trap them then they take them into the jungles on Brisa and turn them loose.”

He was watching her as she stared at his lower body. He knew perfectly well where her attention was directed. The blood rushing through his veins, the heat in his loins made his cock flex and that broke the moment for she sat back on her heels, dropping the sponge in the water.

“I won’t bathe your whatzit,” she announced in a prim voice.

“My whatzit?” he echoed, amused at her wordage. When she looked at him, gave him what he was beginning to term her stubborn glint, he held up his hands. “I can’t wash my whatzit, wench. You’re going to have to do it.”

Lanelle squinted at him. “You are a beastly man, Thiessen Allen.”

“I am a helpless man for the time being, Lanelle Mac Cloud.”

She glared at him then flung a length of hair that had come down from its mound atop her head over her shoulder. She pushed to her knees, fished in the water for the sponge then pressed it down on his hard erection.

Pain shifted through Thiessen at her roughness and he yelped, his eyes going wide and accusing as he glowered at her. "Damn it, wench. That's not a fucking inanimate object between my legs. That hurt!"

"Sorry," she mumbled, having realized too late that she had caused him discomfort. She saw the white line that had formed around his lips, the clenching of his hands, and felt guilty.

But her clumsy action had very effectively vanquished the hard as stone erection and his poor, battered little whazit lay bobbing in the water as she gently ran the sponge over his pubic mound.

"You most likely maimed him for life," he grumbled, raising his head to stare down at his injured shaft.

"Or tamed him," she said with a smirk.

He lifted his gaze to hers. "It would take more than what you just did to tame that bad boy, wench."

She arched a brow at him. "Is that so?"

"Aye. He's made of tougher stuff."

"Really?"

It was a gauntlet thrown that Lanelle had no intention of letting lay on the ground at her feet. She would pick it up and win this battle of wills handily. And she intended to do just that. She'd wiped that self-satisfied, smug smirk from his chiseled lips.

Thiessen sucked in a quick breath when she discarded the sponge and flexed her fingers one at a time around his rod, seemingly taking hold of him as though intent on getting a job done. He was cupped in her hand with her eyes boring into his as she began to knead him between her fingers, sliding her fingers up and down his length until his cock was so engorged her fingers would not close around it. He doubted she knew what she was doing but it didn't take her long to realize that she had aroused him for that hard length was encased in fingers that stopped moving of a sudden.

"Now look what you've gone and done," he said in a voice he didn't recognize as his own.

Lanelle felt those words stab into her belly where a tightening clenched her somewhere in the vicinity of her womb. She could feel the pulse in his shaft as she held him and saw the passion that had gathered in his amber stare.

"You can't leave him like that," Thiessen said. "It would be too painful for me, Nell."

She might have been a novice to the intricacies of sex but she knew enough to know he was telling her the truth. She'd started this retaliation so it was up to her to finish it. "W...what do I do?" she asked.

He had to clear his throat before he could answer.

"Soap up your hand again and then continue what you were doing," he said in that husky tone that sounded so alien to him.

She released him for a moment to take up the soap and roll it between her hands. When her palms were slick, she reached for him again, feeling power gathering within her at his light groan. She grasped him firmly and began to rotate his cock, working her fingers up him from base to just below the tip.

"Gently, wench!" he insisted, squirming against her too tight, too rough hold. "Gently."

She eased up on her grasp. "Like this?" she asked, amending her grip.

"And slowly," he added.

Lanelle became immersed in what she was doing. She knew she was wielding complete control over him, had undertaken a command of his rigid flesh that had him defenseless and at her mercy. His eyes were closed again and he was lying there as stiffly as his cock with his knees slightly bent, his hands opening and closing as he braced his elbows on the rim of the pool.

"Stop flexing your hands, warrior," she warned him. "You are making them bleed."

"I can't," he whispered for she had hit the perfect rhythm and speed that was giving him such keen pleasure it was all he could do to lie there without groaning and moaning and writhing.

Her hand stilled. "Do you want me to stop?"

"No!" he hissed, eyes snapping open.

She continued her gentle pulling stroke, alternately tightening and loosening her fingers around him for she could tell he liked that. He was ripe to bursting in her hand and though her sexual experiences had been very limited--one with her rapist when she'd felt nothing at all but disgust and shame and the two times with Thiessen that had rocked her world completely off kilter--she knew what came from a man's cock and why. In some curious part of her mind she wanted to see that spurt of juices, to actually see what it looked like when it wasn't sliming her thigh.

"Are you about to blow, warrior?" she asked. "Should I stroke you harder and faster now?"

Her innocent words made Thiessen harder still and he felt the rising of his climax galloping toward him on spark-flaring hooves. He could hear those hooves striking the ground as the blood roared in his head. He tensed, waiting for the spurting of his seed to erupt, straining for the culmination of the lust riding him with white-hot spurs.

Her hand stopped once more. "Warrior, I asked if..."

"*Don't stop!*" he yelled at her. "*For the love of the gods, woman, please don't stop now!*"

Though his tone of voice, his shout irritated the hell out of her, she realized that the power she was wielding now was even greater than before. She could either grant him surcease from his suffering or make it worse. She could give him peace or send him down into a painful abyss. She tightened her grip and increased her speed.

The release came so hard for him he nearly lost consciousness. It was a rapture he had not expected and as his juices pulsed from him he opened his eyes to see her watching his cum fountain from him. That only increased the pleasure he was experiencing and his head went back on the pool's rim and he arched his hips, the last of his fluids dribbling down her fisted hand.

"Oh, my," he heard Lanelle say. "I never knew there was that much stuff inside a man's shaft."

He groaned, feeling arousal beginning all over again, though he knew there was nothing he could do about it just yet. He was utterly drained, spent, barely able to move and the bath water around him was growing cold and clammy against his flesh. His ass was stuck to the bottom and he had to wriggle to unglue it from the tiles yet still she held him in her hand.

"Ah, wench," he said in a strained voice, "you can let go of him now."

Lanelle seemed almost reluctant to release him but she did, and then trailed her hand through the water to cleanse it of his fluids. "That was very instructive, Thie," she told him.

"Aye." It was all he could manage to say.

“You’d best get out of the pool now,” she said, getting to her feet and tightening the belt of her borrowed robe.

Feeling as limp as an overcooked noodle, Thiessen pushed himself up out of the water, grimacing with pain as his palms came into contact with the surface of the tile rim.

“That really hurts, doesn’t it?” she asked.

He didn’t answer as he sat down on the rim and swung his legs out of the pool and over the side. He grunted when his feet touched the floor. She surprised him by reaching for a thick, plush towel and squatting at his feet to dry his feet and legs.

“What do you call the stuff that comes out of you?” she asked.

He didn’t think he could use the word he normally did in referring to the fluids. He was already well on his way to wanting her sweet hand on him again.

“Stuff,” he mumbled as she vigorously rubbed his knees and thighs. When she would have dried him between the legs, he growled at her, warning her away.

“Ah,” she said, realizing that might not be a good idea—especially considering that she was kneeling at his feet. She shot up and began to dry off his waist and chest.

“What exactly is it you want, wench?” he had to ask and when she met his gaze he once again wanted to pull her to him and slant his mouth over hers. He was dying to know what her lips tasted like.

“What I wanted you very effectively put an end to,” she said with a pursing of her lips. “I wanted to go to Lochinvere, the estate my father gave me for my twenty-first birthday and live my life as I wanted to live it.”

“Without the encumbrance of a husband,” he stated.

“Aye.” She gave him a considering look. “If what I was told about you is true, you had no desire to take a wife.”

“It’s true enough,” he said.

“All would have worked out just fine if you’d left me where I was,” she said with a sigh. “Morgan and I...”

“There *is* no Morgan and you!” he snapped, his eyes blazing golden fire.

His reaction stunned Lanelle and she ceased in her movements to look up at him. “What bothers you so strongly about my friendship with your brother? I told you we were not lovers.”

“You were familiar enough with the bastard to invite him into your bed for him to hold you during the storm!” he threw at her. “And he’s my *half*-brother!”

Lanelle recognized jealousy when she saw and heard it and filed the knowledge away in that part of her brain all women reserve for such interesting tidbits they can later use against their men folk.

“Isn’t that right?” he prodded. “It was him you asked to hold you?”

She considered him for a moment. “You don’t know your brother very well, do you?”

“I don’t know the bastard at all and have no desire to remedy the situation!” he snarled.

“Well if you did know him, you’d know his bent is in a different direction than yours,” she declared and took his arm to dry it, being very careful of his wounded hand.

“What the hell are you...?” He realized what she’d just said and stopped, his face leaching of color. “What?” he managed to ask, choking on the word.

“Morgan prefers men to women,” she said in a matter of fact tone. “So you see there could never be a liaison between us. He was going to come live with me for he hates *Vista del Mar*.” She reached for his other arm. “We were going to be quite independent and were very happy about the prospect until you messed things up.”

“Sorry to have thrown a wrench into your plans, Nelle,” he growled.

“No, you’re not.”

“No, I’m not,” he agreed with a grin.

As he had done with the blanket at the cave, she swirled the towel around his shoulders. “I’ll get you some clean clothes,” she announced with a piercing glare and pivoted on her heel to leave the room.

“Just pants and a shirt!” he called out to her. “And socks!”

“Just pants and a shirt and socks,” she mimicked as she rummaged in his armoire for the clothing. “I’m not his damned slave!”

“Do you get much chance to spar?”

Bent over, she twisted around to see him standing just inside the sleeping chamber with the towel tucked around his waist. “What?”

He shrugged. “Just asked because I get in practice every morning and thought maybe you’d like to have another go at me.”

The idea of sparring with him intrigued her and she straightened up. “Aye, I would like that. It’s good exercise.”

“It is and it keeps me on my game.”

She looked at his bandaged hands that would need re-bandaging. “It will be a few days before...”

“I’ll be out on the bailey in the morning,” he stated.

“Suit yourself,” she said and tossed him a pair of pants that he caught with ease though she noticed he winced when his fingers closed around the material.

“Who taught you how to fence, anyway?” he inquired as he dropped the towel to step into the pants.

Lanelle tore her gaze from his nudity. “Master Jonas McIlroy,” she replied.

He paused with his hands on his fly. “I’m impressed.”

“I never again wanted to be defenseless against an attacker as I was with Silva. I asked that he teach me to fight like a man.”

“You won’t ever be able to fight as well as a man, wench,” he said and when she opened her mouth to disagree, he held up his hand. “Not because you don’t have the skill because you do. It’s because you do not possess the strength of a man. That is why I bested you.”

She gave him an evaluating look. “That’s true but sometimes cunning can augment the lack of strength.”

“So can dirty play as you saw,” he agreed. “Besides, I’m a WyndMaster and as such, you would never be able to win.”

“And just what makes a WyndMaster such a skilled warrior?” she challenged.

He wagged his brows at her. “It’s my weapon, baby. I can wield it with the best of them and when I slip it in---all hot and slick---all you’re gonna hear is a sigh.”

She rolled her eyes as she brought his shirt and socks over to him rather than throw them at him. “You’re too full of yourself by far.”

“Would you like to be full of me again, wench?” he asked in a honeyed tone.

Lanelle ignored his sinful question. “Will you teach me a few dirty tricks to add to my arsenal, warrior?”

“I could but I’ll always win,” he boasted.

“That remains to be seen.”

He considered her for a moment before reaching for his shirt. “What will you give me if I best you?”

She pursed her lips. “What would you require?”

He looked down at those gorgeous lips then slowly shifted his gaze to her wary eyes. “A kiss.”

Lanelle blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“A kiss each time I win against you.”

Her stomach did that funny little clenching thing she was beginning to associate with Thiessen. “And if I win?”

A cocky grin tugged at his lips. “I’ll strip and let you hog-tie me to the bed to have your evil way with me.” He winked. “How’s that?”

Once more her stomach rippled with a hot core of expectation. Seeing him in her mind’s eye bound and defenseless as he’d been at Ambergast did really wicked things to her body. The memory of the pleasure he’d given her was something she had every right as his wife to demand he give her again. She found it was also something she craved. She slowly nodded, having every intention of besting him, believing with his hands hurt, he’d be at a distinct disadvantage. “All right, warrior,” she said and held out her hand. “It’s a deal.”

He snaked an arm around her and snapped her to him, lowering his mouth to claim her lips in a searing kiss. His lips worked hers, his tongue flitted between her stunned lips, and when he was finished, they were both trembling.

Lanelle stared up at him with wide eyes as he moved back. It was her first kiss and as kisses went it had to rate as high on the tally sheet as any ever bestowed.

“It’s a deal,” he said, breathing hard.

Chapter Five

Lanelle really hadn't expected him to agree but when he did then turned his back to sit down on the bed to draw on his socks, she was uncertain if she'd made a devil's bargain or not. She barely listened as he discussed having her room next door aired and readied for her use, of how they would now go down to break their fasts with a light repast of cheese and bread before a heartier meal later in the morning.

That last statement got her attention. "I can't," she said.

He frowned. "Why the hell not?"

She plucked at his robe. "In this?"

His frown deepened. "Oh, right."

She watched him get up from the bed and stride purposefully to the door. "Where are you going?"

"To light a fire under Mistress Nan. She should have been here with your gown before now." He flung the door open to find the woman in question standing with her fist up to knock.

"Your mother's gown and under things, Your Grace," the woman said.

He narrowed his eyes. "Were you listening at the keyhole, Nan?"

"Of course," she answered, thrusting the clothing into his arms. That said, she pivoted on her heel and started back down the corridor, her wide ass shifting ponderously from side to side in the gray wool of her gown.

"Nosy old witch!" he called after her, slamming the door shut with a kick of his foot.

Lanelle took the gown he brought over to her. "Was she really listening?"

"Hell, yes, she was," he replied with a snort. "She was my nurse when I was an infant and she considers herself my babysitter even now!" He let out a long, aggravated sigh. "You'll have to get used to her interfering."

"How much do you think she heard?"

"Every blasted thing," he grumbled. "Do you need my help in ...?"

"No!" she was quick to tell him. "Just ask Tara to come do up the buttons in the back. I would have to be an acrobat to reach them."

He shook his head. "Put the gown on and I'll do up the buttons, Nelle. There's no sense in calling Tara to do it when I'm right here and more than willing to be your lady's maid."

She gave him a steady glower but he seemed immune to it. Instead, she thought to shock him to his foundations, to wipe the smug look from his face, so unbelted the robe, shrugged it from her shoulders, and let it fall to the floor. "All right if you really think you can. The chemise first."

Thiessen's mouth had gone completely dry as he stared at her loveliness. He couldn't have swallowed or spoken if his life had depended on it. Every bit of moisture in his body had been sucked out like a vacuum and his knees felt weak.

"Well? Will you give me the chemise?" Lanelle insisted. She knew perfectly well he wouldn't be able to do up her buttons when he couldn't even undo the buttons on his own shirt and those buttons were larger than the tiny pearl studs that ran the entire length of the gown's bodice.

He extended his arms to her like an offering and when she plucked the linen chemise from him and ran her arms through the sleeves, he could do no more than just stand there aching so fiercely he doubted he could walk. His gaze followed her lovely breasts when they arched upward as she tugged the garment over her chest and settled it over her nakedness, hiding her long legs and wiry triangle from his view. He wasn't even aware of her taking the gown and thrusting her arms into the sleeves as he stood there like a statue.

"Go fetch Tara for me, Thie," she ordered. "You'll never be able to button me." When he didn't move, she glanced at him over the voluminous spread of the gown's skirt bunched along her upper arms. "And have her bring some clean bandages for your hands." She stuck her head through the gown's neck opening. "And tell her to get more salve for your wounds."

Like a man in a trance he turned away to do her bidding, feeling the heat and the hardness of his cock jutting against the front of his pants with every step he took. He groaned as he reached for the door handle but it wasn't the pain in his hands that caused that reaction but the pain in his loins.

"Stubborn man," Lanelle said under her breath as she turned to the long floor mirror and smoothed the borrowed gown over her hips. The gown fit her perfectly—she must be of about the same size as the prince's mother—and its dark russet color complimented the pale green of her eyes. She turned this way and that, looking at the lovely gown, sweeping the skirt to and fro and felt very feminine, very alluring. She giggled. But apparently she looked positively stunning in her altogether if Thiessen's reaction was any indication.

Staring at the high color in her cheeks, the bright gleam in her eyes, she wondered if married life wasn't working out to her advantage. Though she had intended her Joining to the prince to be nothing other than a convenience for the both of them, it was turning out to be something else entirely. She had discovered a part of herself she hadn't known existed and a pleasure she had never known to be out there waiting for her to experience.

"And are you upset about that, Lanelle?" she asked her reflection.

Apparently not for the saucy wench in the glass grinned back at her with a wickedness that was very uncharacteristic of the good little girl her father considered her to be.

"You could work this to your benefit if you play your cards right," she mumbled.

She turned to survey her husband's room. It was a comfortable room that showed his good taste. His choice of knick knacks scattered around the room told her he had a sense of whimsy.

"He is a handsome man. There is no denying that," she said softly. He was muscular and strong and a very skilled warrior. He had an irreverent sense of humor to rival her own and a cocky way about him that just made her want to tweak his nose. He could be exasperating but he could also be caring when the mood struck.

She walked over to the low chest where the carved wooden soldiers stood sentinel. Most had obviously been around since his childhood for they were smooth in places, the paint worn away, little nicks and chips that said they'd been played with when he was a boy. The others looked ancient and she wondered how he'd come by them. She picked up one of the older soldiers and touched the tiny hand curved around a bayonet, stroking it with her thumb.

And there was his hand, she thought as memory of that warm palm pressing against her sex, those powerful fingers entering her, eliciting such strong pleasure, made her shiver delicately. "Aye," she said. "There is his hand."

She could have done worse, she thought as her attention wandered to his bed. He'd said he was having the room beside his own prepared for her use. Was he expecting her to sleep in

that room or here, in his bed with him? Her own parents had slept in separate beds at the palace but her stepmother slept in the same bed with her father. It could go either way with Thiessen, she supposed.

“Which way would you have it, Lanelle?” she queried aloud.

“Be careful of that, wench. It belonged to King Edmond.”

She had been unaware of him having entered the room but his voice right behind her, almost at her ear, surprised her and she gently replaced the soldier.

“From his childhood?” she asked.

“From his father’s, actually,” Thiessen answered. He reached around her and took up the same soldier she had held. “What I wouldn’t give to have you stroke me as you did this toy.”

She turned so she was facing him, her gaze lifting to his and she saw such need pulsing in his golden eyes it made her womb quicken once again. She started to put her palm to his lean cheek but Tara took that moment to enter the room, curtsying quickly, and the chance was gone.

“I brought the bandages and salve, Your Grace,” Tara informed Lanelle.

“Come fasten Her Grace’s gown, Tara,” he told the servant and moved away, carrying the little soldier with him as he sat down in one of the overstuffed chairs. He hooked a leg over the chair arm and began twisting the toy between his fingers as he watched Tara buttoning the gown.

“That is not helping your hand, warrior,” Lanelle cautioned him.

He laid the toy in his lap and arched his fingers, frowning at the pain the action caused. “The Healer said to flex the fingers else they would stiffen on me.” He was looking into her eyes.

“You have a problem with things stiffening on you, don’t you, Thie?” Lanelle asked.

His smile was evil. “Aye, wench. That I do.”

There was a confused look on Tara’s face as she finished the long row of buttons on the princess’ gown. It was obvious she had no idea of what was causing the strong undercurrent in the room but had been made nervous by it.

“Tara, would you help me re-bandaged His Grace’s hands?” Lanelle asked, moving over to the table where the servant had placed a tray with a pot of salve, scissors, and a roll of bandage.

“Aye, Your Grace,” Tara agreed.

“Where do you want me?” Thiessen asked.

“Right where you are,” Lanelle told him and came to kneel at his feet, surprising him. “Give me your hand.”

He held out his left hand to her and watched as she carefully slid the scissors under the top layer then unwrapped the gauze gently. Her immediate frown when she saw the condition of his palm made him want to stroke the damp hair back from her face.

“This hand looks like mincemeat,” she said. She looked up at Tara. “I need hot water, a mild soap, and a clean rag.”

Tara hurried to get what was needed.

“It’ll be fine by morning,” he told Lanelle. “It will take more than a few blisters to put me down, wench.”

She made no reply to his boast. “The other hand.”

That hand when it was revealed was worst than the left one. She gave him a steady look. “There is no way you will be able to spar with me tomorrow with this hand.”

“Afraid you’ll lose to me, Nelle?” he drawled.

Tara returned from the kitchen with a basin of hot water and the mild soap the princess had requested. She knelt down beside Lanelle with the washcloth draped over her left forearm.

Lanelle lifted her chin. "If you persist in maiming yourself, I won't say another word but if you meet me tomorrow, I will not take pity on you, warrior. I will strike with as much strength as I possess."

"I'd ask for nothing less, wench."

She cleaned his hands, slathered salve over them then reapplied the bandages, tsking at the amount of damage he'd done to his flesh. Finished, she looked up at him. "You'll be lucky if they don't get contaminated and you keel over dead from infection."

"And leave you an available widow?" he asked and lay the back of one bandaged hand on her soft cheek. "Not gods-be-damned likely, wench."

His words did something strange to her heart and she got to her feet, needing to put distance between them. "I'm hungry," she muttered.

* * * *

After a light meal, Thiessen explained he was needed to arbitrate a matter amongst two of his border lords and told her to roam the keep at her leisure while he was occupied. "Don't worry about your safety," he said. "There will always be someone nearby."

"To see I don't run away?" she countered.

"To see nothing happens to you," he stated.

With the rest of the day before her, she went in search of Tara, asking the servant girl to show her around Windemere. By midday and after a meal she had eaten all alone in the formal dining room since her husband was still seeing to business, she'd visited only a third of the massive fortress, amazed at how well-run the citadel was and how many people lived within its walls. It was a modern structure with all the latest conveniences and with improvements she would love to add to her own personal estate.

"Prince Thiessen designed much of what you see," Tara told her. "He is a very innovative and modern-thinker."

"So I see," Lanelle agreed. She was duly impressed.

"Your Grace?"

Lanelle turned to see Thomas striding purposefully toward her. She waited for the stately seneschal with a mildly inquiring look upon her face.

"The seamstress and her women are here, Your Grace," Thomas informed her with a slight bow. "I took the liberty of sending them to your solar."

"Oh goody," Lanelle said. She hated fittings with a passion. Truth be told, she much preferred a man's pants and baggy shirt to the billowy gown she was wearing, although she had to admit it was lovely, made her feel very womanly, and brought out all her finer features.

"Shall I send refreshments up, Milady?" Thomas inquired. He almost smiled at her droll tone.

"Lemonade would be nice and cakes if the cook has any handy," Lanelle said. "Nothing too heavy after the lunch I had."

Thomas elevated a skimpy brow. "You found the lunch too heavy for your tastes, Your Grace?"

"Nay, on the contrary!" Lanelle was quick to assure him. "I found my hand growing too heavy from putting too much food into my mouth, Thommie."

If the nickname irritated or surprised the seneschal his cadaverous countenance did not show it. Instead, he cocked one thin shoulder in sympathy. "Cook is very good at what she does, I'm afraid."

"Professionally so," Lanelle said. "Does His Grace always consume so much at the noon meal?"

Thomas shook his head. "Prince Thiessen usually prefers a sandwich or two and a piece of fruit, perhaps a wedge of cheese on occasion. He eats lightly at all but the evening meal then tends to overdo, I fear."

"Then let's have soup and a sandwich or two, a bowl of fruit and whatever cheese he likes for the noon meal. There is no need to make such a heavy meal if neither he nor I eat that much," Lanelle said. "Tell cook I would like to confer with you and her tomorrow to learn His Grace's preferences for the evening repasts. Perhaps we three could meet in the library around two of the clock and share a pot of tea?"

The seneschal actually smiled this time, his rheumy eyes taking on the sheen of a younger man as his deeply lined face lit with pleasure. "Very good, Your Grace," Thomas acknowledged. "I shall see to it."

"Best not to keep the seamstress waiting, Your Grace," Tara warned. "She can be a real bear."

"She's yet to meet this she-wolf, Tara," Lanelle stated. "I doubt me she would like to have my claws in her back."

Thomas guffawed and put up a hand to quickly hide his amusement. His eyes, though, were twinkling with respect as he gazed upon his new mistress.

"If I am not out of that woman's clutches within two hours, Thommie," Lanelle said as she began walking, "come fetch me and say my presence is urgently needed. I shall--out of necessity--have to protest but be firm with me as befitting your station. It must need be a matter of vital state importance for me to leave that hellish fitting."

"As you will, Your Grace," Thomas declared, the corners of his mouth slipping upward.

"You've made a conquest of old Stick in the Mud Tom," Tara whispered to Lanelle as they started up the serpentine staircase to the solar on the fourth floor of the castle keep.

"He just needs to smile more, that's all," Lanelle said. "Now tell me about this ogre seamstress"

* * * *

Tired from a long day of listening to nothing but complaints and bellyaches, whimpers and whines, and out and out grumbles of imagined grievances with a few real problems thrown in for good measure, Thiessen climbed the stairs at dusk depressed and irritated. He had a pounding headache, his hands were plaguing him, and he was hungry, for the quick noon meal he'd wolfed down with his ministers in between the bitching sessions of his infantile border lords had been both unsatisfying and it had given him a severe case of heartburn. He was looking forward to a long, leisurely meal, a quick bath and the comfort of his bed.

He had completely forgotten about his new wife.

Shoving open his chamber door, he walked right past her as she stood in the doorway between their two chambers. He did not see her open her mouth to greet him nor did he see the narrowed glance she shot him when he failed to acknowledge her presence. Going into the bathing chamber to relieve himself, he was unaware of her flouncing out of his room and into her own, leaving the door open between their chambers.

Having gotten rid of much of the cup after cup of hot coffee he'd consumed to stay awake during the session disputes he was rearranging his pants when he came out of the bathing chamber and spied the door into the next chamber standing open. He frowned—wondering why it would be open—then as memory surface, he groaned and headed that way.

She was seated at her vanity drawing the brush through her long honey blonde hair, apparently unaware he was watching her. He leaned against the jamb with his arms crossed and observed her as she expertly parted three sections of her hair and began braiding it then looping the heavy mass into an intricate mound atop her head, securing it with jeweled pins.

“Did you have a taxing day, warrior?” she asked, not looking his way.

Thiessen jumped. He could have sworn she hadn't known he was there. “It was a very taxing day, Nelle,” he admitted. “Why isn't Tara doing your hair?”

She glanced around at him. “Because nothing annoys me more than to have someone fooling with my hair. I positively hate it.”

“I see the seamstress came,” he said, admiring the pale green dress in which she was attired.

“The gods save me from having to have that arrogant, self-important woman in my home any more than is absolutely necessary,” she said as she tucked the last pin into her hair and swiveled around on the vanity bench. “By the time she'd poked and prodded and pinched and pricked me, I was ready to skewer her and be done with it.”

All he heard was the ‘in my home’ part and for some reason that made him feel very good. He pushed away from the wall. “Would you prefer another seamstress to do your wardrobe?”

“I hate all seamstresses, warrior,” she said. “One is as bad as the next.” She stood, smoothing down her skirt. “Can I not wear what I normally wore when I was at Ambergast?”

“Pants?” he inquired and at her eager look, shook his head. “I'm afraid not, wench. You are the Princess of Emardia now and have a certain decorum to show to our people, but ...” He reached for her hand, taking it between his bandaged ones. “I doubt you could spar with me in those skirts so each morn until the noon meal, a pair of pants and a shirt will suffice, I'd say.”

“Until after our noon meal?” she countered.

He thought about it for a moment. “Aye, I suppose that will be all right.”

Gently she removed her hand from his. “Will you dress for supper now, Thie? I am starving.”

“So am I,” he said, turning away and going back into his chamber. “I only hope I can enjoy the meal.”

“Why would you not?” she asked, following behind him.

“I've got a bitch of a headache,” he informed her. “Have had it most of the blasted afternoon.”

“Why didn't you say so?” she asked. “Where is the tenses?”

He frowned. “I don't take that crap. It's addictive and ...”

“A drop or two won't hurt you,” she cut him off.

“Nelle ...”

“Where is it?” she asked, hands on her hips.

“In the cupboard in the bathing chamber but ...”

She ignored his whine and walked past him and into the chamber. When she came back, she had the purple glass vial in her hand and walked straight to the fresh pitcher of water and tumbler she'd had Tara bring for him. Uncorking the liquid, she carefully added two drops to the

tumbler, re-corked the vial, set it aside then poured water into the tumbler. She swirled the water until the drops were thoroughly mixed.

“Here, drink this down quickly,” she instructed him, handing him the tumbler.

He glanced down at the milky concoction, thought of protesting and knew it would do him no good. He reached up with his free hand, pinched his nostrils closed and gulped down the brew.

“That’s a good little boy,” Lanelle said, taking the glass from him.

Almost instantly the drug worked and his headache lessened, the nausea and heartburn he’d had all afternoon vanquished. He gave her a grateful look. “Thank you, wench.”

“You are welcome, warrior, now get dressed!” she told him.

Thiessen gave her a little lost boy look. “Can’t, wench.” He looked down at his shirt. “I had a hard enough time just undoing my fly to piss.”

She shook her head. “And you think you’ll be sparring with me tomorrow?” she challenged.

“I’ll be fine by morning,” he stated. Her snort made him smile.

“Sit down and let me get your boots,” she ordered. “I’m not going to allow this to become a habit, you know.” She gave him a stern look as she straddled his leg, turned her back to him and began tugging on his boot. “Don’t you have a steward?”

“I do, but his mother is sick and I gave him leave to help care for her.” He shrugged. “I’m usually not so helpless I can’t dress and undress myself.”

“Couldn’t prove it by me,” she mumbled while she pulled off his boots and socks and set them to one side. “And stop ogling my ass.”

“But it’s such a sweet little ass,” he said.

She motioned impatiently for him to stand up.

“Nag, nag, nag,” he complained.

When she turned to him, began unbuttoning his shirt and pushed the shirt from his chest, his smile wavered. She was so close to him her perfume was gaining the attention of that part of him that was the most unruly and hard to make behave. The untrustworthy little worm wriggled in his pants and drew her notice.

“Oh for the love of the gods, Thie!” she grumbled. “Can’t I touch you without that thing of yours leaping like a fish out of water?”

“It appears not,” he told her and when she put her fingers to his belt buckle, he drew in a breath. “Careful lest he jump even further.”

She giggled, surprised at how comfortable she was beginning to feel around this man. As she ran the buttons of his fly and felt the hardness of him grazing the backs of her fingers, she thought about that for a moment. When--she wondered--had she lost her anger and sense of outrage that he had abducted her from her home? When had she begun to think of him as her husband instead of her captor?

“Nelle?” he questioned for her hands had stilled on the last button.

She looked up at him with a dazed look. “What?”

As soon as their eyes met something neither could explain leapt between them. It was heat--pure and simple--and passion but it was overwhelming heat and passion and a desire so blatant, so needful it boggled the senses.

“Get them off, wench,” he said gruffly. “Now!”

Lanelle's fingers seemed to have a mind of their own and she pushed his pants down his hips. She felt his hand grip her shoulder as he braced himself to step out of the pant legs and frowned when he kicked the garment away.

"Be careful of your clothing, warrior!" she chastised.

Thiessen was greatly annoyed that his wife was fully dressed and with his palms burning like hell's fires, he couldn't take it from her. A strangled sound of irritation pushed from his throat. He reached for the gown, determined to rip it off if he had to.

He never got the chance.

"Lay down on the bed!" she hissed at him, pushing his bare chest, nudging him toward the bed. He stumbled back against another shove. "Now, warrior! Do it now!"

It was by far the oddest moment of his life as he practically dove for her bed, rattling the bed frame, and flipped over just a fraction of a second before she was on him, crawling onto the mattress with the skirts of her gown crumpled in her arms, her lower body suddenly bare of stockings and garter belt, her knee digging into the space beside his hip.

"How did you do that so quickly?" he asked but she didn't answer. She flung a leg over him and straddled his hips, letting go of her skirt with one hand to reach beneath her to guide his erection into her.

"I want...", she said, fumbling to get him inside her. "I want"

"I know what you want, wench!" he said gruffly and arched his hips, stabbing his hardness into her with a grunt.

"Aye!" she yelped and pushed herself all the way down upon him, falling forward to lay on his chest, wanting to feel his arms around her for once, an action he gladly accommodated.

Thiessen wrapped her in his arms—sensing that was what she needed—and began to push his lower body up against hers, pressing his heels into the mattress as she pushed her groin down on his. Her thighs tightened along the sides of his hips and he moved his legs farther apart to open her to him even more.

"Aye, warrior," she breathed, her forehead on his shoulder. "That feels so" She made a little groaning sound. Her arms were beneath his, her hands on his ribcage, fingers digging into the flesh as he rocked her on him.

"Take me, baby," he said through gritted teeth. "Take all of me."

Lanelle felt him go so deep inside her, fill her so fully, stretch her so completely she could barely draw breathe. It was a delicious pain that exploded over her nerve endings as that wondrous, sublime itch began low in the pit of her belly and started to spiral downward in hot little licks of fire that soon enflamed her entire body. She writhed on his shaft as he pumped into her, felt his arms squeezing her, holding her, imprisoning her against him. She felt his lips on her temple and heard him whispering sensuous, wicked things to her that seemed to fan the inferno building within her.

"You are mine, wench," he told her and those words unleashed the wave of pleasure that rocketed so forcefully through her she thought she'd pass out. Ripple after ripple after ripple of exquisite sensation undulated through her lower body with such strength it made her toes curl. She cried out as the release went on and on until it finally subsided into tiny spasms that left her weak. Lowering the side of her face to his pectoral, she shuddered delicately.

"Aye, Nelle," he whispered into her hair. "That's what I wanted you to feel."

And then she felt his cock jerk within her, felt his juices spurt and groaned, knowing she had brought him the same intense joy he'd given her for the sound he made was more howl than grunt as he came. One last heave of his lower body and he stopped moving for a moment then he

went limp beneath her, gasping for breath, his heart pounding brutally beneath her cheek, sweat slicking the flesh of his chest.

They said nothing for a long time. His arms were still tight around her and she was content to just lie there with him. It felt good. It felt right. It felt like coming home. Even when he slipped out of her, she didn't want to leave him just yet.

Then his stomach growled.

With regret, she eased off him and scooted over to swing her legs over the side of the bed. She looked down at the wrinkles crimping her gown. No amount of hand-smoothing would iron them out. She'd have to change before they went down to supper.

"I don't think I can move," she heard him say.

Lanelle slid to the floor, wondering why the beds at Windemere were so high up off the floor. "I could call Thomas and have a tray sent up for us," she suggested.

Thiessen managed to turn his head. "I've no desire to have servants traipsing up here with platter after platter, bowl after bowl," he said.

"You're that hungry?"

"Starved, wench," he agreed. "I am starved."

"Then get up and let me dress you before I change this rumpled gown," she said. "I've no desire for the servants to know what we've been up to."

"I'll warrant Nan knows," Thiessen said as he got to his feet. "The old bat knows everything."

It took awhile for her to dress him then slip into a gown that did not require him to button it. The thing was one of the plain day gowns of serviceable wool that the seamstress had brought ready-made from her shop. It wasn't the prettiest of frocks but it would do though normally--as Thiessen told her--dressing for the evening meal was something expected of them.

"Then we'll change the expectations," she told him with a cocked brow. "I would rather be comfortable than encased in some dainty frock."

"You'd rather have on a pair of men's pants and a baggy shirt," he teased.

"I won't deny it," she said with a long exhalation of breath.

"Tomorrow," he promised.

She glanced down at his bandaged hands but made no comment to his statement. Just to slide her legs into the comfort of a pair of pants and leave off the cumbersome camisole and stockings and garters and all the folderol required of her sex would make her morning--if not her entire day.

The meal they enjoyed was fit for a royal couple and prepared lovingly by a cook who was a master of her craft. There was roasted pork with baked apples, thick slices of corned beef, succulent cabbage swimming in a broth speckled with peppercorns and bits of smoked ham, creamed potatoes, sliced cucumbers pickled in a rich cream sauce with sliced green onions, and three different types of bread. For dessert, a large bowl of fruit was placed before the prince.

"This is entirely too much food, warrior," Lanelle complained. "One meat, two vegetables, a salad and one bread is sufficient, don't you think?"

Thiessen gave her a surprised look. "My thoughts exactly!" he pronounced. "I've always thought it a waste to have such a varied fare. I don't care for rich desserts but an apple or a pear or two after a meal would suit me just fine!"

"Perhaps wedges of sharp cheese with roast beef, mild cheese with ham and something in between for pork and venison?"

“Aye!” he agreed. “Sweet bread with ham and pork, something salty with beef and venison and something fried with fish.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I dislike fish but I love shrimp and lobster.”

“Clams? Muscles? Oysters?”

She shook her head. “They remind me of someone’s bad cold.”

He grinned. “Crab?”

“Aye if cooked in a nice succulent cake or made into a spread for toast points,” she agreed.

“Eel?”

“Eew.”

“Caviar? Fried fish roe? Squid?”

“Not on your life.”

He leaned back in his chair with a paring knife and a mango resting on his dessert plate. “Nelle, you and I are going to get along just fine.”

Lanelle smiled at him and took a banana from the bowl, peeled it then put it to her lips. The instant she saw his eyes flare and heat generate in his amber gaze, she brought the fruit from her mouth. “What?”

He swallowed. “Nothing,” he said, slicing into the mango.

She looked down at the banana with her forehead wrinkled then an odd thought crossed her mind. Her eyes went to his face. “Do women ...? Is there ...?” She had no idea how to ask what had occurred to her.

“Aye,” he said, hoping she’d leave it at that.

Lanelle returned her attention to the banana. “How?”

Thiessen squirmed in his chair. “I don’t want to have this conversation right now, wench.” He cut off a piece of the juicy orange fruit and popped it into his mouth.

“But do women actually suckle ...?”

“Aye and some men do it as well!” he snapped.

Her eyes widened. “How on earth do you get your head that low to...?”

“No, wench, no!” he said. “Men of Morgan’s bent. If a man could blow his own horn nothing would ever get done.”

“Blow his own horn?” she repeated. “Is that what it’s called?”

He groaned, the turn in the conversation causing that part of him below the edge of the tablecloth to strain against his pants. “It’s called blowing, aye, but actually it should be called sucking.”

“Ah,” she said, understanding setting in. “A woman sucks the stuff from her man’s staff.”

Another tightening of his cock and he was on fire between his legs. He wanted her so badly he felt like leaping across the table and dragging her to the floor to rut like the peasants around the bonfire on May Eve.

“You’ve that look in your eye again, warrior,” she told him. “Is your fish jumping in the pond?”

He met her look. “What if it was?”

Lanelle slid the banana into her mouth and twisted it, wetting it, pursing her lips around it as she imagined a woman might when pleasuring her man.

“Wench,” he warned, his gaze narrowed.

Withdrawing the banana, she slowly licked her lips, enjoying the power she held over him for his face was red with his desire and the look he was giving her was as hot as the flames beneath a boiling cauldron.

“And is there a reciprocal pleasing, warrior?” she wanted to know.

He knew gods-be-damned well what she was asking and leaning toward her, glad she had chosen not to sit at the far end of the table as was her rightful place of honor as lady of the castle, and spoke to her in a soft, incessant whisper.

“A man will lay his naked lady upon their bed and spread her legs wide. He will slip his fingers to either side of her warm, moist folds and open her. Then he will proceed to lower his mouth to her clit—that sweet little nubbin that lies just below your pubic hair—and there he will commence to grazing it with his teeth then nibbling it before finally drawing it between his lips to suckle . . .”

“Enough!” she said, panting, for heat had spread from her cheeks to her toes.

He ignored her interruption. “He will suckle her hard before dragging his tongue from the base of her opening to the top of it then thrusting his tongue inside her to . . .”

“*Enough!*” she cried out, dropping the banana to grab the edge of the table.

He saw the lust full-blown in her eyes and scooted his chair back, grabbing the napkin that was sliding from his lap to toss it upon the table. He took two steps to her chair, pulled it back and when she stood on trembling legs, gave her no chance to protest before he swept her up in his arms and started for the stairs.

“W...what is it called that you are about to do to me, warrior?” she asked as his foot took the first riser.

“I’m going to eat you, wench,” he said. “Eat you until I’ve had my fill!”

A hard shiver of anticipation rippled through Lanelle. Her arms tightened around his neck. “Well, I hope you’re a hungry man, Thie.”

Chapter Six

Lanelle had wondered where she would sleep her first night at Windemere. After the rousing bout of lovemaking that had occurred after the evening meal, she'd been given no choice. Her husband had taken her to his chamber and kept her there where he had proceeded to do such wickedly glorious things to her she was still in a numbing fog as she felt him get up from the bed at first light.

She heard him rumbling around in the bathing chamber but must have fell back to sleep for a few moments. A repeat of what had happened when he'd brought her upstairs began replaying in her mind

* * * *

"Be careful!" she warned him but Thiessen paid no attention. He began ripping the gown from her body like a starved man aching to get to a banquet.

"I'll buy you more gowns, wench!" he snarled at her.

"I'm not worried about the gown. Be careful of your hands!"

He growled deep in his throat. Pain in his hands was the last thing he cared about at the moment. Baring her flesh came before all else and the sound of the fabric tearing spurred him on. In some distant part of his brain he thought that might be why rapists enjoyed ripping the clothes from their victims. It did something wicked to the ego.

Lanelle realized she was not going to deter him with concern for his wounds. Instead, she batted his hands away, shrugged out of what was left of the gown and began unbuttoning his shirt.

"Rip the fucking thing off me!" he ordered, his eyes blazing with pure lust.

"I will not," she said but she did pop off the buttons, tearing the two pieces of the front aside in her haste to undress him.

It was his boots that presented the biggest obstacle when she'd stripped off his belt, undone the buttons and shoved the pants down his legs. Neither had thought about the obstruction of the boots and had there been a voyeur watching them, no doubt the pervert would have laughed as Thiessen hopped over to the bed and fell upon it as Lanelle dragged off the offending boots.

He reached for her, snagging her around the waist and catapulted her into the bed on the other side of him, scrambling up on his knees to slither over her, wedge her legs wide part before he slammed his questing mouth down on hers. Her fingers were in his hair, anchoring his head as he kissed her, his tongue swirling inside her mouth. He felt her heels lock over the calves of his legs and pushed his groin hard against hers.

"Mmmm," he heard her sigh into his mouth. That sound put the very devil in him and he tore his lips from hers, trailed a kiss down her chin, down her neck, down the swell of her breast until he had captured her erect nipple.

"Eyow!" Lanelle shrieked and her fingers—still threaded through his dark hair—tightened painfully, unconsciously pulling brutally but Thiessen couldn't have cared less. He was suckling her, laving her with his tongue, nibbling the swollen bud and reveling in the feel of her arching her hips up for his impalement.

“Not yet,” he spoke around the sweetness clenched lightly between his teeth.

Lanelle’s eyes rolled back in her head as his mouth left her breast and moved down her belly, his tongue slipped into her navel, and then his face was buried in the wiry patch of nether curls.

“Mother of the gods!” she breathed and knew he was about to do something to her that would bring the stars down from the heavens.

And she’d been right. The moment his lips touched her clit, she exploded inside, that itch coming full blown quickly.

“Aye,” he whispered, his hot breath fanning over her sensitive flesh.

The moment his tongue lapped at the moisture oozing from her cunt, Lanelle screamed, for another wave of release shot over her and she snatched her hands from his hair, slammed them to the coverlet and grasped handfuls to ride out the intense pleasure rippling through her loins. It was as much the sound he was making as he licked her, thrust his tongue inside her, and made this satisfied little grunting sound as he worked that sent a third wave of convulsions rushing through her.

She could take no more and her hands shot up to grab his head, pulling him away from her overly-sensitized flesh. “No more,” she begged. “Thiessen, please! No more!”

He ignored her and a hard, unrelenting finger drove deep inside her. Then two. Then three until she was riding his hand hard and rocking her hips, pleading all the while for him to stop even as she arched against him, one fist to her mouth to still her screams of pleasure as still one last orgasm undulated through her with as much force as the first and she sagged against the bed with her legs spread wide, her arms flung out to either side of her in surrender and sacrifice to his lust.

“Open your eyes,” he demanded and when she didn’t obey him, he thumbed her clit until she groaned. “Open your eyes, Nelle.”

Reluctantly she pried her eyes open and looked up at him as he lay atop her. She felt his fingers leave her sex and moaned at the loss but when he brought those fingers to his lips and put them in his mouth, began licking the moisture from them, she shuddered hard, another spike of passion clenching low in her belly.

“Delicious,” he proclaimed as he moved off her and lay upon his back.

She turned her head on the rumbled covers to look at him. He turned his to face her.

“Your turn,” he said.

Her face reddened but she sat up, twisting so she was looking down at him. “You’ll need to tell me what to do.”

And he had. At his instructions she had positioned herself between his spread legs, wrapped one hand firmly around his shaft and slid the other beneath his heavy balls. He had taught her the rhythm of moving her hand down him, twisting lightly going down the length of him, twisting light coming back up again. He told her how to caress his sac and how to run a finger along the smooth corridor of flesh between his scrotum and his anus.

“Now take him into your mouth, sweeting,” he had asked.

She had not balked at doing so. It felt strange and the seepage from his cock momentarily gave her pause but as his hands spiked through her hair and he groaned she only wanted to give him as much pleasure as he’d given her. She drew upon the swollen head, caressed and spiraled her palm along its length, licked the beads of moisture from the tip until he growled deep in his throat.

“Let go of him, Nelle. Let go!”

She frowned, thinking she'd hurt him as he reached down to push her hands away. She released his cock and he spurted, the hot juices from the very core of him shooting upward from his closed fist as he held himself still upon his belly.

The sight of his pool of seed fascinated her and she put a fingertip to the pearly liquid then brought the taste of him to her mouth. It was a salty experience she didn't care for.

"Thank you, warrior, for not allowing that to flood my mouth," she said. "I don't believe I would have liked that."

He was striving to bring his errant heart under control and merely nodded. "That's all right, wench. Some women don't care for the feel of it on their tongue."

She cocked her head to one side. "But some do?"

"Aye," he agreed. "Some even swallow it."

That notion made her slightly ill but she kept her thoughts to herself. "It wasn't so bad when there wasn't that much of it," she told him and heard him groan.

"Lie down with me, Nelle," he said and she realized he was shivering.

"Are you cold?" she asked, unfolding her shapely body beside his long, brawny length.

"Nay," he said as he took her into his arms and cupped her head to his shoulder. "You just completely annihilated my body, love."

Smiling, she plucked at the crisp hairs on his chest, let her palm wander down over his belly, feeling power in her hand as he quivered beneath her touch. They fell asleep with his body wrapped around hers, his chin atop her head.

* * * *

The opening of the solar door woke her from her dream and she opened one eye to see him laying something on the foot of their bed.

"Wake up, sleepikins," he told her. "The sun is up and you should be, too."

Lanelle groaned. "Go 'way."

He chuckled. "I'll meet you down in the bailey," he told her as she snuggled down into the covers, every inch of her body aching with sweet tiredness, her muscles sore but wonderfully so.

What a phenomenal find she'd discovered in the man she had forced to Join with her. What an exceptional--and she suspected--incomparable lover she had in this handsome, brawny male. His energy had been unflagging all during the night and session after session of the most superb lovemaking had bled over into the dawn when both had been so exhausted they had fallen asleep--her in his arms, tucked sweetly against his sweaty side. Never in her wildest fantasy could she have imagined finding such a treasure and it was all hers to plunder as she would.

"Wench, did you hear me?"

She mumbled beneath the covers while he seemed to be making as much noise as was humanly possible. Lanelle was not a morning person and after the night she'd had, it was a wonder she could open her eyes.

"If you are going to spar with me, you'd best be up and dressed else I'll find another partner," he warned her.

She flung the covers down, sat up, squinting against the harsh morning light flooding in from the opened draperies, her hair a rat's nest haloed around her head. "What time is it?" she asked.

"Daytime," he replied. "Now get your sweet little ass up."

She watched through narrowed eyes as he left the room. For a moment longer she sat there until she noticed the clothing he'd laid out on the bed for her. She smiled. He had not

forgotten. With a squeal of joy, she was up and padding into the bathing chamber to relieve herself and wash her face, totally unconcerned that she was as naked as the day she'd been born and had passed the night that way.

All the way down the stairs, she was smiling, her palm itching for the pommel of a sword. She loved the exercise generated in fencing and matching wits and prowess with her husband would start the day off fine. She hadn't, however, considered there would be an audience and she came to an abrupt halt with her eyes rounded wide as she saw the warriors and servants who had ringed the inner bailey and who were looking expectantly at her. She felt her cheeks flame.

"What kept you, wench?" Thiessen called out to her.

Lanelle didn't see her husband at first then two warriors moved aside and there he was, stripped to the waist, a pair of tight black pants fitting him so snugly her mouth began to water. The broad belt around his lean waist had a thick buckle that caught the light from the morning sun and shone brightly for a moment as the WyndMaster started forward.

There was no other way to think of him, she realized. He didn't so much walk as he strutted, taking the field like the warrior he had trained to be. In his hand was a broad sword—not a wimpy little foil—and the sight of it dried up the spit in her mouth. It was a hefty weapon and as dangerous looking as the man who carried it. She looked at his hands and frowned. He had removed the bandages.

"Your Grace?"

She turned to see the man she knew to be Vargas DuMond, the captain of Thiessen's personal guard. In his hand was a sleek sword more suited for her smaller grip.

"His Grace thought this would be a better blade for you," Vargas said and extended the sword across his arm, pommel toward her.

"Aye, Vargas," she said as she took the weapon. "It looks to be similar to my own."

She heard the rumble of voices as her remark reached the ears of the warriors and servants. She saw them nudging one another and that made her hackles rise. They obviously thought this was a lark for her, an indulgence on their prince's part and she intended they leave the bailey with a different view of her altogether.

Thiessen was in the middle of the bailey, sword braced carelessly on his shoulder, his free hand on his hip. He was grinning at her but it wasn't the cocky grin she expected but one that seemed to say he was going to enjoy himself.

"Ready?" he asked.

She nodded and walked over to meet him. With expert fluidity she flexed the sword, whipped it back and forth as she went, testing its weight and heft, its balance. It was a fine blade and the pommel was comfortable in her grip.

The only warning he gave her that he was about to attack was the playful pursing of his lips in a make-believe kiss and then he lunged with a wicked grin on his chiseled features. She barely had time to bring her blade up to block him and felt the reverberation of the metal all the way down her arm.

Vargas strolled over to Mac and Seth and stood with them to watch the sparring exhibition. He had no doubt who would be the winner but it was a true pleasure to see the princess giving as good as she got. She was moving with grace and precision across the dusty bailey, meeting Thiessen blow for blow, driving him back with ease and taking his lunges on the balls of her feet and pivoting expertly away.

"The wench is good," Mac observed. "No wonder she bested him at Ambergast."

“I don’t think she did,” Seth remarked. “I believe Lord Morgan snuck up on him and got the upper hand.”

“Aye, that’s what the lad told me,” Vargas put in. “It’ll be a cold day in hell when a female bests a WyndMaster.”

“Still,” Mac said. “She’s good.”

“That she is and he’s hurting,” Seth agreed. “She might not be able to beat him but at the rate she’s attacking—see him grimacing?—he’s going to know she was there.”

It was true that Thiessen was hurting and the jolt of each of his wife’s parries had opened the wounds in his palm. The pommel was slick with his blood but he would be damned before he cried quarter. If he was to save face, he had to pretend the opponent before him was an enemy and not a well-loved during the past night vixen who had pleased him as no other ever had. His thinking about her innocent, virginal lips around his shaft as he taught her the intricacies of the act made his knees weak.

“Careful, warrior,” she said. “Your fish just did a little wriggle in the pond!”

He made the mistake of glancing down at his crotch to see if his erection was, indeed, showing and she drove him back with an expertly timed hit that caused him to stumble. It took all of his concentration to keep from falling over the circular base of the well and into the water.

Lanelle laughed merrily and with her the entire assemblage of watchers. They might not have understood her comment to him when she made it but when he’d looked down, explanation hadn’t been necessary.

Grinding his teeth, Thiessen moved away from the well, moving to her left, watching her closely for she tended to telegraph her moves and he’d have to work with her on that.

Their swords clanged together lightly, each testing the other as they circled. He feigned a lunge. She easily deflected it, their blades connecting and clinging together as they inscribed a wide circle.

“Tiring, wench?” he asked.

She put a hand to her mouth in a pretend yawn. “Not yet, warrior. Are your hands bothering you?”

“Not enough to matter,” he lied.

One moment he was sliding gracefully to her left and then his foot shot out to connect with her ankle to sweep her leg out from under her. Her eyes widened and she fell backward to hit the ground hard on her rump, collapsing to her back because the air had been knocked from her lungs, her sword nearly falling from her hand. Before she could scramble out of the way as she gasped for air, he was on her with his left knee pressing upon her sword wrist, his right foot wedged at the V of her legs. His own sword was once more braced on his shoulder as he grinned down at her with that infuriatingly cocky grin she had expected at the start. He simply arched one dark brow at her.

“You lose,” he said unnecessarily and to her utter mortification, stretched out full length upon her, his face just above hers, his lips so close to her mouth she could feel his breath. “Now pay up, wench.”

Vargas would later say you could hear a pin drop in the bailey as those gathered watched their prince slant his mouth firmly over his wife’s and take a kiss from her that made many a man’s tool quicken in his pants.

“I thought the little bugger was going to forget we were all there watching him,” the old warrior would comment.

Lanelle gave in to that deep, invading kiss and flashes of the night before streaked across her mind to send her blood racing. When he released her lips and moved back, she saw her own fierce desire mirrored deep in his golden eyes.

“We need a bath,” he said and as lithely as a panther he was on his feet, his hand extended to her.

“I believe that will have to wait, Your Grace,” Vargas said and cocked his chin toward the standard that was being raised on the pennant pole that stood higher than Thiessen’s.”

“Ah, shit, not now,” Thiessen grumbled.

“The King?” Lanelle questioned and watched as a second standard on the shortest of the three poles atop the battlements carried a soft blue rose on a white background.

“And my mother.” Thiessen groaned again.

“The King’s party approaches!” a man on the walls reported.

“Oh goodie,” Thiessen said. His hand was wrapped securely around Lanelle’s and he looked down at her. “Go change, wench.” At her stubborn tilt of the chin, he added a heartfelt please.

She sensed his need for her to make a good impression so she gently squeezed his fingers and slipped her hand from his. With a toss of the long braid on her shoulder she headed for the keep.

“They’ve no doubt heard of your Joining,” Vargas warned his liege lord, “and are here to meet the bride.”

“No doubt,” Thiessen agreed. He looked around him. “Thomas!”

The seneschal came forward with a stately walk. “Aye, Your Grace.”

“The usual pomp and circumstance, if you will,” Thiessen ordered.

“As you wish, Your Grace,” Thomas acknowledged and, with a slight bow, turned to do as directed.”

Mistress Nan strolled by and with a bawdy wink aimed at her prince told him he’d pay the piper now for his waywardness.

“And one of these days I’m going to slap your wrinkled old ass in one of my dungeon cells!” Thiessen threatened but the middle aged woman only laughed at him as she continued on her way.

“Best see to those hands, Your Grace,” Vargas advised, handing over a pair of supple black leather gloves. “You know how your mother will react to seeing them in such a state.”

Thiessen glanced down at the meaty pulp of his palms and made a face. “Aye,” he replied. It was agony pulling the things on over the mess he’d further made of his palms and he had to clench his jaw tightly shut to keep from moaning.

The sound of the drawbridge lowering--the squeal of the chains, the chuff of the horses straining at the ropes of the pulley, the creak of the wooden boards--made Thiessen tense. It had been months since his parents had come to visit and he would just have soon kept it that way.

“Think you they’ll have heard of Morgan’s supposed imprisonment at Ambergast?” he asked Vargas.

“They don’t miss much,” Vargas answered. “Them being here tells me they know what you’ve done and depending on the look on their faces, you’ll know just how they feel before they utter the first word.”

Thiessen didn’t need to be told that and when the stamp of hooves rattled over the drawbridge he felt the blood begin to pound in his ears.

As was King Sierran's custom, he was at the head of the column of riders trotting into the inner bailey. His lady-wife, Queen Celeste, was only a few paces behind, sitting sidesaddle upon her dainty gray mare.

"He ain't smiling," Vargas said quietly.

Thiessen could see that. His father and King was staring right at him with a look that said Thiessen's ass was about to be put in its place. One glance at his mother saw pity on the lovely woman's sweet face to make matters worse.

"Shit," Thiessen said on a long sigh. He stepped forward, pasting a smile of welcome on his sweaty face. "Good morning, Your Highness," he greeted. "Did you have a good journey?"

King Sierran did not reply. He rode his mount up to where his son was standing and reined it in, crossing his wrists over the saddle's pommel, controlling the horse with firm pressure from his thighs.

Thiessen shifted his gaze to his mother. "Good morn, Mother. I hope you are well."

"I am sick at heart, Thiessen Gair," she stated. "And sorely disappointed."

Thiessen's smile wavered. "In what, Mother?"

"As if you didn't know," his father snapped, drawing Thiessen's attention back to him. "Do you ever use your head for something other than growing that wild mop of hair, boy?"

"Sierran," Celeste said softly.

"He needs a bloody hair cut, Celeste!"

"And he'll get one but we did not ride all the way from Dullwitch to discuss his need to visit a barber," she reminded him.

"Where is Morgan?" Sierran demanded, swinging his gaze about those gathered and not seeing his eldest son among the throng.

"Is he not back at *Vista del Mar*?" Thiessen asked with an innocent air.

Sierran's eyes narrowed dangerously, reminding his son this man was still a WyndMaster and perhaps the most skilled of that rank. "You know gods-be-damned well he isn't!"

"What did you do with your brother, son?" Celeste asked gently and when he turned guilty eyes to her she held up a hand. "And pray do not tell me he's wasting away in your dungeon or still locked up in a cell at the Solarian keep."

"We know you went after him," Sierran said. "So where the hell is he?"

"You heard he had been captured by the Solarians?" Thiessen asked.

"Don't answer a question with a question, boy!" his father thundered at him. "Where is your brother?"

"I am sure he is still at my keep at Ambergast."

Every eye in the bailey flicked to the firm voice that had spoken. Lanelle was attired in a soft pale green gown that had been delivered just that morning from the seamstress. She came down the steps of the keep with her chin high, her hands at her side.

"Who is this woman, Thiessen Gair?" his mother asked and her voice held more than a rime of frost.

"The Princess Lanelle of Solaria," Thiessen replied. "She is"

"For what purpose did you have my son taken, mademoiselle?" the King snapped. His amber eyes were shot through with fiery sparks as he glared at Lanelle. "If you intend ransom"

"Morgan and I are friends, Your Majesty," Lanelle interrupted him. "We have been since I was ten and five. He was never my prisoner and has free rein as my representative while I am away from Ambergast."

“And just why are you here?” Celeste questioned.

Thiessen realized his parents did not know of his Joining to Lanelle. He didn't think explaining the situation to them in front of the warriors and servants was a good idea and opened his mouth to invite them inside but then the world crashed down around his ears.

“Where else would a bride be if not with her husband?” Lanelle asked.

Queen Celeste stiffened. King Sierran's lips parted in shock. The two looked at one another for a brief moment then turned their tight-lipped, narrow-eyed displeasure on their son.

“Surprise,” Thiessen said with a flinging out of his hand and wished he could snatch the word back. His father looked like he could thrash him and his mother looked as though she'd make no attempt to keep her husband from doing just that.

“This,” he heard his father say, “is what comes of his own choosing, wench.”

“How was I to know he'd make such an unsuitable choice, warrior?” Celeste hissed back at him.

“I beg your pardon?” Lanelle snapped, eyes flaring as she came to stand beside Thiessen. “Unsuitable?”

The Queen gave the young woman a stony look. “We know nothing of you, girl. All we've heard is that you took Morgan prisoner and lured our son into Solaria in a foray that could very well start a war between our countries.”

“There will be no war since Thiessen and I are legally Joined,” Lanelle said. “Not unless it is Emardia and the Federation that starts it.” She lifted her chin. “My father will hold the Joining legal and binding and under Solarian law it can never be put aside.” She shifted her gaze to the King. “Unlike the Joining of Morgan's mother to you, Sire.”

“Why would we wish to put the Joining aside?” Queen Celeste was quick to pick up on the young woman's wording.

“Perhaps because Morgan and I forced Thie into it and then bound him”

“Bound me to her with love,” Thiessen hurried to say. He snaked an arm around Lanelle and drew her to him. “I love her with all my heart and soul and will defend her with my last breath.”

“She forced you into marrying her?” It was all King Sierran heard.

“You know Morgan, Father,” Thiessen said. “It was a prank and”

“She forced you?” Sierran repeated.

“My father was in the process of foisting Prince Egg” Lanelle stopped as Thiessen made a low growling sound. “...Egbert of Ulnia on me as my husband. Have you met him?”

Celeste nodded. “We have.”

“Then you know I could no more have wanted to spend my life with Egg...bert than Thie wanted to be shackled to his sister, Marguerite. It seemed a logical thing to Morgan that Thie and I would suit reasonably well and we decided the only way to prevent my Joining to Egg Fart and”

“Wench!” Thiessen groaned.

“And Thie's shackling to Maggie the Maggot,” Lanelle finished, casting her husband a smug look, “was for the two of us to Join. In name only.”

“She would stay at Ambergast and I would return to Windemere, the chances of either her father or you forcing us into unwanted marriages settled.”

“Maggie the Maggot,” Celeste said and put a hand to her mouth to keep from laughing.

“I can still put aside the Joining, Thiessen,” his father declared, “and contract you as Princess Marguerite's betrothed.”

“Actually, you can not,” Lanelle said.

“Oh, and why can’t I?” Sierran demanded.

“Because we consummated the marriage at Ambergast and find we suit quite well together,” the princess replied. “As a matter of fact, Thiessen felt so deeply about it, he returned to Ambergast, scaled the walls, and spirited me away in the dead of night.”

“And Egg Fart,” Celeste repeated, this time laughing out loud. At her husband’s warning glower she shrugged her dainty shoulders. “Oh, Sierran, it is just too much. I can’t help it!”

“Why would he need to scale the walls, wench?” the King asked. “As your husband it is within his rights to be allowed entry without question to any estate in which you reside.”

“A fairy tale, Your Majesty,” Lanelle said on a long, melodramatic sigh.

“Fairy tale?” Sierran echoed.

“The Handsome Prince and the Helpless Damsel locked in her cold, dark tower by the Ugly Ogre,” Lanelle said and looked up at her husband to bat her eyes dreamily at him. “He was my knight to the rescue, scaling the walls, flinging me over his shoulder and carrying me off into the night.”

Thiessen shot his wife a look that said she was going too far.

“Let me see your hands,” the King told his son.

Thiessen’s eyebrows shot up into his hair. “Sire?”

“I said let me see your hands.”

“Why, warrior?” Celeste asked her husband.

“If he scaled a bloody wall his hands will tell the tale of it,” Sierran snapped. “Let me see your hands, boy!”

Peeling the gloves off was a chore and Thiessen once more ground his teeth to keep quiet. The material stuck to the blood that had crusted in his palm and he found it was worse taking them off than it had been putting them on.

“Oh, Sierran!” his mother proclaimed. “Look at our baby’s poor hands!”

But the King was still not convinced. He swung around in the saddle. “Vargas!” he shouted and the old warrior stepped forward.

“Aye, Your Majesty?” Vargas responded.

“You were there at Ambergast?”

“Aye, Majesty, I was.”

“Are these two telling me the truth?”

“As I know it, aye, they are,” Vargas acknowledged.

“And do you agree with that, Mac?”

Mac inclined his head. “I’ve no other explanation for what occurred between them, Your Majesty.”

“Seth?”

Pushing his way past two servants, Seth came forward to agree with what his brother and Mac had already said. “He went after her, Your Majesty, and brought her back in the dead of night as she says.”

“In the pouring rain,” Vargas added.

“Ah,” Celeste said on a long breath and her gaze softened as she met Lanelle’s gaze.

“How sweet.”

“Sweet my hairy ass,” Sierran grumbled. “Something isn’t right here, Celeste.”

“Seth, come help me down so I might embrace our new daughter,” Celeste ordered the warrior.

“Celeste . . .” Sierran began but his wife waved aside his suspicious tone.

Once on the ground, Celeste strode briskly to where her son and his wife stood and held out her arms. “Welcome to the family, Nelle.”

Lanelle flinched at the nickname but returned the embrace, feeling Thiessen relaxing besides her then smiling as he, too, embraced his mother, giving her the Kiss of Peace as was her due.

“Something isn’t right here,” Sierran muttered beneath his breath as he swung a leg over his horse’s head and slid to the ground. “It stinks to the heavens.” As he walked behind his wife, son and suspicious new daughter-in-law the King of Emardia wasn’t at all satisfied with the explanation he’d been given.

Chapter Seven

On entering the keep, Sierran saw Thiessen leading the ladies to the brightly-lit, spacious conservatory where the family usually took their early morning repast. Filled with plants from all over the world, the room smelled of blooming flowers and the rich aroma of the bold coffee Thiessen loved so well.

“Prince Thiessen,” the King called out. “Join me in the library.” When Thiessen glanced around with a worried look, his father added the sharp word, “Now!”

Squaring his shoulders, the young WyndMaster followed the older from the conservatory and down the corridor to the more masculine room filled from floor to ceiling with bookshelves groaning under the weight of hundreds of leather-bound books and ancient manuscripts.

“Close the door and take a seat,” Sierran ordered as he went to stand by the large marble fireplace, bracing his elbow on the mantle. He indicated a chair across from where he stood.

“Papa...,” Thiessen began but his father held up a hand.

“To my knowledge you have never lied to me, Thie, and you’d best not start now. I want to hear the whole of it from your lips.”

“What we said was true,” Thiessen defended his and Lanelle’s words.

“As far as it went I imagine it is,” his father agreed, “but there is more to it that you have not revealed and I want to know what that is.”

“First you must promise me something.”

“I don’t have to promise you anything, Thiessen,” his father snapped.

“If you want to learn what happened you’ll have to or I’ll not say another word,” the young prince declared.

Sierran’s brows drew together. “What promise is it you require?”

“That you won’t set aside my Joining to Lanelle.”

The dark brows of the King shot upward. “You are content with this?”

“And becoming more content with each passing day,” Thiessen admitted. “She and I are well-met, Papa.”

Sierran left the fireplace and sat down in the chair beside the one in which his son sat.

“This explanation you’re about to give had better satisfy me, Thie.”

“You won’t annul the Joining?”

“Against my better judgment, no, I won’t. Get on with it.”

Thiessen inhaled deeply then released it slowly. “You know I went there to rescue Morgan?” At his father’s nod, the prince grinned mirthlessly. “Although why I felt the need to do so is beyond me.”

“He is your brother.” It was all the explanation Sierran felt was necessary.

“We were expecting opposition but found it very easy to enter the keep. The real resistance was inside. The Solarians fell on my men like a hoard of locusts and”

“How many were hurt?”

“None. Well, maybe a scratch or two but nothing serious,” Thiessen said. “They’d been ordered not to harm my men but to take them into custody.” He glanced ruefully at his father. “I

engaged a woman warrior who was quite good actually. I had bested her when I felt the prick of a blade at my throat.”

“Your brother snuck up on you when you weren’t looking?” Sierran asked and at Thiessen’s surprised look, the King’s lips twitched. “That would be something my eldest would do. Go on.”

“Nelle told you the truth about her and Morgan formatting a plan to get her and I married. I was infuriated about it, but since I was bound and gagged”

His father held up his hand again. “Bound and gagged?”

“It was the only way they could accomplish the deed.”

Sierran frowned heavily. “Who was the woman warrior?”

“Ah, Nelle,” Thiessen replied.

“I see.”

“She’s quite good actually.”

“So you’ve already said. Go on.”

Thiessen’s cheeks reddened. This was the part he hated to tell his father, unsure what might happen with the telling. “The Joining was performed and then Morgan reminded Nelle that for it to be legal and binding, it had to be consummated.”

“Oh, here we go,” Sierran said, already having guessed what must have happened.

“When it was done,” Thiessen said, “they let us go and we rode out.” He let out a relieved breath for having gotten that humiliating piece of news off his chest.

The King just stared at his son.

“I was still pissed about it so later that evening, I went back for her and took her right out from under Morgan’s nose.”

“Why?”

Thiessen squirmed in his chair. “I thought they were lovers and I wanted to get back at Morgan for his part in forcing me to marry Lanelle. My original intent was to take a troop back to Ambergast and turn the keep into rubble but since that might have started a war between Emaridia and Solaria”

“There’s no might about it,” Sierran snapped. “There *would* have been a war. There might be one yet!”

“I don’t see why,” Thiessen said. “Nelle is as content with the Joining as I am.”

“Aye, but her father might not be,” Sierran said with narrowed eyes.

“Again, I don’t see why he wouldn’t be. I’m a much better catch than Egg Fart...ah, Egbert.”

“Does King Robert know what the two of you’ve done?”

“I don’t know, Papa,” Thiessen admitted, “but I’ve a feeling Morgan most likely has sent word to him by now. I’ve heard nothing from Morgan so I’m assuming he’s content with Nelle being here.”

“That might well have been their plan all along.”

Thiessen shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. She fought me when I took her.” He looked down at his ravaged hands, thinking he was going to have to get them seen to again.

“You thought Morgan and Nelle were lovers,” Sierran stated. He gave his son a wondering look. “You didn’t know your brother leaned another way?”

Thiessen blinked then his eyebrows crooked. “You knew?”

Sierran made an irritated gesture with his hand. “Of course I knew. I’ve known since he was a teenager in which direction Morgan was going. I wasn’t happy about it, but I didn’t

interfere.” His gaze darkened. “I assume you were tied to her bed when the Joining was consummated.”

Thiessen flinched. “Ah, aye, that was the way of it.”

“And that she wasn’t virginal else you would not have concluded she and Morgan were lovers. What man breached her maidenhead?”

“She was raped by a Toscalian raider when she was a schoolgirl.”

The King lowered his head. “One of these days those bastards need to be wiped off the face of the earth.”

“If I ever meet up with Emilio Silva, you can kiss his greasy ass goodbye,” Thiessen stated.

Nodding absently at his son’s vow for WyndMaster’s did not make such promises lightly. Sierran put a hand up to rub at the sudden headache that was forming behind his right eye.

“I can’t say I’m happy about this situation, Thie, but I’ll not interfere. You’re a grown man and you are the one who must live his life as he sees fit.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’ll send a courier to Robbie and let him know Emardia is not going to get into a pissing contest with him over the matter.”

“And you need to send word to King Stanislaus that I won’t be marrying Maggie the”

“Don’t say it!” Sierran warned. He knew it was bad enough that Celeste had heard that vile sobriquet for Marguerite, whom the Queen did not like. “I’ve already informed him that there would be no alliance between our two houses.” He gave Thiessen a sharp look. “And he wasn’t happy about it. He’s going to be even less happy to learn you stole Egbert’s intended from him.”

“If you had a daughter, would you want her married to Egbert?” Thiessen asked.

Ignoring the question, the King got to his feet. “Get to the Healer and have those hands bandaged before you wind up getting them infected. What the hell were you doing sparring with them in such a condition? Don’t you have any sense at all, Thiessen Gair?”

The prince stood also. “I practice every morning, Papa, and since it was Nelle with whom I was sparring, I didn’t think it would be too much of a problem, but the wench is...”

“Quite good actually,” his father said in a droll voice. He motioned for Thiessen to precede him from the room.

* * * *

“Oh, you didn’t!” Thiessen whimpered when later that morning his bride told him she had given the full story of their meeting to his mother. “How will I ever be able to look Mama in the eye again with her knowing you raped me, wench?”

“Stop whining,” Lanelle countered. “I do think I saw her eyes sparkling when I told her about what you did to me when I was finished peeing”

“You did *not*!” he hissed at her like a cornered wolverine, his eyes wide in shock.

“Of course I didn’t, you idjit,” she laughed and swatted his shoulder.

“What did she say about what you did to me?” he asked, not happy with her finding humor in the situation.

“I believe she called it forced seduction and while she wasn’t exactly thrilled that her son had been forcibly taken in that manner, I think it bothered her more that you had been overpowered. She worries for your safety, you know.”

“Oh, gods,” he moaned, burying his head in his hands, wincing at the pain it brought to his newly re-banded palms. “She’s going to have one of her infamous talks with me. I just know it!”

“What kind of talk?”

“Where she reminds me I am the son of the greatest WyndMaster to ever walk the face of the earth and that I have a tradition to uphold that makes men fear me and” He made a choking sound. “And all the rest of that shit.”

“Poor baby,” she said, rubbing her palm on his bowed back. “You do have it rough, don’t you?”

He lifted his head and glared at her. “It’s what comes from thinking with the wrong head!”

She sank gracefully to the floor to kneel at his feet. “Would it help for me to tell you I’ve been doing a lot of thinking with that tiny little head you suckled so thoroughly last eve?”

“Oh, Nelle, don’t!” he protested as his cock jerked.

She giggled and laid her head on his thigh. “Your mother and I decided that neither of us likes a whole lot of food at the noon meal and that a large repast wasn’t good for either you or your father, so we are meeting with the cook to have her prepare something much lighter in fare. Do you have a preference for what kind of soup you would like?”

“Don’t change the subject, wench,” he growled.

“She also agrees with me that one meal instead of two should suffice to break our fasts each morning. Something hearty and filling when we first rise and”

“Not before my sparring sessions!” he snapped. “Never any food before my sparring sessions!”

Lanelle sighed. “All right, then after the sessions.”

“Potato and ham,” he said, realizing the subject had been changed whether he liked it or not. “Broccoli with a sharp cheddar melted into it.”

“How about chicken and rice?”

“That and vegetable barely are good, too,” he answered, smoothing her hair with the back of his bandaged hand. “A different soup every day would not be amiss.”

“With sandwiches, cheese and fruit?”

“That’ll do.”

“Ale or lemonade?”

“Lemonade for the warmer months and spiced cider for the cooler.”

“Perfect,” she said and pushed to her feet. She leaned over, gave him a quick kiss then headed for the door.

“Where are you going?”

“To meet Celeste,” she answered and flounced out of their room.

Leaning his head against the back of the tall chair, he snorted. “At least if she’s with my mother, Mama can’t lecture me about not living up to my WyndMaster legacy.”

* * * *

“They are becoming as thick as thieves,” Sierran complained as he and his son strolled through the stable, taking a look at the new colt that had been born the evening before.

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it?” Thiessen questioned.

“Not necessarily,” his father grumbled. “Especially not if they take to siding with one another against us. Women can be savage creatures when they band together. My sisters were evil beyond words.”

Watching the colt trying to stand on its wobbly, spindly legs the two men smiled.

“You were like that not all that long ago,” Sierran mused. “It seems only yesterday that your mother blessed me with you.”

Thiessen propped his foot on the lowest rung of the stall. "Have I been a blessing, Papa?"

"Most of the time," his father replied with a laugh. "You've had your moments though that put all this white hair at my temples."

Thiessen looked over at his father. The man was handsome by anyone's standards and a powerful warrior. That little fan of gray just above his sideburns added distinction to his chiseled features. He knew the lines at his father's eyes hadn't just been put there by the sun and laughter. Sierran Morgan Allen had known pain in his lifetime—most of it meted out at the hand of his wife's brutal father, the late and unlamented Lord Charles Allen.

"Is that the new baby?"

The men turned to see Celeste coming toward them.

"Where's Nelle?" Thiessen asked.

"A servant came to her while we were in the kitchen and she said there was something she had to do," his mother replied and wedged herself between her husband and son. "Oh, Thie! That is the cutest foal. What are you going to name him?"

"I haven't decided yet. Which servant?" At his mother's shrug, he asked if Lanelle had said what it was she had to do.

"No. All I know is she left Windemere about..." Celeste stopped for her son's foot scraped off the stall and he spun around and was tearing out of the stable at a dead run. She looked up at her husband.

"Something tells me she wasn't supposed to leave," Sierran commented.

* * * *

It hadn't been hard to track her. Many people had seen her leaving the fortress on foot and none had thought to stop her. He found her in the glade behind Windemere. She was sitting beside a rippling stream, staring into the water, her hand trailing along the sun-dappled surface. When she heard him approaching, she looked around, startled for a moment then she smiled.

"Did you think I was trying to escape, warrior?"

A sheepish grimace settled on his sweaty face. He was panting from his run after her, standing there with his hands on his hips, leaning slightly forward as he gasped for breath. "Aye, wench," he managed to get out between swallowing hard and drawing in gulps of breath.

"It might surprise you to learn I have no desire to escape you, Thiessen," she said softly, returning her gaze to the stream.

"I'm growing on you, am I?"

"Like a fungus," she replied.

He laughed as he straightened and came toward her. "Fancy that."

"I needed some time alone without prying eyes watching every move I made," she explained.

"Why?" he asked as he sat down tailor style beside her on the ground.

"To think."

"About?"

"You."

That both surprised and pleased him.

"What were you thinking about me?"

She lifted her gaze to the far side of the stream where the dense forest with its changing fall foliage was arrayed in a burst of color.

"I was thinking I'm falling in love with you," she admitted.

He stopped breathing for a moment then left out a wavering breath, not sure how he felt about her but glad to know she was beginning to have feelings for him. "And is that a good or bad thing, Nelle?"

His continued use of the nickname was not as annoying as it had been. She found she was beginning to accept it.

"There's something I have to tell you," she said. She turned to look at him. "It's about Emilio Silva."

That name put dark hatred in Thiessen's soul. "What of him?" he asked, a muscle flexing in his jaw.

"He's tried several times to get his men into Ambergast and into my personal estate as well, though its defenses are ten times as strong as any of my family's other abodes. Each time Morgan and my men were able to foil his attempts and drive him off but I don't believe he intends to give up so easily."

"Did you lie to me, wench?" he asked, searching her eyes. "Were the two of you...?"

"I did not lie about what happened between him and me. He raped me, Thiessen. I hate him with every fiber of my being and had I the chance, I would slit his miserable, worthless throat," she said. "It wasn't until after I escaped him that he found out who I was." She snorted derisively. "The bastard had the gall to send me a letter telling me since he took my virginity, I belonged to him and that he had laid claim to me as his help-meet."

"Is that so?" Thiessen asked, his eyes narrowing dangerously.

"One of the reasons I wanted to go to Lochinvere was to make sure he could never get his hands on me. I thought once married he would give up and leave me alone but apparently not." She reached into the pocket of her gown and drew out a folded piece of paper. "He sent this to me by one of the servants." She handed him the paper.

Thiessen studied her face for a moment then looked down at the note, unfolding it to read the words that had been scrawled in a careless hand across the paper. When he had read it, he cursed vulgarly then crumbled the note in his injured hand and tossed it into the rippling stream.

"It won't happen, Nelle, but you coming out here unguarded and without a weapon is just asking for trouble." He got to his feet, glancing around him as though he expected the Toscalian raider to appear out of the greensward.

"I am not without a weapon, warrior," she said and pushed aside her skirt to show him the dagger she had hidden in the folds of her gown. "I was hoping he'd show up."

He cursed again. "Give me that damned blade before..."

The arrow had been silent, making not a sound until it hit Thiessen in the back, the head going all the way through his back to protrude out the front of his leather jerkin. He looked down at it, opened his mouth to say something when another arrow hit him only an inch from the first, jerking his body as though he were a marionette on a string.

"*Thiessen!*" Lanelle screamed, dropped the blade to reach for her husband as his knees began to buckle and he pitched toward her. As a third arrow slammed into his back, she saw his eyes close.

Snapping her head toward the trees beyond the stream she saw a single archer with his bow lifted and primed to fire again as Lanelle held her sagging husband, trying to ease him to his side to prevent the arrows from going any further inside his limp body, she heard the splashing of water and turned to see Emilio Silva wading through the knee-high water.

"No!" she screamed at him, seeing the dagger clutched in his dark hand and the determined look on his face.

“Get away from him, woman,” Silva snarled at her.

“Please, no!” she sobbed, unable to hold Thiessen’s unconscious form. “Don’t hurt him.”

“You belong to me,” the Toscalian raider stated as he came up the bank.

“Aye,” she said eagerly. She let go of her husband and moved between him and Silva.

“Aye, I belong to you and I’ll go with you. I’ll do whatever you want just don’t hurt him any more.”

Silva stopped, glanced behind her at the fallen warrior, at the blood staining his shirt and pooling beneath him to soak into the greedy ground and grinned. “I’ve no need to.” He shot out a hand and took hold of her wrist, jerking her toward him. “After all, he’s not long for this world anyway.”

* * * *

When Thiessen and Lanelle did not return in a timely manner, Vargas became concerned. He asked about and learned from a guard coming off duty to break for the noon meal that he had seen the Prince headed for the glade beyond the stand of willows. Foreboding nudging him, the old warrior put two fingers to his mouth and gave a loud, piercing whistle to gain Mac’s attention. When Mac looked his way, Vargas motioned him over.

“What’s up?” Mac asked.

“Let’s you and me take a stroll down to Blackmoor Burn,” Vargas stated.

Falling into step beside Vargas, Mac frowned. “What for?”

“I’ve just got a notion to take a skinny dip in the fucking stream, why else?” Vargas snapped. “And you ask too gods-be-damned many questions.”

“Won’t find out unless you do,” Mac argued, thrusting his hands into the pockets of his leather pants. “Sometimes you don’t say enough.”

“Him and her been gone too long for my comfort,” Vargas said.

Mac didn’t need to ask who the warrior meant. “You think she’s running?”

“I know she’d best not,” Vargas replied. “He’ll go after her and drag her back by the hem of her gown if she tries.”

“Or toss over his shoulder like a sack of salt,” Seth said as he appeared out of nowhere to walk beside his brother and Mac.

“You got the feeling, too, brat?” Vargas asked.

“I reckon I do,” Seth agreed. “It’s sitting like a rock on my shoulders.”

The men walked through the glen leading down to the glade, their senses alert for the sound of laughter--or arguing. It was far too quiet for their peace of mind and by the time they reached the rambling stream known as Blackmoor Burn the unease that had niggled Vargas and bother Seth had gripped them both with iron talons.

“Something ain’t right,” Vargas said softly. “Seth, you go down that. Mac, go up stream.” He kept going straight as the other two broke away.

It was Seth who found him and he let out an ear-piercing yell that brought his brother and Mac running.

“Oh, Mother of the gods,” Vargas said as he saw Thiessen lying on his side, the shafts of three arrows piercing his upper body.

Seth was already on his knees beside the body, a trembling hand going to the still column of his liege lord’s neck. “He’s alive, though barely.”

Mac didn’t need to go any farther. He pivoted sharply and dashed back toward the fortress, knowing a wagon and the Healer would be needed, his arms and legs pumping like pistons as he ran.

“Them are Toscalian arrows,” Vargas said as he went to his knees with a grunt beside his Prince’s body.

“Thank the gods they missed his heart,” Seth said. “Do we remove them while he’s still unconscious or wait for the Healer?”

Vargas looked at the spread of blood that had darkened the ground. “Pull ‘em out from the front.” He began stripping off his shirt to make padding to stanch any further blood loss. “You do it.”

Seth took a deep breath and took hold of the first arrow, the one lowest on Thiessen’s belly and quickly pulled it free. A small spurt of blood trickled out. “He’s got very little to lose,” the warrior said.

The second arrow just about that one was a bit harder to extract but it, took came free with little loss of precious fluid. It was the third one that seemed to be lodged in bone that wouldn’t be budged.

Having torn his shirt into padding he gave to his brother, Vargas took out his dagger and began sawing at the portion of the arrow that held the fletch. Once he had the wood cut away, he told Seth to gently lower the Prince to his back.

There was a slight groan from the unconscious man but he did not move. The front of his clothing was saturated with his blood and he was as white as a sheet. A faint pulse at his neck showed he was struggling to stay alive.

“Do you suppose they took her?” Seth asked as the sound of galloping horses toward them rang out.

“Aye, I’m sure they did,” Vargas said with a worried frown.

If the two men were surprised to see King Sierran driving the wagon, snapping the reins to the horses like a mad man as he raced toward them with his lady-wife perched beside him on the seat, they didn’t show up. They simply stood up and moved away from the Prince.

“He’s alive,” Vargas said, seeing the strained bleakness on the Queen’s face.

The Healer was in the back of the wagon with Mac and two other warriors, six other men on horseback with weapons brandished had ridden behind. Sierran was the off the wagon and kneeling beside his son before anyone else could reach him.

“How many wounds?” the King demanded.

“Three,” Vargas replied.

“So much blood,” Sierran said. He put his hands on Thiessen’s shirt and ripped it open, drawing in a breath at the gaping wounds.

Mac helped his Queen from the wagon and she came running to her son’s side, falling to her knees to touch his still face with trembling fingers. “Oh, Thie,” she sobbed.

“Where is the girl?” Sierran asked.

“Taken is my guess,” Vargas answered.

Sierran saw the fletching on the arrows and a muscle tightened in his cheek. “Toscalian.”

“Aye,” Vargas agreed.

The Healer quickly and expertly examined the wounds. “This one I will need to carve out of His Grace,” he said, indicating the remaining arrow. “Quickly, get him in the wagon. The sooner I get him in my operatory the better.”

Between them, Mac and Seth carefully lifted the Prince at his shoulders and knees and carried him to the wagon. Scrambling into the wagon before her son was laid down, Celeste had them lay Thiessen’s head in her lap. This time Vargas took the reins to the horses as the King joined his wife in the wagon bed.

“Bring back memories, wench?” Sierran asked his lady.

She gave him a tremulous smile as tears cascaded down her pale cheeks. She was tenderly smoothing the hair back from her son’s face.

* * * *

The six horses galloped full out as four Toscalian raiders, their leader, and the woman he had taken captive raced toward the sheltered cove and the ship they had hidden there. Hooves skidding on the loose shale as the mounts were ridden over a shallow embankment and toward the water, the animals fought the bits in their mouth, strained against the rough handling of the men on their backs.

Lanelle’s hands were tied to the saddle pommel as Silva led her horse, a kerchief tied around the Princess’ eyes to keep her from seeing where she was being taken. She’d dared not make a sound, dared not call out for fear Silva would go back to make sure Thiessen was dead. In her heart, she knew her husband still lived. She knew she would have felt it had he left this world.

When her horse was pulled to a stop and her hands were untied, she sniffed the air, knowing they were at the sea. She could hear the lap of water against the shore as Silva swung her up in his arms and carried her.

“Give them time to find Thiessen,” she thought as she lay still in the raider’s arms. “Wait until the bastard’s ship is at sea before you go after him.”

That she would, there was no doubt in her mind. He might not have been the one to shoot the arrows into her husband’s body but he was the one who had given the order for it to be done. For that, Emilio Silva would pay with his life.

* * * *

“The arrow went in at an angle, lodging between two ribs, barely missing the heart and going between two more ribs. It became caught against the sternum and that was why it could not be pulled out like the other two arrows,” the Healer told Sierran and Celeste. “My guess is the wind caught the arrow at the last moment and forced it down. Had it continued on a true course no doubt as it was intended to do, the arrow would have gone straight through His Grace’s heart.”

“Or the gods had a hand in it and caused the arrow to miss its mark,” Sierran suggested.

“Considering your son is still alive after losing so much blood, I have no doubt the gods were looking out for him,” Celeste said quietly.

“It will be touch and go and we must keep him as still as possible,” the Healer stressed. “That will be hard to do once he wakes and learns his lady has been taken by the raiders.”

Thomas, the Prince’s seneschal came into the room and bowed deeply before his King. “Your Majesty, might I have a word with you?”

“Not now, Thomas,” Sierran said. “We are...”

“I assure you, Sire, it is of the utmost importance,” Thomas said and the interruption was so out of character for him Sierran nodded.

“I’ll be right back, Sweeting,” he told his wife and motioned Thomas to walk ahead of him.

Celeste barely noticed her husband’s departure. She was holding her son’s hand, plucking nervously at the bandages.

“This had best be as important as you say, Thomas,” the King snapped as the seneschal led him to the library and opened the door, standing back for Sierran to enter.

The King's eldest son, Morgan Summerall, was in the room, his hands clasped behind him as he was interrupted in his pacing. He stood still as the door closed behind his father.

"How is he?"

Sierran plowed a hand through his hair. "Not good. He lost most of his blood before they found him."

Morgan's shoulders slumped. "I thought I was doing the right thing," he said, lowering his head and squeezing his eyes shut. "I thought I was handing her over into the safe keeping of a man who would let nothing harm her." He shook his head. "I was wrong."

"Do not blame your brother for this!" the King shouted.

Sierran's oldest son raised his head. "I am not blaming him, Papa. I am sure he did everything he could to protect Lanelle. It just wasn't enough."

"Protect her from what?" Sierran demanded.

"Emilio Silva," Morgan replied.

"That's twice I've heard that name. Who the hell is this bastard?"

"He is the leader of the Toscalian raiders. He assumed command when Augustine Balder was killed in a battle near Beaumont Cay."

"Thie said he raped Nelle."

Morgan nodded. "Brutally raped her and if he hadn't passed out afterwards most likely would have slit her throat. He had no idea she was King Robert's daughter until later and he started making claims of owning her. He's tried numerous times to get to her but we've always been able to foil his attempts." He sighed heavily. "This time, he succeeded."

"And nearly killed your brother in the bargain," Sierran growled. "How did you hear about this so soon?"

"I came as soon as I learned you and the Queen were in residence. I wasn't sure if you would try to set the Joining aside. If you did, I was prepared to take Lanelle to her estate at Lochinvere and keep her there in safety. Talk of what happened to Thie had already reached the village of Windemere. I made haste to the fortress for I knew Lanelle had been taken."

"We will assemble a squad..." He stopped for Morgan was shaking his head.

"You can send a hundred squads of men after him, Papa, and you'll never find his location. Every government in the world is after his ass. The Federation already has the largest bounty in history on his head and not one single man or woman brave enough to come forward to claim it by revealing the Toscalian stronghold."

"It's somewhere on the Bay of Isberia," Sierran said.

"Aye, but where?" Morgan asked. "That encompasses a lot of territory up there in the Northlands. There are miles and miles of ice floes sitting there like a labyrinth. Ships and crews have met their doom trying to find Valdemont."

"So what do you suggest?" his father demanded.

"There is a man sitting in a cell at Wardsgate awaiting execution. He is a master thief, true, but he is one helluva swordsman and a savage fighter. I would trust him with my life but—more importantly—with Lanelle's."

"One of your lovers?" Sierran asked.

Morgan exhaled loudly. "No, Papa. He is not of that bent."

"How do you know him?"

"That's a long story but let it suffice to say I have had dealings with him in the past and I know him to be an honorable man."

"An honorable criminal?" Sierran scoffed.

Morgan shrugged. "What can I say?"

"What did he do to warrant the death sentence?" the King asked.

For the first time Morgan seemed unsure of himself. He pulled at the cuffs of his jacket. "Treason," he replied. "Against the Crown."

Chapter Eight

Kyllian Reddick wasn't particularly concerned about the hanging awaiting him. It was the drawing and quartering that had kept him largely sleepless since being thrown into Wardsgate two weeks earlier. As a child, he had been forced to stand alongside his grandmother as a man had been brought to the punishment yard to be executed. That day had never left his memory and now tormented him as he sat on his hard bunk and stared at the noxious water dripping down the wall beside him.

He remembered the hurdle upon which the naked man had been tied spread-eagle. It was a hellish contraption consisting of two long poles attached to a yoke that had been pulled by a prancing horse. Across each pole had been woven a network of barbed wire strands that had worked their way into the helpless prisoner's back. With each heavy fall of the horse's hooves, the man had cried out as the barbs sank into his flesh.

The hanging had been matter of fact—a rope clamped tightly around the prisoner's neck. His body had been lifted until his feet were free of the ground, his face turned red as he struggled to breathe, his legs scissoring beneath him. He hadn't hung there long but it must have seemed like an eternity to the struggling man. When he'd been dropped to the platform, his loud gasps as he tried to get air into his depleted lungs was a harsh, pitiful sound.

Then the true horror had begun and Kyllian had tried to turn his face away.

"Nay, ye will not! Ye will watch, boy!" his grandmother had insisted, forcing his head around so he had to view the atrocity taking place on the block upon which the prisoner had been tied.

The bloodcurdling scream that rushed from the poor man's throat as his genitals had been sliced from him would stay with Kyllian until his dying day. It was the most hideous, spine chilling cry of agony that would only be matched by the unbelievable howl the condemned man emitted when his belly was sliced open and the executioner began to slowly and methodically pull out the prisoner's entrails.

And the smell!

That smell seemed to permeated the air and sink its ugly stench into the very fabric of the young boy's clothing. It was the odor of burning flesh as genitals and entrails were tossed into the firepot beside the block, the sizzling and popping as the organs were consumed a most horrid sound.

Despite the grievous injuries perpetrated upon him, the poor man still lived as he was forced to watch his flesh being devoured by the flames. It was not until his heart was ripped from his chest that he gave one fine undulating cry of anguish and ceased to struggle against his bonds.

After all those years Kyllian could still taste the sour bile that rose up but he had known better than to unleash the vomit struggling to escape his straining throat. His grandmother had been a mean bitch, a heartless hag who took a strap daily to his back whether or not he had done anything to deserve it. There had been no telling what she might have visited upon him had he disgraced her by throwing up at the execution.

“Ye see what a mistake can do to a man, boy?” she asked, bending down to breath her putrid, rotted tooth breath into his face. “He got caught and this punishment is light compared to the hell he will face when the demons get hold of him in the Abyss!”

Even with the prisoner dead, his punishment had not stopped. The executioner had ripped out all the organs then slashed at the dead man’s arms and legs, severing them from his body. Finally, he had removed the head with its wide, staring eyes filled with bloody tears, mouth locked in a yowl of agony. The limbs and head were tossed into a boiling pot of water to be parboiled so they would not rot too quickly then the head had been stuck upon a pike to display to the crowd. The limbs would be taken to four distant cities to be put on exhibit.

Laying there with those vile memories assailing him, Kyllian knew a despair so great he feared he would unman himself when it came time for his own execution to be carried out.

Not that he deserved that fate. He was innocent of the crime of which he’d been accused. Innocent yet condemned at the whim of a woman who had paid a lot of money to have him framed.

“Faithless bitch,” Kyllian named her and covered his face with his filthy hands. “Heartless, faithless bitch.”

Women—it seemed to Kyllian—had forever been his downfall. First it had been his crazed grandmother then his equally insane twin sister and finally Summer McKidd, the most beautiful, dangerous cunt in Emardia. Each in their turn had led him down the path to destruction and this time it seemed there would be no reprieve.

“You are leaving me?” Summer had thrown at him that last night they were together. “We’ll see about that!”

Kyllian thought of the first time he’d met her and cursed that night again as he had done many times over the last two weeks...

* * * *

It had started with a con gone very wrong, a mark getting wise to the swindle before the deal could be finalized. What had began as an easy way to make a few thousand gold keans had turned into a grifter’s nightmare of being chased in the dead of night by the sword-brandishing Federation militia, of running and hiding and evading capture as soldiers went house to house, barn to barn searching for their target. He had come much too close to being taken, thrown into prison for the standard twenty years for thievery had a door not opened and a hand grasped him by the arm to pull him into a hiding place, a false wall between the boards of an old stable.

She had put a slender finger to his lips in warning, cautioning him to a silence he had no intention of breaking. Due to the tight confines of their hiding place he was pressed up against her shapely body, inhaling the sweet scent of her perfume, watching the quick rise and fall of her lush breasts as lantern light shone through a crack in the wall’s boards. While the militia poked around in the stable—stabbing bayonets and swords into the mounds of straw and climbing the rickety ladder to the loft—he kept his attention riveted on the tempting mounds of her flesh rising so delectably and invitingly from the bodice of her gown.

When the militia had departed and all was still in the farm yard where he had taken refuge, Kyllian had felt her hand pressed against the front of his pants, her fingers molding around the bulge that had suddenly appeared there.

It was too a space to do anything. He could not lift his arms from his sides for he was squeezed in tight, her body only inches from his, her hand stroking him, massaging him, gently squeezing his swelling flesh.

“You want me, warrior?” she whispered.

“Aye, wench,” he said huskily.

She leaned her shoulder against some hidden spring on the door she had closed behind them and the panel popped open on well-oiled hinges. He could not help but wonder how many times the safe place had been used and who she had hidden there.

“Come with me,” she said, taking his hand and leading him from the stable’s ramshackle rear door and out into the darkness of the late fall night. Skirting the midnight fields lest the full moon sailing overhead betray them, weaving through a thick copse of trees and past a gurgling brook she led him with the sound of militia hoof beats fading away to the west. At last they came to a cabin deep in the woods, all but hidden within a protective circle of thick foliage and tall trees.

“Where is this place?” he asked as they entered the cabin and she struck a flint to light a lantern.

“My home,” she told him.

He looked about the small cabin. It was sparsely furnished with nothing more than the bare essentials: a bed, a table with two chairs, a trunk, a dry sink to one side of a soot-blackened fireplace in which sat a wrought iron cauldron. But it was shelves ranged along all four walls, around the windows, floor to ceiling that drew his gaze. Glass jar after glass jar stood sentinel alongside metal boxes and small burlap sacks. It was the smell of the place that told the tale more than the sight of the pharmacopeia stocked on the shelves.

“You’re a witch,” he accused, backing away from her.

She smiled lustily at him and that smile mesmerized him like a snake charming its prey, kept him from taking another step. “I am what I am, warrior,” she admitted and reached up to tug the drawstring loose from the bodice of her chemise, allowing the worn fabric to drop down to reveal her plump breasts. “Those who come to me expect spells and I give them spells.”

He swallowed with difficulty. “Do the spells work?” he asked as her gown slid to the rushes at her feet and for the first time he realized she was barefoot.

“No, but once I have their money in hand, who but them cares?” she asked, kicking the gown aside to stand naked before him.

His gaze slithered down her like warm honey and it was an intoxicating sight he beheld. Though he’d bedded many women in his twenty-eight year old life, he had never seen a more beautiful or voluptuous woman. Her red hair was the color of ripe strawberries and it hung loose in rampant curls to her small waist. Her eyes emerald green and her skin like freshly-drawn cream. Emphasizing that tiny waist were large breasts and sharply flaring hips that gave her a classic hourglass figure without the constraint of a corset. Her legs were long and finely shaped and when he forced his attention back to her face, her full lips were a dark mauve shade.

She moved toward him, a smile like none other he’d ever encountered touching her luxuriant mouth. “Want to taste, warrior?” she asked and put her hands to her breasts to lift them, caress them.

He did. He wanted nothing more than to fasten his lips on the large nipples and suckle until she moaned. With one quick step he was on her and his head lowered to the ripeness of her breast.

She held those heavy bosoms for him to draw upon—one to the other—and when he seemed to be more fascinated with one than its mate, she threaded her fingers through his dark curls and held his head as he made a feast of her.

“I’ve heard of you, Kyllian Reddick,” she told him as his lips pulled and tugged, his tongue dragged over her willing flesh. “We will make a good pair, you and me.”

She laughed when he swept her up in his arms and nearly hurled her upon the bed in the corner. Wrapping her long, slender legs around him she barely gave him enough room to free his cock from the confines of his pants so he could thrust within her. She took him as hard as he took her, arching up to meet his frenzied strokes. She allowed him to thrust once, twice, three times then shoved him away from her and off the bed.

Kyllian looked up, stunned, his shaft pulsing with hunger as she sat up to stare down at him.

“Take me as a gentleman would, Kyllly, or not at all. It will be no quick fumbling and a poke.”

Frustrated, infuriated that she had shoved him off her, he scrambled to his feet, intent on getting back inside her. When he reached for her, he was met with the gleaming tip of a wicked dagger she had snatched from beneath her pillow.

“Take off your clothes and do it right or you won’t do it at all,” she hissed at him, clutching the blade in a hand he understood knew how to use it.

It was with a snarl and teeth peeled back from his lips that he shed his shirt as quickly as he could, revealing a taut, muscular chest and back that bore numerous lash marks. Removing his boots was a maddening endeavor for the leather had gotten wet during his earlier mad rush from the militia before he took refuge in the stable. Cursing, he finally managed to get them off and shuck his pants before he flung himself upon her, his cock still engorged and aching to be sheathed.

Her hands ran down his shoulders and arms as he pushed at her to gain entrance. “Who whipped you, Kyllly?” she asked in a soft voice.

“Who hasn’t?” he countered as he drove home, groaning at the sweet, tight pleasure of her cunt sliding around him. He slammed his hands under her ample hips and hefted her higher, rammed into her with such force the mattress groaned beneath them and the woman cried out.

“Aye!” she said, apparently reveling in the brutal treatment. Once more her arms and legs wrapped around him to hold him tightly to her, squeezing hard at his waist, impeding his ability to draw his cock out as far as he preferred before thrusting it into her moist heat again.

Kyllian likened her to an octopus that could drape its tentacles around a hapless sailor and pull him to the depths of the ocean, tightening its grip as it dove deeper beneath the waves. He felt her teeth clamp down on his neck and yowled but it was a minor pain and nothing compared to the burning one building in his cock as he strove to release the passion.

He was unprepared for her to buck beneath him and roll him over to his back. He stared up at her with wide eyes as she sat up, still impaled on his hard shaft and tossed her long red hair over her shoulder. Her green eyes flashed fire as she pushed down hard on his groin and began to ride him like a recalcitrant pony.

Fascinated with the rise and fall of her breasts as she moved up and down upon him, he reached up to cover them but there was more flesh there than his fingers and palm could encompass. He squeezed them light, pressing his fingertips into the soft mounts.

“Harder,” she ordered and he looked up at the underside of her chin for her head had fallen back.

He dug his fingers into her breasts and—to his way of thinking—mauled them but she seemed to enjoy the pain he gave her. He would later learn that in order for her to take pleasure from sex, there had to be pain, the rougher the better.

She swiveled on his loins to drive him as deep inside her as he could go. She bounced on him until he began to grimace with the discomfort. He sucked in a harsh breath when she bent

forward and dug her long, scarlet red fingernails into the pectorals of his chest—drawing blood—as her movement went from up and down and rotating to a hard back and forth motion that stiffened his rod even.

Kyllian slid his arms around her waist and jerked her down to him, flipping over with her as she'd done with him. He slapped a hand under each of her thighs and hoisted her legs up to his shoulders, bending her back sharply as he dug his toes into the mattress and began to pound into her mercilessly.

“You want pain, baby,” he told her. “You got it!”

He put every bit of his strength behind the thrusts and drove into her hard, mindless to the grunts and groans and moans that came from her opened mouth. He felt her fingernails piercing his upper arms, felt the trickle of his blood but it didn't matter. All the really registered with him was to shove himself into her as hard, as fast, and as thoroughly as he could.

The bed frame shook from his furious pounding. It hit the wall with each thrust and the ropes holding the cornhusk mattress groaned with the weight of their bodies.

Bodies slick with sweat, Kyllian slammed his cock into her for all he was worth, feeling the release hovering just out of his reach and striving to grasp it, straining to achieve it. For the first time in his life it didn't matter to him whether the female body beneath him gained pleasure from this savage act. He only wanted the surcease of the burning hardness that gripped his cock. He wanted to feel the copious spurting of his cum. He wanted relief.

Her cunt rippled around him, milking him, little spasms gripping him so tightly he cried out with the pleasure it gave him. He was only a thrust or two from fulfillment and he slammed into her even harder, sweat dripping from his brow to land upon her lips.

“Fuck harder, warrior,” she spat at him and her fingernails drove into his flesh to spur him on. “Fuck me harder!”

Those words drove straight to his cock and he came with such wildness, such blinding strength that he howled like a wild animal. He shoved himself into her like a machine, the thrusts as deep and as hard as he could provide them and she came again and again on his shaft as he spilled himself into her.

Exhausted, spent, drained as he'd never felt before, he collapsed atop her then rolled, pulling free to fling an arm over his eyes, his chest heaving, heart pounding fiercely in his chest.

“Not bad,” she proclaimed. “I've had better but not bad.”

He slowly turned his head to stare at her. The sex had been the best he'd ever known. It had shattered him and he was still finding it hard to draw breath yet she had labeled it *not bad*?

“You'll learn to do better,” she told him and snuggled close to his side, throwing an arm over his sweaty chest and a leg over his thigh. “I'll teach you to come like a race horse.”

* * * *

And she had he thought as he lay in his jail cell striving not to count the hours 'til his execution—an execution she had ordered for him.

“May your cunt rot from the inside out, you bitch,” he grumbled as he turned to his side and drew his knees up.

A clank from farther down the row of cells echoed to him but he ignored him. He had grown accustomed to hearing sobbing, wails, curses and prayers at all hours of the day or night. One man often beat his head against the bars until he was unconscious though nothing was ever done about the poor, mad creature. Another made loud, animalistic grunting sounds as he pulled his pud morning, noon, and night. It was a wonder the bastard still had a dick to abuse.

And there was the wench two cells beyond his who sang softly every night as a mother would to her child, lulling herself and many of the inmates into a restless slumber. Her sweet, clear voice was the only bright thing in this dark realm of tortured thoughts.

A furtive movement close to his cell drew the thief's interest and he opened his eyes to look out into the corridor but there was no way he could see anything out there in the pitch darkness.

"Rat," he said with disgust for the place was literally crawling with them, their musky stench a constant reminder of the filth in which he was housed.

The door to his cell suddenly creaked open and Kyllian sat up so quickly the blood rushed to his head and blackness encroached on his vision. He had to grab the mildewed wood on the bunk frame to keep from pitching off it.

The guards never opened his cell door. It wasn't necessary for when the chamber pot needed emptying, it was passed through a small latched opening at the base of the vertical bars just big enough for the slop pot to fit through. Meals were slid into him in the same way on a narrow tray. Considering the fare was stale bread, a slice of moldy cheese, and brackish water, it really couldn't be considered a meal. Once a week he got an orange that was going bad and he considered himself lucky.

It was a full day before his execution and he'd had no visitors since he'd been shoved into Wardgate. The only reason the door would be opened was to take him out to his death.

Unable to see in the unrelieved darkness of the cell for no light shone down the corridor at this time of night, he pressed against the wall behind him as though by doing so he could hide from whatever or whoever had come for him.

"It's too early," he said and hated the whine in his voice.

"Come with me," a voice whispered urgently. "Now, if you want to see daylight after tomorrow's dawn, Reddick!"

For a moment he didn't move but then a wild thought flitted through his head. Perhaps Summer had relented and she was giving him a reprieve, saving him for the fate she had paid to have him suffer. He scooted off the bunk, waving a hand in front of him, unable to see anything except the faint darker bulk of the cell bars.

A hand wrapped around his upper arm and he almost yelled but another hand clasped brutally over his mouth.

"Be quiet!" the voice hissed before the hand was removed.

Kyllian nodded and was pulled along behind whoever had been sent to rescue him. He and his savior moved silently past the other cells until the man holding his arm stopped to open the door that led into the guard room. He yanked it open and bright light spilled out, blinding Kyllian who threw up an arm to ward off the painful intrusion after days spent in near-darkness.

He had a vague sense of bodies lying on the floor and knew the guards had been taken out—either dead or unconscious, it didn't matter to him. They were all a vicious bunch who took delight in tormenting their wards. He stumbled in his rescuer's wake as he was pulled from the guard room and down a long, dimly lit corridor to a small iron-studded door.

"Out you go," the man holding him said and released Kyllian's arm as the door was opened and he shoved the thief into the night. Almost immediately the door closed again and the sound of a lock engaging stamped finality to the moment.

"Reddick, over here!"

That voice sounded somewhat familiar and Kyllian obeyed, squinting to see a carriage and four sitting at the corner of the prison wall with the carriage's door opened wide. In the

darkness, he could make out a man beside the door, waving him forward, heard the words hurry and come on hissed urgently.

He ran crouched over—half afraid someone would see him and take him into custody again. Once at the carriage, he looked up to see the man who had called to him and he blinked with astonishment.

“Morgan?” he questioned, confused.

“Get the hell in the carriage, Reddick!” Morgan Summerall snarled.

Not needing another invitation to save his life, Kyllian sprang into the carriage and across the seat, crowded in as Morgan leapt in after him. Morgan had the door barely closed when the carriage jerked forward, pitching Kyllian back against the thickly upholstered seat.

It was dark inside the interior of the carriage but he didn't need to see for the thief to smell the wafting of perfume. He smiled, sensing the outline of the woman sitting across from him. He also sensed a larger, masculine presence beside hers and wondered who the man was who had accompanied Summer.

“Summer, I...” he began but Morgan shushed him.

“There'll be time to talk later,” Morgan insisted in a tone that left no opening for argument.

Settling back in his seat—the first comfort he'd known in weeks—Kyllian tried to relax. He was saved and he was grateful, knowing whatever Summer asked of him he'd do. Never again did he want to be faced with her spite and vengeance. He'd come too close to losing his life for him not to be grateful for any scrap she threw his way.

Into the night the carriage sped, the pace of the horses picking up once they had left the confines of the city and moved out over the coach road into the countryside. The rocking movement of the vehicle lulled him and he fell easily into a much-needed sleep, his head sagging to his chest.

“Wake up, Kyllly.”

A gentle hand shook him and Kyllian's head snapped up. The first thing of which he became aware was that the carriage was no longer moving and there was light coming in through the windows on the door. Only he and Morgan were in the conveyance.

“Where are we?” he asked, feeling numb from the sleep.

“Our destination,” Morgan said cryptically and pushed open the carriage door. He climbed out, holding the door open for Kyllian. “Come on, man. We don't have all night.”

Kyllian got out of the carriage, surprised to find himself in the bailey of some fortress. He glanced around, looked up at the walls to see guards making their circuit of the battlements and frowned. This was some rich lord's stronghold. He'd been to *Vista del Mar* and he knew that wasn't where he was. He turned very confused eyes to his companion.

“Everything will be explained to you in a few minutes,” Morgan told him and set out for the stairs that obviously led to the keep.

Following Summerall, Kyllian ran a forearm under his nose, no longer able to smell the sour body odor that clung to him but his companion had not missed it.

“A bath is being prepared for you and fresh clothes. When you're finished, come down to the main hall. I'll have a meal ready for you,” Morgan said.

“Food?” That was all that mattered to Kyllian at that moment and at Morgan's nod, the thief's stomach growled and clenched.

There was a servant waiting for them and Morgan told Kyllian to go with the man. Dazed by the turn in the events, Kyllian meekly followed the servant, too engrossed in staring at the riches around him to say a word.

* * * *

“The poor man,” Celeste said as she sat before the fireplace. “I remember all too well...”

“Aye,” her husband cut her off. “I know you do.” He glanced at his eldest son. “You are sure this man won’t shimmy down the walls with the silverware tucked in his britches?”

Morgan looked down at the snifter of brandy in his hand. “Kyllian is a thief, Papa, but he is an honorable thief. He’ll be down as quickly as he can if not out of the curiosity I know is beating at him but for the food he hasn’t had in a good long while.”

“Wardsgate has never been known for its culinary delights,” Sierran quipped as he took a sip of his own brandy.

“Perhaps we should look into the running of that awful place, warrior,” his wife suggested.

“We will,” the King—not her husband—declared.

“Where did you meet him, Morgan?” Celeste inquired.

Though he’d never been comfortable around his father’s legal wife, Morgan liked the Queen. She had always been kind to him, always smiled at him and never looked down her pert little nose at him because he was his mother’s son.

“I met him when he swindled me out of one of my prized race horses,” Morgan said with a rueful grin. “I won’t go into details but suffice it to say he was so good I never suspected a thing until it was too late and both he and the pony were long gone.”

“But you went after him?” his father prompted.

“Tooth and nail,” Morgan asserted, setting the snifter on the table beside him. “I wasn’t about to let anyone get the best of me, especially someone I’d taken an instant liking to when we first met.”

“He flirted with you,” Celeste said with a glimmer of humor.

“Aye, Milady, he did,” Morgan admitted. “He had done his homework and knew my leanings.” He shrugged. “He was never overt with it and neither was I. It was such sort of implied that he might be interested after the business deal was in the bag.”

“What happened when you found him?” Sierran questioned.

“We fought,” Morgan said, rubbing his knuckles as if remembering the fight. “Luckily neither of us had a weapon so we simply beat one another into the ground.” His laughter came from a man whose memory was a fond one. “I had a broken rib and he had two. My nose was broken and I almost unhinged his jaw, gave him two black eyes. I broke two of his fingers and both of us pissed blood for a week.”

“Sounds like you had fun,” Sierran observed.

“We did and when it was done and we were lying there bleeding and gasping and moaning, we started to chuckle. I gave him my hand, he took it, and we have been friends ever since.”

“I take it you got the horse back,” Celeste said.

“Well, no,” Morgan replied. “He’d already sold it but he gave me his portion of the proceeds from the sale.”

“He had a partner?” his father inquired.

“A woman named Summer McKidd,” Morgan replied. “A real mean bitch—pardon my language Milady—and the reason he wound up being charged for a crime he didn’t commit with his neck in a noose and his belly ripe for slitting.”

“A woman scorned?” Celeste asked.

“Precisely.”

“Despite his lawlessness you trust him,” Sierran stated rather than questioned.

“I do. He’s as loyal as the day is long to his friends—or those he considers his friends—and I know him well enough to know that he will want to pay me back for breaking him out of Wardsgate.”

“If he agrees to help us and comes out of this in one piece,” the King said, “I’ll grant him a full pardon. There’s no sense in having something like that hanging over his head if he’s innocent.”

“I swear to you he is, Papa, and…” Morgan said then locked eyes with his father. “You might consider placing him under Master Ian’s tutelage.”

Sierran cocked an eyebrow. “You believe him skilled enough to take on the challenge of WyndMaster training?”

Morgan glanced at Celeste then away. “I know that you should have someone other than your son as your champion for the very reason we are here tonight. Thiessen is good—I’ll grant you that—but he is the future heir to the throne and his safety should be uppermost in your mind as it is in his mother’s.”

Sierran cast his wife a contemplative look. “You believe I did wrong in making Thiessen a WyndMaster?”

“No,” Celeste said, shaking her head. “But as Morgan says, he will be the next king. Who will be his champion?”

A long breath came from the King’s lips. “You are right, as usual, wench.”

There was a discrete cough at the door and everyone turned their attention that way.

“Pardon, Your Majesty, but your guest is on his way down,” Thomas said.

“Lord Morgan tells us his friend is no doubt very hungry,” Sierran told his son’s seneschal. “Take him to the dining hall and we will join him for dessert.”

“As you wish, Sire,” Thomas said.

“There is something else you should know about Kyllly, Papa,” Morgan said. “His mother died when he and his twin sister were born. They were raised by their grandmother, an old gypsy who beat him every day of his life and who put her granddaughter out for prostitution when she was barely twelve. It was the old woman who taught him to steal and con his way through life. The only good thing the hag ever did for him was to die.”

“So thievery is the only thing he knows,” Celeste says.

“Aye, Milady, it is,” Morgan told her.

“Poor man,” she repeated.

“A man has free will, wench,” her husband said in a stern voice. “He can make the conscious decision to do right from wrong.”

“Normally I would agree with you, Papa, but in Kyllian’s case, it was a matter of doing what he was told or suffering the consequences. You never met the hag. I did and I’ve never met a woman any eviler.”

* * * *

Kyllian had strove hard not to gobble the delicious fare laid before him but by the time he had sopped the last of the gravy from his plate and the vessel was so clean it looked as though it

had been washed, his hands were trembling from having exercised such constraint. He didn't want it to appear that he had been starving or that he had no manners—which he most assuredly did—nor did he want to look as though he as desperate as he felt. When the large piece of trifle appeared in front of him, it took all his self-control not to cram his spoon into it. Instead, with his hand trembling, he turned the dessert plate around and around and made himself content just to study the wonderful-smelling concoction. From the soft white sponge cake dribbled with sherry and brandy to the creamy perfection of the pale yellow custard to the tiny chunks of macaroon cookies, zest of lemon, browned almonds, glacé cherries, and the strawberry jam and the whipped cream, the layers of the dessert called to him like a lover and like a lover, he wanted to feast his eyes on her before he took the first bite. He ignored the cup of fragrant coffee set on the table and continued to inspect the dessert, putting the tip of one finger into the whipped cream for just a taste.

“For the gods' sake, Kyllly, eat the thing,” he heard Morgan said but did not lift his gaze from the dessert.

“Topsy Laird,” Kyllian said in awe. “Do you know I've never had one of these?” He was unaware that chairs were pulled back and that he'd been joined by people other than Morgan. “I've only seen them through restaurant windows.”

“Then it's high time you found out if it is as good as it looks,” Morgan replied.

“Not yet,” Kyllian said. “I will.” His voice lowered. “Just not yet.”

“Then I hope you don't mind if we have ours,” a man said.

Kyllian glanced up with irritation for just a split second then back at the dessert but then he went as stone-hard as a statue and slowly lifted his head again and turned it to stare at the man who was sitting at the head of the table. The thief's mouth dropped open.

“Topsy Laird is my favorite dessert,” the woman sitting beside the King of Emardia said with a soft smile and Kyllian knew she could be none other than the Queen. “The trouble with it is I might as well salve it on my hips for I fear that is where the bloody thing will wind up.”

“Nonsense, wench,” the King disagreed. “Nothing you eat puts a single pound on you.” He had scooped up a large portion of the dessert and was putting it in his mouth when Kyllian shot up from the table as though a fire had been lit under his ass.

“Your Majesty!” he said and dropped like a rock to the floor, one knee hitting it so hard everyone in the room winced.

“Do as my son tells you, Reddick, and eat your dessert,” Sierran said around another gob of sweets. “Or I'll eat yours as well as my own.”

“He will, too,” the Queen agreed. “I've lost many a dessert by not eating it fast enough around my husband. Please, be seated.”

On legs that felt as though they would buckle beneath him any moment, Kyllian took his seat, giving Morgan a look that was half-fear and half-shock.

“You have the King to thank for your jail break, Kyllly,” Morgan said after taking a bite of his own dessert.

“We need your help, Lord Kyllian,” the Queen said.

Kyllian shook his head. “Your Highness, I have no title. I...”

“You will before the night is through,” the King said. “There is a pardon in it for you if you accept.”

“Anything, Sire! I am yours to command!” Kyllian agreed, his hands clutching the edge of the table.

“You have not heard what help we need,” Sierran reminded him.

“It matters not. Ask me to walk barefoot on hot coals and I will take off my boots now,” Kyllian swore. “Ask me to wrestle a bear in my birthday suit and I will be out of here so fast...”

Sierran held his hand up to waylay the extravagant suggestions. “All we need is your help in retrieving our son’s wife, the Princess Lanelle, from the clutches of her abductor.”

Kyllian’s eyes flicked to Morgan with surprise.

“My brother’s wife, Kyllly,” Morgan was quick to explain.

“Who would dare abduct the lady?” Kyllian asked, returning his gaze to the King.

“A Toscalian raider named Emilio Silva,” Sierran supplied.

“I’ve heard of him,” Kyllian said. “He’s bad news.”

“That is why we staged your breakout,” Morgan said. “We will need you to infiltrate his gang and retrieve Lanelle. If he believes you are an enemy of the Crown, he will want to make you his ally.”

“An enemy of my enemy is my friend,” Sierran commented.

“And the Prince?” Kyllian asked, afraid of the answer. He—like everyone in Emardia—knew Prince Thiessen was not only a WyndMaster but the King’s champion. If he was not going after his wife, there had to be a critical reason.

“Our son was grievously injured by the raiders,” Celeste said.

“He took three arrows to the chest and belly,” Morgan stressed. “He will live but it will take him weeks, perhaps months, to recuperate.”

The dessert forgotten at this news, Kyllian pushed the plate from him. “Tell me all you know about the brigand who did this and I will see he is brought to justice.”

“We don’t know that much. The militias from many countries have been unable to find the stronghold of the raiders,” Sierran said. “It will be up to you to locate him.”

The Queen drew Kyllian’s attention to her. “Lord Kyllian, as a special kindness to me, personally, I would consider it a great favor if you locate this man quickly and bring our son’s lady home to us.”

“Consider it done, Your Highness,” Kyllian vowed.

“Then eat your dessert before my warrior snatches it from under your nose,” Celeste ordered.

Chapter Nine

Thiessen's eyelids fluttered open and he groaned. There appeared to be a fire in his belly that was consuming him from the inside out. Every shallow breath he took burned with a vengeance and he dared not breathe too deeply. The gods forbid he should have to cough or move even a fraction of an inch for the pain was so intense it was flaying him alive. Add to that misery a brutal headache and a mouth so dry he could barely make a sound.

But that sound had been enough for a face appeared above him in the dim candlelight.

"So you're awake. It's gods-be-damned bloody time, brat."

It was Morgan who was leaning over him.

"N...nelle?"

It was more croak than word.

"She was taken but we've a man who will be going after her," Morgan said, seeing no reason to lie to Thiessen.

"Who?"

"You don't know him," Morgan replied and reached for the pitcher of water on the table beside his brother's bed. He poured a goblet half full then slid his free hand under Thiessen's neck. "Here, drink."

"Who?" Thiessen demanded, too weak, in too much pain to put extra emphasis on the word but his eyes told the story his strength could not.

"His name is Kyllian Reddick, Thie. He's no stranger to a sword. Now drink."

Thiessen obeyed, his mouth as dry as a desert. He knew he had a fever for sweat was dripping down his face but he had no idea how badly he'd been hurt.

"That's enough," Morgan said. "Too much and you'll just throw it back up." He took the goblet away and eased his brother's head down on the damp pillow.

"I remember an arrow hitting me," the Prince said.

"Three arrows to be precise," Morgan told him. He set the goblet on the table beside the bed and crossed his arms. "You're lucky the gods hold you in such high favor else I'd be sitting *basgaire* for you tonight."

Thiessen almost smiled despite the live coals smoldering in his belly. "You mourn for me? Not likely, Morgan."

Morgan shrugged. "Think what you will. I might not like you, brat, but we are kin."

The Prince tried to push himself up in the bed but the agony ripped through him from chest to groin and he gasped, nearly losing consciousness as he dug his hands into the sheet.

"Three arrows, Thiessen," Morgan reminded him. "Two of which nearly took your life. Lie still before you break open the stitching the Healer took such pains to do." He unfolded his arms and leaned over to tug the covers around Thiessen's chest.

"I'm burning up now, Morgan," Thiessen complained.

"Tough shit," his half-brother stated. "You don't need to catch a cold."

"So you'd rather bake me instead."

Morgan arched a brow but made no comment.

"I want to talk to the man who is going after Nelle," the Prince said.

“I figured as much. At the moment, I believe the old man is knighting him.”

Thiessen frowned. “He is not loyal to throne already?”

“As loyal as they come, brat, but nothing more than a gypsy warrior with a penchant for larceny and a steady hand with dagger, sword and pistol before tonight. He was in Wardsgate awaiting execution for a crime he did not commit. He’d run through hell as naked as the day he was born to prove his allegiance to Emardia. He’d also make a deadly WyndMaster to champion his King.”

Thiessen gave his half-brother a steady look. “I am the King’s champion,” he said.

“And should not be,” Morgan declared. “You are the future of this kingdom and you nearly succumbed to your wounds. Who would sit the throne if that had happened?”

“You,” Thiessen replied.

“Not fucking likely,” Morgan disagreed. “I’d cut my own throat before I’d allow that to happen.”

“Think of all the handsome couriers at court,” Thiessen said, “you could blackmail into your personal service.”

Morgan grinned. “Well, there is that, but nevertheless, I’ve no desire to wear the crown, brat. I’m content enough to allow you that dubious honor.”

“And serve me?” Thiessen challenged.

“Tolerate you,” Morgan returned.

A soft knock at the door brought Morgan’s head around. “Come,” he ordered.

The portal opened and Kyllian entered. He stood with his hand on the knob, his eyes on Morgan. “I am getting ready to leave now,” he said.

“Come meet your Prince first,” Morgan said. “He wishes a word with you.”

Kyllian left the door open and came forward, bowing to the man on the bed. “I am at your service, Your Grace,” he said.

“I’ve only one request of you,” Thiessen said.

“Ask and it shall be done, Highness,” Kyllian stated.

“My father asked that you bring Silva to justice?”

“He did, Your Grace,” Kyllian acknowledged.

Thiessen held the other man’s gaze. “That isn’t what I want. I want the bastard dead and I want him to die in agony.”

Kyllian glanced at Morgan whose face was stone-cold hard then back at his Prince. “He’s as good as dead now, Prince Thiessen,” he vowed.

“In agony,” Thiessen repeated. “The worst agony you can hand him.”

Acute pain was etched into the lines on the Prince’s face for Kyllian to clearly see. Sweat glistened on a pale, drawn countenance and bright color dotted the sunken cheeks. Each breath was labored as it was pulled in and the voice that spoke was weak, filled with discomfort.

“I will avenge you, Highness,” Kyllian swore.

“He is not asking because of the agony Silva brought to him,” Morgan said, drawing Kyllian’s glance. “But for the agony the raider’s inflicted on the Princess.”

“Understood,” Kyllian said.

“Take my sword,” Thiessen said and nodded his chin toward the widow maker that hung on the wall over the fireplace. “It is a WyndMaster weapon, blessed by the gods, once wielded by your King. It will not miss.”

“Nor will I, Your Grace,” Kyllian told him as Morgan went to take down the massive weapon. When it was laid into his hands, Kyllian felt command coursing through the steel. He

stared down at the weapon, surprised there were no jewels in the pommel or etching along the blade. It was a plain sword but in it was immense power. He touched a nick on the cross-guard, wondering how it came to be.

“Now go,” Thiessen said, closing his eyes. His head was aching horribly and he hurt so bad it was all he could do not to groan. “Bring my lady back to me.”

“I’ll walk you out,” Morgan said, indicating Kyllian was to precede him from the room. Once out in the hall, he put a delaying hand on the young thief’s shoulder. “Don’t come back without her, Kyllly.”

“You have my word on it.”

“And take this,” Morgan said as he took off the signet ring Lanelle had given him for his birthday the year before. It was a one of a kind ring she had had commissioned just for him. “Let her see it so she’ll know I sent you.” He gave the ring into Kyllian’s keeping. “Guard that ring with your life, gypsy, for it means more to me than your worthless hide.”

“Once I have the lady, how should I proceed?” Kyllian asked.

Morgan clamped a hand around the thief’s shoulder. “You’ll send us a ransom demand. This is how we’ll do it...”

* * * *

Lanelle was terrified as she lay in Silva’s bed aboard his ship. The seas were rough, a storm lifting the raider’s ship high on towering waves before dropping it into deep troughs where it bobbed unmercifully, rocking brutally from side to side. Though she had always been a good sailor, the fierceness of the gale and the close quarters did nothing to alleviate the growing sense of hopelessness into which she’d fallen. It added to her misery and to the disgust that crawled over her flesh where the raider’s hands had roamed. She could still feel the slimy slide of his palms, the intrusion of his coarse fingers, and the hard pull of his lips on her nipples. Though she had fought him, it had done her no good. He was too strong and the manacles he had finally clapped onto her wrists and ankles to restrain her had done what his threats could not.

“Be still or I’ll beat you, woman!” he had warned but strangely enough, he had been gentler with her than she would have expected. His raping of her had been repugnant but it had not been as painful as it had been the first time he’d ravaged her. Of course then she had been an untried virgin but even so she suspected he had been too drunk to notice the difference.

Rain lashed at the porthole above her head and a trickle of water plopped into her face. She flinched and moaned, jerking against her bonds but the iron held fast, bruising her wrists. Spread-eagled to the bunk, it was more than just her nakedness and the invading cold that sent shudders of fear racing through her. It was the knowledge that should the ship succumb to the storm, sink beneath the waves, she would go to her death without a fighting chance.

“Silva!” she yelled but knew he could not hear her above the booming thunder and skirling lightning.

“You are my woman,” he had told her. “I will see to your safety.”

“Aye,” she said to herself as she pulled fiercely on the manacles. “You’re seeing to my safety you ugly bastard!”

Thoughts of drowning pushed at her mind and she had to bite down on her lower lip to keep from crying. As deaths went, she supposed it wouldn’t be so bad. All she’d have to do would be to open her mouth and breathe in the water. She doubted there would be much pain if any at all. But it was the claustrophobic press of smothering that scared her more than anything else.

Suddenly the ship stopped rocking and it seemed to surge upward as though being tugged by an unseen rope. The water around it calmed and she knew they had sailed into the eye of the storm. At least for a little while, there was safety then the chaos would begin again as the gale flowed over and around them once again on the backside. She jumped as the cabin door opened and Silva hurried in.

He was drenched to the skin, his oilskin slicker glistening with water. His thick black hair was plastered to his skull and he reached up to run a hand through the sodden mess.

“Are you all right?” he asked in his thick Toscalian accent.

“Oh, aye, I’m just fit as a fiddle,” she said with a glare of hatred.

Emilio Silva was a handsome brute of a man with wide shoulders and hair that hung down well past those brawny shoulders. His upper arms were as thick around and as hard as small tree trunks—as were his heavily-muscled thighs. Tall for his nationality, he had dark olive skin that made the whiteness of his teeth stand out behind thick mustaches and a neatly-clipped goatee. His black eyes would have been sensuous had they not held a hard gleam of menace within their ebon depths. Large hands reached up to unbuckle the clasps of his slicker.

“If you promise not to fling yourself overboard, I’ll unchain you,” he said as he removed the slicker and tossed it aside to tug the tail of his shirt from his pants.

“What if the ship had floundered?” she threw at him.

“I would have hurried to your aid, wife,” he replied as he dragged the shirt over his head to reveal a wet chest thickly matted with dark hair.

Lanelle ground her teeth at the title. “I am not your wife!”

“Aye, but you are,” he said, removing his belt to strip out of his sodden pants.

She turned her face away as he pushed the pants down his long legs. She had no desire to ever see again the large shaft of which he was so inordinately proud. It had entered her twice already since she’d been in Silva’s greedy hands and the thought of it thrusting into her again made her sick to her stomach.

“Such modesty,” the raider said with a laugh. “You’ll get over it.”

And then he was on her again, crawling onto the bunk to cover her with his cold, rain-slick body, wedging himself between her thighs, his hands molding to her breasts as his growing erection stabbed at the junction of her legs.

“Bastard,” she hissed, squeezing her eyes shut as he lowered his head to suck her nipple deep into his mouth. His moan of pleasure brought tears to her eyes while his tongue swirled over the peak.

He lifted his head, gave his attention to the other nipple for a moment then slid his lips down her chest, over her belly, his intention clear as he wiggled down the bunk. “You taste so good,” he said.

Helpless to do anything but lay there as he shoved his hands under her hips to lift her to him, Lanelle hated the feel of his mouth on her sex. He dragged his tongue all along the folds—making lapping sounds that disgusted her as he fed from her moistness. He drew upon her clit, licked it, nibbled it until it was a hard little bead and there was nothing she could do to stop the treacherous thing from gaining pleasure from his actions. His tongue flicked inside her, drove as deep as it could go then slithered over and around her folds once again. She stiffened as she felt his thumb creeping close to her opening and when he thrust it inside her she pushed the side of her face tightly into the pillow.

“You like it,” he said as he made little circling motions with his thumbs. “You know you do.”

“I hate it!” she snarled. “I hate you!”

He laughed and moved his other thumb over to join the first, splaying her vagina apart to thrust his tongue inside again. “Umm,” he said, the vibration against her core adding to the growing arousal she could not keep at bay. He slipped a finger into her anus and she cried out with outrage as the digit drove far up inside her.

“You slime!” she said.

“Watch your mouth, wench,” he warned.

He had impaled her on his hand and was working his finger and thumbs in and out of her, drawing a response she found abhorrent but was unable to control. Her hips seemed to move of their own accord and pushed her against his invasion.

“Aye, that is what I want from you, wench,” he whispered and withdrew his thumb and finger to plow first two then three then four inside her cunt, pushing hard and wriggling them, grinning at her whimper.

Her body wanted him whether or mind or heart did, she realized. She was finding it harder and harder to hold her desire at bay. Little trickles of pleasure were creeping along the base of her belly and the itch was demanding to be scratched. She fought it but knew it was a useless battle.

And then his hands were gone from her flesh and she moaned, hating herself for having done so. His laughter was loud and brutal and when his hands went to her ankles to unshackle her, she tried to kick out at him but he was too quick and too strong for her. He merely knelt on one of her legs as he unshackled the other then stretched out atop her again, his wide chest hovering above her as he unchained one of her wrists.

Lanelle tried to claw him, to hit him but he wedged her arm beneath her and clamped his body tightly to hers to keep her from freeing it. Undoing the shackle on her other wrist, he kept a hard hold on her arm as he moved so quickly she had no time to react, flipping her to her belly and snaking a hand under her waist to jerk her up to him.

“Let’s try it this way since you don’t care for the other,” he growled in her ear.

She felt the probing of his hard cock along the crease of her ass and snarled in protest. She bucked beneath him, striving to throw him off, but his shaft rammed into her from behind, stretching her vagina on its steely length. She felt him all the way to her womb.

“You bastard!”

“You don’t like that, either? You’re a hard woman to please, Lanelle!” he cooed and pulled free only to ram himself brutally into her anus with a loud grunt.

Lanelle screamed in agony. Burning, tearing pain spread through her lower body and tears flooded her eyes as he thrust in and out of her torn flesh with no care to her sobbing. She grabbed handfuls of the sheet and pulled at it in her pain.

“You’ll learn, woman,” she heard him growl as he continued to batter her.

A loud clap of thunder shook the cabin and then the ship began to rock again. It rose up and then sank down again in a stomach-curdling plunge. As it began to rock from side to side, Silva’s thrusts into her came quicker until she felt him stiffen behind her, felt the jerk of his large cock, then heard him growl like an animal as he released his cum. He pushed her down to collapse atop her for a moment then he pulled free, mindless of her shriek of pain as he did so.

“That was partially satisfying,” he said, rolling off her and going to his sea chest to retrieve dry clothes.

Lanelle drew her knees up as she lay there sobbing wildly, her body torn and bleeding.

“Don’t worry, little cunt,” he told her, putting a hand to her bare rump to rub her briskly. “I’ll be back to stretch you some more.”

With a savage laugh, he headed for the door, his wet slicker sending sprinkles of water on her as he swirled it around his shoulders. She heard the snick of the bolt as he locked her in.

Chapter Ten

It took Kyllian Reddick over three weeks to find the *Cierzo*, Emilio Silva's ship. The sun was setting over Sinate Bay as the big black barkentine sailed into the harbor at Jonastown. Its black shrouds looked ominous in the lowering sky but it was the sight of the woman standing at the rail that put fear in Kyllian's gut.

There was nothing remotely alive in the lost expression that held the woman's lovely face so still. Though her hair was neatly braided in one long queue hanging over her shoulder, the gown she wore hung on her like a shroud. Her complexion was pasty white and her eyes were dull, without hope as she stood there with her hands wrapped around the teakwood rail. He knew she was unaware of what was going on around her as the ship was docked.

Reluctantly, he tore his gaze from the pitiful sight of the woman to search out the man he knew was responsible for her condition. When he thought he'd located him, Kyllian's gaze hardened and held, taking in the swagger of the Toscalian raider as he walked the deck, watching a wide grin form as the man he thought might be Silva clapped one of his sailors on the back and released a hearty laugh.

"Who is the captain of the *Cierzo*?" Kyllian asked one of the men milling about the dock.

"The one with the red bandana," the man said. "Captain Silva be his name."

Kyllian nodded, his gaze narrowed on the long black hair that hung from beneath the confinement of the wide scarlet bandana. He took in the large gold hoops that hung from Silva's earlobes and made a mental note to make sure he snatched them from the raider's flesh when they met.

"You looking for a berth?" the man beside Kyllian asked.

"You know of one?" Kyllian countered.

A careless shrug hiked the man's shoulder. "The raiders take on a few hands here and there." He glanced up at the sword pommel showing above Kyllian's shoulder. "You know how to use that?"

"Nah," Kyllian said. "It just came with the scabbard. Thought it made me look manly."

The man laughed, displaying a mouth pitted with rotten teeth. "You're a card, you are!" He tugged at his filthy pants. "They make the Belle Marie their watering place," he said, hooking a finger over his shoulder. "If'n you're looking for work, that's where you go to meet up with the raiders."

"That's assuming I don't mind running with Toscalian raiders," Kyllian drawled. "There are safer things to do, you know."

"Suit yourself," the man said and ambled off.

Kyllian leaned against a post and watched the *Cierzo's* crew debarking until only a few sailors remained along with the captain and the woman who stood so still at the rail. She was staring down at the greasy waters flowing back the ship, seemingly alone in a world of her own.

"Come, wench," he heard Silva bark and saw the Toscalian snake out a hand to firmly grip the woman's upper arm. He pulled her along with him as he headed for the gangplank.

It wasn't until the duo started down the wooden incline that Kyllian noticed the woman was barefoot. He winced as she stumbled along in the raider's wake but no emotion registered on

her pretty face. She seemed unaware of the roughness of the wood underfoot or the stray pebbles over which she walked. They passed within three feet of Kyllian and as they went, he saw the dark bruises banding her wrists. One quick glance downward and similar bands were revealed at her ankles as the gown swayed away from her feet.

Grinding his teeth that a woman should be treated so—and a lady of royal blood, at that—Kyllian dug his fingernails into his palms. He made no move until the raider had entered the tavern door over which hung a gaudy sign proclaiming it to be the Belle Marie. With a quick roll of his shoulders to settle the sword more comfortably, he struck out for the tavern.

“Ale for me and the missus!” Silva shouted as he swung Lanelle around and yanked a chair from one of the grimy tables to push her into it. He hooked a boot under the rungs of a second chair and plopped down beside her, finally releasing his punishing hold on her arm.

Kyllian strolled in as a round of applause shook the smoke-filled room. The center of attention was the woman at Silva’s table who saw demurely with her head down, hands clenched in her lap. She seemed unaware of the congratulations sent her way as the patrons raised a toast to the captain and his recent nuptial. Walking to the bar, the warrior ordered ale and stood there with one booted foot on the foot rail, shoulders hunched over his mug as he covertly watched the couple in the reflection of the mirror behind the bar.

“Stole her right out from under the eagle eye of the Prince of Emardia!” Silva proclaimed. “Made her mine in every hole there is for a man to claim!”

Fury lashed through Kyllian but he kept a steady hand on his mug as he brought it to his lips. Though blackness fringed his vision he knew he had to keep a clear head if he was to take the man lounging at the table behind him. He let his assessment wander over Emilio Silva, sizing him up as well as the wicked dagger at the raider’s thigh.

Silva had a score of years on him as well as at least sixty pounds or more but that weight Kyllian knew he could use to his advantage. He would be lighter on his feet than the Toscalian and though the other warrior might have heft and muscle behind a punch, he surely could not move with the same agility as Kyllian knew he, himself, possessed. It was an ability that had held him in good stead over the years in fleeing the law hot on his heels.

As he took another sip of his ale, he saw a man sidle up to Silva and bend down to whisper in the raider’s ear. Kyllian almost smiled for he had planted seeds among the riffraff on the docks when he’d first arrived, let it slip he was an escaped convict having fled the Federation prison of Wardsgate. He watched Silva turn his head to give him a once-over and Kyllian’s hand tensed around the mug.

“Is that so?” he heard Silva say. “Fetch him to me.”

The man appeared at Kyllian’s elbow. “The Cap’n would like a word with you.”

Kyllian slowly turned his head to survey the man speaking to him. He swallowed his ale, letting his gaze wander contemptuously down the smaller man. “What captain would that be?” he asked.

“Cap’n Silva of the raiders,” the man boasted.

With a show of disdain, Kyllian looked away. “Don’t know him.”

A small gasp escaped the man. “Everybody knows the Cap’n!” he declared.

Kyllian remained silent. He took another sip of his ale and ran his tongue over his upper lip, staring into the mirror to meet Silva’s steely look.

“What were you in Wardsgate for?” the raider called out to him, effectively stilling all over sound in the room.

Nonchalantly, Kyllian turned around with the mug in his hand and leaned against the bar, his elbows braced on the sticky surface. “What do you care why I was there?” he inquired, the heel of his boot hooked on the foot rail.

Silva tipped his chair back. “I hear it was high treason and you were a breath away from being turned inside out.”

Kyllian shrugged. “I wasn’t.” He lifted his mug and drained it, turned to set it on the bar. “Another,” he ordered the barman.

“Put it on my tab, Rooks,” Silva said and when Kyllian glanced around at him, the raider motioned him over. “Come and sit with us. Any man who dares thwart the pompous pricks of Emaridia’s royal household has my highest regard.”

His fresh ale in hand, Kyllian sauntered over to the table, ignoring the woman sitting there though he saw her gaze shift as Silva invited him to sit down. “My thanks for the ale,” he said.

“I am Silva and this is my woman, Lanelle,” Silva said. He folded his arms over his broad chest. “I confess I am curious. How did you manage to get out of Wardsgate?”

“I have friends in high places,” Kyllian stated.

“Still, that is not an easy thing to do,” Silva said.

“My friend hates the royals as much as I hear you do,” Kyllian told him.

“Ah, so you have heard of me!” Silva said with a grin.

“I heard you say you stole this wench from under their nose,” the warrior replied. He stared at the woman beside him. “If memory serves, this one is the Prince’s bride.”

“Was,” Silva said and Kyllian saw the woman flinch.

“Is,” Kyllian corrected.

Silva frowned. “The prick is still alive?”

“Vented with arrows, he was,” Kyllian said. “But very much alive.” He saw a tiny flicker of a smile tug at the woman’s mouth.

“Fuck,” Silva said and was silent for a long moment.

Kyllian put his left hand on the table and began to tap out a light rhythm, the action drawing the woman’s notice to his drumming fingers. He saw her eyes widen for just a moment as she recognized the ring he was wearing on his pinkie.

“So you snapped this piece of fluff up and carted her off, eh?” Kyllian asked.

Silva nodded. “Been wanting her for years,” he answered. “She’s rightfully mine since I was the first to breach her.”

“Toscalian law,” Kyllian said.

“Aye!” Silva agreed. He glanced around. “Where’s the musicians? I want to hear a reel or two!”

The woman lifted her head as the raider’s attention was elsewhere and gave Kyllian a long look. He saw her gaze shift to the sword he carried. She must have seen the nick on the cross-guard for a steady light began to glow in her vacant eyes.

“See something you want, wench?” he asked in a throaty growl.

“Hey, now!” Silva grumbled. “Don’t you be flirting with my wife!”

As though she’d not used her voice in some time, the woman spoke, the grating, rasping sound almost painful to hear. “Kill him and I’ll be yours, warrior,” she said, staring into his eyes.

Silva shot out a hand and grabbed her by the wrist, jerking her arm around so she faced him. “You keep your mouth shut unless I want it around my cock. Do you understand me, bitch?”

Kyllian grinned. "That's telling her."

"You shut the fuck up, too!" Silva thundered.

The warrior allowed the smile to slip slowly from his face. "I'll shut the fuck up when I gods-be-damned well feel like it," he said and once more silence fell over the tavern as patrons started backing away from the table where it seemed a confrontation might be brewing.

Silva's eyes nearly popped from his head. "Do you know who it is you're talking to?"

"Kill him and I'll make it worth your while," the woman said in a louder, clearer voice.

The raider jerked her around once more then backhanded her, sending her reeling backwards in the chair. She hit the floor with a loud expulsion of breath, a trickle of blood oozing down her split lip.

Kyllian pushed his chair back and stood, his hand going to the blade at his back. "One thing I won't tolerate is a pig who hits a woman," he said and drew the blade.

"Cap'n!" someone yelled and a sword was tossed to Silva.

"You're a dead man," Silva told his opponent.

Lanelle scooted back on the dirty floor as the two men lunged at one another. She scrambled to her feet and pressed up against the bar, her heart pounding in her chest. She'd seen Silva fight and knew him to be an expert with his weapon, a dirty fighter who would do anything to win. The man who had somehow garnered Morgan's ring and Thiessen's sword was an unknown quantity but if her men folk had sent him, she knew he had to be good. By the way he efficiently and brutally wielded his weapon against Silva she thought he might well be a WyndMaster like her husband.

Slashing at one another with their blades, the two fighters circled, looking for an opening. There was death stamped on both faces and though the smaller of the two men had a grim smile on his face, the fury in his eyes belied the humor. She was worried someone might interfere but from the looks on the faces of the bystanders, the sailors didn't feel they needed to. It was evident their belief was high in Silva to come out the winner.

Kyllian met the heavier man's vicious downward hit and reflected it with difficulty. His arm throbbed from the contact but he had faith in his ability to best the raider. His gypsy blood was alive and flowing thickly through his veins, the pitch of battle sending adrenaline racing through his body to add to his strength. He knew enough about the Toscalians to know they would not aid Silva in his fight. Neither would they prevent him from fighting dirty if that was what he chose to do.

"I'm going to take your life then I will take your wife," Kyllian told the older man. "The *Cierzo* will be mine, too. I wonder which is sweeter? The ship or the cunt?"

Just as he knew the taunt would, it spurred Silva to a recklessness the raider might not normally have undertaken. He lashed out clumsily in an attempt to gut Kyllian and stumbled, crashing into a table. The instant swipe of Kyllian's blade across the heavier man's back from shoulder to shoulder brought a thick stream of blood coursing down the raider's gray shirt.

"First blood," Lanelle heard one of the sailor's say and then there were rumblings throughout the room.

Kyllian lunged and a scarlet streak appeared down Silva's left arm as the warrior's blade dragged from upper arm to wrist. Another flick of the blade and a similar streak began running down the raider's right arm. A slash across one thigh; a slash across the other. A nick high on a tight cheekbone and Silva began to weaken as the loss of blood took its toll.

With a careless flip of his wrist, Kyllian disarmed the raider and tossed aside his own weapon, drawing the dagger at his thigh instead.

“Come on, old man,” he taunted. “Can’t you do any better than that?”

Silva roared like a bull, fumbling for the blade at his waist. He arched the blade in a low swing and when Kyllian jumped agilely back, he rushed forward, intent on driving the blade into the younger man’s belly. But Kyllian sidestepped the attack, reached out and snagged the golden hoop on Silva’s left ear and yanked it through the lobe.

Shrieking, Silva slapped his hand up to the injury, for the first time allowing fear to show in his black eyes. He backed away, limping, his blade held low.

“I’m going to enjoy thrusting my weapon into her sweet little honey pot,” Kyllian said in a low, deliberate voice. “I don’t think I’ll have to tie her to my bunk to get those long legs wrapped around me. What do you think, Silva?”

Hatred flared in the older man’s eyes and he struck out again, swinging his blade wildly only to have the young warrior spin around and snake out a hand to snatch the other hoop from its place.

“Fuck!” Silva howled and stamped his foot, the pain registering on his beefy face. Blood was everywhere on his body and he moved back, out of range of the blade that came in an arc toward his chest. The dagger barely missed his flesh but it put a long slit in the raider’s shirt.

Lanelle saw disbelief forming on the faces of the men watching. They had not expected Silva to lose. Their eyes were now on the man whose name Lanelle did not know.

Little by little the younger man whittled away the life of the older. More gashes appeared on Silva’s arms and legs and it was evident he was nearing his limit of strength as he staggered about the room in an attempt to stay out of his opponent’s way. Though he mumbled beneath his breath, the raider did not curse the man circling him with not a single scratch on his tall, muscular frame. There wasn’t a hair out of place or a wrinkle or smudge on his clothing. He flexed his weapon with an ease that made it look effortless and he commanded the room, strolling about it to inflict a wound here, a wound there, a cut, a slash, a prick, a nick, a slice...

Silva was breathing heavy, his face covered with blood and sweat. He made one final, desperate lunge and before he could pull up, found the blade of the younger man’s dagger buried to the hilt in his gut. His black eyes widened, his mouth dropped open—a thin stream of blood-tinged saliva dripping from the corner.

“*This* is for His Grace,” Kyllian whispered in the dying man’s ear then he twisted the blade savagely to the side. “And *this* is for his lady.”

Agonizing pain ripped through Emilio Silva as he stared into the unforgiving eyes of the man who had killed him. As the blade sliced downward—cleaving his cock in twain—he had no strength left to cry out or even grunt. His knees began to buckle and as he sagged, the blade turned again and the blade carved upward through belly and chest until it severed the still-beating heart.

“Gawds!” one sailor breathed.

Kyllian let the dead man collapse to his knees and as Silva’s head fell against the warrior’s waist, the gypsy grabbed a handful of the raider’s hair and sliced the head from the torso, hefting the gory prize high for everyone to see.

“I am the captain of the *Cierzo*!” he proclaimed. “Who will challenge me?”

Not a man there would dare and Kyllian knew it. He lifted his leg and kicked Silva’s headless body to the floor then with the ghastly memento still clutched in his hand, stepped over the dead man and up to Lanelle.

“Come, wench,” he said and turned his back to her.

Lanelle held her head high as she followed the warrior from the tavern and out into the darkness of the early night. He said nothing to her as he walked along the quay with the blood still dripping from the severed trophy to mark their passing.

Up the gangplank of the raider ship he walked and when those who had been left behind saw what it was he carried in his hand, they moved quickly out of his way, their eyes wide with fear.

“Where?” Kyllian asked.

Lanelle stepped around him, knowing he meant the captain’s cabin and led him to the place where she had thought she had lost everything. She opened the door and moved aside for him to enter. Her gaze fell to the bloody head for only a moment.

“Close the door and lock it,” he told her as he sat the monstrous souvenir on the maps that littered the desk. He wiped his hand on the front of his shirt. “Greasy bastard,” he commented. “What did he use for pomade? Whale oil?”

Lanelle turned from the door to give her rescuer a tremulous smile. “My husband is truly well?” she asked.

“In pain but well, Your Grace,” he said. “Had he been able, he would have come.”

Her eyes briefly closed in what he knew must be thanksgiving. When she opened them, she searched his face. “And Morgan?” she asked.

He looked down at the ring. “He loaned me this.”

She nodded. “I knew they’d sent you as soon as I saw it.” She moved closer to him. “What now, warrior?”

“Are you well, Your Grace?” he asked. He knew he would never forget the hopeless look he’d seen on her face as she’d stood at the railing.

“I am a survivor,” she said. “I will do whatever it takes to get back home.”

“Even if that means pretending to be my wench?” he asked.

“Aye,” she said.

“We must keep up appearances, Your Grace,” he told her. “The men must believe I fought that fight to win you and the ship. It must look convincing. They will know if it is pretend.”

“I understand,” she agreed.

“We dare not let them know I am an agent for the Federation or the King,” he reminded her.

“No, that would not be healthy for either of us,” she said.

“It must look that I am your master and that you are keenly grateful.”

She gave him a roll of her pretty eyes. “Who are you, warrior?” she asked. “A friend of Morgan’s, no doubt. He would not have taken that ring I gave him off for any other.”

“I am Kyllian Reddick, Your Grace. I am...”

She smiled. “The gypsy thief,” she said. “I should have guessed. Morgan has spoken fondly of you many times.” She put a hand on his arm. “He has great affection for you.”

Kyllian’s face reddened. “We are nothing more than friends, Your Grace,” he was quick to tell her. “I am not of his inclinations.”

“Ah,” she said, a frown appearing between her eyes. “Then should I worry about being in this cabin alone with you?”

“By the gods, no, Your Grace!” he gasped. “I would no more compromise you than cut off my own...” His face turned redder still. “Well, you know.”

“Speaking of heads...” She looked around at Silva’s severed head. “You aren’t going to keep that thing in here, are you?” she asked.

“Your husband asked that I bring it back to him on a pike,” he said.

Lanelle made a face. “For what purpose?”

“He wanted to put it in the courtyard of Windemere and...”

“Like hell!” she snarled. “Throw that grizzly thing overboard and let the sharks feast on it. It’s already starting to smell and I’ll not have it where I will be sleeping.” She glanced at the bunk. “And speaking of sleeping, you dare not lock the door once we are under sail.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“Should the First Mate need you, he can’t find you sleeping on the floor,” she replied.

“The bastard walked in on Silva all the time without knocking. He might do the same with you.”

He chewed on her lower lip. “Aye, you have a point.”

“Aye, well so do you but you will keep it in your pants while we sleep in that bunk, warrior,” she declared.

Kyllian laughed, unable to keep from doing so and when he saw the tightening of her lips knew she was teasing him. “I’ll do my best to keep him restrained, Your Grace.”

“See that you do, warrior,” she said with a nod.

He gave her a guarded look. “You were faking it,” he said, voice filled with speculation.

Lanelle asked what he meant.

“On the dock,” he said. “I saw you standing at the rail, looking helpless and hopeless, no light in your eyes, listless. You were...”

“Waiting for Silva to drop his guard,” she interrupted. “To turn his attention from me, to be so sure of his hold over me I could slip away without him being aware that I was doing so.” She smiled. “I’ve never been submissive to anyone, warrior. It was an act and one I am glad to be done with.”

Deep respect flowed over Kyllian’s lean face. “My compliments, Your Grace,” he said with a slight bow.

“Of course, I will have to handle you differently,” she said, tapping a finger to her chin. “The crew will know by now that I asked you to kill Silva and that I promised you anything if you did. I will hold to that bargain and for the world to see, I will be so grateful to you for having taken me from that skunk’s hands, I’ll be all over you like white on snow.”

“Your Grace,” he said with a shake of his head. “I’m a thief, a rambler, a man not given to having a woman at my side. I will, of necessity, ignore your valiant attempt to seduce me and let it be known I find you a great nuisance.”

Lanelle’s eyebrows shot up. “Me? A nuisance?”

“A veritable pest,” he assured her. “You’ll follow me around like a moonstruck calf—eyes batting, lips trembling—and I will do my best to keep away from you. You will exasperate me to the point that I will be forced to send word to Emardia for them to take you off my hands before I am tempted to strangle you.”

“You would ransom me, warrior?” she said, eyes narrowed, hands on hips in challenge. “Toss me away? Me, your future Queen?”

“In a heartbeat, Your Grace,” he told her, lips twitching.

She glared at him for a moment. “Well, pooh,” she said, flinging out a hand. “What if Emardia doesn’t want me back?”

Kyllian knew it was a teasing question but he could see a flitting shadow of uncertainty skipping through her green eyes. “Milady,” he said, reaching for her hand and bringing it to his

lips. “Your husband asked me to bring you home to him or else not return. He sits there eagerly awaiting you.” He cast a look to the grisly head atop the desk. “He also asked I bring him Silva’s head and I intend to do that for I never break a vow once given.”

Lanelle sighed. “Well, at least put the ugly thing outside the door in a bag so I don’t have to see it. It was bad enough staring into his face when he was breathing.”

Kyllian walked over and picked up the head then unlocked the door to go out into the corridor. She heard his boots stomping up the stairs and glanced back at the desk. She arched a lip for there was congealed blood on the maps where the head had sat. Going over to them, she wadded them up and stuffed them into the wastebasket beside the desk, dusting her hands together when she was finished.

“So much for your precious maps, Silva,” she snorted.

When the warrior came back, she noticed he was grinning broadly. He came in, shut the door behind him and leaned against it.

“Kyllian...” she said, drawing the word out. “What did you do?”

“I’ve already set our plans into motion, Your Grace. I...”

“My name is Lanelle,” she cut in. “You’ve more than earned the right to call me by that name.”

He shifted uncomfortably, knowing full well he’d never presume to do so. “Aye, well, I let it be known that I’ve had my wicked way with you and found you somewhat lacking.”

Lanelle pursed her lips. “Was I really that bad?”

“A simpering miss with clinging hands that I just simply can’t tolerate,” he said. “The good news is they believed me. The bad news is I had five offers to take you off my hands.”

“Which I’m sure you declined!” she said.

“It’s going to be a long journey to Coromell, I was told—that is their fortress on the North Sea—and it gets cold up that way. I assured them I would need you to keep me warm.”

“Lucky for you I’m inclined to do so,” she mumbled.

“But I planted the seed of ransoming you,” he told her. “They weren’t outright dismissive of the notion.”

She walked over to the bunk and hopped up, curled her bare feet beneath her. “You know, you could send word to Lord Morgan Summerall. I am quite sure he would agree to be an intermediary with the Federation and its King.” Her eyes twinkled with mirth.

“Lord Morgan Summerall,” he said, nodding sagely, coming to stand beside the bunk, lowering his voice. “A man not known for being a Federation toady. That just might work. I am sure he would guarantee the ship’s safety if we are returning the Crown Princess of Emardia to her rightful owners.”

“You could sail to Vardar and ask that Summerall meet you there to take me off your hands. How much would you ask for me?”

“Enough so the crew would find it hard to pass up,” he said. “A hundred thousand levens, perhaps?”

“Ooh, I am an expensive nuisance, aren’t I?” she giggled. “I would...” She stopped for Kyllian’s hand shot up to silence her. Almost at the same time, she heard the creaking of a board outside the cabin.

Kyllian winked at her. “The gods-be-damn it, wench!” he yelled. “Stop pawing me! Twice is enough for one night!” That said, he spun around and stomped to the door, jerked it open, his face set and hard and nearly plowed into a man bending near the keyhole. “Out of my way, sailor!” he hissed.

Lanelle pressed her hands together at her chin, clamored to her knees and gave the departing warrior a beseeching look. "But Milord, please! I would lay the moon at your feet if you but allowed it!"

"Lock that door before she decides to come after me again!" Kyllian said, pretending a shudder. "My cock is so sore now I could barely stuff it back into my pants!"

The sailor hurried to shoot the bolt. He gave Kyllian a bewildered look. "Cap'n, she fought the old Cap'n tooth and nail when he rode her. What you reckon got into her?"

"Me!" Kyllian said, eyes snapping. "Where's the fucking First Mate?"

"He ain't back from the Belle Marie, yet," the sailor replied. "You want him to fuck her, Cap'n?"

Kyllian gave the man a deadly look that had the sailor taking a step back. "Go fetch his ass and tell him I have a plan to make us a goodly sum of money. That should bring him back in a hurry," Kyllian ordered.

"How much money, Cap'n?" the sailor asked, a sly look glittering in his rheumy eyes.

"Think you the King of Emardia will pay less than a hundred thousand levens for the return of his precious son's leman? If I had it, I'd pay that much to be rid of her!"

Slyness turned to greed and the sailor smiled a gap-toothed grin. "I'm on me way to get Hotchkin now!"

Kyllian followed the departing sailor at a slower pace, formulating what he would say to the First Mate and the crew to convince them ransoming the wench would be the way to go. He was careful to be rubbing his crotch and walking carefully when he came up the gangway so it would be evident to the men that he had had more than his fill of the woman in his cabin.

An hour later, the *Cierzo* raised sail and left the port at Jonastown and tacked southward toward the neutral country of Vardar where lawmen and outlaws alike were welcomed. Once there, a rider would be sent to deliver the ransom demand to Argonne. Since *Vista del Mar* was on an island off the coast of Emardia, it would be necessary for the demand to then be sent via boat to Lord Summerall.

"What if'n he ain't in residence?" Hotchkin, the First Mate demanded.

"Where else would the fop be?" Kyllian inquired. "He hates his father. Can't abide the Federation. He keeps to himself on that island of his."

"Then why do ye think he'll help us?" Hotchkin asked.

Kyllian lowered his voice, looked around as though searching for eavesdroppers though the two stood alone at the ship's bow. "I heard tell him and that clinging vine down there had something going before she up and married the Prince. One of the reasons he hates the royalty so much is because he couldn't have her ass. He'll jump at the chance of helping her, don't you think?"

"Ye are most likely right, Cap'n," Hotchkin agreed. "A hundred thousand levens, eh?"

"Should we ask for more?" Kyllian questioned.

The First Mate thought about it. "Nah, that be enough, I think." He grinned brutally. "Don't want to get too greedy, do we?"

Chapter Eleven

Thiessen sat down heavily on the bench as the snow flew around him and the brisk wind howled through the bare branches overhead. If his mother knew he was outside, she'd light into him like a firecracker but he had needed the solitude, the distance between himself and those who were constantly dancing attendance on him. Though he was healing nicely, it still hurt to walk and sitting for any length of time was a chore, he had stood all of the keep he could take. He was not the only one chaffing under the strain.

"I need to get back to *Vista del Mar*," Morgan had said a few days earlier. "Hopefully by now Kyllian will have found her and dispatched Silva."

"You believe the raiders will follow him if he has?" Thiessen had asked his half-brother.

"I've known Kyllian a good long time. He can be a mean motherfucker when he needs to be. I once saw him slit a man's throat from ear to ear without so much as batting an eye. He'll do what needs to be done to win the crew's respect. He'll make sure he gives them something to fear," Morgan had replied.

"What if...?"

"Don't," Morgan had cut him off with a firm shake of his head. "Keep only positive thoughts, brat. He'll bring her back to us."

For the first time in their lives, the two men were beginning to develop a begrudging affection for one another. It had began when Morgan had found the younger man in the keep's chapel, on his knees, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"I couldn't protect her, Morgan," Thiessen had wept bitterly. "I could not protect my own wife!"

Morgan had hunkered down beside the Prince and after a few false starts, had laid a comforting hand on Thiessen's shoulder. "I put her in your path because I thought you were the best man for her," he said. "I still believe that."

"But I let them take her!"

"Arrows ripping into your body might have had something to do with that, don't you think?" Morgan had inquired in a droll voice.

His face buried in his hands, his body hurting no worse than his breaking heart, Thiessen had given no thought to unmanning himself before a man long sworn to be his enemy.

"Come here, brat," Morgan had finally said and had wrapped the Prince in his arms. "Let it out and then let it go."

His shoulders slumping beneath the heavy weight of the greatcape into which he was bundled, Thiessen watched the snow drifting past him, thinking of that day a few weeks earlier when he had broken down in front of Morgan. It had not been mentioned and he doubted his brother would ever tell anyone what had transpired in the chapel.

"I love her," he had sobbed.

"So do I," Morgan had admitted. "And I believe I chose the right man for her."

A large clump of snow fell from a branch nearby to gain Thiessen's attention. He shivered and hunched forward to stare at the ground. He was warm enough but his nose and cheeks stung from the cold so he put up a gloved hand to rub at the wind-battered flesh.

“Where are you, Nelle?” he asked as tears filled his eyes.

Overhead a flock of geese wedged by, their loud, raucous noise breaking the stillness of the quiet morning. Once more the wind shook the trees and a dry rustle of leaves clinging tenaciously to the branches lent their voice to the quiet.

He thought of his lady’s soft beauty, her striking wit and infectious laughter. He closed his eyes to better see the lush curves, the shapely limbs, and the sweet sway of her walk.

A single tear fell down his cheek and froze, prickling his skin but he did not bat it away. It burned him—as the pain of Lanelle’s absence had seared a hole straight through his heart. Hanging his head, he gave in to the loneliness and fear that were his constant companions.

* * * *

“Is he still sitting there?” Celeste asked as she plied her needle through the tapestry in her hoop.

“Aye,” Sierran said on a long sigh. “I wish you would allow me to send someone to...”

“Leave him be, warrior,” she said, encircling the thread twice with the needle while she fashioned a delicate knot for the embroidery. “He’ll come in when he can no longer stand the cold.”

“Aye, but Celeste he...” her husband began but then she lifted her head from her work and gave him a silent lift of a brow. That was all that was needed for him to stop his complaint.

“Would anyone like another cup of tea?” Brent LeMoyné inquired of his friends.

“I’ll take another, please,” Celeste replied, giving a lawgiver a thankful smile.

“Did you file the paperwork to grant Reddick’s pardon?” the King asked as he finally moved away from the window.

“It was filed a week ago when you questioned me about it then and it was filed a week before that when you asked the first time,” Brent replied with a sigh. “It will still be filed when you ask me again next week.”

Sierran flung out a dismissive hand. “Have you found the woman who framed him?”

“Not yet, but I have men working on it,” Brent answered. He carried a fresh cup of tea to Celeste.

“That’s what you said last week and the week before!” the king reminded him.

“Brent, ignore him,” Celeste suggested. “He’s just worried about his son.”

“And you aren’t?” Sierran challenged.

“Warrior,” she said with an exasperated hiss. “Please sit down. Your pacing is distracting.”

“Aren’t you?” her husband repeated.

“Aye, Sierran,” she snapped. “I am worried about him but he—unlike his father—is a grown man and capable of handling his own emotions. Now, sit the hell down!”

Sierran blinked at his wife’s uncharacteristic outburst and took a sweat, his lower lip thrust out. He began picking at a loose thread on the arm of his chair, further annoying his wife who gave him a stern look and cautioned him not to take the upholstery apart.

Vargas took that moment to enter the room, a wide smile on his face. “We’ve just received a ransom demand forwarded to us from Lord Morgan!” he announced.

Sierran shot to his feet. “Reddick has the lady?”

“Apparently so,” Vargas reported. “The exchange is to take place in Vardar. Lord Morgan is to come alone with the ransom and the Princess will be given over into his keeping.”

“How much ransom?” Sierran asked.

“Does it matter?” Celeste snapped, laying aside her embroidery. “See to it, Brent.”

The lawgiver nodded, not even bothering to look to his King for confirmation. He headed out of the room.

“Vargas, go with him,” Sierran said. “Make sure everything is handled as I would handle it.”

“Except correctly,” Celeste put in with a quirk of her eyebrow aimed her husband’s way.

* * * *

Despite arguing strongly with his parents, Thiessen was not allowed to go with Vargas when the older warrior left with ransom money in hand. Mac and Seth rode with Vargas, the three taking a clandestine route to the seaside town of Longia where they would then take ship to *Vista del Mar*.

Forced to watch from the safety of his room as the warriors rode away, Thiessen leaned against the window with a hand to the glass, the cold seeping into his palm. The snow had stopped but the temperature had fallen sharply, plummeting ever lower as the sun sank toward the horizon. He could see steam billowing from the nostrils of the horses as the trio took the coach rode eastward. Shifting his position for the pain in his belly and chest was a constant reminder he had not fully healed, the Prince turned away and walked slowly to his bed. He was hurting more than he’d let on and knew he needed to lie down for awhile.

As he stretched out on the bed, he edged his hand over to the spot where his lady should be lying beside him—feeling the coolness of the coverlet, the emptiness. He closed his eyes and began still another prayer to the gods for Lanelle’s safe return.

* * * *

Morgan paced the solarium that faced out to sea. He knew it would be morning before the couriers arrived with the ransom money yet he kept watch all the same. The myriad plants surrounding him—some he still could not name—made the air warm and calming but he felt the outside cold down to the very marrow of his bones. He knew it was worry that he was feeling, anxiety, a helplessness he refused to accept. With each circuit of the lovely room that his stepmother had made even more beautiful when she called *Vista del Mar* her home, his tension rose until he was chewing at his thumbnail, a habit he unknowingly shared with his half-brother.

Staring at the silver-blue span of water stretching out as far as the eye could see he searched for the ship that would take him to Vardar. It was being provisioned, a skeleton crew only accompanying him for he was to debark alone, satchel in hand, or the raiders would not meet their end of the bargain. As soon as the money arrived from Windemere, he and his ship would set sail, a fourteen hour trip from Zykanthos to Vardar. Another ship also lay at anchor, awaiting orders.

“No bodyguards, no law,” the ransom note had read and even though he had told Kyllian what to write when the time came, it still sent a niggle of worry down Morgan’s spine. He would be at the mercy of the Toscalians should something have happened to Kyllian on the way to the meeting.

“Keep a cool head, Reddick,” Morgan whispered as he watched his ship being prepared. “Protect her until I can get there.”

Lanelle had always seemed like a sister to him, Morgan thought. He’d spent many an engaging hour with the lively wench and enjoying her vivacious antics. She was—by his own admission—his very best friend, his confidante, and on occasions, his confessor. They shared secrets he doubted she would ever reveal to her husband. It had been hard for him to allow Kyllian to go after her, to rescue her, but if there was one thing Morgan Summerall knew, it was

his limitations. Though he could use a sword well enough not to do damage to himself, he knew he was nowhere near the expert his half-brother and Kyllian were.

Nor was he the born killer Reddick had become over the years. Thanks to women like his grandmother, his insane sister and the bitch who had betrayed him to the law.

“Women are the bane of most men’s existence,” he mumbled. “Even sisters, I suppose.” He smiled, thinking of Lanelle. “Well not all sisters.”

Clamping his hands behind his back, he commenced to pacing again for the sun had dipped so far down in the sky it was now hard to see any activity on the brigantine.

“She is my true sister, now,” he said aloud. It was a relationship he knew he would cherish for it had brought him a shallow step closer to his only real sibling.

Though he would never admit it to even Lanelle, Morgan had wanted that closeness with Morgan. The gods knew he’d never shared even a hint of affection with his mother nor had he enjoyed all that much warmth from his father. Giving Celeste her due, she had at least tried to include him in the family but Morgan had pretended indifference and rebuffed her attempts. As he grew older, he realized what a fool he had been and just how much he’d missed out on.

Releasing a long breath, he sat down in the tall wingback chair where he spent many a night, book in hand. He was too on edge to read so he did the only thing he thought to do.

He prayed.

* * * *

Morning came with a flurry of activity on the deck above them. The *Cierzo* had sailed through the night and had docked in Vardar just after the false dawn began to tint the sky. The stomp of feet woke Kyllian and he groaned, turning over on his side and forcing his eyes open to find himself staring into the amused eyes of his future Queen.

“You snort something awful, warrior,” she told him. “I thought Thie was bad but you have him beat by a mile.”

The thief would have vaulted from the bunk but before he could, the Princess threw herself on him, pinning him down to the bunk and slammed her mouth over his, stunning the hell out of him. His first reaction was to push her away and he had his hands on her shoulders to do just that when the door burst open and the First Mate came stomping in.

“Woman, get off me!” Kyllian managed to say, his face filled with shock as the Princess rolled away, a petulant look on her face as she snatched the covers up to her chin to glare at Hotchkin.

The First Mate shook his head. “Can’t keep her hands off you, can she, Cap’n?”

“You’d best have a good reason for interfering,” Lanelle threw at Hotchkin.

Ignoring the woman beside his captain, Hotchkin touched a finger to his forelock. “We’ve spotted a ship sailing this way that may be the Summerall brigantine,” he told Kyllian. “Ye might want to get up and come topside.” He snorted. “If’n the wench will let ye.”

Lanelle reached out to stroke Kyllian’s bare arm but he snatched it away, scuttling off the bunk as though she had the plague. He grabbed his pants and stepped into them, his face dark with memory of the evening before when she’d insisted he come to bed with just his long johns on.

“That wouldn’t be proper, Your Grace. I…”

“If some bastard comes barging in, how will you explain wearing pants to bed, warrior?” she had asked. “And the shirt must come off, too.”

“Your Grace!”

“Off!” she’d ordered.

Memory of hovering close to the edge of the bunk so he wouldn't come into contact with her royal person made his cheeks burn. "I'll be along," he told Hotchkin in a low mumble. "Shut the door behind you."

Hotchkin shrugged, cast a disgusted look to Lanelle then sauntered out. The door was barely closed behind him before the Princess was scampering across the bed, reaching out to snag Kyllian's arm.

"Did I not tell you?" she hissed at him.

"Aye," he said, gently disengaging his arm from her grip. "You did, Your Grace." He sat down on the sea chest to pull on his boots. He couldn't look at her. "And I apologize for snoring."

"You're a man," she said as though that said it all.

"Get up and get dressed," he told her. "I'll be taking you with me to the meet. Hopefully Morgan has a plan for getting us all away safely."

"Not on the Westwind," she said, referring to Morgan's personal brigantine. "If I know him, he'll have a second ship waiting for us somewhere along the coastline that will take us around Vardar and up the northern coast to Emaridia while he sails the Westwind back to Zykanthos."

"Let's hope so," Kyllian agreed. He tucked in his shirt, studiously avoiding watching the Princess as she stepped into her skirt. "Do you have shoes, Your Grace?"

"Silva threw them overboard to keep me from running away," she said.

"We'll have to get you some," he said.

"I'd prefer boots and a pair of men's pants," she said and when he turned a surprised look to her, she cocked a shoulder. "It's more comfortable when you're fleeing for your life, warrior. Try running in a skirt and petticoats and see how far you get."

He conceded she might be right. "Would the cabin boy's clothing fit you?"

"Most likely," she said.

"I'll tell Hotchkin to fetch you a shirt and pair of breeches, explaining that I'll be taking you into town dressed as a boy so as not to draw attention. I'll say we don't want someone to try to steal our prize before we get paid for it."

"Sounds good to me," she said.

"I'll be right back," he said and left the cabin.

Lanelle walked over to where he had left Thiessen's sword and scabbard and ran her fingers along the pommel. "I'm coming home, my warrior," she said. "Where I belong."

* * * *

Walking beside Kyllian in worn-down boots he had managed to pilfer from the cabin boy, Lanelle kept her hands wrapped firmly around his upper left arm as they moved down the dock and toward the tavern where they were to meet Morgan. Careful not to come into contact with the bag he held in his hand, she leaned against him as though she needed his support, as though she were a shy young boy afraid of the hustle and bustle on the cobblestone street. Her lovely, refined face was hidden beneath the sweeping, floppy brim of a Toscalian cavalier hat, the normally pinned up right side left to hang free to better obscure her soft features.

"The gods-be-damn it, boy, move away!" Kyllian hissed at her for men were beginning to give them strange looks as they passed, a few giving the warrior come-hither looks that made him very nervous. "No one is going to pounce on you!"

"I'll take him off your hands," a dandily dressed man called out.

"My brother is a bit squeamish," Kyllian replied. "First time on the town."

“Hand him into my keeping and I’ll make a right proper cabin boy of him!” another man joked.

“I’m sure our father, the Jarl, would not appreciate me letting Fyn out of my site,” Kyllian declared.

Hotchkin and two other sailors were behind Kyllian and Lanelle and the First Mate chortled at his captain’s quick thinking. In Toscalia, the Jarl was feared even more than his raiders and those who were covertly inspecting the boy at the captain’s side looked away.

The Merry Widow tavern was alive with strident music and the hearty laughter of sailors and townspeople alike as Kyllian pushed open the batwing doors and strolled inside. He glimpsed an empty table and moved toward it, allowing Lanelle and the raiders to follow behind. Careful not to pull out a chair for her, he placed the bag he was carrying on the table, swung a leg over the back of a chair and slid down, glancing around him at the patrons, wondering if there were Emardian guards lurking nearby should there be trouble.

A slovenly woman with huge breasts that were on the verge of spilling from the top of her chemise came over, her lacquered tray with dirty mugs held expertly at her shoulder. “What will it be, milord?” she asked Kyllian, giving him a once over with her knowing eyes.

“Ale for me and my men,” he said. “Nothing for the boy.”

The woman swept her gaze to Lanelle, frowned then nodded, glancing back over her shoulder at the supposed cabin boy a couple of times before heading to the bar to place her order.

“She sees them mounds ye couldn’t disguise,” Hotchkin told Kyllian.

“Slump your shoulders, wench,” Kyllian commanded, giving Lanelle a stern look.

“I’d rather run my tits over your...” Lanelle began but Kyllian shot out a hand and slipped it around her neck, pulled her face close to his.

“That is enough! Do you hear me?” he barked while amusement danced in his gray eyes.

Lanelle pursed her lips. “I don’t want to leave you, Kyly,” she protested. “You’re more man than I’ve ever had and...”

“Enough!” Kyllian snarled and leaned back, releasing her. He had to bite his lip to keep from laughing.

“You sure you want to sell her, Cap’n?” Hotchkin asked with a chuckle.

“I can’t wait to get rid of her ass,” Kyllian snapped and at that moment spied Morgan coming through the tavern doors. He nudged Hotchkin’s boot with his own. “Ain’t that Summerall?”

Hotchkin nodded. “Aye, that’s the lord, himself.”

Morgan had obviously spied them but moved in the opposite direction since he wasn’t to know who he was meeting. In his hand was a large satchel.

“Go fetch him,” Kyllian ordered one of the other two sailors who had accompanied them from the ship.

Following the sailor, Morgan’s attention was locked on the cabin boy. He had glimpsed the soft curve of a feminine chin beneath the shadow of the hat but even if he had not, he would have known Lanelle would be clad in men’s clothing if at all possible.

“Have a seat, milord,” Kyllian said, kicking a chair way from the table.

“I’d rather not,” Morgan said with disdain. He gave Kyllian a hateful look and set the satchel on the edge of the table. “The money’s all here. Are you well, Your Grace?”

Lanelle lifted her head just a little. “I’m as well as can be expected,” she grumbled.

“You won’t mind if I make sure everything’s in order, will you?” Kyllian told Morgan and snatched the satchel from his grip. He opened it, studied the contents for a moment then closed it. He pushed it toward Hotchkin. “Take this back to the ship and put it in the safe.”

Hotchkin’s forehead creased. “I’ll wait for you,” he stated.

“You’ll do as you’re ordered,” Kyllian grated, a muscle jumping in his lean jaw. “I’ve no fear of this jackanapes!”

Grumbling, Hotchkin got to his feet, turning to the two sailors beside him. “You keep close watch on the Cap’n,” he said. “I don’t trust no swell to keep his word!”

“Oh, he’ll keep his word,” Kyllian said and pushed the bag toward Morgan. “Just a little something for you to carry home to Emardia with you so you’ll know I mean business.”

Morgan looked down at the bag. “What is it?”

Kyllian smiled nastily. “Why don’t you open it and see?”

Hotchkin dawdled, wanting to see Summerall’s reaction.

His jaw clenched tightly, Morgan reached for the canvas bag and untied the hemp chord that held it closed. Pulling the sides open, he looked inside then let out a long breath. “Who was this unfortunate bastard?” he asked, closing the bag.

“Someone who dared crossed me,” Kyllian said. He locked eyes with Hotchkin and the First Mate pivoted on his heel and hurried off to do as ordered. Loud enough for the departing sailor to hear, Kyllian directed his words to Morgan. “There’d best not be a cordon of Emardian ships out there waiting for us, Summerall. I’ll come after you and we’ve enough cannon to blow your little rowboat to kingdom come.”

“I’ve no desire for your capture, Captain Silva,” Morgan said, using the name he would be expected to use. “All I want is Her Grace.”

“And you can have her,” Kyllian said and swung his gaze to Lanelle. “Get your ass up and go with him, wench.”

Lanelle scooted her chair back, gave Kyllian a long, pleading look then lifted her chin when he refused to acknowledge her attempt to sway him.

“My husband will reward you for what you’ve done, Reddick,” she said. “That I promise you!”

“Come, Your Grace,” Morgan said, stepping around the table to take her hand. “I’ve procured rooms for us at the only decent inn here and proper clothing for you to wear.” He held out his arm to escort her. “A bath will be awaiting you.”

“A bath?” she said, batting her eyes. “Oh, thank you, Lord Summerall. It has been weeks since I’ve had a proper bath!”

“Take this with you,” Kyllian said and plucked the bag containing the Toscalian raider’s head from the table. “And give my regards to your fucking King!”

“I don’t...” Morgan began but Kyllian slammed a fist on the table, cutting him off.

“I said take it with you!” the thief bellowed.

Morgan picked up the gruesome bag, his eyes flashing fire but he made no comment as he spoke quietly to the woman at his side and began leading her from the tavern.

“That’s telling him, Cap’n,” one of the sailors who had remained behind laughed.

The tavern maid came back with their ale and placed the overflowing mugs on the table. “Anything else, milord?” she asked Kyllian.

“Your cunt spread wide for me to slip into?” Kyllian asked.

A broad smile tugged at the woman’s heavily-roughed face. “Me room is up the stairs,” she said.

Kyllian stood, swiped up his ale with one hand and took the woman's arm in the other. "Then let's go have a look at it." He looked to his men. "When he comes back, tell Hotchkin we'll be a bit late in departing. I'll be seeing to the business at hand."

The two sailors grinned broadly and set to drinking their ale.

After informing the barman where she was going and motioning for another woman to take her place seeing to the customers, the blowsy prostitute led Kyllian up the stairs and to a room at the far end of the landing, telling him her name was Greta as they went. Slipping inside, she stood back for him to enter then closed the door with her hip.

"It's twenty sotes for a tumble," she told him. "I need the coin up front."

He looked around the room and was surprised at his cleanliness and neatness. He arched a brow at her. "You're a right good housekeeper, Greta."

She lifted her chin. "I may be a whore, milord, but I'm a clean one."

He reached for his purse, pulled it out then gave her a speculative look. "How'd you like to make a hundred sotes instead of twenty?"

Greta shook her head. "I don't do kinky things, milord. I..."

"All I need you to do is get me out of the tavern without me being seen," he said.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Why?"

"One hundred-fifty sotes," he countered.

"You're running from the Toscalians," she said then shook her head. "That's a dangerous thing to do."

"Two hundred."

"Two hundred and you take me with you," she said. "My life won't be worth a plug base if they find I helped you."

Kyllian had no choice. "Then let's go. I've not got all night to barter with you, wench. Take what you want and..."

"Ain't nothing here I want or need," she said and led him to the window. She pushed aside the curtains and raised the window. She reached out a hand and caught a rope dangling from the roof.

"Now that's handy," he said as she swung a leg over the sill. "How did that come into use?"

"You aren't the first customer of mine what didn't need to be seen leaving the Merry Widow," she commented and then she was gone, scampering down the rope like an acrobat, as agile as a monkey.

When Kyllian poked his head out the window, he saw her standing on the ground, her hands on her hips, grinning up at him. She motioned him down and he was quick to follow her lead, being careful that his sword and scabbard did not clatter against the wall as he climbed out. When his feet touched the ground, he adjusted the scabbard on his back.

"Do we go after your woman now or make tracks?" Greta inquired. At his surprised look, she shrugged. "No man has bumps like she does, milord, no matter how muscular he be built." She cocked an eyebrow. "You're gonna take her from the man you sold her to. I was paying attention, milord."

Kyllian grinned. "I see you were," he said. "Where's the inn?"

"This way," she said and led him along the back of the tavern and to a dark alley.

It was to the rear of the respectable inn she led him for they both knew there was no way she would be allowed to enter the establishment and he dared not risk being seen doing so. The

only viable solution would be to go in through the kitchen and up the backstairs the servants used for cleaning. Getting past the kitchen staff would present a problem.

“How the hell are we going to do this?” Kyllian asked as they stood in the shadows and watched the people milling around in the kitchen.

“Can’t you send word up to your woman?” Greta asked. “Have her come down to meet you?”

Kyllian thought about it a moment, “That might work.” He glanced around then slipped along the side of the building and to the back door, hissing to gain the attention of a scullery maid scrubbing pots at the pump. When she glanced around, startled, he motioned her over. She hesitated for a moment then came toward him, drying her hands on her apron.

“Aye, sir?” she said.

“I need to get a message to my lady,” he told her and produced a gold coin, holding it between his thumb and middle finger. “This is yours if you’ll let her know I’m down here and ready to elope.”

“Elope?” the girl repeated, her eyes sparkling. “Ain’t that romantic?”

“She’s with Lord Summerall but I don’t know what room he’s in. He’s...”

“I heard ‘em talking about him. I can find which room,” she said. Her eyes brightened even more. “Are you taking her from him, milord?”

“Damned right I am,” Kyllian said with a cocky grin. “It’s me she loves, not him. Her family’s making her marry him.”

“We seed her come in dressed like a boy,” she said. “Hiding from him, was she?”

Kyllian nodded. “He caught up to us too quickly.” He pressed the coin into her palm. “You’ll be doing us a boon favor, Sweeting.”

The girl beamed and spun around on her heel, hurrying to do her part for the lovers.

Kyllian slipped back into the shadows and to Greta’s side. “I need two horses,” he said.

“Three,” she corrected him.

He nodded. “Aye, it would be best if we each had our own. We could make better time. I didn’t know if you rode or not.”

“I do,” she told him. “Wait right here. Don’t you leave without me!”

“I wouldn’t do that, Greta,” he said.

“Give me the money, just in case,” she said, holding out her hand.

Kyllian took out his purse and gave her the whole thing. “That’s all the money I’ve got with me, wench. I’m trusting *you* to come back with it.”

Greta gave him a hard look then melted into the deeper shadows.

Kyllian shifted nervously from foot to foot as he waited for Lanelle to come down. When she appeared, dressed no differently than she had when she’d followed Morgan from the Merry Widow, he breathed a sigh of relief.

“The *Black Thorn* is waiting for us in a harbor about ten miles up the coastline,” she told him without preamble. “How are we...?”

He grabbed her and pressed her tightly to the building, swooping down to claim her lips in a fiery kiss that had her burying her hands in his shirt.

“Kitchen girl,” he mumbled against her lips and felt her slight nod. When he released her he tugged her deeper into the shadows, away from the avid looks of several kitchen staff who were watching them.

“How are we...?” Lanelle began again.

“I’ve got horses coming,” he interrupted. “Where’s Morgan?”

“Helping a maid dress in those fancy clothes he brought along for me. He’ll escort her to the Westwind, letting people think it’s me. They’ll be weighing anchor within the next half hour,” she replied.

“Good because I’ve a feeling when I don’t show up, Hotchkin is going to know we played him false and he’s as liable to come after us as not,” Kyllian said.

“Oh, Morgan is counting on it,” she said with a grin. “There are Federation ships waiting out past the barrier reef just waiting for the *Cierzo* to come after Morgan’s brigantine. King Sierran intends to put the Toscalian raiders out of commission permanently!”

The neigh of a horse made them both press up against the wall but Greta’s low hiss set Kyllian into action, taking hold of Lanelle’s hand and drawing her toward the tavern maid’s voice.

Two minutes later the three horses were galloping hell bent for leather up the coach road that led north. Under a full moon, the thundering hooves dug the miles toward the hidden harbor where the *Black Thorn* lay at anchor.

Chapter Twelve

As the *Black Thorn* slid into the deeper waters of the North Sea, the warm clime of Vardar gave way to a cold wind that increased in strength and decreased in temperature. The large ship cut easily through the icy waves while the three passengers dined with the captain.

"We should reach Emaridia by noon tomorrow if the weather holds," Captain Larson reported as he lounged in his chair, a snifter of brandy in hand. "I know you are anxious, Your Grace." He kept cutting his eyes over to the dockside doxy whose large breasts were all but tumbling from her bodice.

"I am," Lanelle said. She yawned, covering her mouth delicately. A warm bath upon gaining the ship and a fresh set of boy's clothing had relaxed her to the point where she was more than ready for the bunk.

"Would you like me to escort you to your cabin, Your Grace?" Kyllian inquired.

"No, thank you, milord," she said, getting to her feet, motioning the men to remain seated, flinching as Greta shot up as though propelled from a cannon. "Sit, Greta. I need no help. I believe I can find it on my own. Stay and enjoy your cigars and brandy, gentlemen." She gave Greta a little smile and bid the tavern woman a good evening.

"A very brave woman," Captain Larson commented after the Princess left. "Being at the mercy of the Toscalians would have been brutal."

"Aye," Kyllian said. "I only hope the bastards were caught in the net set for them."

"Lord Morgan would have led them right into the trap," the captain assured him. "He was very angry and I've found when he's angry, he can be quite dangerous."

Kyllian smiled. "So I've noticed." He drained his snifter then pushed his chair back. "Well, I'm for my bunk, as well. It's been a long day."

"I'll try not to make a lot of noise when I join you," the captain said since he would be sharing his private cabin with Kyllian. A cot had been laid for Greta in a small storage room off the galley.

As he passed Lanelle's cabin on his way to the captain's, Kyllian heard the quiet sobbing of his future Queen. His heart ached while he stood there listening. After a moment's hesitation, he knocked lightly on the door.

"Your Grace?" he said softly. "It's Kyllian."

He didn't know whether or not she would answer but then the lock disengaged and she pulled the door open. Her eyes were red and swollen from her crying, her lips trembling, and he had no other thought than to comfort her. She stepped back to allow him to enter the cabin and when he did, he simply opened his arms and she walked into them, placing her cheek against his broad chest.

"You're safe now," he said, smoothing a hand down her back. She still wore the boy's shirt and pants though her feet were bare.

"I'm so worried he won't want me back," she said and he felt tears wetting his shirt.

"Why would he not?" he asked.

"Silva..."

His arms tightened around her for he understood her concern. “Your Grace,” he said gently, “what happened to you was not your fault and no intelligent man would blame you. Had your husband been well enough, he would have come after you himself. He couldn’t so he sent me.”

She raised her head and looked up at him, hurt stamped across her lovely features. “I’m soiled goods now,” she said. “Will he be able to see past that?”

“Aye,” he said and nothing more, staring unblinkingly into her tearful eyes.

“Will our people?” she asked, one last tear rolling down her cheek.

Once more he gave an emphatic answer: aye.

Lanelle laid her cheek on his chest once more. “Thank you, Milord,” she said. “I needed to hear that.”

* * * *

Thiessen had been haunting the battlements all morning despite his father’s arguments and his mother’s exasperated sighs. It was freezing cold with a stiff northerly wind that whipped the three standards signifying the royal presences but he was bundled in his great cape with heavy fur boots and gloves, the lower portion of his face protected by a thick wool muffler. Though his eyes were tearing from the cold, he would not go below, keeping a watch on the harbor a mile distant in the hopes of seeing the sails of the ship bringing Lanelle home to him.

“Her Grace won’t be happy with you if you catch lung fever up here,” Vargas told him. The aging warrior had returned along with Seth and Mac after a successful encounter with the Toscalians on the high seas.

“You blew that ship to kindling, right?” Thiessen asked.

“We did,” Vargas agreed.

“And the raiders are in Wardsgate?”

“On their way there even as we speak. If the Federation has its way, they’ll be swinging from gibbets before the week is out and that’ll be the end of that miserable crew,” Vargas answered. He thought of the missing captain of the ship but was of the same mind as Lord Morgan that the man must have fallen overboard and drowned during the pitched battle. If the bastard had been a craven coward and hidden aboard the doomed ship while charges were laid in its hull, he had met his fate amidst the kindling when the *Cierzo* was blown sky high. Either way, it was presumed Nathaniel Hotchkin was no more.

“their Jarl will no doubt commission a new crew of raiders,” Thiessen said, flapping his arms around him. He was near to being frozen but he would not leave the walls.

“It’ll take ‘em awhile but that’s the way of them marauders. They been a’pirating since time began,” Vargas stated. “But at least we now know where their fortress is and patrol boats can be sent out to keep an eye on them.”

Thiessen nodded absently. He didn’t really care about the Toscalian raiders but he desperately needed to make conversation else he’d go stark, raving mad as he paced. He put his hands on the top of a crenellation and leaned out. “Is that my brother?” He blinked against the intrusion of the cold wind against his eyes.

Vargas looked to where his Prince was staring and saw the lone rider coming up the roadway to Windemere. “Aye, I believe so.” He gave Thiessen a considering look. “I guess he’s finally come to his senses and realized he is part of the family, eh?”

Thiessen smiled behind the heavy muffler. “It took some doing but we’re mending fences between us. I’m glad he’ll be here to welcome Nelle home.”

As the rider neared the drawbridge he glanced up to the walls and upon seeing the two men staring down at him, lifted a hand in greeting.

“Any news?” Thiessen held up his hand and yelled down to him but his voice was caught and flung away by the howling wind.

“He can’t hear you,” Vargas reminded him.

“I would have thought he’d wait at the docks for her,” Thiessen said, his eyes narrowed with concern. “You don’t think the ship has had problems, do you?”

“Let’s hope not,” Vargas said under his breath.

Thiessen lifted his head and stared at the distant harbor for a long moment but there was nothing on the horizon. He stood there indecisive for a second longer then spun on his heel. “I’m going to talk to Morgan,” he announced.

Vargas bobbed his head in acknowledgment but did not follow his Prince. He turned his still-sharp gaze to the broad expanse of silvery-blue water, hoping to spy sails on the horizon.

Morgan dismounted, unhooked a canvas bag from his saddle horn, and handed his horse into the keeping of a stable boy. He glimpsed his half-brother coming down the stairs from the battlements and waited for him, walking slowly toward the keep.

“Have you heard anything?” Thiessen asked as he hurried to Morgan’s side.

“Nothing yet but I’ve no reason to believe they’ve encountered problems. The winds are sharp so they are bucking a strong headwind. Larson is a good man, Thie. There’s no need to begin worrying.” He extended the bag toward his half-brother. “I believe you requested this.”

Thiessen glanced down at the bag but didn’t take it. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Aye, it is.”

With a look of disgust, Thiessen called a servant over and ordered him to take the bag. “Put what’s inside on a pike and…”

“She doesn’t want it in her courtyard,” Morgan warned.

Thiessen nodded. “Put the putrid thing on a pike and stick it up on the battlements where my lady-wife isn’t likely to see it.”

“Aye, Your Grace,” the servant said, holding the bag well away from him, his face a bit green.

“She was adamant about not seeing that head again,” Morgan said on a long breath. “I’m glad we got that shit straightened out.”

“Aye, well, there’s nothing like crooked shit to fuck up a man’s day,” Thiessen quipped as the two brothers climbed the steps to the keep, Morgan chuckling at the retort.

“I hear the *Cierzo* took a bite out of your railing,” Thiessen said.

“Bastards,” Morgan said with a grunt. “No other damage to the Westwind and that was the only lucky shot they got in before the Federation frigates began pounding them senseless.” He looked around and up at the battlements as the door to the keep was opened for them by a servant. “You been standing up there long?”

“Long enough for my feet to feel like blocks of ice,” Thiessen replied. “I’ll warm up then go back.”

“You watching for her won’t make her get here any the quicker, brat,” Morgan observed. He was drawing off his own heavy gloves to hand to a waiting servant.

A maid came up to them and curtsied quickly. “His Majesty asked that you join them in the library, Milords,” she reported.

“I could do with a glass of something hot and potent,” Morgan said. “Damn if that wasn’t an unpleasant ride up from the docks.”

“The Prognosticators are calling for a foot or more of snow tonight,” Thiessen told him as Morgan shrugged out of his great cape.

“I don’t doubt that at all,” his half-brother replied.

their father and his Queen were sitting before the fire place in the library, the smell of mulled wine redolent in the warm air. On a small table between them sat a platter of sandwiches and a bowl of fruit.

“I thought we’d eat in here rather than that drafty dining hall of yours,” Celeste told her son. “I’m fare to freezing as it is.”

“Going to be a cold winter,” her husband commented.

“I asked Thomas to have the cook prepare a pot of corn chowder just for you, Morgan,” Celeste said. “I’m told that is your favorite.”

Morgan smiled. “It is, Your Majesty. Thank you for your thoughtfulness.”

“Sit,” the King ordered. “I dislike craning my neck looking up at your boys.”

Thiessen took a seat on the other side of his mother and bent over to remove his heavy fur boots. He sat them aside, wriggling his damp toes in the thick socks. He took a cup of mulled wine his mother poured for him and reached for a sandwich on the tray.

“A light repast instead of a heavy meal makes so much more sense, don’t you think?” Celeste asked her men folk.

“Lanelle set that into play at *Vista del Mar* a few years back when she came to visit,” Morgan informed them. He chuckled. “As I recall, she pinched my waist and said all that heavy food I consumed at breakfast then lunch was packing on the pounds.” He shrugged. “She was right.”

“Don’t say that in her hearing,” Thiessen said.

“You know,” the Queen said as she sat aside her cup of wine. “She will be unsure of her welcome, gentlemen.”

Thiessen’s head came up. “Why?”

“Silva,” Morgan said softly.

Looking from his half-brother to his parents, Thiessen saw the concern on their faces, the speculation in their eyes and a muscle ground in his cheek. “She is not to blame for what that pervert did to her!” he said.

“No, of course not,” Sierran said.

Celeste looked to Morgan. “What was her state of mind when you saw her, Milord?”

“Steady,” Morgan replied. “Lanelle is a strong woman and all that mattered to her was getting home to Windemere.”

“Did she discuss with you what happened to her at Silva’s hand?” his father inquired.

“No, but it wasn’t needed,” Morgan said. “I have known her a long time and was privy to what the Toscalian did to her in the past. I suspect this time it was much worse but it did not shatter her. It did not make her throw her hands in the air and give up. She is a determined little woman and as hard to break as a diamond.”

“We will work through this,” Thiessen said. “I will let her know that this interlude changed nothing between us.”

Morgan looked at his brother. “Don’t deceive yourself that it won’t, brat,” he said. “It will always be there with you every time you take her to you.”

“It won’t,” Thiessen said with a firm shake of his head. “I won’t...”

“Morgan is right,” their father interrupted. “It will be there at the back of your mind and in hers. Only time will iron over the wrinkle of it in your lives.”

“You need to get it out in the open, discuss it,” Celeste said. “She must know the family supports her and that we are here for her if she ever needs us.”

“She needs to know we will not look any differently at her because of the incidence. You and she need to get everything out in the open,” his father stressed.

“We will, but I refuse to allow it to ruin our lives. It...”

“It happened and it is over,” came a soft voice from the door.

Every eye snapped to Lanelle who stood just inside the room, Kyllian at her back.

Thiessen leapt to his feet, a flicker of pain flashing over his face as his wounds reminded him they had yet to fully heal. He rushed to his wife and grabbed her, his hold so tight on her the breath rushed from her body.

“You’re smothering me, warrior!” she told him.

Mindless of the people seated behind him or the warrior standing in front of him, Thiessen put a hand to his lady’s chin and lifted her mouth to his, claiming her lips with a kiss that made Kyllian look away in embarrassment, coughing discreetly behind his hand.

“Here, now. Take that upstairs,” Mistress Nan said as she came in carrying a large tureen. Her twinkling blue eyes met Celeste’s. Thomas—the stately seneschal—had been pressed into carrying a tray of soup bowls and gave the couple an arched brow at the kiss ended on a long sigh from both lovers.

Reaching down to clasp his wife’s hand in his, ignoring the man he later would realize he should have thanked immensely for rescuing the Princess, Thiessen drew Lanelle from the library and toward the stairs.

“Watch your wounds!” his father called out to him.

“Come join us for lunch, Milord,” Celeste told Kyllian.

Kyllian obliged her, nodding at Morgan. “Good to see you came unscathed through the battle,” he said. He bowed to his King and Queen, who waved away his formality and bid him sit.

“The Westwind took a hit on the port rail but not a single one of my men or the Federations got a scratch,” Morgan told him. As Kyllian sat down beside him on the settee, Morgan leaned toward him and lowered his voice. “All but one of the crew of the Cierzo is accounted for either among the captured or the dead.”

Kyllian met his friend’s eyes. “Which one?”

“Hotchkin,” Morgan said. “We’ve no idea what happened to him but we do know he was on board the Toscalian raider and had assumed the captainship.”

“I would like to propose a toast,” the King said, coming to his feet. Kyllian and Morgan joined him while the Queen remained seated. “To Lord Kyllian Reddick,” Sierran said, lifting his wine cup. “We owe you a tremendous debt of gratitude.”

“Here, here!” Celeste agreed.

“A full pardon was issued and you are a free man,” the King told him. “Your service to us is complete.”

“It was my honor to serve you, Your Majesty,” Kyllian said, blushing.

“I hope you will continue to serve us, Kyllian,” Sierran said.

“My loyalty to the Crown has always been there, Sire.”

“Good then you won’t mind accepting an assignment I have in mind for you,” the King replied.

Kyllian blinked. “An assignment, Sire?”

“Master Heyward Reynolds has taken over duties as the Emardian WyndMaster Trainer. You are enrolled in his first class which will begin a week hence, weather permitting,” Sierran stated. “Upon graduation, you will be commissioned at my champion.” He took a bowl of chowder from Mistress Nan, smiling his thanks to her.

Kyllian stopped breathing. He was staring at his King with a look that defied description. “Sire, I don’t understand,” he managed to say.

“It is our desire that you be our champion, Lord Kyllian,” Sierran said. “What part of that is beyond your comprehension?”

“Warrior,” his wife chided him as she accepted her bowl of chowder.

“Well, hell, wench!” the King snapped. “I thought I was being succinct with my statement.”

“You were, but I believe Kyllian would like you to tell him why you chose him for this honor,” she said.

“Because he’s good with a sword, wench!” her husband grumbled. “Why else would I ask him?”

“Did you ask him, Darling, or tell him?” she countered.

Sierran narrowed his eyes. “Wench...”

“Warrior...” his wife drawled.

Morgan exchanged an amused glance with Kyllian as husband and wife continued to goad one another. “Let’s eat,” he said. “I’m starved.”

Kyllian took a sandwich offered to him by Thomas and agreed he’d like some of the delicious smelling chowder. Surprised with the royal couple bickering good-naturedly, he sat back in the seat and listened with rapt attention, realizing this was what a family must be like.

“They’ll go at it for awhile,” Morgan whispered to him. “They get a kick out of pulling each other’s chain.”

Smiling to himself, Kyllian hoped that he would one day have a wife to bicker with and who would bring the same hot gleam of desire to his eye as the Queen had put in her King’s.

* * * *

Thiessen shut the door to his chamber and took his wife into his arms. “By the gods, wench, I was going crazy without you!” he swore and she felt a tremor pass through his body.

“You are well?” she asked, searching his amber eyes. “The wounds are healed?”

“Almost. I’m still sore but that will pass,” he said. “Now that you’re home where you belong, I’ll be just fine.”

She tilted her head to the side. “So will I,” she told him.

“No mention of our wounds again, all right?” he asked.

“No mention of them ever again,” she said.

“Now, let’s see if we can’t make up for missing time!” he said, tugging her toward the massive oak bed.

“I think not,” she said as she dug in her heels and pulled against him.

Thiessen gave her a surprised look. “You don’t want me?” He feared her ordeal at the hands of Silva might have done irreparable damage.

“Did you not just tell me you were sore?” she asked and pulled her hand from his grip.

Her husband’s face fell. “Aye, Nelle, but...”

“How sore?” she asked. When he would have hedged, she raised both eyebrows in challenge, expecting the truth.

“I hurt a little now and again but it’s nothing a little loving will aggravate,” he stated.

“Then why don’t you just take your clothes off and climb into bed and let me take care of you,” she suggested.

His forehead creased. “Take care of me?” he repeated.

“As I took care of you the first time we met,” she said with a sweep of her tongue over her top lip.

Thiessen’s eyes flared. “You’re going to plunder me, wench?”

“Thoroughly, warrior,” she said, her fingers going to the buttons of her shirt.

“I can do that,” he said and headed for the bed, stripping his shirt over his head as he went.

“Careful of your wounds,” she cautioned for she had spied the three red scars that dotted his broad back. She sat down in a chair to take off her boots.

He grumbled, mimicking her words while he took off his belt and pushed his pants down, stepping out of them and toeing off his socks as he hopped up on the bed and faced her, as naked as the night she’d ravished him. He spread his arms wide in invitation. “How’s this?”

“Promising,” she said as she removed her own shirt and pants. She stood, smiling as his heated gaze traveled slowly down her.

“No underwear, wench?” he asked.

“What’s fair for the gander is fair for the goose,” she replied. She came to the bed. “Scoot over, warrior.”

He obeyed her, moving into the center of the bed, flinging his arms and legs wide. “Take me,” he offered. He wrapped his hands under the back piece of the headboard.

“All in good time,” she said, having to use the little stairs beside the bed to climb up on the mattress.

“You gonna truss me up like a feast goose again, Nelle?” he asked, wagging his brows.

“I believe I can trust you to keep still while I pillage you,” she replied.

“Aye, but it wouldn’t be as much fun,” he protested.

Lanelle grinned. “Do you want me to tie you up, warrior?”

He nodded eagerly. “It was fun the first time though I had to pretend it wasn’t since my manhood was being sorely tested and abused.”

She put a hand to his shaft. “I intend to abuse that manhood some more before the day is out,” she said, caressing him. When he started to sit up to grab her, she wagged a finger at him. “Unh, unh, unh. Lie down and be still.”

“Then you’d best tie, wench, because I don’t believe I can lie here and not put my hands to those glorious tits of yours.”

Lanelle scrambled off the bed and harvested his belt and hers, deciding his ankles could be left unrestrained as long as his wrists were secured. She crawled back on the bed and began looping his belt around his right wrist. That tight, she threw a leg over his waist and sat on his hips for a moment before she moved on to his left wrist and shackled it. She tried not to look down at the healing scar on his chest where the one arrow had to be cut out.

“It isn’t going to go away, Nelle,” he told her softly.

“I know,” she said and leaned down to kiss the wound tenderly. She licked at it as a mother cat would her kitten’s injury and heard him suck in his breath. She looked up. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, Nellie,” he said. “You caught the undivided attention of the little man.”

Her gaze slid down him and she smiled, enclosing his cock within the warmth of her fingers. "He's not so little, warrior," she said then looked up at him through her eyelashes. "And he's growing."

Thiessen laughed. "That he is. He..."

Once more the breath was whipped from his chest as his lady leaned down and took him into her mouth, her tongue spiraling around his swollen flesh. She suckled him strongly, lapped at his dewy tip, and pierced that tip with the point of her tongue while she gently cupped his balls, massaging them to the rhythm of her drawing upon his flesh.

"Ah, Nelle," he sighed and one look at him showed him with his eyes closed, hands clenched now around the leads of the belts attached to the headboard. He arched his hips up in offering to her.

Lanelle savored him. She moved over him so she was kneeling between his legs, pushing his thighs farther apart with her shoulders. Her lips contracted around him as she pulled him deep into her mouth, working her tongue and pallet on his heated shaft until she knew he was ripe to bursting then she released him.

"No," he moaned, on the verge of coming.

Not giving another chance to protest, she straddled him while she gripped him firmly and settled her cunt over his throbbing member. Impaling herself upon him, she ground her hips against his, her long hair swaying as she rode him. He stretched her fully, filled her completely, almost to the point of pain.

Thiessen pulled against his bonds. His lower lip was caught between his teeth as the pleasure built in his loins. He could hear the blood pounding in his ears, feel the heat gathering in his balls, smell the combined juices of their bodies and he lifted his hips higher, closing his legs to make the ride easier for her, digging his heels into the mattress.

"Aye, warrior!" he heard his lady whisper and opened his eyes to see the rapture on her beautiful face as the first squeeze began high in her sheath.

Strong vibrations took hold of Lanelle and rippled from one end of her channel to the other like waves to the shore. She cried out for the pleasure was so intense, so overpowering it made her entire body pulse. Her hands were on her husband's sides and she was unaware her nails were digging into his flesh but Thiessen would not have complained for the slight pain was goading him to a completion of his own that nearly shattered the man.

"*Nelle!*" he shouted and exploded inside her, feeling every ripple of her climax, every spurt of his own so forcefully it brought darkness to the periphery of his vision.

The pleasure went on and on until it drained him and sated her. She collapsed, falling beside him so as not to touch his wounded chest. She was gasping for breath, her heart racing as she turned so her head was on his outstretched arm.

"Oh, my gods, warrior," she sighed and a hard shudder traveled down her body. "You may well have seeded me that time."

A horrible thought sprung unbidden and unwanted into Thiessen's mind. If a child came, who's would it be? It dampened a portion of his pleasure, leached away a portion of the warmth that had begun to wash over him. He lay there as still as death, staring sightlessly at the ceiling as his lady ran her hand tenderly over his chest, barely drawing breath as the wicked, violating thought refused to go away.

"Thie?" she asked, lifting her head to look up at him. When she saw the expression on his face, she pushed up on her elbow. "What's wrong, dearling? Did I hurt you?"

He shook his head, unable at that moment to speak for he felt numb, his heart aching.

“Thiessen?”

Slowly he turned his face toward her and locked eyes with her. “Even if the child is his, I will love it just the same. I will never do to him what my father did to Morgan. He will never be anything but my son.”

Lanelle said nothing but instead sat up and began unbuckling his wrists. When he was free, she lay down beside him and he wrapped his arms around her, concerned by her silence.

“Lanelle?” he questioned.

“It would not be his child, warrior,” she said. “The gods made sure of that.”

A frown appeared on his face. “In what way?”

“He boasted of being sterile,” she said. “He was a selfish man and hated children with a passion so he got himself fixed.”

Thiessen’s eyebrows shot up. “Fixed? What do you mean fixed?”

“There is a Healer in Zephyrosa who has perfected a way to keep men from getting women pregnant. All I know is that he snips something. What matters is that I am grateful to him for having done his magic on that Toscalian bastard.”

“So he couldn’t get you with child?” Thiessen asked, relief flooding his entire being.

“No.”

He breathed easier and tightened his arms around her. “Then if we do it again just to make sure I’ve seeded you, you won’t mind?”

She smiled against his chest. “I think I can endure it, warrior.” She looked up at him. “But only if I can ride you again.”

“Feel free to climb aboard at your leisure, Nelle,” he told her.

“Oh, I will, warrior,” she agreed. “I will.”