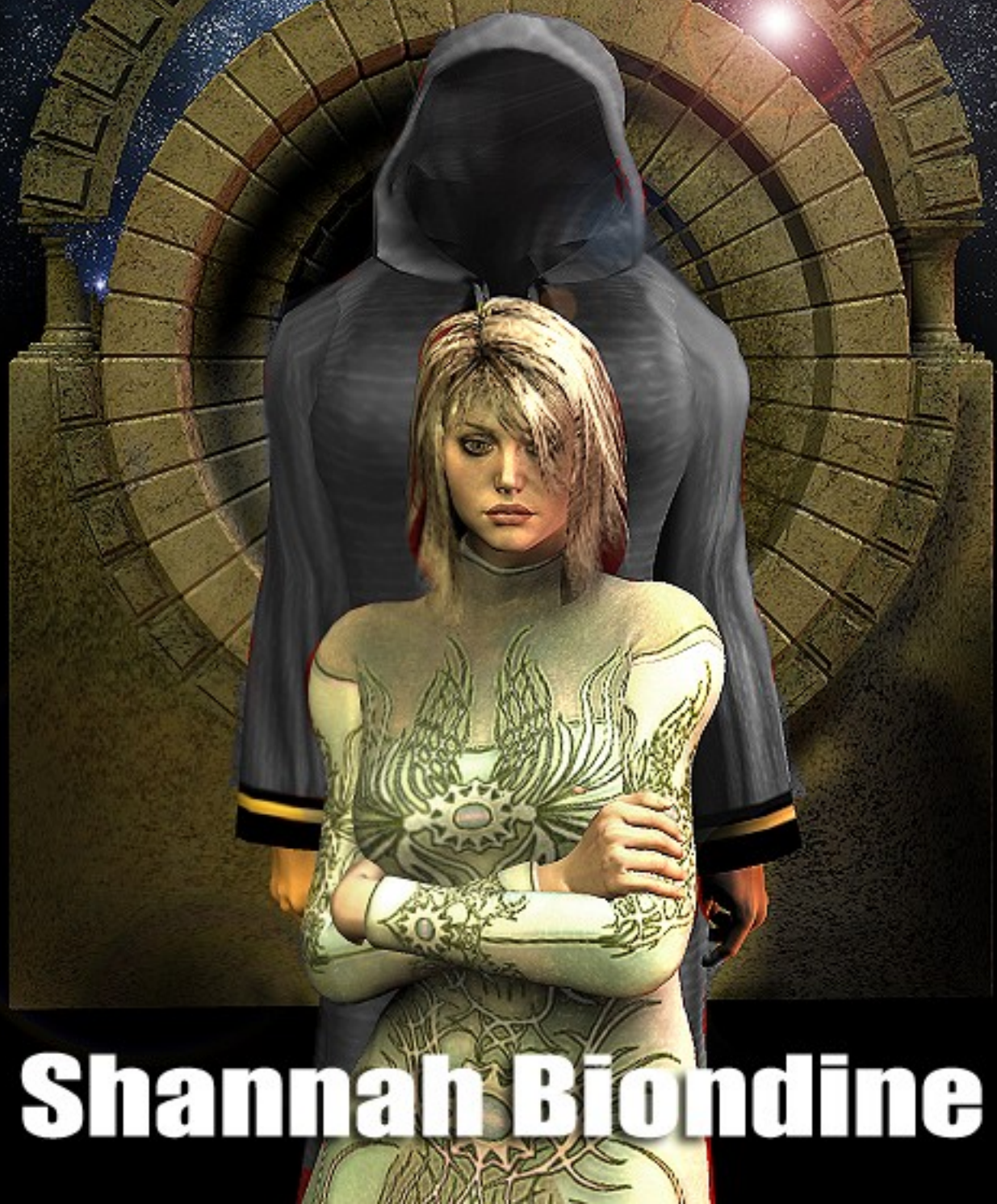


SHADOW IN STARLIGHT



Shannah Biondine

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By

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my supporters & friends.

They listened, read, endured, challenged.

They shared their faith & patience when mine ran low.

Thanks to: Linda, Marilyn, Ann, Larimee, Kassia, Dayna, Trish, Connie.

And always, with loving appreciation to Bob.

Bless you.

Chapter 1

"Forsooth, a wry misadventure," King Cronel declared with a heavy sigh. "Your father will be sorely missed. He was one of my most valued advisors."

Wry misadventure?

Moreya Fa Yune tore her gaze from the beringed hand her sovereign waved as he droned on about how Anthaal Fa had averted war more than once with his polished speeches and calm demeanor. How well Lord Fa had acquitted himself in the peace negotiations following the great battle in Tuleskeff, how well liked the royal emissary had been here at court.

Well liked, it seemed, by everyone but the royal cook, whose body sagged on a pikestaff at the castle gates. The king decreed swift and lethal punishment for the man who'd prepared the sumptuous meal Moreya's father had fatally choked upon. The cook was executed even before Moreya arrived under guard at Cronel's castle, mere days after her father's unexpected demise.

A wry misadventure, indeed, she reflected darkly. Her father had spent years traveling at the king's behest, visiting both near and distant realms. Anthaal had eaten roasted yak and caribou, boiled serpent, pickled vermin; he'd boasted of dauntless digestion and unwavering good fortune. Other reeves had been struck by lances or arrows upon occasion. Anthaal suffered not so much as a scratch. He convinced warriors to lay aside their weapons, arranged vital trade pacts and defense alliances. He boldly strode unarmed into many a war camp and lived to stride out again.

Only to return to his native Glacia, and strangle on a chunk of roast boar in the palace hall. Leaving Moreya bereft and confused.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," she mumbled, when Cronel finally stopped praising his dead ambassador and reached for a cup of wine. A serving girl rushed forward to mop at the king's sweaty brow with a silken cloth. Moreya focused upon his damp forehead and kept her eyes averted from the king's flashing rings and pudgy fingers.

"Your sire had just returned from Greensward," Cronel announced, pinning Moreya with his sharp gaze. "He sought my permission to arrange a betrothal for you, Lady Fa."

A betrothal? Her father had said nothing of this, not one word about marriage or setting up a contract. Moreya's stomach tightened into a knot. Here was the true reason she'd been summoned by guards storming Anthaal Fa's home. She'd known, of course, that she and her father occupied the ambassador's sprawling manor as part of the king's largesse. Upon learning of her father's demise, she assumed the king would expect her to find lodgings elsewhere.

A sense of impending dread warned she was about to discover precisely where now.

"You shall wed the prince regent of Greensward," King Cronel proclaimed.

A collective gasp echoed off the marble walls.

Moreya stood at the base of a flight of steps leading to a broad dais and Cronel's throne. The throne room was a massive chamber of polished marble. High-backed wooden chairs aligned against the outer walls. Massive entry doors were perpetually flanked by guards and castle pages. She'd been granted a personal audience, but she was far from alone in the room.

The king's bold announcement had wrought a stiff silence fraught with expectation. She must respond, yet how?

She had absolutely no idea what to say in the face of such absurdity. Her father had been a high privy council member, a trusted royal advisor-but still and all, merely lackey to the Glacian king. The Fa line boasted no royal blood. Anthaal had been a petty noble, considered by most to have been more than fortunate in his own match with a Yune woman of gentle birth. Moreya's mother had been a distant cousin to a sovereign of the far realms. Moreya couldn't imagine that any royal family would have agreed to a match between a future king and herself-a woman of little consequence.

"Surely there is some misunderstanding, Your Highness," she said softly. She did not want to antagonize him. Her gaze swept up from the steps to where Cronel sat, to the heavy crown resting on rumpled white locks framing a florid, piggish face.

She had been to court before, of course, to be formally presented to the monarch. She had been a child the first time, and foolishly spoke her mind.

"Why does the king have so many fingers, Father? I count six on each hand!"

Courtiers and ladies in waiting had coughed and tittered, locking their eyes on Cronel to see how he'd react to being so baldly insulted. Cronel had laughed and pronounced Anthaal Fa's daughter a most clever girl. Then he'd explained that was *why* he was king. He was born with excess digits. He was, he told her with pride, a polydact. A person with more than the usual number of fingers and toes. The excess proved he was superior, meant to rule. Everyone accepted the fact.

She had been tempted to reply that it seemed to her everyone had made a silly mistake, then. She had once owned a kitten with too many toes its front paws. It had been a troublesome animal, and no better hunter than its littermates. But her father squeezed her shoulder in warning, so she'd kept silent. As she grew in years and understanding, she learned the politics of the throne . . . that Cronel was a bastard who'd risen to rule after viciously slaughtering anyone who stood between him and power.

Allowing this fat bastard to order everyone about merely because he was a polydact seemed preposterous still, but Moreya would hold her tongue on that point. He did, after all, hold her very life in the twelve fingers of his fat hands. But she would not remain silent about the Prince of Greensward.

This gallows humor was too cruel to ignore. "There is a mistake, surely."

"No mistake, my dear. Nay. Indeed, the betrothal pact was the cause for our celebration-er, that is, I regarded it as quite an accomplishment, even for your renowned father. He spent nearly a fortnight with Queen Vela. All is in readiness. You will leave on the morrow for Greensward, where you shall be wed within the month."

"But Your Majesty, I-"

The chamber doors flew open. Moreya glanced back over her shoulder and quickly ducked to one side. A knot of grappling men whooshed past her to the foot of the dais steps. She realized they were castle guards wrestling with a prisoner. His arms were pinioned behind him. Moreya could see little but black and grey disheveled waves on the back of his head.

A trio of royal guardsmen came forward. Each guard tensed at the knife or sword pressed against his throat, held at the ready by common soldiers. The men who'd overtaken the guards wore no colored surcoats or distinctive blazons. Who were they then, motley outlaws and vagrants?

She debated whether to remain where she stood or dash to safety behind a sturdy chair. Would anyplace be safe, or was the castle itself under siege? These knaves dared mock royal guards at blade-point! Yet surely, had the royal palace been overrun, there would be more troops swarming about, she reasoned. A great many, bound for this very chamber.

A deep voice spoke up. "Damn it, Cronel, do you have naught better to do than keep signing those fool warrants? What's the sot accused of this time? Wiping his ass with royal bed linens? Tugging a prize ewe? Mistaking your belly for an ale keg?"

Something black loomed at the edge of Moreya's vision. Big and black and somehow producing the words they'd all heard quite audibly. Dangerous, sarcastic, treacherous words.

Which had been spoken, she now saw, by a tall, imposing figure who stood just a few feet from her. His head and face were completely obscured by an oversized dark cowl. He offered a mocking bow toward the dais. Moreya swallowed and inched back slightly, but felt her skirt hitch.

The stranger's broadsword had snagged the hem of her kirtle!

Fighting a vision of herself being bodily dragged before the high executioner, her garments still entangled with the blade of this brash rebel, she tugged. The cloth tore with a slight rending sound . . . which might have gone unnoticed, had every soul in the throne room not been straining in hushed anticipation for what might happen next.

The cowl pivoted in Moreya's direction. "I hope your skirts haven't dulled the keen edge of my broadsword, madam. 'Twould be a shame to have to skewer the king on my best eating dagger."

Appalled, she responded without thinking. "Could you not find some less flamboyant way to die, sir? A wild animal in the forest, a joust, a bold leap off one of the nearby mountain peaks. Your blade may be keen, but the like cannot be said of your wits!"

"Bested by a maid!" The king let out a roaring guffaw and laughter exploded in the room. Cronel slowly descended the dais steps, pausing to release another loud chortle. "So, the Warmonger cometh, at last. Did you answer my page's summons, like any other knight of the realm, I'd not have to resort to warrants against your men. Release Sir Graeme."

The guards let go of the rumpled fellow in their midst, who smoothed a hand over stained garments. He hiccuped as he tossed a baleful look toward the stranger in the cowl. "I'd drunk only a cupful, I swear it, Preece."

Preece. Warmonger.

Oh, Good Creator, what had she done?

Moreya nearly fainted at the realization that the man she'd just insulted was none other than the legendary dark knight. Subject of murmured tales her father had shared with Drix, the captain of their home guard, or male visitors. Anthaal had never spoken to Moreya directly of the cowed-one's escapades, but she'd overheard enough to know she definitely stood before her sovereign at the wrong time. Next to a ruthless warrior who had abundant reason to mark her continued presence. Ill fortune, indeed.

She'd assumed the craven stranger wore a cowl to hide his face as he led some brash, final assault against their sovereign.

But Sir Preece was reputed to wear a dark cowl at all times. To obscure a hideously deformed face and head, so rumor had it. He rarely appeared at court, and was allowed open belligerence and hostility only because he'd proven himself an incredibly lethal henchman for Cronel. So effective that some called him the Royal Blade.

The ebon cowl turned toward her again and Moreya instinctively flinched. She could feel the stranger's unwelcome eyes rake over her like an icy draft. She could only imagine this was how a poor rabbit must feel under the scrutiny of a black wolf. She couldn't run, couldn't speak, couldn't think. Beyond ascertaining that he stood much too close to her . . . and she had no business with whatever business brought *him* before the king.

She stepped back one pace, yet another, then was pulled up short as her skirts snagged once more.

She glanced down and discovered the knight's sword nailed her gown to the leg of a nearby chair. She glanced up into the empty blackness of his cowl and felt a prickle of hot temper. Her father had died, she'd been summoned here to court with no time to prepare or adequately pack her belongings. She'd been told a preposterous lie about some betrothal to royalty in another realm, and now found herself the brunt of a jest with

this hooded knave!

"Your weapon appears in dire need of a scabbard," she seethed. "Would you please pull it out so that I might-"

"Ah, as I long suspected, Preece," Cronel sneered. "The lady asks that you pull it out."

This brought snickers from the male assembly and even more unwelcome heat to Moreya's cheeks. She knew she must be blushing like a springtime rose. The knight made no move to unpin her skirts, curse his soul. It must already be blackened as his awful cowl.

"But I assure you, Lady Fa," the king went on, "This is the first time I've ever known Preece to put his sword into a damsel's skirts. Which is why I decree he's the knight who shall escort you to Greensward." The king took another drink from his jewel-encrusted cup, then turned to gaze at the forbidding figure.

"Take your besotted friend and however many knights you require. Lady Fa has a personal maid and both have baggage. I shall provide a coach and pack animals. You shall name your usual outrageously ridiculous fee, and I shall agree to half that sum. You depart on the morrow, Warmonger."

"She doesn't leave this chamber until you sign a pardon for Dugan," came the low response.

The king's pronouncements, for all their clipped, impatient tone, had not sounded half so commanding as this softly spoken phrase. The hackles rose on the back of Moreya's neck.

The king abruptly turned.

The royal guards no longer had blades at their backs, but Moreya sensed this could change with the blink of an eye. The throne room stilled as the sense of impending danger mounted.

"My blade now pierces her gown," the cowed knight said, gesturing toward the chair. "Would you have me prove how easily it could likewise pierce her heart?"

The king snarled something in answer, but whatever he said was lost on Moreya. Her knees trembled, the chamber grew dim. Its walls seemed to recede, leaving her more exposed than ever. She couldn't just stand there! The faceless madman just might slay her, simply to prove he could!

With a peculiarly detached sense of urgency, Moreya gave one last ferocious yank at her skirts.

They jerked free and she tumbled backwards in a heap on the floor.

Chapter 2

Preece had been summoned to the royal bathing chamber. He folded his arms across his chest and addressed his monarch. "She's a Yune," he stated pointedly.

"Indeed," Cronel chuckled. "Why else would I order *you* to serve as escort? You'll deal with the Raviner threat and are perhaps the only man in the realm who'd not be tempted by her exotic appeal. I've offered Yune flesh before."

Cronel soaked in a massive tub especially designed to accommodate his great girth . . . with space for several bathing attendants. One such female idly scrubbed at the king's back; another braced a royal foot against her bare breasts as she trimmed her sovereign's toenails.

These were but two of Cronel's personal slaves. In a castle the size of this one, there were any number of servants and attendants bustling about at all hours, day or night. These were not serfs of that kind.

Cronel had taken dozens of female prisoners during his various battles-women from every conceivable race and known realm-and though technically enslaved for the personal enjoyment of the Glacian king, the women were routinely shared with knights and nobles at court.

Preece declined to sample such women. Like other Waniand warriors, he had neither a taste for slavery nor the need to indulge in random bedsport. Cronel mocked Preece with his casual words. Preece took a step closer to the edge of the great tub.

"Sire, I-Damn, are you blind, woman?" Preece railed at the old servant who'd splashed him. "With my face covered, I see better than you do!"

He'd been about to protest that he couldn't be ready to embark the following morning for a Dredonian crossing. The king's schedule allowed no time to recruit additional mercenaries. Preece had ridden to the royal castle with only a handful of warriors, two of whom had already departed on another foray of their own.

Which left only perpetually-besotted Dugan; Preece's trusted friend, Lockram; and Sieffre, one of the youngest knights in Preece's band.

The bumbling maidservant had spilled a pitcher of cold rinse water down Preece's leggings, angering him into forgetting his other concerns. The woman must be wall-eyed if she'd been aiming for the king's broad pink shoulders.

"Oh, by the stars and six moons, look at what I've gone and done! A thousand pardons, sir. If you'll follow me, I'll have you stripped of those wet things and some dry clothes p-"

Preece jerked away the towel she offered to wield for him. He swiped at his knees, which seemed to only grow damper. He glanced up to find the chambermaid lewdly

winking at him. Preece suppressed a groan. He knew that wink, and how a dry towel could seemingly make fabric wetter.

"All right. Which chamber houses my belongings?" He started for the door. The bumbling maid scurried ahead of him. Once in the passageway she made a quick left, a right, then led him to one of the castle's many guest chambers. As soon as they were inside and the door securely closed behind them, Preece threw the towel against the wall in open disgust.

"*Bourke*. Were you hoping to drown the fat throne-sitter?"

The stooped shoulders flared slightly. Sagging pendulous breasts shriveled and flattened, to be obscured by a flowing alabaster beard. The servant's apron elongated into a tattered ankle-length robe darkened with soot. The soot from a mage's hearth.

"You've been away some time, boy. I knew you'd ride in, when I heard Dugan had been taken again."

Preece scowled, pointing at his soggy boots and damp leggings. "You needn't have soaked me to announce your presence. I know your wink."

Bourke shrugged shoulders so frail and thin as to be almost invisible beneath his robe.

"You needed a good soaking after that display in the throne room. I've never known you to ill use a gentlewoman. Or your weapon."

"Both my sword and the Yune maid are well enough."

"Mayhap, but I suffered a bit." The old wizard thrust out a spindly forearm. A scabbed-over gash ran its length. "I was the chair!"

Preece sighed and lowered his dark cowl. "Were you not so fond of following me about and using every possible guise to eavesdrop on matters which do not concern you, you'd not suffer these indignities. Remember the time the wild boar tried to mate with you on that hunt? Why don't you return to your cave and let me-"

"I raised you from a dribbling youth, and unto this very moment, what endangers you concerns me!"

Preece continued stripping off his clothing and mumbled a curse beneath his breath. There was little point in reminding the old sage that Preece was no longer a lad, but a man full grown . . . a man who hired out his blade to protect and fight for others. He was scarce in need of guarding himself.

"Yunes are always unpredictable," Bourke warned in his rasping voice. "I took the precaution of casting spells upon these neck amulets. They render males immune to the girl's physical appeal." The wizard floated toward the ceiling and tried to sling a necklace around Preece's throat. Preece ducked with a hiss.

"It's enough I wear these accursed ebon tunics with cowls. I won't wear the stinking hind part of a bat! I've no need of any lustbane. As Cronel pointed out, and you plainly

overheard, I've encountered Yunes afore. This particular one is no different. She detests me. If she could have hefted my glaive, she'd have run me through with it."

The wizard scrutinized Preece. "You did not find her attractive, pleasing to gaze upon? You felt naught at all when you lifted her from the floor?"

Preece grunted negatively as he stretched out full length upon the bed, gloriously bare from head to toe. He was bone weary and impatient with the foolishness of other men. Yune females were accounted remarkably sensual, but Preece cared little for ogling women. Right now he felt grateful for the peace and quiet of this chamber and a soft bed.

"You gathered her in your arms and handed her off to those royal pages," Bourke persisted. Was the mage never going to let this tiresome discussion end?

"The maid had fallen to the floor. What should I have done, sent for a kitchen barrow? Maybe she can ride in one to Greensward. Fie, of all the fool errands, being ordered to see the daughter of some baron delivered to her future husband in Greensward. And of all the realms, why that one? I hate all the ceaseless plowing and talk of grain."

"She's not a baron's get, but the only child of Anthaal Fa."

Preece ran a hand over his bare chest and considered this new fact. Lord Fa had been among Cronel's privy council members, an eminent ambassador. The girl with the flashing violet eyes was Fa's daughter . . . interesting. Preece seemed to recall talk that Anthaal Fa married a Yune noblewoman of great beauty. The daughter should have inherited some of her mother's exotic allure.

Yet Preece had not seen much to remark upon. At least not the factors men usually noted. Though he'd stubbornly denied any outstanding impression to Bourke, she'd appeared to almost glimmer. Ripple before his eyes. Surely because he was so overtired and vexed at having to rescue Dugan.

Not because of the woman herself.

"With that sharp tongue of hers, her father likely sought to transplant her as distant as possible from his own household." Preece recalled her taunt about his wits.

Bourke shook his head. "She's not betrothed to some petty noble, but the *prince regent*. See you now how grave is your duty? Taking a Yune across Dredonia, the most inhospitable of realms, to marry royalty at Greensward Palace? No small task. You are certain . . . you do not find her in the least. . . beguiling?"

Preece yawned. "Vexing, truth to tell. She likely has an even lower opinion of me. Her dislike was clear enough. And that was after encountering me with my cowl in place." He waved a hand, indicating his bare upper body. "Can you imagine what she would do, seeing what I truly am?" Were he not so dead tired, he might have let his lips quirk into a grin. He could picture the Yune ripping her skirts free and knocking aside every guardsman stationed between her and the castle gates in her haste to flee.

The wizard hovered over Preece's bed. "Be ever vigilant, Warmonger. There are dangers greater than you suspect awaiting you."

Preece drew the bed furs over his lower body and rolled onto his side, turning away from the wizard. Why didn't Bourke make himself part of the wall and let Preece get some much-needed rest?

"Whatever they may be, I'll face them squarely. When has Cronel ever given me an easy challenge? He'll pay dearly, you may rely on that. He trusts no other knight with his delicate Yune goods, and few would attempt crossing the wastelands with her for any sum. But this sojourn will get me coin with which to outfit a vessel all the sooner. Go home to your cave, old one, and take your bat's rump with you. I'll be fine."

"You'll be forever changed," came a rattling whisper. Preece rose up on his elbow and glanced around, ready to challenge that assertion.

Bourke was gone.

"He's been sniffing dead bats and evil concoctions too long," Preece assured himself under his breath. "Forever changed. As if I could get that lucky." He knew better. He'd be hiding under black cowls the rest of his days. Whatever aging a man might do in fifty winters wouldn't be enough to change him.

He could not escape what he was, what he'd been born to. Trueblooded pure Waniand, and hated for it.

Chapter 3

Moreya paced her bedchamber, frowning in consternation at her maid. Glaryd had been Moreya's companion for many years, ever since her mother's death. The older woman truly seemed more blood relation than servant, and had been known to disagree with Lord Fa in matters concerning the raising of his only child. Glaryd was plain spoken and occasionally rash of action.

But never had she dared such as she'd done this night. Nor had there been a hint of penitence when she'd reported her deed to her mistress. As if Glaryd hadn't grossly overstepped her station by seeking out the enigmatic stranger beneath the cowl.

"I cannot fathom that you dared approach him, let alone proceed to tell him how to carry out his assigned duty."

Glaryd puffed out her already full bosom. Her eyes narrowed and her lips thinned. Moreya recognized the signs. Glaryd would not apologize.

"You've not been here since you were a child. You do not know this castle as I do. 'Tis a wicked place, Moreya, corrupt and debauched." Her voice lowered to a hiss. "From the throne itself downward through the ranks, even to the lowliest male serf. There is evil here. The hooded fellow was ordered to guard your chastity, and he shall begin this very eve, right outside yon chamber door. He and I agreed. Now pass me your brush, and I'll see to your hair. No more tongue wagging."

"No more tongue wagging?" Moreya repeated, both amused and astonished by the maid's gall. Glaryd hadn't used that particular admonition in some time. The last instance Moreya could recall was when she'd reported to her father that one of his retainers had searched for a missing serving ladle beneath a kitchen maid's skirts.

"*I'm* not the one carrying tales, Glaryd. Just what did you tell our great protector when you bid him sleep in the passageway? That you feared besiegers would choose tonight to attack the battlements?"

Moreya plopped down atop one of their traveling chests and yelped when Glaryd nearly tore a chunk of hair loose with a fierce tug of the brush. "You do not understand the peril," Glaryd insisted. "He did, only too well. Any man who'd spent a night or two within these walls knows. It's not the fortress at risk of being breached, but your maidenhead, and that shall not happen! My girl goes to her husband pure and unblemished."

Moreya tried pointing out that she was perfectly safe, that King Cronel's edict was a trustier seal than the lock on any chastity belt. But her protests went unheeded. Glaryd merely lengthened her nightly prayer ritual, flopped onto her pallet, and began to snore.

A vexed Moreya blew out the rushlights and stared morosely at the ceiling. Glaryd hadn't been the same since Anthaal Fa's death. Of a certainty, neither was Moreya. But

she worried that Glaryd had begun to suffer the addled wits of advancing age. To think some courtier would dare enter this chamber uninvited, intent upon . . . Lord of all Lords, it didn't bear contemplation. 'Twas preposterous.

Moreya was not the beauty her mother had been. Moreya didn't favor the gossamer, brilliant-hued gowns most Yune women wore. She chose instead simple garments in muted colors. She kept her gleaming gentian tresses-tresses considered rare by most standards-covered in the presence of strangers, and tried to blend unobtrusively into her surroundings. So far, she'd escaped the notice of nobles and fighting men.

Except for the barbarian who'd deliberately speared her kirtle with his sword. And now Glaryd had . . . The woman must be mad, inviting *him* of all the available soldiers, to linger outside their portal!

Having the Warmonger blocking her exit would hardly calm any maid's nerves. At supper in the great hall Moreya had overheard the gossip. Hushed whispers that Preece was no ordinary *man* at all, but a fearsome, twisted creature from the depths of hell itself.

Moreya had recognized two knights amongst the many seated at the long trestle tables. She recalled the pair from the confrontation in the throne room. They were Preece's men, yet he'd not been seated with them. Nor had she spotted him elsewhere in the hall during the meal. From the snatches of conversation around her, it became clear why he was conspicuously absent.

The things other men said of him were truly appalling.

They swore he wore the dark cowls to hide a grotesque deformity. One belched and vowed that in more than ten years, Preece had never dined with other guests at court. He took refreshments alone in his chambers. His food was delivered on a tray by some unlucky servant: whichever unfortunate serf had drawn the short twig from the kitchen broom.

This night Glaryd had spared both broomstick and kitchen serf. She'd personally delivered the tray and requested her boon. Moreya hadn't asked what foodstuffs had been on the Warmonger's supper tray. She'd been afraid to find out.

She'd nearly fallen off her bench when an elder knight boasted he'd glimpsed Preece sans his usual cowl at a joust. The fellow averred that the Warmonger's mouth was located not over his chin, but in the middle of his brow. Every man at the table shuddered with revulsion. Several ladies threatened to faint.

Moreya had held herself stiffly erect, feigning interest in her food, refusing to let anyone know she shamelessly listened to the gossip. But her appetite had deserted her.

When a swaggering fellow remarked he knew for certain that the Warmonger fornicated like a beast, rutting in accordance with the cycles of the sixth moon, Moreya had bolted from her place, gone the way of her missing appetite.

Now, though, Moreya doubted the stories. She would not be as gullible as Glaryd, suspecting every man beneath the castle roof was some evil monster. Besides, she'd clearly heard the Warmonger's speech. It was clear and coherent, not slurred. And Preece's vision must be superior to that of most men, for despite his shadowy cowls, he rated amongst the best swordsmen in the realm. King Cronel himself had given Preece the moniker of Royal Blade.

She had to stop this unpleasant musing. Images of a dark, misshapen ogre would hardly induce restful sleep. It was hard enough to settle herself in a strange bed and chamber. Particularly hard since she was faced with the dual losses of her father and the only home she'd ever known.

She sat up and swung her feet to the floor.

She would send Preece away, back to his own chambers-which were hopefully located in an entirely separate, remote wing of the castle. Or mayhap he'd go off to sleep in the garrison, where he might arise early and see to preparations for their departure. Aye, that made more sense than him spending the night sitting up in the stone passageway.

Moreya stepped over her sleeping maid. Fortunately, Glaryd was a sound sleeper. She'd rant and rail if she learned that Moreya had unbarred the door to dismiss their protector.

It was best, and not as though Moreya set out to banish the fellow . . . exactly. Nay, she offered them both a chance to make a fresh start. They'd not met under the best of circumstances. This was her opportunity to remedy the situation. She would greet him courteously and attempt to establish a modicum of rapport, as her father would have encouraged. Lord Fa had taught her the most successful alliances oft began with simple acts of friendship.

Friendship .

Could Moreya offer that?

She wasn't certain. She wasn't certain she could gird herself for what might be revealed beneath that cowl of his. Beyond that was the matter of her own history. Glaryd and Drix had been Moreya's only friends-a maidservant and the captain of the house guard. Two friends in an entire lifetime. A painfully limited accounting; certainly no recommendation that Moreya was someone in whom a stranger should eagerly place his trust.

But, in fairness, Moreya was being asked to trust him. Utterly and without question. He owed her at the very least a brief personal audience.

The second she swung the door open, Preece shot to his feet and took up a warrior stance, sword upraised. Thankfully, the black cowl still obscured his head and face.

Moreya cleared her throat. "I cannot rest with you out here, sir. My maid should not have summoned you. We are safe enough. You must be tired and-"

"Your maid was right. You've neither sire nor brother to watch over you. I am charged with keeping you safe. There is no reason you should not rest. All is quiet. Return to your bed, Lady Fa Yune."

She cocked her head, studying the dark cowl, trying to make out the general shape beneath it, the edge of a jaw or nose. "If someone came with malicious intent, you would not hesitate to slay him, would you? You would endanger your own life for mine. Because the king has asked it, or because he offered you coin?"

"Both reasons you give are one and the same. Cronel will not accept fealty from a Waniand. I am only too happy to accept payment from the royal coffer. What he asks, I do. I would kill any man who seeks to harm you. Does this ease your mind?"

"Ah, yes. You are *Waniand* ." Moreya had heard of the obscure race. They were said to be mystical people. "Do you-forgive my boldness, but I do not understand. It has been said . . . Are you somehow in concert with the changes of the sixth moon? I'd heard a fellow claim as much about your bodily nature, but I doubt his assertion is true."

There was a long silence. Did Preece simply stare at her?

The cowl obscured his features completely. Peering closer, Moreya wondered if there wasn't yet another cloth beneath it, masking his face. She could make out nothing, not even the glimmer of an eye. Yet she felt his gaze on her, that wolfish gaze she realized again was both intense and troubling.

This had been a poor idea, this attempt at reconciliation. She should have let sleeping beasts lie and never been so bold in her speech. Her father had oft complained it was one of her flaws, though hardly the worst.

"Forgive me, sir." She stepped back to close the door. "I have no right to ask such questions, nor do they matter."

"They do," he countered. "I was merely surprised you'd so candidly address the subject. I admire your courage. For the second time today."

He admired *her* courage?

He made a strange sound, which she belatedly realized had been the rough clearing of his throat. His stiff posture had not changed, but he was likely as chagrined as she at the decidedly odd turn their conversation had taken.

"Nay, Lady Fa Yune, I am not in concert with the sixth moon. Nor the first, nor the third. My seasons vary. There is no danger of one at present, nor by the time we reach Greensward. That is why Cronel entrusted you into my care."

Moreya really could not fathom what he'd said beyond the last of his words. No one but Glaryd and her father had spoken of caring for her. The Warmonger's clipped words were strangely comforting, even when uttered from beneath a dark cowl.

"Do you know the other knights say you do not dine in the great hall because you are . . .

different? Mayhap you stay away purposely to set tongues wagging. You like making people wary of you, I suspect."

"Indeed, and with good reason. I am Waniand, a warrior. The king's blade. Go to bed, my lady."

"Do you mean to call me that for a fortnight, sir?" The cowl dipped in assent.

Moreya frowned up at the pinnacle of black cloth. "I would hope that by journey's end, we might become friends, Sir Preece. After all, I must place faith in you. I would have you understand that I did not know whom I'd encountered at first this afternoon, or I'd not have spoken so rashly. I beg your forgiveness, and pray you come to trust that I mean neither harm nor disrespect."

She leaned closer, adamantly shaking her head. "I do not accept their sordid tales of a monster hidden 'neath your cowl. Truly, I've no need of you here, but you may stay if you prefer to stand guard. Good evening."

She thrust out her right hand.

He ignored it. "You are to ride in a closed carriage with your maid. My men and I will guard it and the pack animals bearing your dowry and household goods. Dredonia is not a welcoming realm, but with precautions, I hope to forestall trouble. The first precaution is to train you not to make overtures to strange men, Lady Fa."

A broad smile lit her face. "But you are not a strange man. You are the Warmonger. Sleep well, sir." She shut the door and scurried back into bed, feeling tremendous relief. He'd wanted to take her hand. She'd sensed his hesitation. Would he have kissed it? Surely not, for then she'd have to feel his lips brush her skin. He'd not risk that. Not yet. But he wanted to clasp it. Moreya just knew he did.

He'd blustered instead, endeavoring to prove himself worthy as her defender.

Moreya released a small giggle. The dark knight called Preece was all her father had said of him, naught of what the gossips maligned. She'd desecrated a secret: the ferocious Warmonger was a decent, honorable man.

She was very glad she'd opened the door to speak with him, for she doubted his prowess as warrior not one whit. But she also knew he was no slathering beast. He harbored no malice toward her. In fact, she would almost go so far as to suspect he liked her.

That thought brought sleep easily.

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The door to the woman's bedchamber shut. Preece collapsed with his back against it. He slid to the floor and wiped a hand over his head, allowing the oversize cowl to tilt back enough to admit a draught of cool air. He felt as though he'd climbed a glacier. His chest hitched with every breath.

He'd seriously misjudged the situation here. Misjudged the Yune female.

In the throne room, she'd worn a shapeless gown he couldn't even describe, beyond the recollection it was some drab brown or wheaten shade. He'd run his sword through her skirts, yet he couldn't now name the precise hue of them. He'd scoffed at the rumors about Yune women, refused Bourke's amulet, assured himself and everyone else there was no cause for concern.

Then she'd opened her chamber door and unleashed a maelstrom.

The faint glow he'd detected in the throne room emanated from a magnificent head of gleaming violet hair. It spilled down over her shoulders and waist, reaching clear to the back of her knees. The gleaming mantle matched her iridescent eyes. Which he'd mistaken for grey that afternoon. Ha! Never grey, not even blue, but a remarkable deep violet. Amethyst and crystalline. Warm-cold as the gems themselves.

Her flesh was not peachy like that of most Yunes, mayhap owing to her father's Glacian blood. But her shape was lithe and willowy, wraithlike and supple. He had only to close his eyes and he could see and hear her again. Asking his forgiveness, standing there with her hand extended.

Even though she *knew* .

She knew what he was. She'd asked about his cycle. She'd stood there and smiled, saying she hoped they might become friends.

Women who were not of his blood did not treat him thusly. They did not offer friendship and smiles. Nay, they cowered, whispered behind their hands, looked elsewhere, pretended they did not see the black cowl. This he'd come to accept. Just as he'd come to accept the markedly different lore of his race, the rigid rules of his existence. The Ancient Ones left tablets and scrolls behind. Mystic tomes filled with sacred cabals, rites and rituals, the mysteries of olden ways. Preece had studied Waniand lore and understood the arcane ways of his race.

So by all natural order, this should not be happening to him. Not now . . . and not with this noble female. She was young and mayhap foolish, green to the ways between females and males. He was not.

He'd find a way to quell his fascination. He would not permit himself to indulge in unseemly thoughts. Thoughts of how she'd stood in the doorway, silhouetted by the torchlights in the passageway, holding out her hand to him. Smiling with her lips and eyes as the tips of her breasts pressed against her thin gown. How they and her gleaming mantle of flowing tresses had all but begged for a male's caressing touch.

He should not have even been aware of such things out of season. That he was could only be the accursed woman's own fault. Had she no sense of proper decorum, no maidenly coyness?

Damn her.

If only she hadn't sought him out, hadn't smiled at him. Hadn't stood there, *glowing* . But she had. And he did not sleep a wink that night for remembering.

Chapter 4

Cronel's castle sat within the bowl-like cirque formed by a ring of steep glaciers. The crags technically divided Inner from Outer Glacia, though no travelers now recognized a border marking as they passed through the narrow gorge between peaks.

The two realms of Glacia had once been distinctly different, with separate rulers and customs, before a long and bloody battle engineered by Cronel. Moreya had been a babe when Cronel defeated King Bobos and acquired the larger expanse of Outer Glacia—beyond which lay the dark realm of Dredonia.

Dredonia .

The name itself evoked images of gloom, murk, misery . . . The name suited the barren, nearly forsaken expanse of open flatland. Rabble and outcasts from the other known realms inhabited Dredonia's crude mining camps. Beyond the dark mining pits themselves lay rough settlements comprised of brothels, smithy huts, clapboard taverns and alehouses.

Dredonia's primary race was a dark, diminutive people known as Raviners. Once little more than bands of roving nomads, Raviners now worked in or controlled most mine operations. They owned many of the gaming and whoring establishments or trading posts within the Dredonian realm, and still conducted frequent raids beyond her borders.

They had an innate fondness for theft and pillaging. What Raviners wanted, they took. They were also competent with grazing animals of every description, natural shepherds and cattlemen. Their skills allowed them to both tame wild griffons and breed them in captivity.

Raviners attacked from the backs of horses, goats, and musk oxen, then augmented ground raids with winged griffons plummeting from the skies. Few journeiers made it across the breadth of Dredonia without losing some belongings to Raviner raids.

The knowledge they'd entered Raviner territory had everyone tense as Moreya's journey reached its third day. Outer Glacia's rolling foothills lay far behind them now. Ahead the terrain stretched bleakly, dotted with sparse vegetation and few signs of human life. What passed as a roadway was hardly more than a rutted vacant tract. Moreya knew it was unsafe to venture from the closed coach for more than the briefest moments to attend to personal needs. She even slept within its confines. Glaryd made a pallet beneath it; the men took up encircling positions around it and the pack animals each night.

Within the dark coach, Moreya lay awake, wondering about Preece.

He slept very little and seemed to prefer the night watch. He dined alone, rode well behind the coach most of the time, and spoke only when necessary. He did not ride a horse, as his men did, but mounted a great tahr specially trained for battle.

Preece was a tall man, and few tahrs had the requisite shoulder height to accommodate human riders. But his was gigantic, with black hooves and legs emerging from a shaggy coat of silken brown fur. The beast's massive, curving horns could slash a foot soldier to pieces, which Lockram assured Moreya the tahr had done more than once in the heat of battle.

Preece chose the giant cousin of a goat because the tahr was faster and more nimble than any warhorse. His battletahr could pick its way through large rocks or along narrow ledges. It could leap gorges and chasms of up to twenty feet. It was-like its master-courageous, strong, and tireless.

How Preece managed with but a few hours' rest without flagging, Moreya did not fathom. He seemed almost too alert. Once she ventured to crack open the coach door a few inches late at night. He came instantly to his feet and surged forward, demanding to know what was amiss.

Nothing. She'd merely wanted some night air. He hovered nearby until she lied, claiming she needed privacy for a few moments. The dark cowl moved like one of the deep night shadows beneath the canopy of starlight. She made a harmless observation about their progress so far, and won only a curt dismissal back to her bed.

The Warmonger remained an enigma. But then, so was Moreya's intended bridegroom.

She knew little of Greensward, its rulers, or its populace. Her father had seldom spoken of that realm. Naturally enough, since it lay so distant from Glacia. He'd rarely ventured to Greensward. That he'd gone recently, intent upon arranging a betrothal, without discussing the matter first still rankled. Moreya no more fathomed his last diplomatic laurel than she did his unexpected, ignominious death.

But understanding came in a flash of horrible insight later that third evening, as the travelers stopped for the night.

They obtained lodgings in a decrepit inn. Though she should have been tired enough to drop off quickly, Moreya found she could not sleep, and thought to get a cup of milk from the kitchens. She crept down the dimly-lit back stairs barefoot, clad in her night rail, hoping the men would be so engrossed in drinking and dicing in the taproom, none would realize she'd left her chambers.

As she reached the bottom riser, Lockram's voice halted her progress.

"Can you believe Preece has us taking a Yune to wed the prince regent in Greensward? Why that sodomite would even go through the pretense of taking a wife is beyond my ken. Any woman would be wasted on that one, but a *Yune* !"

"Say you're jesting, friend!" someone answered overloudly. "A Yune bride for a man who prefers hairy buttocks and a stiff prick? Queen Vela must hope to change his leanings."

"Could be," Dugan replied, belching. "The woman we bring is but half Yune, yet comely

enough to stir any man's blood. She'd get a few lances hoisted here, which is why we wear these ugly amulets. A sorcerer enchanted them. They ward off Yunish beguilement."

"Too bad, eh, young Sieffre?"

The youngest knight's voice faltered slightly. "Actually, I don't favor her. Her hair is blue. Can you imagine her nether grove-bright as a patch of wildeberries? I prefer what's between a wench's thighs to be pink."

This brought roaring laughter and the scrape of benches on wood flooring.

Moreya dashed back up the stairs, her heart pounding in her chest. Her father had once dismissed a pair of house guards for misconduct. It was a few days later, when Moreya heard the vague whisperings of other servants, that she learned what had actually happened. The term "sodomite" had been spoken as explanation for the incident. And after much prodding and pleading, Drix had finally confessed to Moreya what the word meant.

Anthaal had long suffered an aversion to unwholesome acts and men who engaged in them. So how could he have betrothed his own daughter to the prince regent of Greensward, when it seemed plain his lewd preferences were common knowledge?

Moreya fought back hot tears of mortification and anger. Her father had often despaired of making a good marriage for her. That much was true. But her affliction was nothing so awful as this prince's! She could love, honor and obey, have an ordinary existence, so long as she remained indoors. Within a hall or bedchamber, she could please a man and be a fitting wife. And like most young maids, she hoped for children one day.

But she'd be fortunate to beget even one babe if she wedded a sodomite.

Lost in her dismaying thoughts, she slowly moved along the hallway to her own chamber. But before she reached it, she noticed Preece's door. It was closed, while the rooms of the other knights sat vacant with their doors wide open.

Preece was not with the others belowstairs, of course. He did not drink and carouse. He did not socialize. He was alone in his chambers, perhaps without the damnable cowl. That thought fanned the flames of her ire.

Fie, the Warmonger had been hiding more than his misshapen face!

He'd likely been smirking beneath that accursed cowl of his from the very first. Pretending concern for her well-being, knowing all along he was taking her to Prince Velansare, who would not want her, however desperate his mother was to change his preference. How Preece must have enjoyed this pathetic farce. And sad jest it was. A Yune maiden whose outward appearance was said to be so enticing, men wore bat hindquarters to ward off her allure . . . sold into marital slavery to a man who couldn't care less if he ever gazed upon her flesh.

What a cruel, vicious jest. And hardly amusing to Moreya.

She'd been courteous, genial, and forthright. He'd been a sneak and a liar.

Without a second's hesitation, she burst into Preece's chamber.

A tall man stood with his back to her, naked above the waist. He'd been washing his upper body at a basin. He straightened and turned, groping with one hand for a cloth.

Moreya dashed to where his towel lay and snatched it before he could. Then held it clutched to her chest. "You are the most-"

The words died on her tongue as the larger realization dawned. This stranger had to be Preece. Her shock was so complete, at first her mind denied that the person before her could indeed be the Warmonger. But she knew better. This was his chamber. This man was tall, young, lean and supple of build. Common sense told her he could be no one else.

This had to be Preece, the Warmonger.

But he was *beautiful*.

Not simply correct in form and feature, but ruggedly, yet ethereally, fair. Silver-blond locks fell in a thick sheen to broad shoulders. His physique was that of a seasoned warrior, all hard muscle and sinew.

Still clutching the towel, she took a step back. She still could not get over the shock. Here stood the monster of the crows.

He looked like a heavenly angel fallen to earth.

His mouth was exactly where a mouth should be, and firmly set in a hard line. Yet she saw at once his lips were sensual; his chin and jaw, smooth and square. The flesh of his cheeks and brow was unlined. His eyes were framed by pale lashes and brows that winged slightly upward at the outer corners.

His eyes .

They snapped with fury, but that registered second. What she noted first was their color. The same whitish green-blue of northern ice, the core buried in the heart of every glacier. Icy cold and burning hot at the same time.

Why in the name of the Great Creator did this man hide his visage? Unless to keep women like her from swooning. Or mayhap drooling!

She numbly offered the towel. He took it and began drying his face and neck.

She watched the towel erase the droplets at the hollow of his throat. She stared as little rivulets ran down a smooth chest to his flat belly. The man had not a single freckle nor ounce of excess flesh on his frame, but several scars on his chest and upper arms. Except for those signs of his hard profession, his body rivaled the perfection of his face . . . and stirred an odd sensation as she gazed upon him.

Whatever had come over her?

She'd heard the tales of Yune women supposedly weaving spells over their mates. Were Yune females also susceptible to mating enchantment? If so, Preece must have cast some unwanted entrancement upon her. Her anger had melted; resolve to do battle evaporated. She could barely recall why she'd entered his chamber in the first place.

"You're handsome!" She croaked the accusation, then flushed. Why in the Lord's name had she blurted *that* out? She was here to speak of Velansare.

The fury in his eyes changed to astonishment. "What? Are you ill, Lady Fa? Why have you come? Is something wrong?"

"Yes. You lied. About everything." She heard her voice, the words coming in quick little pants. She tried to slow down, make sense. "That is wrong, because I do not deserve treachery. I was kind to you. I tried to befriend you and your men. And in exchange, you deceived me. You're beautiful. And callous."

He merely stared. Moreya was too wound up to stop now.

"You laugh at my expense, and I'll not abide that." She straightened her shoulders, realizing only then they were hidden beneath a tattered spare blanket she'd pulled from her bed as a temporary cloak. What a picture she must present, bursting in here dressed in only her shift and a moth-eaten blanket. Enchanting, right enough.

"I do not laugh at you, and I have told no lies," he answered slowly. He seemed to choose his words with care. "Waniands do not speak untruths. It is not our way. Your thoughts have become addled for some reason unknown to me."

"My thoughts are clear at long last," she snapped. "Look at you! You're the most incredibly handsome man I've ever laid eyes upon, yet you allow everyone to believe you're a monster. I expected you to drool into your own eyebrows!"

" *What ?*"

Moreya abruptly decided against retelling the tale of the mouth in the center of his forehead. Repeating that would hardly refute his claim that her mind was addled.

"You're taking me to wed a man who prefers knights to ladies. He doesn't want me or any maiden. Your men are belowstairs laughing about it. I heard them speak of the great irony, a Yune bride for a twisted sodomite. It's true, isn't it? Prince Velansare is unlikely to father children."

Preece flung the towel aside and released a heavy sigh. He glanced at the dark tunic thrown over the foot of his bed.

Moreya stepped forward to block him from donning the useless garment. "Don't bother. It's too late to hide your face now. I know the truth. You lied about being deformed and you lied about Prince Velansare-Well, mayhap not an actual lie in words falsely spoken, but you obscured the truth. That's but another manner of lie."

"I've heard rumors about the prince," Preece acknowledged. "But talk is not the same as truth, no matter how pernicious. 'Tis said he enjoys the company of both males and females, but I cannot confirm that. I've yet to meet Prince Velansare."

"Well said, Warmonger." She was still seething, despite his calm reply. "Indeed, talk is not truth. Look at you. They said you were malformed from birth."

"I am Waniand by birth."

This was not said in defiance. Moreya studied his face and hair. She had heard Waniands were tall and light of complexion. What she hadn't known was how breathtakingly handsome they could be. "Waniands are said to be pale. You are beyond that, almost so ethereal as to be angelic."

"Now you laugh at me. Your own cruel jest." He skirted around her to jerk on his tunic. This time he did not raise the great hooded cowl. He kept his face averted as he tidied his belongings near the washstand. Moreya watched him and a new thought appalled her.

"You are ashamed of such beauty? Your race? How can you possibly be ashamed of being Waniand?" Dear Creator, had the warrior never seen his own reflection in a mirror or pond?

His gaze slid to the door. "You are Yune. You cannot understand."

"I do not understand much this night. I do not understand how any man so well favored can hide himself in shame. I do not understand why my father would pledge my troth to a man who'll never be a fitting husband, but I begin to see how he was able to make a royal match. What woman of royal blood would accept Prince Velansare? I've neither home nor family, thus, no choice. There is not a living soul I can trust. I have been forsaken even by my own father."

Preece frowned. "I'll let no harm come to you."

"You bring me to the true monster. I could . . . pay you well not to deliver me to him."

"You could not restore my neck to wholeness once Cronel's executioner has severed it. Speak no more of such insanity."

She'd been determined not to resort to womanish tears, but there they were, coursing down her cheeks, adding to her humiliation. She swiped at them with the edge of the blanket and turned back toward the door.

She'd been obedient and tried to overcome her tendency towards brazen speech most of her life. Too much of it. Her father was dead and gone, her former life lay in shreds. What was the point in obedience now? If her soul be forever damned for her wild thoughts and impulses, so be it.

She abruptly spun back, stretched up on her tiptoes, and braced herself with her hands on Preece's shoulders. Her face was very close to the beautiful pale one that had been

obscured so long from her sight. "You betrayed my friendship. I want recompense, Warmonger."

He did not speak, only swallowed. The action drew her eyes to his throat again, to his thudding pulse, up to his mouth. His well placed, beautifully-formed mouth.

"You owe me a boon. Honor demands this." She strained upward and pressed her lips to his.

What she intended as a chaste brush of lips, a taunt, a game, deepened into something much more. Preece's powerful arms came around to embrace her. He melded his mouth with hers, and left them both struggling to catch their breaths when he at last pulled away.

"I should not have been so bold," she gulped, blushing to her core.

"Nay, lady, but the damage is done." He lowered his face and kissed her again, this time forcing his tongue past her teeth to rub hers in a slow mating dance.

All thoughts of her righteous ire or state of undress fled. She might have stood there in his chamber the whole night, clinging weakly to him with her fingers wrapped in his long hair, had Preece not ended the kiss and led her back into the hall. "Go back to your bed, Moreya Fa. We'll both rue this night enough without making matters worse."

Moreya returned to her bed wondering how matters could possibly get any worse.

She'd confronted the beast, only to discover in his stead an earthbound angel. A man with the face of a saint, who inspired this unwise, ignorant maiden to sell her soul to the devil.

She was promised in marriage to a vile creature who would likely pay her less mind than one of his servants. He'd wed her and leave her alone in their marriage bed. Alone in her need for closeness, alone and wanting a man's touch

She would have only this one scrap of memory. Memories of a Waniand's searing kiss.

Chapter 5

Preece noted his men avoided him. They kept their gazes focused on the surroundings and spoke little, as though they sensed his fouler than usual mood. They couldn't begin to guess the reason for it. Thankfully, not even inquisitive Lockram had asked questions. Preece would not explain his irritation. To do so would mean admitting his folly of the previous night.

He rubbed the stiffness from the back of his neck, recalling the look of surprise and hurt in Moreya's eyes that morning as they'd left the inn. He'd ordered everyone to mount up. Moreya hesitated at the steps of the coach and turned to him, indecision plainly written on her face. She hoped he'd reconsidered her bribe.

Ignoring her silent plea, he announced they would continue on across the wastelands, to a small enclave some twenty leagues distant. There to spend the night at another tavern before forging on to Greensward's borders the next day.

Moreya flinched as though he'd struck her.

He felt as miserably conscience-smitten as if he had.

Madness, what she wanted. What he'd allowed to unfold the eve before in his chamber . . . Sheer, incredible madness.

He must have lost nigh every one of his wits yestereve. He should never have allowed her so close, never tasted her lips. His only excuse was the Yune herself, and her peculiar insistence that he was far from repulsive. Nay, well favored and comely to the point of *angelic* . He'd been undone by her assertions, though he disbelieved they were even partly based in fact.

After years of hiding his Waniand coloring, coping with the scorn and outright shunning from ranking nobility, he'd been totally unprepared to hear a noblewoman declare him attractive. Even less prepared for a bold, if chaste and maidenly, kiss.

He would have told any other maid to stop teasing.

But he suspected this Yune did not play wily female games. He'd seen the clear intensity of truth and desire in her eyes. Those damnable, gleaming violet eyes.

So damn his weak and rotten soul, he'd capitulated. Given into his own weakness and curiosity. He'd dared to hold the source of the faint purple gleaming fire in his arms and sample her forbidden charms. Dared to indulge in the headiest of spirits-a forbidden kiss-though he should not have craved such whilst out of rut.

Then had come the dawn, and as oft befell any fool who indulges unwisely, he'd awakened burdened with lingering remorse and rue for his actions the night before. He feigned no recollection of anything unusual, though, pretended naught had changed. He'd behaved like the unfeeling beast those around him expected, nay needed, him to be.

The role grew tiresome. His mercenary life grew tiresome.

They stopped briefly at noontide. Moreya refused to leave the coach. Her maid offered a weak excuse about the chill winds chapping her mistress' tender face, but Preece knew better. Moreya hid from him. She was hurt and angry, and he could do nothing to lessen that. He withdrew deeper into his cowl as they set out again after their meal, praying they reached Greensward before he completely lost control.

For, despite his determination to forget his mistakes of the eve before, he could not stop thinking about Moreya. He could still see her there in his chamber, the room lit only by the light of a single taper. Her dark violet tresses gleamed, the outline of her willowy form a mere hint beneath her thin night garment. Her eyes glittered through angry tears, reached to the core of his soul.

Which she should not be able to touch, nay even find, unless she was-

"Preece, beware! Raviners!"

The warning shouts came too late. Even as Preece jerked from his reverie and saw the danger, a mounted band of small, dark men surrounded the coach and slaughtered its driver.

How had Preece fallen so far behind? The coach was a half-league ahead of him. Damn! He vaulted into a blur of motion, knees prodding his tahr as he reached for the swords hung from scabbards on either side of his saddle. Within seconds he entered the fray, swinging dual broadswords with all his might.

The Raviners set upon the pack animals. Two men hacked through the ropes securing the Yune's trunks and chests. A third Raviner on horseback stole one of Cronel's horses and rode off. Dugan and Sieffre kept their backs to the coach, successfully holding the attackers from rushing the conveyance.

Preece cut down three of the marauders advancing on foot and whirled his mount back around for another pass. Sieffre fell, clutching a bloodied shoulder.

Lockram moved to take up his abandoned position, physically blocking the door to the coach. Two Raviners immediately engaged him with their swords. Dugan was outnumbered four to one. Preece heard the old woman with Moreya shouting; her face was framed by the narrow window of the coach. Preece cursed and spurred his mount forward again. That damned serving woman should be on the floor, shielding her mistress with that plump body of hers, not uselessly shrieking like some she-devil!

He reached the disabled coach and struck at the knot of men around Dugan. His tahr leaped and scrambled, then spun and dashed in what seemed like three directions at once. Preece lopped off heads and arms, ignoring the gouts of blood that spattered him and the screaming around him. He had killed several Raviners, but saw more running towards him, and suddenly one roped the tahr's great curving horns. Preece's animal jerked in mid-flight and thumped to the ground, kicking and bellowing.

Preece was unseated in the fall. Enraged now beyond rational thought, he shot to his feet, ignoring that his cowl had slipped back onto his shoulders. He slashed at everything around him that yet moved. Three Raviners appeared above the melee, swooping low, swinging heavy maces and clubs from the backs of their griffons. No matter how many ground soldiers he killed, the Raviners found fresh reinforcements. Preece and his men could not make the same boast-and they were tiring quickly.

Even as he reached the conclusion he might not live out the day, Moreya darted from the coach.

She tore across the open ground, away from the carnage. She jerked her wimple from her hair. She dropped to her knees, keening and wailing.

To see her driven mad with terror cut at Preece the way no sword could. She must be raving in stark fear, else she'd not have left the coach. The accursed female had refused to leave the security of the thing even to break bread! Now, when it made no sense, when it defied all his instruction on what to do in case of attack, she ran away into the open. And placed herself right in the path of greatest peril.

Mayhap she'd also sensed the inevitable, and couldn't bear to wait for what she'd suffer at the hands of the dark horde.

Preece vowed to slay her himself before he'd allow them to rape and savage her.

He shouted and raced across the uneven ground toward her, still slashing, though his arms felt heavy as twin stones.

Moreya began whirling in place. She turned her face to the skies and howled. The unearthly sound curdled Preece's blood.

The lone Raviner who'd begun to chase her faltered. A fatal mistake, for Preece hacked his dark head off. Then Preece whirled his tahr around, putting his back toward Moreya, ready to die shielding her.

An immense shadow passed overhead. A griffon screamed, then plummeted from the sky. A boulder crashed down, seemingly out of nowhere, striking two other raiders. Three more broke rank, scrambling for cover behind a nearby rock.

Preece looked up and blinked at what he saw.

Dragons .

One circling directly over his head, more descending toward the coach. The beasts hissed and spewed their great belly stones. Pelting stones crushed two of the men Dugan had been battling at swordpoint. A griffon darted in for the kill, hurtling toward Lockram as he fainted away from the coach. The griffon was seized in massive talons and smashed to a bloody pulp along with his rider.

Moreya spread her arms. The dragon above them swooped down, snatching Moreya in its talons. A trio of Raviners scrambled toward Preece over the rocky barrens. Preece

dodged a club and struck with both swords. The last man tried to run, screaming and clutching at his gut.

Preece spun back around, but was buffeted by the force of mighty leathern wings. The dragon rose directly overhead. Preece flung a sword at the beast's underbelly, but it had risen too far aloft and the blade fell short. He ran for his tahr and vaulted up into the saddle. A mighty blow struck the side of his head. Limbs splaying, Preece crumpled to the ground.

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Preece winced. He wasn't certain where he was, other than on his back on the unforgiving, stony ground. The object prodding his left shoulder blade had to be a sharp rock. A face loomed over his. The features were blurred. He heard a voice. It sounded feminine, insistent.

"Lady Fa?" he croaked, nearly choking on the dust clogging his throat.

The plump maidservant answered. "She is not with us, sir, but she's unharmed. I swear as much, only your men will not listen. She's safe. You may be certain of that."

"Whyever would we doubt it, I wonder?" Preece recognized Lockram's voice, heavy with sarcasm. Preece winced again and glanced around. Yes, Lockram stood slightly to his left, glowering at the maidservant. "Just because we all saw your mistress carried off by a firedrake! Safe she may be, but only until the beast plops her down as a morsel for its hatchlings."

"Nay, the reptile will not," Glaryd argued. "They never harm her."

"What say you?" Dugan grouched. "Never harm her? As if such has befallen the Yune oftentimes before. You're either daft or-

"Such *has* before now! My master ordered me to remain silent on the matter, but he's dead, and I fear I cannot save my lady by holding my tongue."

Preece gingerly felt along his ribs and thighs. Finding he wasn't covered in blood and could draw a steadying breath, he sat up. The world spun. He seized a handful of the bodice in front of him and levered himself to his feet. "If your mistress has been taken by a dragon, your life may be forfeit, right along with ours. Speak plainly, old woman."

He wasn't wearing a cowl now. Everything surrounding him looked too bright, colors too vivid. The smell of fresh blood added to the roiling in Preece's gut. His skull pounded. He was in no mood to quibble with a servant. He shook the plump partridge by the fistful of bodice he still clenched. "Tell me where your mistress was taken. Do you know?"

The maid shook her head. "The dragons take her to their nests. She's likely not far. Some high point, upon a rock ledge, or amongst the tallest trees. You or one of these stout fellows must find the firedrake's nest."

Sieffre burst into a fit of deranged laughter. "We risked our throats for that Yune bitch, who's likely as mad as this hag! No wonder she was promised to that foul creature in Greensward! Cronel found a mad Yune beauty, with her equally mad servant, and sends them both to Velansare."

Preece ignored the outburst, ignored Dugan pacing back and forth only a few feet away, ignored the dead Raviners lying all around them, ignored the pain in his own skull.

If there was yet a thread of sanity left in this region of Dredonia, 'twas up to him to find it. His men were benumbed by the freakish turn of events; the servant clearly suffered from shock. Preece would have to think of a course of action.

In the first seconds after Moreya disappeared in the skies, Preece had been unable to move or think. Then it washed over him in a flood. An excruciating sense of loss and failure. Crushing finality.

He'd tried to deny it from the first, but could dispute reality no longer. He had been oddly affected by Moreya Fa Yune from the moment he laid eyes upon her. Felt peculiarly disconcerted by her every word and gesture, and somehow had forced himself not to examine what those reactions meant.

But he knew now, with certainty. He would not harbor this intense rage, or suffer these unfamiliar twinges of helplessness, were the Yune just another noblewoman. She was an extraordinary female. And she touched something deep within him.

He confronted the serving woman. "Firedrakes prey upon humans. The beast would not have taken Moreya, except to feed itself or its young."

The woman goggled at him and seemed incapable of speech.

Lockram seized Preece's forearm. "You're terrifying her," he pointed out. "This woman has never before seen you bareheaded. She was nearly killed. Her mistress was carried off by a monster. Let her go." He pried Preece's fingers from the fabric of the woman's rough kirtle. "I recovered your sword." He placed the hilt in Preece's open fingers. "One of the Raviners tossed a mace at you from whence he lay on the ground. I lopped his head off for you."

Preece swayed a bit and Lockram frowned, reaching to steady him. "Fie on our luck, eh? Our charge snatched by a dragon. Cronel will be livid, but even he must understand we could not have prevented it . . . particularly as we were fending off a Raviner attack at the time."

Dugan fretted, "Cronel is not known for leniency and understanding."

Lockram sighed, scowling. "Aye, but we must face his wrath, nonetheless. We've complete disorder here . . . and a damnably long ride back to Glacia."

They gathered their weapons and buried the dead driver. Preece was accosted by Glaryd when he neared the coach. "You cannot go back, my lord! You cannot abandon Moreya!

She's alive, I tell you, and will try to find us. The beast will let her go and she'll try to find us. Seek the highest point nearby. A hill or rocky pinnacle. She'll be there, I swear to you."

"Glaryd, I am not a lord," he said tiredly. "You are overwrought, with good reason. You may disbelieve me, but by the blood of my ancestors, I wish Lady Fa were still alive as desperately as you do. We must accept that such is not possible."

"Look at this, good sir." She thrust out her hand and opened it. On her palm lay a very large onyx. Rough, uncut, but worth a king's ransom still. "She gets them from the dragons. She has others. The beasts came the first time when she was just a child. They spit and rend those around her, but never Lady Moreya. They simply abduct her. 'Tis why she's never left home afore this. Anthaal would not allow it."

"He knew of this strange. . . attraction you speak of?"

"He did. He discovered firedrakes came when Moreya ventured into a meadow or field. Anywhere in the open. She knows too, Sir Preece. She told me you'd all be killed. She couldn't bear it." The woman began to weep in great heaving sobs. "She risked her life for you and yours. Yet you propose to ride off and forsake her."

Preece reached out and wiped a damp smear of dirt from the maid's sagging cheek. "She called the dragons. That's what you mean. She knew they would come if she left the coach. Knew they would smite the Raviners attacking us?"

The maid nodded. "I begged her to stay inside. Leave me; put me out with my things. Take your men and go, if you'll not hearken to what I say. But go nowhere without Lady Moreya."

Cursing, Preece stalked across the pebbly dust to untangle the rope snared round the horns of his tahr. The beast had been grazing with the hemp trailing behind it and appeared unharmed. Preece swung into his saddle. He rode toward woodlands barely visible in the distance.

He'd lost the Yune to an accursed firedrake. Which-if he could believe the rantings of her maidservant-was akin to a friend or personal pet. A pet with talons like steel blades and a gizzard full of stones and acid, ready to be vomited onto fools riding large, goat-like tahrs.

Here was a tale for the minstrels.

Preece the Warmonger, the spurned and denigrated Waniand mercenary, fearsome Royal Blade of Cronel, riding in search of a dragon's lair. He'd left the others tending their wounds, agreed to meet at Tivershem's, then taken off alone. Because he'd been unable to bear a fat serving woman's tears.

Because you cannot bear to think of Moreya dead , his mind argued. Well, aye. That too.

Chapter 6

Moreya stood at the mouth of the cave and peered over the rocky ledge. A useless exercise, to be sure, since solid ground was just as far below her now as the thrice other times she'd checked.

Her clothes were torn and dirty. Her stomach rumbled with hunger, and she'd lost one of her shoes. She had no rope and no mount, no real sense of direction, beyond the vague sense the cave faced northward. She'd never been to Dredonia before, thus had no idea where the nearest settlement lay, even were she magically able to slide down the cliff and set out on foot to find one.

A sound reached her from the broad expanse below. It seemed to come from somewhere off to her left. A dark blot of indeterminate shape moved amid the rocks.

Hope surged in her heart.

Whatever the creature might be, it was the first sign of life she'd detected for hours. The mother firedrake had flown off shortly after sunrise, but was bound to return soon. Moreya had to escape before the dragon came back with another regurgitated offering of food.

It was both humbling and horrifying to be treated like a reptilian hatchling.

The moving shape continued its approach. Moreya knelt down, squinting, then leaped to her feet. She smoothed her skirts. Preece was atop his giant battletahr, riding to her rescue.

Half an hour later, a loop of rope snagged a jagged outcropping of rock, and Moreya watched Preece begin scaling the cliff. "There's no need to come up, sir. I can try to come down to where you are."

Her reply was a rude oath and a clatter of loose stones. She leaned farther out from the ledge, afraid he hadn't heard her. "I'll come down, Preece!"

He didn't respond, but as Moreya straightened, she caught a tiny dot on the far horizon and panicked. The firedrake mustn't return to find Preece scaling the crag to get into her nest! Moreya gave no thought to further warnings, or how the rope would burn her hands. She threw her legs over the ledge and grabbed the line with both hands.

"Damn you, woman, I said to stay put!"

"The dragon's on her way home!"

Moreya slid down the rope too quickly, fumbled, and landed in a heap atop her gallant rescuer. He glanced up in time to see the dark shadow looming overhead and cut the line with his dagger. He tried to boost Moreya onto the tahr's saddle.

"Nay!" Moreya hissed, glancing overhead quickly to make sure the dragon wasn't about to swoop down upon them. "She'll see me. We must wait until she goes back inside. The

cavern is deep; her clutch of eggs far to the rear. We can get away while she checks them."

Preece glowered at her and urged his mount back, sheltering them beneath the overhanging rocks. "Glaryd swore you'd be perfectly fine. The others have gone ahead to Tivershem's and-"

"They're all right, then?" Moreya interrupted. She really had no interest in his peevish complaints, anyway. All night she'd worried that he and his men had perished at the hands of the Raviners. Or that poor Glaryd had been raped or murdered. "Everyone made it safely away?"

"We lost the coach driver and Sieffre took a blow to the shoulder. Lockram and Dugan will have stitched him back together by now. I've heard Glaryd's version of the tale. Now I wish to hear it directly from you. Why did you not obey my orders and stay inside the coach?"

"You were badly outnumbered. When I saw griffon riders, I knew you couldn't hope to prevail. I had to try summoning whatever dragons might be nearby. I didn't know how else to help you."

His hand clenched the saddle pommel until his fist went white. "You knowingly summoned dragons? Why did you never think to mention this unusual talent ere we set out on this trek?"

"You said I'd be in a closed coach. Why do you think I stayed in it all the time? Certainly not for the pleasant air! I can't go out in the open, I have to hide my-"

"Hiding your hair only dims it. It does not eliminate the problem."

Moreya blinked. Was he saying he knew what the problem was, what attracted the monsters? "Dims it . . ." she repeated, uncertain as to his meaning.

"Your light."

"What light?" She glanced down at herself, seeing only a dirty gown and a bare set of toes. Her hair hung in snarled, purplish-brown ropes. She imagined she must look an utter mess. She wore no jewelry, nothing that could reflect the sun. She mostly wore grime. What was he about, some new jest at her expense?

"That glow around you. The purplish halo. It's mostly your hair, but even in the throne room with your tresses covered, I could see it."

The firedrake's massive shadow flitted by and Moreya took the opportunity to distract Preece. "We can be on our way now. The dragon left again."

Preece swung up into the saddle behind Moreya. They rode in silence for a time, but her curiosity nettled until she could no longer hold her tongue. "I'm not aware of any glow or luster, Sir Preece. No one else has ever-"

"Mayhap it takes a Waniand or firedrake to notice," he replied. Then he abruptly pulled back on the reins. Moreya glanced back over her shoulder. He looked angrier than she'd ever seen him.

"Why are you wroth with me for saving all our lives?"

"Why didn't you tell me? You proclaimed yourself my friend and ally. You claimed to trust me. We've hundreds of leagues of open countryside yet to cross, and we might be swarmed by winged reptiles at any moment? Satan's breath! I worried about Raviners. Now I find I'm carting around a woman who pulls firedrakes down from the skies!"

Moreya's last thread of patience snapped. "Why didn't I tell you? Just when should I have mentioned it-and how? Had I casually boasted that I attract dragons, the way a spring flower draws honeybees, what would you have said? That I was mad? Did you not misbelieve Glaryd when she vowed I was alive and well?"

He flushed and she saw she had him there. She'd strike with another thrust before he recovered. "Why do you conceal yourself beneath that damnable cowl? Mayhap I do not announce my attraction for dragons for the very same reason you do not let strangers see that you're a Waniand. I too know shame. I can't help but be mortified, and wish with all my heart I could change. But I am helpless against churning events once the firedrakes discover my presence. Witnesses to these events never regard me the same again. Some have even mistakenly talked of a 'glow' and seek explanations for that which has none."

Preece nudged his mount forward until they found a bower of sheltering trees and a small brook. Without a word, the humans parted to heed their respective calls of nature while the tahr drank deeply of the fresh water. Preece walked slowly back to where Moreya sat brooding on a tree stump.

"Lady Moreya."

So formal. So distant.

She hadn't forgotten that a few nights before she'd been in his chambers with him; in his arms, kissing him. Now it was as though the whole interlude had been a dream. She raised her chin, but did not speak.

He gazed down at her, his face softer than usual. "Forgive my anger. It was misplaced."

Unwanted moisture sprang to her eyes. She glanced away quickly. "I am accustomed to it. My father forbade me to leave the house after my mother's death. We'd gone to the meadow together to pick flowers. I was taken aloft. My mother was killed by a falling terrestar. One of our retainers lost his leg. I neither killed my mother nor maimed our servant, but my father never forgave me."

"Moreya." Her name came on a whisper very near her left ear. Preece's arms wrapped around her, pulled her off the stump onto her feet, and Moreya gave in to the tears. Not for her mother. Those had all been shed years ago. For her father, for the shame of this strange knight learning her awful secret? Maybe. She didn't know.

Preece held her as she wept. "I swear on Dugan's besotted soul," Preece said with a long exhalation, "there is a glow about you. It grows more evident with your distress. I think it's visible to the firedrakes and that's why they swarm around you."

"I think one of us suffers addled wits," Moreya sniffed, wiping her eyes with a torn bit of sleeve.

"*I'm* not the one who soars with dragons," Preece reminded her, and Moreya smiled. His blue eyes were not icy now, but intense as they studied her face. "You are the most incredible female I've yet to encounter, Moreya Fa Yune. I shall always think upon you as most remarkable, do I live to be as old as Bourke."

She frowned. "Who is that?"

"A wizard of my acquaintance. He offered me an enchanted bat's rump to wear about my neck to ward off the charms of a certain Yune maiden. Mayhap he should fashion them for dragon necks, as well."

Moreya stared at the open neckline of Preece's tunic, noting for the first time since he'd come to the cave that he was bareheaded. His hair was tousled. "You're not wearing anything around your neck. Nor do you wear your cowl."

He shrugged. "It fell onto my shoulders during the fight and would only have made searching for you more difficult." His voice sounded oddly hoarse. He continued to stare at her, and she realized his arms were still loosely wrapped around her shoulders.

"Meseems it's too late for either my cowl or a bat's ass to protect me. I'm already under your spell."

How long they kissed, Moreya couldn't say, only that it wasn't nearly long enough. She craved his touch and taste, his strength, his ability to remain calm in the face of danger, even his humor at her expense. She knew he jested to raise her gloomy spirits. It was his form of apology, and she accepted it along with everything else about him. How could people detest Preece for being Waniand? She still thought him nothing but handsome and harsh in all the ways a man should be. Yet there was kindness lurking behind those blue eyes. She felt it.

And rode with it for long hours that day.

It was nearly sundown when they arrived at a ramshackle village of sorts. At least Moreya guessed that's what it was, by Dredonian standards. In Glacia, such an itinerant encampment would have been called a blight upon the landscape. Traveling minstrels lived better. Preece rode up to a stable where his tahr would be put in a stall and groomed. He led Moreya to a door beneath a swinging plank which proclaimed the establishment a tavern and inn.

Preece paused and reached back for the fallen hood of his tunic. Moreya placed her hands on his arms to still him. "There is nothing wrong with you. I detest that you hide your face. Can we not have honesty between us, after all that has happened?"

"You'll not appreciate the honesty beyond that door," he warned. But he left his head bare and strode inside, keeping Moreya close beside him. "Tivershem, are you here?"

A man as round as a keg of ale came from a rear doorway into the taproom. He wiped meaty hands with a soiled towel and grinned. "Preece, you boulder! Why- eh, you're not under a hood."

He gave an exaggerated roll of his eyes to indicate a table where several strangers hulked over a cup of dice. None of the men had paid any attention to the new arrivals. Moreya saw at least one appeared to be a Raviner, dark and squat. His companions were badly dressed, slovenly fellows who looked to be of mixed heritage.

"My compatriots arrived already?" Preece inquired.

Tivershem nodded. "Put the woman in the room at the top right, menfolk across the hall. Dugan's gone swilling elsewhere; said he'd be back afore nightfall. Think the others are up in their rooms." He glanced at Moreya. "Hope yours is satisfactory, milady. We don't get much royalty here."

Moreya blushed. She wasn't royalty yet, and if she had her way, would never be. This was likely Glaryd's boasting. At the innkeeper's remark, one of the seated strangers twisted around on his bench. "A Yunish royal. Will you look at that."

Moreya felt Preece's grip tighten and detected a slight tug. A hint she should move out of sight of the men. She returned her gaze to Master Tivershem. "I'm sure the chamber's fine. Is there any food prepared? I confess, I've not eaten since yestereve."

"I've a nice sausage casing for you here, Your Highness," announced one of the crude strangers. He rose and began unfastening his leggings.

Chortles of rude laughter rang out and died almost at once. The noisome tavern patron found Preece's dagger pressed into his throat. The tip drew a bead of blood. "She is under my protection, you pig bladder."

The man hastened to straighten his garments and grumbled an apology. Preece led Moreya to the stairs. She'd just passed the landing when she caught what one of the men said behind her.

"Accursed Waniand. Might be lethal with a sword of steel, but his flesh dagger's likely shriveled from disuse. Heard tell his kind copulates but once a year, at festival time. E'en then, 'tis sheep they're after tuppung. Foul miscreants! Look human, but they mate only with other beasts."

Moreya whirled around so fast, Preece lost his grip on her elbow. "What did you just say?" she demanded of the strangers.

"Moreya." Preece couldn't tell which fool had uttered the slander under his breath. Didn't matter. They were none of them any more important than dung beetles.

But his growl of warning was wasted. Moreya glared at the strangers and pressed her

point. "Did I hear you make false statements against my bodyguard and others of his blood?"

Tivershem fumbled behind his plank bar, withdrew a stout piece of wood, and held it clutched against his chest. The men at the table smiled in feigned innocence back at Moreya. "False statements, milady?" one inquired. He belched and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "You must've heard wrong. We're no liars, as anyone can vouch. 'Tis common knowledge Waniands aren't verily *men* ."

"Forsooth?" Moreya squeezed Preece's forearm and looked him up and down. "He's tall, strong, and most assuredly solid. Verily a man, indeed. You misspeak."

"He's not like other fellows in the way that counts," the stranger argued, letting his gaze rake Preece's lower extremities.

"Nay?" Moreya's voice took on a silky edge Preece did not like one whit. She gazed up at him with something akin to open curiosity. "Sir Preece, have you ever mounted a sheep or cow?"

She was leading them all right into another fray. Her features might betray nothing of it, but Preece sensed righteous anger-hot and palpable-coming off her like waves of summer heat. Righteous anger in defense of *him* . The air around her crackled with purple arcs of light.

"Nay, I've never mounted a sheep. Nor a cow."

He'd already guessed her next words, and she didn't disappoint him.

"Have you ever mated with a lightskirt? By that I mean a human woman of no morality?"

After everything else thus far, what was a tavern brawl? A mere minor inconvenience afore supper. Preece glanced at Moreya, inhaled, and pinned the table of brash wayfarers with his iciest gaze.

"Aye, several such females. One or two I distinctly remember from the last time I passed through Dredonia. That fellow's sister and the other one's mother. Lusty bitches they were, too. Brayed like donkeys whilst I swived them."

Moreya dashed up the stairway as the furniture started flying.

Chapter 7

He'd told Lockram he needed to check the stabled animals, but Moreya suspected Preece was waiting for the other inn patrons to go to bed. Tivershem warned he'd abide no more fighting when violence nearly erupted again at supper. The strangers remained hostile as ever, but glowered in silence as they nursed split lips and broken noses. Preece sported not a single bruise on his comely face. The Waniand had bested four brawlers and still looked pious and unsullied as a saint.

Moreya found her saint sitting alone in a corner of the dark stable.

"I'm sorry I caused so much havoc," she sighed. Preece looked up in surprise. Moreya ran her hand down his tahr's shaggy nose. "I should have ignored their ugly words, but I couldn't. I wanted them to see that whether they like you or not, someone does. A woman does."

She really didn't know why she'd phrased things quite that way. She'd muddled her apology because of the look on his face. That angelic, handsome face. He'd fought Raviners and common sots, ridden after a dragon, faced racial slurs. Without hesitation or indecision. Now he looked peculiarly confused. Wary. Uncertain. Why? she wondered.

"It's late," he said.

"I know." She turned her attention to the tahr. He truly was a marvelous beast. He snuffled when her hand stroked his nose, and she found the fuzzy mane rather appealing. She never turned her gaze from the beast, but her question was soft and meant for Preece's ears.

"Do women share the same view of Waniands? I mean women of other races. Do they speak ill of your bloodline, as those men did?"

"The answer depends on where and when I encounter them." He paused, then sort of rushed his words. She could hear the shame in his admission. "At court, aye. They hurry past or hide behind fans. They whisper amongst themselves, as though my cowl somehow interferes with my hearing."

He patted his tahr's shaggy shoulder. "But in taverns like this or local faires, I can usually find a willing wench, do I have the need."

"Does that come often?" She was horrified to realize she'd spoken that question aloud, but it was too late to pretend she hadn't.

"About thrice yearly. But why do you ask this now?" he hissed. "You know about my seasons. We spoke of them the first night back at the castle."

Moreya ducked when it appeared he was moving to stand beside her, putting an empty pail between them. She'd forgotten how she'd repeated idle gossip from King Cronel's

high tables. Nay, not forgotten, exactly. Misunderstood. She hadn't truly kenned at the time exactly *what* they'd discussed in relation to cycles of the various moons.

Did she admit to ignorance before, how foolish would she look now? And did he believe she'd understood before, that first evening . . . Graces absent head to toe, what must the man think of her? That she was obtrusive and rude as the strangers back inside?

"I'd forgotten," she replied in partial truth. "Not that I had-er-have reason to be concerned."

She felt his fingers under her chin. Against her will, she lifted her gaze to his as he spoke. "You have good reason. You are in my care, under my protection. And you wonder if what they say is true."

Her eyes widened. "Nay, I don't. I'm sure it's all horrible lies."

"It is not altogether a lie to say I copulate like a beast. Waniand males go into rut, unlike males of other human bloodlines. I do not seek female companionship when out of season."

Moreya edged away from him, disconcerted by his frank admission. "I . . . Good night, Sir Preece." She pecked his cheek and darted for the safety of the tavern.

Preece stared after her. He had an inkling she'd come looking for him, to apologize for starting the ruckus earlier, though that had naught to do with why he'd come to the stable. He wasn't cowed by the strangers. They might scowl and grumble, but they'd learned what happened to men who taunted a Waniand warrior to his face. They were no threat.

Moreya herself, and the strange anger that had come off her just before the fighting broke out . . . That was something else again. She confounded him. Her anger disconcerted him. That it came in defense of him scared the hellfire right out of his soul.

"If you had taken a bat's rump, you wouldn't be longing after hers."

The voice came from the shadows near the doorway. A stranger entered. One of the patrons Preece recognized from the tavern. This one had been lounging inside at a separate table and hadn't joined in the furniture-tossing melee.

Preece had thought him a haggard coward. Until that bat comment. "You might have lifted a finger to help in there, Bourke."

At his name, the sorcerer let his appearance ripple back to its true state. His deep voice became again the rasp of skeletal tree limbs in a winter breeze.

"You had them trounced without need of aid. Been waiting here since the day after you left Inner Glacia. I know you always stop at Tivershem's on your way through this part of the barrens. I've news. You're so late in coming, I feared you'd run off with the little Yune."

"Nay, I was off rescuing her from a dragon. She was held prisoner in its lair, some two hundred yards above ground in a small cave. It seems she has been snatched by firedrakes several times. She deliberately let the beasts come, to thwart an attack by Raviners. Other than that, it's been a dull journey."

Preece expected Bourke to lift his scraggy white eyebrows.

Instead they pulled down into a scowl, and Preece didn't care for the way that made the hair at the back of his skull ripple . . . as if some unseen cold hand had just caressed his nape. The stable was suddenly filled with a charged *wrongness* .

Preece recognized the sensation from years of battles fought and survived.

Danger was present.

Bourke folded his legs under his robes and wafted up to the ceiling. "I'm afraid, my son, your report meshes uncannily with my news. To form a dark net of misery and intrigue."

"Ah! Is this some new kingly plot?" Preece knew the answer. For more than twenty winters, Bourke had claimed every occurrence in Glacia to be proof of wicked scheming on the part of King Cronel. If birds migrated east instead of west, if corn stayed green or snow fell in clumps instead of granules. Why should a woman flying with dragons be due to any different cause?

"I believe the girl's father was murdered."

Preece had already been told the man choked to death during a banquet. "By a hunk of meat?"

"Did you not find it strange the palace cook was executed the morning after that feast? Lady Fa was not summoned to court until after her father was buried and the cook slain. Do you make nothing strange of both deaths following directly upon the heels of Lord Fa's return from Greensward?"

Preece shrugged. "Men die every day."

"Indeed, but seldom after securing royal betrothals for their only daughters!" Bourke wagged a forefinger in the air. A bale of hay began to dance in time.

"Please, Bourke," Preece chastened. The finger lowered and Bourke continued speaking in hushed tones.

"Anthaal Fa was able to negotiate a contract for his daughter to marry a prince. This daughter, whom you just stated has a peculiar affinity for dragons. Do you suppose Cronel did not know this about her?"

Preece folded his arms across his chest. In point of fact, he hadn't given thought to that aspect of the matter . . . though he should have. Very little escaped Cronel's notice, or that of his paid informants. Servants in Moreya's home must have known. One of their own was maimed. And 'twas common knowledge that retainers in the manor house were

placed there by order of the king.

"I assume he must have. She claims she was blamed for her own mother's death and an injury to a scullery worker caused by one of the reptiles. Cronel must know." Preece reflected upon his own role and warmed to the topic. "Then 'tis likely he sent me and my men in hopes we'd share her mother's fate. Cronel uses my blade, but can't truly abide me."

Bourke shook his gray head. "The *father's* fate. He needs you to get the maid to Greensward. He wants this alliance with the prince regent. Afterward you should die. Quickly."

Preece's own brow knitted. Why this alliance? Greensward was no threat, lying beyond Dredonia, a thousand leagues from Cronel's kingdom. The people of Greensward had ever been known for farming and raising crops, not arms. The only advantage the realm had was a long coastline and harbors along the Great Seas.

"Trade routes," Preece guessed.

"One might surmise as much, or to claim Greensward, then proceed to squeeze this realm, Dredonia, out of existence between the other two strongholds."

Preece did not follow. "How does Moreya Fa aid in this? She cannot summon dragons from across the oceans."

Bourke's eyes narrowed until their pupils nearly disappeared. "It may be of interest to note what I've learned of Greenswardian custom since you began this trek. You know Prince Velansare's elder brother died some years ago. He was heir to the throne. I do not think Queen Vela would press her sodomite son into marriage, were there any other branches of the royal bloodline capable of producing a future heir to the kingdom."

Preece's head jerked up. "He is in truth as unnatural as they say?"

Bourke nodded and went on. "There is an old custom that the king or prince must lead his new bride in a procession, across the great meadow outside Greensward Palace. The queen rides just behind the royal couple on her own palfrey."

"Moreya in a procession across a meadow?" Preece shuddered. "Nay, for of a certainty-Satan's bones, she's a *weapon* ! Cronel's sending her there to smite down the royal family."

Bourke drifted back to the stable floor and began picking loose straw from the hem of his robe. "A great tragedy. A freak occurrence. And the girl will be eliminated once she has served her purpose. Like her father. Like you. So now what say you, Warmonger? Is the duty still worth the chance for great coin?"

A death warrant against him would not spark a reaction, as the old hermit knew. Preece had been on too many battlefields, fought in the tourneys, been issued private challenges too often for death threats to strike fear in his heart. But using a maiden to start a war-or

allow Cronel to conquer a distant realm without one-then dispatching her . . . This Preece could not calmly accept.

Particularly when the maiden in question was Moreya Fa.

"I must reflect upon your tidings. Have you proof of any of this?"

"None beyond the obvious," Bourke replied. "The timing of it all: Lady Fa's betrothal, her father's death, the slaying of the cook before anyone could question him about the possibility of poison at the banquet. The warrant against Dugan luring you to court, even as Cronel needed a knight for escort. A Waniand to escort a Yune. There is beauty to this plan, and so far the execution-excuse the choice of words-has been flawless."

"I can stall here a day or two."

Bourke pointed at the open stable door and shuffled toward it. "Aye, there's a nasty storm brewing. Three days of rain, no less. But you must decide whether to forge onward, or mayhap tell her of your suspicions, and let the Yune decide."

"Nay, she must not hear of this," Preece said with conviction. Moreya could not be told. Such cruel news would devastate her. "She's been through enough with the loss of her father. I'll not have her learn she was to be used in such a reprehensible manner . . . by the monarch she seems to respect. If only fate had given me an extra digit, instead of this face and pale hair."

Bourke shrugged. "Fate has given you the Yune with her dragons. Reflect upon that." Then Bourke vanished into the night air.

Preece cursed so violently his tahr stopped munching oats and looked up. Preece shook his head and stroked the animal's nose. "Eat. We'll meet our foes yet, but first I must decide upon a plan. I need a strategy. Something clever, befitting the worst predicament of my life. I'll leave you to your oats."

Preece swore again, silently this time. Formulating what to do would be simpler if he weren't facing three days of rain in a rundown tavern with a known sot, four hostile strangers, and a Yune woman.

Foul weather and foul male tempers he could handle.

Dugan on a swilling spree was nothing new.

But three days of enduring Moreya's eyes on him? And her attempts to engage him in conversation, which only made matters worse. How would he endure that? He'd tried to ignore her and met with little success.

And beyond the days were the three restless nights. Satan's tail, but he'd never get a moment's rest! Each time he stripped and took to his bed, he was pestered by mental images of Moreya in her night shift. There in his chambers with him-or standing in the doorway of her own chambers. Smiling. Beckoning. Glowing.

"Bah!" At the moment, Preece could only plan to go inside and get very, very drunk.

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Preece admitted to himself that settling down with a tankard and a determination to drink until he forgot his woes had been an idiotic exercise. He hadn't forgotten a word of his chilling conversation with Bourke. His gut was already sour and protesting the strong spirits he'd hoped would cause him to fall into a stupor.

He wasn't anywhere near swooning.

But he was very close to pulling his dagger and taking a life as he overheard snippets of talk drifting from the table in the corner. His tormentors hadn't given up. Now they were casting lots, betting on whether his cock was long and thick or, of all absurd things not even possible, reed thin and prehensile.

A prehensile *cock* ?

"Hell, I'd hoist my tankard with it, could I get it to curl," he snarled to no one in particular. He glanced at the ringleader's neck. It didn't look terribly thick. "Mayhap I'd knock you to your knees and strangle you with my erection, you worthless glob of pox."

Preece shoved his bench away from the table and got to his feet. He reached down to the fastenings of his leggings. "Here, if you're so damned interested. Have a look at my blade!"

He didn't realize he'd caught the dagger hanging at his waist in the lacing at his crotch, or that the dagger's blade now extended straight in front of him. Benches flew back and men scurried in all directions, leaving Tivershem and Lockram guffawing on the floor.

Preece was abominably tired of men laughing at his sexual prowess. Or what they saw as a lack of it. "Not a true man, am I?" he scoffed, belching. "Showed you! Ha. Well, 'struth, you were too affrighted to look, craven fools. But I've a perfectly good rod and ballocks down-"

He did, *somewhere* down there. He was certain of that. But his fingers were oddly numb. The hem of his tunic kept getting in the way of the damnable lacings. He looked down and the floor rushed up at him.

After a stunned moment, during which he reassessed his closeness to swooning like a buffoon, he sat up, muttering. "You lackwits know naught of my kind . . . our ways." He hiccuped and got to his feet. When the nearly empty taproom dipped before his eyes, he braced his hip against the corner of his table.

Satan's hoofprints, but he was a thrice-damned fool. The ale had fired his blood. The cock he'd misplaced temporarily was there whence it belonged again. Thick enough, even in its flaccid state. He knew who'd appreciate it for the capable masculine tool it was. He'd wager on that.

She wouldn't go running off, screaming like she'd glimpsed a monster. Then again, the

noblewoman in question visited monsters in their lofty homes. How could she possibly take offense? He chuckled, liking that reassurance more by the minute. Aye, Moreya Fa Yune was no chary, squeamish female, but braver than these brash-lipped louts, braver than any woman he'd ever met.

She dealt effectively with whatever strange creature she happened upon. Witness that first night at Cronel's castle. She'd had Preece baffled, bound in knots from his first glimpse of her. Garbed in sleep shift, gentian tresses long and gleaming, her incredible amethyst eyes and smile offered for him alone.

He remembered too her dusky plum nipples. His belly clenched with the picture of them outlined by thin linen. What did they taste like, he wondered? Blackthorns, wildeberries? Deep, dark wine?

He shouldn't wonder, shouldn't care in the least. He certainly shouldn't go trudging up the stairs toward her chamber in search of answers to such pointless questions.

But fermented crops had a strange reverse effect upon Waniands. They dulled reflexes and slowed bodily functions whilst heightening other kinds of awareness. Like mental curiosity. And now that he'd allowed himself to idly muse on the subject, he couldn't seem to shake loose of it.

Of a sudden, he itched and burned. He simply had to know, had to see Moreya again in her night shift to verify his odd recollections . . . or completely destroy his illusions. He would rap at her chamber door and refresh his memory.

The worst possible plan, but a plan nonetheless.

At least now he had one.

Chapter 8

A muffled sound awakened Moreya. "Glaryd, is something amiss?"

The maid answered with a wheezing snore. Moreya could see Glaryd's outline by the faintly glowing embers of their small brazier. Glaryd couldn't have rolled out of bed or thumped the wall; she slumbered on a pallet near the center of the room.

Moreya heard another sound. A muffled groan reached her- this time, she was certain, from just outside their door. She supposed midnight thumps and moans were not unusual in a tavern like this in the hinterlands of Dredonia.

Scowling, she slid her feet to the floor and pulled on her wrapper. Some lout likely pawed some serving wench or staggered in the corridor, on the verge of being ill. Moreya snatched her empty chamberpot and tiptoed to the portal. She knew Preece's men were belowstairs and would come if she screamed, but mayhap she could dispense with the sot herself, rather than alerting the whole tavern. If yon fool was so deep in his cups as to bounce off the walls, a good cosh on the noggin should have him slumbering till morn.

But when she unbolted the door, it swung inward abruptly, depositing Preece at her bare feet.

"Preece, was that you I heard?" she asked, frowning.

He must have decided to guard her door all night again. "Are you unwell? Likely the cause would be the questionable foodstuffs Tivershem served. Here, try to sit up." She reached down for his hand.

He blinked up at her and began to chuckle.

She could not have been more stunned if his clothing had burst into flames before her very eyes.

This was Preece the Warmonger.

Preece rarely smiled. He did not laugh. She'd never heard him make sounds of mirth. His followers guffawed and bandied about jocular comments. Dugan was generally so besotted, he seemed to find everything and nothing vastly amusing. Lockram was wont to spin bawdy tales. Young Sieffre enjoyed ribald stories or clownish jests.

Preece had not once reacted with so much as a grin.

Yet now he sprawled on the flooring, huffing with what seemed to be great mysterious amusement, making no attempt to straighten up. She pressed her fingertips to his brow. He looked and acted feverish, but his flesh was not overwarm. Had he fallen into an ale keg, as his men often did?

"Your glow is making the entire hall gentian as your tresses. I admire that streaming mantle of yours. The odd color, the light it gives off. I've never known anyone's hair to

gleam of its own accord." He ended this pronouncement with an overly loud hiccup.

Ale fever, right enough. She hadn't known Preece to overindulge. But she could find no other explanation for his moonsick rantings. She'd noted earlier it was cloudy without, that nary a single moon was visible in the charcoal skies. He could not be moonstruck, but was more likely awash in strong brew of some variety.

"Get up, Waniand," she commanded. "You're befouling my floor. Your assigned chamber's on the other side of the hall there." She gave him a nudge with her big toe for emphasis.

He glanced at her foot and laughed once more. "Did you know purple sparks strike from your eyes when you're wroth with someone? Dragons. Sparks."

"You're in no condition to guard anyone's door. Go sleep the ale or wine from your sodden brain. You've drunk too much this eve."

He sat up and clutched the door frame, levering himself to his feet. "Waniands do not drink overmuch. Merely enough to be as manly as the next fellow."

She inwardly groaned. He was still chafing from the confrontation with those strangers earlier. That was the source of his uncharacteristic behavior: drinking, laughing, spouting flattery. He wouldn't have been subjected to slurs against his manhood if she'd let him don his cowl before their arrival.

She peered up into his eyes. She noted the orbs weren't reddened, as they should have been after an eve of carousing. They remained the clear blue of mountain streams in springtide, and sparkled as they met her interested gaze.

"You do not have to prove yourself a man, Preece. I-no one is in need of further demonstrations, after your fight downstairs earlier."

"Lot of buffoons," he concurred, offering another hiccup.

"I wager you're more capable in almost any endeavor than those boorish Dredonians. 'Twould be no surprise to learn you outdrank them." Then she had a worrisome afterthought. "You don't think those men you fought would attempt access to my bed? Is that why you've come?"

His amusement vanished. He squared his shoulders and reached for the hilt of the dagger he wore at his waist. "I'll cut their ballocks off and feed them to Tiver's pet mongoose!"

Moreya almost smiled at the vehemence of his response. "Your mere presence would deter them. I think they discovered the folly in provoking a trained Waniand warrior. You didn't even need your weapon to trounce them."

"They deserved it for insulting you."

Now she blinked, momentarily befuddled. "'Twas your race they slandered, not mine."

"Because I stated I was your protector, and as such would abide no leering. Their slurs

against my bloodline and manhood were simply another form of improper suggestion. They sought to impress you by disparaging me."

He was back to appearing vexed and somber. All vestige of humor had fled, to be replaced by something of a different, darker ilk. An intensity, impressions of coiled readiness lurking behind his outward mien. That disturbed her. She'd accustomed herself to his surliness. She understood the gruff knight and how to respond to the boor.

But the suspicion she could not now predict what he might say or do next unnerved her. She was not fond of unpredictable natures.

"I suppose I should be appreciative that you were concerned for my honor. It's unlikely Prince Velansare would bother. He's apt to care less for my esteem in the eyes of strangers than whether he dines on squid or mutton."

Moreya could not believe she'd spoken her dismal thoughts aloud. It was bad enough she secretly contrasted many things about her bridegroom against what she knew of this Waniand. She had neither right nor reason to compare one man to the other. But to let her escort know she harbored such unseemly ideas-

Preece leaned in close. "We must speak frankly, Lady Fa. But not here." He shot a quick glance in both directions, as if to verify they alone stood in the hall. He seized her hand in his. "Come to my chambers. You'll be back afore Glaryd discovers you missing."

Moreya followed, but when he closed his bedchamber door behind them, she regretted her easy capitulation. For a moment she'd imagined them as secret friends, allies. Two wayward children, sneaking about when they should be safely abed, whispering and conspiring together.

But they were not children. Her late-night visit to his bedchamber suggested an entirely different sort of collusion.

"This is . . . imprudent. I should not have come," she murmured. "I'll return to my own chamber." She reached for the door, but he still held her hand, firmly nestled between both his strong, roughened palms.

"You spoke of your betrothed and his disinterest. If there were somewhere else you might go, would you still bid me escort you to the prince regent? You suggested once you wished to avoid your fate. I know of a distant land, a land well beyond Greensward's borders. I could take you there."

She wanted to dismiss his words as the effects of too much ale, but she did not believe he was insensible. In truth, a part of her mind prayed that he made perfect sense, longed to find the reason in his argument and be persuaded by it. Yet she should not listen a second longer.

"No land is distant enough." She shook her head, willing her heart to slow down, her reason to prevail. "The crowned heads of both Greensward and Glacia would rage in fury were I to ignore the betrothal. To defy our monarch's edict is treason, as well you

must know. You taunted King Cronel with your rebellious tongue, but you did not defy him outright."

"In this I will."

She clutched at Preece's fingers. What he offered tempted her beyond sanity. An escape from the arranged marriage she never wanted . . . The chance to make her own choice about her future

But she could not give into temptation.

"Nay. Do not speak so. To even discuss such a possibility is itself an act of insurgence. I do not know of which far realm you speak, nor do I wish to. Your duty is to take me safely to Greensward Palace. Once settled there, I've only to venture into a garden or open field if I'm miserable with life as princess. All the royal guardsmen at Velansare's disposal could not hold me, do I decide to call down the dragons and fly away."

"The dragons are why you must not wed Velansare."

Why should hearing him say that cut to her very soul?

A logical assessment, after all. She'd actually debated the notion of telling Velansare about the beasts herself, in order to persuade him to nullify the betrothal contract. For a trained knight and strategist to point out the obvious should not have stung her pride. Yet she'd hoped the Warmonger might see her as more than a harbinger of disaster.

"Where would you take me?" she bit out.

Her eyes smarted with the threat of tears. What a fool she'd been, with her girlish thoughts of whispered secrets and her heart aflutter at finding herself alone in his room. She'd actually let herself imagine he'd drawn her here with the intent of kissing her again. But no, it seemed he was only operating as any good mercenary ought, seeking to bolster his purse with a change in plans. She *had* attempted to bribe him, she reminded herself.

"Ataraxia," he answered slowly. He seemed to wait for a reaction. She offered none-though she'd heard of the realm, and at the mention of the name, her heart thudded in her breast. Ataraxia was indeed many thousands of leagues away, an island realm of warm sun and tropics.

"I've been saving for a vessel and crew," Preece confided. "It's ever been my goal to sail there. In truth, 'tis why I've sold my sword. I long to see Ataraxia, to live there. You could come with me."

With him ? Just what was he suggesting? Against all common sense, her mind began spinning those illicit images again, of the two of them embracing, kissing, entwined in passion. But she could not be sure that was what he meant.

He crossed to the chamber's sole window and opened the shutters, admitting the cool night breeze. He stood with his back to her, staring out at the moonless dark beyond the

sill.

"I might as well speak plainly." His voice came in words measured, deep and slow. "I've not amassed coin enough, nor do I have my full cache with me. To detour so I might fetch it would cost precious time we cannot spare. I need a boon. One of those terrestars your maid showed me would be enough to secure a vessel. There's a harbor in northern Greensward along the Great Seas. If we cut north toward Zankarat instead of due east, we could set sail before anyone at the palace realizes we're overdue."

Ah, so indeed he invited her purse, not her maidenly softness! This was a mercenary speaking to her, she reminded herself harshly, not some highborn noble. *Mercenary*. What in all of Heaven's breadth would make him pine to transplant himself to such a place as Ataraxia?

"Your sword would rust from disuse where you propose to live, Preece. My father visited that realm. He said Ataraxians opposed trade with outsiders. The realm has no army and survives tranquilly upon its natural resources. You would be useless there, Warmonger. No one would hire your sword."

"Were hefting a sword my sole interest in life, I'd not go," he countered smoothly. "But Waniands fight to defend their loins, land, and kin. Our warriors do not fear death. We are reared with but one true purpose: to procreate. When there is no danger, procreation and studying Waniand lore and traditions are worthy pursuits. I should like time to reflect upon the mysteries and intricacies of the natural world, to raise my sons with a steady hand. I would know peace as intimately as I do war."

Moreya stared at his back. Every time she stripped away an obscuring layer, more beauty was revealed. An ever surprising beauty.

He abruptly turned to face her. "Ataraxia is bound on all sides by restless ocean tides. The clime is warm, the land itself low, with a dearth of mountains or rocky pinnacles. There are few places suited for dragon aeries. You would be like others there, without worry of attracting winged reptiles. You could live in the sun, Moreya."

She sank onto the edge of his bed. Only part of her mind even registered the impropriety of her actions. Bed or no, she had to sit on something, lest her buckling knees drop her onto the floor.

You could live in the sun .

He did understand.

He must, or he never would have offered that inducement. He could have assured her she'd be spared a husband who preferred fondling men. He could have suggested she take haven in a convent or enter some distant citadel, there to disappear into a faceless crowd. But he offered her a life in the sun.

How many times had she wished for exactly that?

Prayed for such an existence, the ordinary life of a milkmaid or farming peasant woman? Vowed she'd purchase such from the Creator, did it cost every dragon stone in her collection? He'd spoken of his own secret longings. . .

Moreya had ever been willing to bargain her immortal soul with Satan himself to be like any other mortal woman.

And now Satan had sent one of his minions to the bargaining table.

Under the guise of an emancipating blond saint.

"Would you also live in the sun, Preece, no longer hiding your bloodline beneath dark cowls?"

He rubbed a palm along the outside of his thigh. "That would depend upon the reception I find. While Ataraxians are reported to eschew trade and ground troops, the legends also say they allow the occasional stranger to live in their midst. Peaceable strangers, with no thought of conquering or disrupting Ataraxian ways. I hate wearing cowls. I need the freedom of a new beginning."

He squatted on his haunches before her, reaching to squeeze her shoulder. "I've disturbed your rest. I apologize, but you can understand that tonight's words could not be spoken where others might overhear the topic we discuss. You haven't answered me, Lady Fa."

She caught his wrist and stared into his eyes. The chamber was gloomy, but she could make out his features in the dim light. "Why would you risk your life this way now, of a sudden? You claim not to know Prince Velansare. My concerns over his abhorrent tastes did not sway you afore. Yet now you would abandon your duty, defy our king . . . Do you need a terrestar so badly?"

"Do you wish to find yourself imprisoned again? What can the palace become, but another stone fortress whose walls entomb you? What do you suppose will happen when the royals learn about the firedrakes? Despite his royal blood, I know you do not want the prince regent. I am a mere Waniand, embittered soldier and fighter, but at least I would get many children on you."

So he did intend they should become lovers.

Moreya could hardly imagine a less pretty speech. In typical warrior fashion, he'd cut through the outer defenses to the crux of the decision. Her choice was between the freedom he offered or living in a prison, trapped in a marriage that would be naught but a twisted lie, knowing she may never birth more than one child. A future king needed but one heir.

"We would . . . ?" She didn't know precisely how to phrase her question. Did Waniands have courtships?

He lowered his voice so she had to strain to make out the words, though he was merely a breath away. "I am not in season, yet I find myself plagued with unseemly thoughts and

an unaccustomed desire to be near you. This urgency is different than any I've known before."

"My."

Moreya was too startled to be articulate. But he'd still found his tongue-he who'd been staggering in the passageway less than an hour before-and he went on with his private confession.

"I allowed myself to be drawn into the fray with those strangers because they regarded you with sexual want. They wished to mount you."

Was it dark enough in his chamber to completely mask her red face?

"I was infuriated by that knowledge, for *I* would mount you, Moreya Fa."

She let out a tiny gasp. Of surging hope, but she prayed he'd take it as outraged shock due to his brashness. And it was brash, unforgivably so. She forgave him all the same.

"You are unused to Yune womenfolk. Such a physical reaction is said to be common in men who are not of Yunish descent. We are overfavored by-"

He shook his head. "I've seen other Yune females in Cronel's court. Very beauteous Yunes, with flesh like the meat of ripe summer fruits. They wore gossamer clothing, balmed their skin with exotic scents, and had males clustered around them. I have never responded thusly to them."

"But how can you be certain? I am the sole Yune female now and you have spent much time physically close by my side these past days. Mayhap 'tis-"

"I noticed you from the moment I entered the throne room. I saw your unique glow, but I fought any affinity. I did not wish to befriend you. Yet you befriended me, and left me no choice. I cannot seem to avoid experiencing the dual desire to both crush and protect you."

She had to admit defeat on this particular jousting field. She was torn herself: between the desire to slap him or laugh at him, yet take him seriously. With an urge to sneer even as she admired him. To run. To throw herself into his arms and demand another wet kiss.

Still, her dilemma wasn't comparable. She was a slip of a female, too thin and willowy, not much of a morsel, even for a young dragon. He was a seasoned warrior of lithe strength and taut sinews-who spoke of crushing her.

"You'll not entice me into sailing away in a ship purchased with one of my gemstones by proclaiming you want to crush me," she sniffed.

He smiled. *Smiled*.

She saw his teeth flash in the darkness and her insides clenched. Again she acknowledged the murky, coiled feeling that was not fear, but had her wary, nonetheless.

"The undoing is worth the price of a gemstone and more, believe me. There are other

aspects to my nature too intensely private to speak about here and now. Say you will go to Ataraxia with me, and I will share the mysteries of warriors of my kind, fair one."

Damn his Waniand soul. He'd offered her freedom, a new life, the promise of children. Now he threw in mystic secrets known only to males of his blood. "Words and hints. I would have more, Preece."

"A sensible answer," he whispered, drawing closer, "deserving a show of faith." He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. There was no jolt, no searing flash of heat. The flame slowly ignited and began licking at her vitals as he traced the hollows of her mouth with his tongue.

He moved one hand to a breast even as he pressed her fingers to his nether region. "Soon we will become mates and your touch will harden me like forged Aldean steel," he promised in a hot whisper.

Each boldly caressed the other, accepted the mutual heat and attraction. Moreya thought she'd suffocate and die. . . of pleasure. Intense pleasure. Pure as his silvery locks or ice blue eyes. Hot and sweet as cherukom peppers.

Damn his Waniand soul. Damn her, for wanting to own it.

She pulled away and drew a quaking breath so she might be capable of speech. "Ataraxia . . . Yes, I'll give you a stone. I must leave now." She darted for the door, for the haven of her room and its dully snoring maidservant.

But hiding in her bed behind a barred door made no difference. Preece had been correct in his boasts. She wanted him, wanted to claim his dark secrets for herself. Wanted to stir the embers of unholy fire, to see those distant shores of glittering bright sand, wanted children and a life in the sun.

Enough to pay Satan's price.

Treason .

The least of what she'd just agreed to.

Chapter 9

Moreya gave up all pretense of getting any rest shortly before dawn. She dressed quickly and left Glaryd still asleep in their bedchamber.

The taproom was all but deserted at the early hour, except for Tivershem pushing a broom across the floor and a solitary man slumped near the hearth. Tivershem swept the refuse toward the front door and cracked it open. Moreya heard the sound of steady rain. "Huh," Tivershem groused, squinting. "I vow that's a rider in the distance. Can hardly make out his shape in this downpour. Just what I need Another drenched soul neath my

roof."

Moreya joined him to peer out of the open doorway. There was indeed someone coming. A lone stranger on a soaked and plodding donkey. The man repeatedly dug his heels into the beast's sides, to no avail.

"By the looks of this storm, no one'll be leaving here for another day or two. Gave your party the bulk of my chambers. My other rooms are occupied, too. I know Preece won't set out in this foul murk." Tivershem shook his head and started back toward the kitchen. "Best see to the stewpot and figure out where I'll put up the new-comer. Even my stable's full. My ostler will have to give up the stall he usually sleeps in for that donkey."

Moreya followed Tivershem into the kitchen and took an apple from the sideboard. "I'm sure we can work out something. You can't turn the poor fellow away." She poured herself a cup of milk and headed back to the warmth of the taproom.

A short time later a stranger entered, slogging water and mud behind him. Moreya bade him remove his wet cloak and was mildly surprised to discover a coarse cleric's robe and tonsure. Their new visitor announced he was a monk hieing to Axcroft, a monastery some ten leagues further south of this outpost.

He joined Moreya at a table near the fire and gazed with obvious longing at the stew and bread Tivershem set before them. "I fear I've no way to pay for board or a room. I'd have been safely amongst my brethren by now if not for the rain. I've no coin, kind sir. More's the pity."

"I will pay whatever is required," Moreya announced, gesturing toward the food. "And you're welcome to stay, even if means a blanket on the floor. We are all at the mercy of the weather, and shall huddle together to make the best of things. I'm sure Sir Preece would agree to extending you aid."

"I would? How come you to be certain of that?"

She turned and found him standing at the base of the stairs. Dressed in one of his dark tunics, but with its hood folded back on his shoulders instead of drawn up covering his head. She smiled. How the sight pleased her.

The monk mumbled thanks-both to his benefactors and the Lord-then dug into the stew. Moreya glanced at him, then back at the tall knight, and suddenly gained a new appreciation for the Creator's brilliance. Sailing off with a valiant knight to some distant land presented a dilemma for her as an unwed maiden. A woman of virtue simply did not do such things. She'd tossed and fretted over the problem most of the night. Then the answer had ridden up on a wet donkey.

"You would not have Tivershem turn this poor holy man out into the storm for lack of coin, would you, sir? I offered to pay bed and board for . . . ?"

"Brother Fense," the man supplied, in between great gulping bites of bread. The poor fellow must have gone some time without a decent meal.

"For Brother Fense. He is a monk from Axcroft, a monastery not far away, who was caught in the rain. The tavern's full. Mayhap Brother Fense could share a chamber with Sieffre."

"Sieffre's on an errand. The monk may take Sieffre's chamber for the night," Preece answered, coming to sit beside Moreya. He reached for the bread, quirking an eyebrow at the monk.

"Please, do help yourself, noble soldier!"

Moreya was glad the monk would have a decent bed, but surprised at the reason for it. When had Sieffre departed, in the middle of the night? "Sieffre should not be out in the damp. His shoulder is still mending. What is so pressing that-

"I believe you know, Lady Fa," Preece asserted, cutting her off. "We spoke at length last night. He's ridden ahead with my coinpouch to begin arrangements for the next leg of our journey."

Moreya saw her opening. "Ah, yes. I have reflected upon that self-same conversation. While I favor your proposed destination, I fear I cannot make the journey without certain provisions." Preece immediately scowled, but Moreya turned to the monk and rushed on before he could reply. "Brother Fense, is it not possible for you to perform basic functions of your station outside the monastery? For instance, could you not hallow burial ground, or baptize an infant . . . or preside over a marriage ceremony?"

Preece seized Moreya's forearm. "Waniands do not recognize the rites of clerics. We must be lifemated, according to Waniand custom, Moreya."

"I understand," she whispered. "I believe I agreed to honor your ways." She stared at him, silently pleading. She knew when comprehension dawned from the subtle lessening of the finger pressure on her arm.

Preece spoke slowly. "I've lived most of my life in Glacia. Even though such rituals hold little meaning for me, you wish to exchange vows as your own kind do." He shifted his regard to the monk, who by now, had ceased eating. "You can say the words to unite us under the laws of the Known Realms?"

"I can. But are you certain you wish to wed this woman? She is not of your kind, but Yune, is she not?"

" *Have you lost your wits ?*"

Lockram and Dugan descended the stairs. Lockram had roared the question. Dugan looked uncertainly from one comrade to the other and scratched his unkempt salt and pepper hair, as if confused as to whose side to uphold in the matter. "He doesn't have a bat charm. He's bedazzled," Dugan muttered. He gave Lockram a look of naked appeal.

Tivershem came from the kitchen, worried by the shouting. Moreya'd seen him still sweeping up broken crockery from the debacle the day before. Preece jerked his head in

Tivershem's direction.

"What of him?" Preece demanded. "Is he bedazzled too? He has no amulet against her."

"This is madness!" Moreya gasped in frustration. "Yune women do not possess the ability to enchant men. That's a foolish myth. I'm sure Tivershem finds me no different than any other woman traveler."

"None other had your strange hair, and few have been ladies of high birth," Tivershem replied. He looked over at Lockram, whose hands were clenched in fists. "She's a fair maiden, I grant, but I cannot say I'd leave my Marie for her. Course, I'm not as young as you fellows, nor as randy. A dozen years back?" He shrugged. "Mayhap."

Preece shook the shoulder of the man who'd been sleeping in the corner. "Traveler, how can you slumber in the presence of this Yune beauty? Does she not make your pulse pound?"

"I don't care if fifty men say yea or nay," Lockram snapped. "They were not hired as we were."

Preece shook his gleaming argent mane in warning. "We do not discuss our business before strangers."

Dugan spoke in a hushed tone. "What business had you rousing Sieffre two hours ago to ride off in the midst of a pelting rainstorm? And why was he given to know what is afoot, whilst the rest of us are not told a blessed thing?"

"Preece is bewitched and thinking with his nether head," Lockram hissed. "He'd have us all brought before Cr-"

"Finish that word, and it will be the last you ever speak." Preece had moved so swiftly, Moreya never sensed his intention. Neither did anyone else, it seemed. He stood barely a hand's breath from Lockram and spoke with quiet menace. Moreya doubted the monk knew Preece had likely pulled his dagger, how near they all hovered to seeing murder done.

She leapt to her feet. "Nay, Preece!"

He'd slay his friend to keep their secret. He couldn't let Lockram admit the new destination was in defiance of royal edict, lest everyone in the tavern learn the knights were traitors to the Glacian king. Cronel had no power here, but information had value. Lives were bartered daily in this crude realm.

Moreya rushed toward the glaring males. "Preece, Lockram! Please, can we not reason this out amongst ourselves after you break your fast? I waylaid Preece this morn with the problems of this poor monk." She gestured meaningfully, hoping Preece's men would drop the subject of why they crossed Dredonia. "You haven't met Brother Fense." She waved a hand at first one man, then the next. "This knight is Sir Dugan Graeme; that fellow there, Sir Lockram. They travel with us. And there is my maid, Glaryd."

Introductions were now complete. A heavy silence followed, during which everyone merely stared at one another. Glaryd looked at Moreya strangely. Lockram and Preece glowered at each other as if fighting to hold their tongues.

A couple of other wayfarers had drifted downstairs and sat at a nearby table. If they'd come to break their fasts, Moreya thought wryly, they'd soon realize they were in danger of getting more broken. Another fight seemed about to erupt at any second.

Brother Fense rose and cleared his throat. "Now, then. Meseems there is some confusion and disharmony here. The abbot is fond of professing 'tis not unexpected for tempers to turn foul along with the weather. I believe whatever trouble has arisen can be resolved without further tribulation. I would bid you ladies return abovestairs. These knights and I shall confer together as reasonable men are wont to do."

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The reasonable men broke two chairs and split open a wine cask before Brother Fense at last summoned Moreya from her chamber. Her traveling companions were still assembled in the taproom, but Tivershem had encouraged the tavern's other guests to return to their rooms.

Lockram seethed in stony silence as the marriage vows were exchanged. Glaryd sobbed aloud, wiping her nose and leaning against Dugan, whose pallor had gone from grey to green. Moreya explained to Brother Fense that Yunes did not wear metal jewelry, so he dispensed with the requirement of a wedding ring. Preece bowed to the witnesses, bestowed the kiss of peace on Moreya's lips, and the ceremony ended.

Brother Fense pronounced the pair lawfully wed, and confirmed he would enter their marriage in the sacred records at Axcroft upon his return. A rumble of thunder shook the tavern even as those words left his mouth.

Lockram snorted in disgust. "There's what the Lord Above thinks of your marriage, Warmonger."

Moreya squeezed Preece's hand. "Would you grant me a few moments to speak with Lockram?"

Preece shook his head. "We settled matters. He goes to Ataraxia with us, as do Dugan and Sieffre. They cannot remain behind. We have much to discuss between ourselves, lady wife. In my chamber."

Moreya heard the reproach in his tone. "I promise I'll not take long to join you there. Please, Preece."

He cursed softly, then shouted to Tivershem to send hot water for a bath as he started up the stairs. "A quarter hour," he reminded Moreya. She turned to Lockram, who'd seated himself in the far corner and now sat guzzling ale.

"You've done it now," he told Moreya, taking another long draught. He rubbed his sleeve

over his lips and grimaced. "All the years your father was ambassador, wiped away in single morn, by a daughter who would start a war. All because she is too stubborn to wed the man her father and king have chosen. As if women near and far do not tolerate the same fate without complaint."

"You saw the firedrake swoop down and take me during your fight with the Raviners," she reminded in a whisper. "I left the coach knowing the dragons would come if I stood in the open. I screamed, so they might hear me if they didn't see me. I knew they'd smite the Raviners. I could only pray they didn't also harm you or Preece and Dugan."

"You *summoned* the dragons? Oh, I forgot. You are the woman who visits their lairs and helps hatch their eggs."

Moreya was angry, but kept her voice low. "Do you think the prince regent would want me for his future queen if he knew that whither I go, winged beasts follow? Preece offered me a chance to sail to Ataraxia with him. He's always wanted to go there, and I can abide there without fear of dragons. They do not nest in tropic climes."

"Aye, *Preece* has always wanted to go there! We others have been left no say in the matter! Preece has betrayed his own men for you, witch."

"Marriage was my idea. I hope you'll not let it ruin your friendship. It would have been unwise for me to accompany him without benefit of lawful union, and I cannot be forced to wed, now that I'm Preece's lawful wife."

"Ah, so this is yet another part of his role as your protector?" Moreya nodded. At last Lockram's fractious attitude seemed to ease. Or so she thought, until he snorted and cast her a sideways glance. "A forced marriage might be the least of your troubles. That pretty head could end up lopped from your neck; ours right beside it. Do not expect gratitude."

Moreya stiffened her spine. "Hate me if you will. At least be honest enough to admit that *enmity* is what you feel, not lust. I am no sorceress. I cast no spell upon Preece. We made a practical bargain, wherein each party stands to benefit. We shall suit. Not because I've enchanted anyone-I cannot-but due to elemental basics."

"Elemental basics and bargains." Lockram banged his tankard to the tabletop. "Hearken these words, for they are the last I'll have with you on this subject. You chose badly, Lady Warmonger. I suspect you bear Preece affection. I'm not blind. He is fair of face and that is what most impresses you. But your affection is misplaced, for he will never return it, no matter what you do. Waniands do not love."

Moreya turned and started upstairs to Preece's chamber, Lockram's words ringing in her ears. He was partly right. She'd not agreed soely to escape firedrakes or impending marriage to Velansare. She was fascinated by Preece.

She could not claim to love him, but she longed for his smile. She enjoyed gazing upon him without his cowl. She thrilled in kissing him, and craved more of the quiet,

thoughtful side he kept hidden from the world. She could be content just watching him sleep.

She paused in the hall. Ever since she'd answered the thump at her chamber door yestereve, events had spun out of control. A storm had detained them. The little monk's arrival had been both an unexpected boon and the catalyst for disaster. Now she was overwrought, questioning her motives and decisions. Aye, overwrought. But what maiden wouldn't be?

She took a deep breath and ordered herself to calm her myriad racing thoughts. She was no longer a child, but a grown woman. A *married* woman.

A wife.

She smiled tremulously at her own folly. That much, at least, was clear and true. The assurance she'd given Lockram was justified-if apprehended, King Cronel could no longer force her to wed the prince regent nor any other man. She doubted Lockram's assertion that war would inevitably result from her broken betrothal.

Prince Velansare could find another bride. He might welcome the chance, once he learned the truth about Moreya.

Whose store of terrestars should go a long way toward soothing ruffled royal feathers, whether Cronel's or Velansare's. She'd give up her entire chest to appease them both, for there was another stone no one knew about hidden amongst her garments. She'd never shown that particular terrestar to anyone. She'd obtained it years ago, that rarest of rare pink stones. While not her largest, even uncut and unpolished, its fire surpassed that of most emeralds and rubies. Such a lustrous stone would make a pendant or brooch beyond price.

While Moreya and her mother's kind did not favor adorning their bodies with chunks of dirt and stone, she understood that women of other races hoarded gemstones and had them fashioned into pieces of adornment.

Moreya would sell her large pink stone to the lowliest trader, did it make Lockram's last words any less true.

You chose badly, Lady Warmonger. Waniands do not love.

She smoothed the fabric of her gown across her bosom and lifted her chin. Preece must not see evidence that her discussion with Lockram left her shaken. She may have chosen badly, but chosen she had.

Now she must accept the consequences.

Chapter 10

Preece gripped the latch of his chamber's begrimed window and fought the urge to bolt downstairs and bodily drag Moreya up to his room. He wanted to strangle her.

She'd manipulated him into wedding her.

Satan's blood, he'd barely broken his fast! The next thing he knew, he was giving away one of his men's bedchambers to some monk, brawling with the one man he considered a true friend, and found himself repeating gibberish in some pointless ceremony. He was now Moreya's husband.

Which meant nothing whatsoever.

He knew that people of higher races took marriage vows, yet disregarded them regularly to fornicate hither and yon. Few barons and overlords were not lawfully wedded. Which did not stop them from sampling the charms of other men's wives, dairy maids, courtesans, or tavern wenches. They tugged women in royal bowers, clandestine back rooms and haylofts. Their wives likewise took solace in the arms of tailors and poets, minstrels or servants.

Moreya did not understand.

Through Preece's own fault, because he'd not wanted to overtax her womanly tenderness in expecting her to absorb all his arcane ways meant even as she agreed to sail off with him. But he must remedy the matter soon as she got up the nerve to face him alone.

His thoughts were interrupted by a sharp rap at the door. Tivershem stood in the hall with twin steaming buckets and a thick towel. "Sorry, Preece. Only one tub large enough for a fellow to sit, and it's being used by a Dredonian of some repute. Couldn't just pull it out from beneath his arse. These should let you scrub for your Yune bride."

Preece did not like the amusement he heard in that last sentence. "When you go back belowstairs, I want you to prepare a tray of victuals and fetch it back here. Then, I warn you, if anyone comes within a foot of that portal whilst my *Yune bride* and I are within this chamber, I'll slit his throat. Even if it's yours."

"Warmonger, that will be quite enough of your surliness," came a soft voice from behind Tivershem. Moreya frowned at Preece. "Must you alienate every living soul in this inn? The man was trying to be generous. 'Tis neither his fault nor mine if you awoke on the wrong side of the bed this morn."

"I woke up alone in it."

"For the last time," she replied, crossing to slip her arms around his waist. Preece gaped as she nestled against his chest in an overt display of affection.

Tivershem grinned. "That's more like it, milady. Food and drink, coming in a nonce."

The chamber door closed behind the innkeeper and Preece grasped Moreya's shoulders.

"What was that about? You contrive to make me do your bidding, then devote your efforts to coddling Lockram and amusing some innkeeper you'll never see again. You mock me, and then wonder at my churlishness. I am not known for forbearance, Moreya."

"Mock you?"

"We are wed."

"Yes. That is why I embraced you. I can do so as the whim strikes me now, and no one will think me forward."

"You wished to wed so you might embrace me? That's why you made me your husband?" He jerked away from her, tore off his tunic, and plunged his head into a bucket Tivershem had left behind. Preece would have preferred an icy stream at that moment, but a dousing of any sort might cool his ire.

Or so he'd hoped, but fortune was not with him.

He straightened and cracked open one eye. Moreya watched, without any betraying flush of color or guilty expression. She held out his towel. He seized it away from her. If she wished a battle yet this day, he'd give her one.

"I do not ken what ails you, Warmonger," she said in tone of irritation. "You speak in riddles. Had I known yestereve you would behave thus, my answer would have been different. Beseems I'm set to sail for Ataraxia with a madman."

"What ails me is you forced me to speak those useless vows before that cleric! We shall become *lifemates*. This 'marriage' you have wrought means naught, and do not think I will condone your embracing!"

"I try to follow, but I confess I cannot. You have held me and kissed me. You said you would beget children. Are you telling me Waniands mate without touching? How is that possible?"

For a moment he was tempted to hurl the contents of the bucket over her head. He fought to control his raging emotions. Which, in some dim corner of his mind, he acknowledged as the true source of his distress. Never in his life had he known this turmoil, such roiling of complex feelings. He was used to a decisive stance, mentally as well as physically. He made choices. He acted. But now he was frozen with confusion. Feeling angry, stung by her cavalier actions, fearful of a future he couldn't easily foresee to shape . . . and consumed by a growing lust.

The thought she would even consider sharing herself with another male irked him until he longed to slay someone. Anyone. Moreya herself. Yet he longed to hold her, gentle her, kiss her. Even as he wanted to bury his flesh sword to the hilt in a mindless frenzy and consume her very breath.

All of which made very little sense.

"I am undone. Undone!"

He threw his hands in the air and sank onto the bed. "You have unmanned me, Yune female. No man has ever mastered me, but you have done it. With words spoken by a monk. Truly, I must be Satan's spawn, to be felled by a twiggish holy man boasting but half a scalp of hair."

Moreya laughed.

Preece glanced over at her and was dealt yet another blow. She sniggered so hard she was nearly doubled over. Tears began trickling from her eyes. Only after she noted that hers was the only happy sound in the room did she sober. "You were . . . You do not jest? Preece?"

"You hoped I might turn jocular, as well as blind and mute, now that we are wed?"

"I did hope you might not be so horribly churlish. In truth, I thought you'd be pleased. I do not understand why you are displeased. You've said the ceremony performed by the monk is meaningless under your racial code, so I agreed to join in the Waniand manner, but-"

"The rites oppose one another!" he roared helplessly. "Do you not see as much? You would be like others of your rank, married and copulating wantonly. Did you wed Velansare, you knew full well he would still take men into his bed. He would mate with you only until he begot a son, then leave you to your lovers. This is the way of the upper races, but it is *not* Waniand."

Moreya dropped to the floor and placed her forehead against his knee. Preece was astonished. She'd prostrated herself at his feet. What she would say next could only come like a dagger thrust in his chest, when already he was sick and shaking and bleeding inside.

"Some of my people behave so," Moreya admitted softly. "I think because so often the unions are arranged, as my betrothal was, for reasons of property or title or fortune. But there are men and women who come together because they wish to share their lives. I will not speak falsely. I wished us wed because I did not want to be called your whore."

He reached down and cupped her chin. She gazed up at him, her purple orbs misted with sadness. "And if we are caught, the king cannot now force me to wed anyone else. I am lawfully married to you." She wiped at her eyes. "I was selfish."

The dagger had been thinner, more lethal than he'd expected. She wept in palpable distress. Distress he had caused her.

"I'm so very rueful, Preece. I never suspected you thought I would allow some stranger to cuckold you. You must know such is not true! I was not forced to wed you. I want to be with you. *Only* you. Please believe that."

He pulled her up into his arms and she clung to him, sobbing. He had hurt her. A

grievous wrong for a Waniand warrior to commit. He had to right matters.

"Moreya." He barely managed to croak her name. There was pain in his own throat. "Do not weep, lady. I misjudged your thinking. I know you are not of my blood, so you cannot understand my views. In this matter of joining . . . in what now lies between us."

"Then make me understand!"

He captured her face between his palms. She was so very beautiful, so trusting. And kind. Generosity flowed from her, as pure as a mountain spring. "Once we perform the lifemate ritual, you will be in my blood and I in yours. A warrior's woman does not deceive him or play him falsely. Waniands regard adultery as grounds for justifiable slaughter. We will both physically be altered as a result of our flesh bond. My seasons will alter. You will grow heavy with my child. Those and other manifestations will occur, which are not to be ignored. So will the bond between us remain unto death. Do you ken now?"

"Yes. It is deadly serious to you. Literally."

He nodded and pulled her close against his heart. "You shall be forever known as my lifemate because my essence and reason to live resides within you. We will become one in flesh and spirit. I have already faltered in my path to harmony with you. You were distressed by my outburst. I am likewise distressed by it. Even in the heat of battle, I do not lose control of my thoughts. But I was affrighted that I'd made a grave error in judgment. A feeling I've not had since I was very young."

"Frightened? How could-Oh, that I would betray you with someone else and you'd be forced to slay me? I don't blame you. 'Tis a horrid thought."

He shook his head and swallowed. It was very hard, this plain speaking. Were it anyone but Moreya, he was not certain he could force the words out. "I cannot bear if you would but *think* of it. That you would wish to leave me. I would that I had never known you, instead."

"Stubborn Waniand, I married you so I could be with you. Always." Her arms came around his neck and she pressed her damp face against his cheek. A sweetness poured over him and soothed his nerves. He had mishandled matters badly, but there was still a chance to redeem himself and forge his bond with her.

He stroked her hair and sighed, waited until her fierce hold became a gentler embrace. "Preece is my clan name," he told her. "Its meaning is much the same as Warmonger, the name I am known by to Glacians. As my lifemate, you alone have the right to speak my sacred name, the name my mother first intoned upon my birth: Kaelan."

She pulled away slightly and stared into his eyes. "Kaelan Preece. It fits you."

His lips quirked at that. "Kaelan describes one who is long of body and light in coloring. Not rare amongst my kind."

"But she knew you would grow into this handsome, tall man. Surely not all warriors of your race have such pleasing facial features."

The sweetness was fading, to be replaced by something richer, more potent. Need. He must take the first step in their ritual. "Moreya, I would make us one in the flesh."

She trembled slightly. He kissed her lips, her cheek, her throat. "We are man and wife. Even in your ways, the union is not lawful until you surrender to me. Does this frighten you?"

"Nay, unless I think about what Glaryd has told me. That there is pain the first time."

"There is, and blood. You fear me because of this?"

"You are talented at kissing until I can no longer think. Last night I could no more rein in my mind than harness a dragon. Mayhap when your season begins, we could--"

He pressed a rough palm to her breast. The tip hardened beneath his hand.

"We need not wait. I have chosen you for lifemate. A warrior does not make his choice without powerful instincts guiding him. Your desire can, at times, fuel mine. There can be coupling without mindless frenzy."

"So we might--This very eve?"

"We might." He untied her kirtle and peeled it away from her flesh. Her breasts were high and slightly pointed, their globes the same pale pinkish hue as the flesh of her neck and arms. But the nipples, ah, the nipples were like twin little plums.

And tasted every bit as sweet as sloe plums in high summer.

She moaned and ran her fingers into his hair, pulling his head closer. He obliged and sucked one tip deeper into his mouth. Moreya gasped. "Oh, I never dreamt it could feel like this! Will your babe make me feel so wondrous as it suckles?"

There was nothing she could have said that would get a Waniand stiffer or hotter than mention of his get. Preece quickly divested her of her shift and untied the laces of his leggings. In a twinkling, he had them both unclothed and settled onto the inn bed.

Where he felt her eyes studying his form in wonder, and his likewise drank in the amazing sight of her. The tales men traded about Yune females were both falsely inflated, yet oddly true. If Moreya was any example, they were indeed markedly different from other womenfolk. He'd just never afore now knew how.

Her pubic hair was as lustrous as the hair on her head. The same violet hue, the same silky texture, and unusually long. Her pleasure jewel was more prominent than any he'd encountered. Swollen and glistening, it was nearly the size of a thumb.

Verily, this was the secret to Yunish enchantment. A man could die blissfully ensnared in such a tender trap . . . particularly as the trap lay open and welcoming.

She did not clasp her knees together, fold her arms over her breasts, or exhibit the

extreme shyness he'd been taught to expect from a virgin.

Satan's hoofprints. If she was unpure, they could not be lifemated. Drawing blood was essential to the formation of the bond. "Moreya, truly this will be your first time beneath a man?"

She nodded, hesitancy showing in her eyes this time. "But I have decided again to trust you, Preece. Placing faith in you has not been a misstep thus far. You came after me when Glaryd told you I'd be found in a dragon's lair, even though I suspect you did not fully believe it. You know what I do not. You will teach me. I do not fear learning."

He stroked his hands up her splayed thighs. Moreya sighed, relaxed, smiled with contentment even as her pointy breasts jutted upward. He stroked her pleasure center ever so lightly with a fingertip. She clawed her fingers into the bedcovers and splayed her thighs all the wider.

He did not deserve so fine a prize. His entire lifetime of plying a sword could not have earned him this bounty. But darkly, a voice whispered in the back of his mind, she was not a gift freely given in truth. Cronel would flay him alive, were he to discover what Preece did now with the Yune promised to a prince.

The realization sickened Preece anew. This beautiful, free-hearted, trusting maiden given to a pederast . . . in the fervent hopes she'd unwillingly destroy him and topple his throne. To cause such wanton devastation would have destroyed her.

Fury rose in his breast, quickened his breathing. It sprung, he sensed, from a fierce protectiveness-yet another signal that she was, in truth, the soul intended to mesh with his own. Taking her somewhere safe, far distant, claiming her as his wife and mate: not only justifiable actions, but necessary. For her welfare. For his own.

Just behind the soul's need and yearning, fed by his pique, rose a darker thrumming in his blood, heat that incited his loins and spurred him to begin kissing and caressing the willing female who whispered his sacred name.

She sprawled and rolled like some great Baltese cat. She kissed him back and reached to stroke his own flesh like some Dredonian madam.

She smiled like the veriest sweet child even as he thrust deeply into her and tore her maidenhead.

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It was nearly midnight. The inn was quiet, but for the constant patter of rain on the rooftop. Preece stood at his open chamber window. He reached out, let the rain soak his palms, then rubbed the cold water on his bare chest.

Moreya lay sleeping.

He glanced over at her with a rueful smile. She still looked vestal as a sylphlike lass, her startling erotic aspects fully hidden now beneath the covers.

He had never in his wildest imaginings dared to hope for such a lifemate. On some instinctual level, his body must have known and begun to respond from the first. Very odd, since he'd years ago dismissed the boasting of other knights who'd lain with Yune courtesans as swaggering flummery. He'd never believed there was anything truly different about one sort of woman over another, felt no spark of desire for any Yune before Moreya.

And when he'd occasionally reflected upon his life's path and acknowledged that the time drew near for him to select a mate, he'd mulled a variety of possibilities. Most always they'd been pliant, unremarkable sorts who would tolerate his surly ways and extended journeys.

He laughed aloud before he caught himself at the mental picture that had just flashed through his mind. He'd actually envisioned some fishwife sailing at his side to Ataraxia!

Moreya stirred and sat up. Obviously she'd not slumbered as deeply as he'd supposed. "You're smearing rainwater on yourself and laughing like someone moonsick. Dare I hope you are pleased with your new wife?"

He ran the towel across his torso and slid back into bed, drawing her into his arms. "I am more than pleased. I am heartened to discover Yune females truly are most beguiling. And I'm grateful I never wore the bat amulet, for I would have missed what we have shared this eve."

Moreya cocked her head with a quizzical look. "How are we beguiling? I have heard this all my years, yet my mother swore it was only some foolish myth, propagated by randy m-"

Preece clamped his mouth over hers to silence her. Aye, he could well imagine the myth had been propagated by randy men, but he was not about to explain how Yunish women differed. She was clever enough to know such an explanation would prove he had grounds for comparison. She would be angry, then, for likely she now felt as possessive as he did.

She tore her mouth free and pushed against his shoulder. "I asked what you meant."

"I meant this. I would have missed this." He let his hands move freely over her bare flesh again, and she melted beneath his touch. Quivered, trembled, sighed, and moments later quickened.

"I am glad neither of us missed that," she announced with a sleepy murmur as she settled herself against his side, sated and drowsy. Her hand reached out to gently explore his now-flaccid cock. He made a low sound of contentment, and she continued to lightly fondle him until she drifted back into slumber.

Preece let out a long breath. She was maid no longer, woman and wife in fact. She had learned about a male's erection, his conquering explorations of her physical self. She'd tasted of part of the carnal knowledge that would forever alter her. But only a part, for

he'd wed her and taken her just the once. To breach her maidenhead and "consummate" their bond, according to the instructions he'd gleaned from her friend the cleric. Preece went through the ceremony and ritual proscribed by her people to unify them in what the monk had called holy matrimony.

He must take her again and perform his own sacred rite. Share his secrets. Make her one with him. Teach her the cabalistic ritual that would forever link them as lifemates.

Chapter 11

Moreya slept far later than usual, and awakened alone in Preece's chamber. Neither occurrence seemed to surprise Glaryd, who bustled into the room shortly before noontide. "You'll need a hot bath."

Moreya grimaced and sat up, grabbing the bedclothes in modesty as Tivershem barged in right behind the maid to deliver a bathing tub and hot water. When he left the room, Glaryd went to slip the bolt on the door.

"Are you sore and regretting your foolish ways? 'Tis too late," Glaryd grumbled as Moreya got out of bed and crossed to the waiting tub. "He's blooded you, I see, the tall brute."

"He's not a brute," Moreya huffed.

"He doesn't have the look of one when he goes about bareheaded," Glaryd said with a leering grin. "Well favored is that one. I can see how he got under your skirts. Bah, I'm none to judge whom a woman lets 'twixt her thighs. Look at the ogre I've lain with and what he did to thank me."

Moreya ceased lathering her arm with the crude soap and jerked round to stare at her maid. Glaryd had rarely spoken of such matters. Nay, less than rarely. Once only, when Moreya's menses had begun. That day they spoke of womanly matters, in the simplest terms only. Moreya learned what men did to women, how babes were sprouted, that there was pain and sometimes pleasure to be had in the planting of male seed. She'd interpreted from Glaryd's words then that Glaryd had never given birth herself, but had taken pleasure and known men.

Moreya had simply assumed Glaryd was a widow, who preferred not to speak of her lost husband. But something about the look on Glaryd's face, her tone now, suggested that was not the case.

"Who, Glaryd? You have never spoken of him, but the once. I assumed he's in his grave."

"Nay, he's on his throne."

Moreya dropped the soap. Glaryd was Glacian. Moreya's mind cried out in denial against the image of six fat, beringed fingers clutching a jewel-encrusted wine goblet. 'Twas impossible!

But it fit with Glaryd's bizarre attitude that night in the royal castle, her insistence that the place was wicked-from the very throne down the ranks, even to the servants.

"King Cronel? You were his courtesan?"

"For a time, in my youth," the maid replied gruffly. "Here, let me do your hair." Moreya sat in stunned silence. As Glaryd began rinsing and lathering Moreya's hair, she

unwound her tale. She had been presented at court as a tender maid by her uncle. Her first night in the castle, guards came to her chamber and said the monarch wished audience with her.

She was taken to his bedchamber and raped.

Her uncle departed the following day amid rumors his gaming debts were now cleared. Glaryd was transplanted into special chambers, garbed like royalty, fed all the finest foods, taught by older slaves the way to cater to Cronel's unusual tastes in bedsport. For more than a year, Glaryd was his personal favorite.

Then Glacian knights cleaned out a settlement of rebels along the far northern edge of Outer Glacia, where glaciers melted into the very seas. They brought back a number of prisoners, among them a beautiful lass of twelve winters. She cowered before the fat king. She prostrated herself at his feet and began to lick them.

"I shall never forget the depravity etched onto his face then," Glaryd said, handing Moreya a bucket for rinsing the soap scum from her skin. "His prick jutted up from that throne as he watched her tongue lave his boots. He told her to remove them and his stockings, to bathe his bare toes with her tongue. Of course, she did it, quaking in terror all the while. He ejaculated on her, before every man in her village, before his council. While I and his other concubines watched in morbid fascination."

"I was ordered to see the royal surgeon the next day, and less than a week later, was auctioned to a slaver. Your father was at the Inner City marketplace and purchased me. I have been with you Fas ever since."

Glaryd motioned for Moreya to rise. She towed Moreya dry as gently as she had when Moreya was very young, and the far-off look in her eyes suggested she'd indeed gone back to those early days in her mind. Moreya was still reeling from the tale, and almost afraid to ask, but she had to know the rest now. The wound could only fester did they not pull the scab completely away.

"Why the surgeon, if you were not ailing?"

"As Cronel's mistress, there is nothing you cannot have, no bauble or velvet too ostentatious, no fare too rich for your palate. Do you want to take a footman's rod in your wetpurse, Cronel will avidly watch whilst you enjoy a good tugging. But when his capricious whim turns his eye away from you and you no longer intrigue him, you can never again know pleasure with any man. He vouchsafes this by having your nub cut away before you are sold to another."

Had she been maid still, ignorant of sensual pleasure and its origins, unschooled in a man's touch, she would likely still have been horrified. Deliberate maiming was not unknown under Glacian law, but always it was a capital punishment for some heinous crime.

Glaryd had done naught but what the king ordered.

And now that Moreya knew exactly what pleasure he'd ordered forever banned, she understood why Glaryd had not married or birthed children. Been content to quietly love Anthaal Fa all the days she had served him, her tender feelings hidden beneath a mask of servility.

Moreya was past horrified. She was hurt and furious and confused . . . and suddenly frightened. Was this what men did, use women and then abandon them so cruelly? Without human decency, without a care for how they would survive in the world?

You chose badly, Lady Warmonger. Waniands do not love.

Could Preece do something so barbaric to her?

"Glaryd, I understand now why you detest the royal castle. Had you told me, I would have-

"Wanted to leave that night or confront the king with what you knew," Glaryd interrupted. "Either would have caused you grief beyond your imaginings. I know him far better than you ever will. Dugan told me the plan has changed. Preece means to take you far away, outside Cronel's reach."

"To Ataraxia. You remember Father spoke of it? 'Tis an island realm in the warm, tropic seas many leagues to the east."

Glaryd nodded. "We must all go, and make haste, for if Cronel finds out you have betrayed him with this Waniand, he will have you slain, Moreya Fa. Do not doubt it. And cruelly misused beforehand until death comes as a mercy."

The mention of her husband's race brought back the dark question hovering in Moreya's mind. "Have you ever known anyone lifemated to a Waniand? Lockram says I erred, that Waniands do not love. Indeed, Preece has said there is no equivalent term in his native tongue for the concept of cherishing one another as we do."

"So that's the bone you're gnawing." Glaryd assisted Moreya in drying her long tresses and donning a clean kirtle. "Do not trouble yourself overmuch. Many husbands of every color and kind do not love. If he does not mistreat you, if he provides and protects, that is all you can hope for."

"Oh." The maid must have heard the disappointment in Moreya's tone, mayhap even sensed it connected to her own years of loving Anthaal in vain.

"Some change over time. I had no plan to ever give a boar's snout about that bastard in Glacia, yet I came to care, despite all my efforts to keep from it. That was the cruelest cut of all, Moreya."

"You loved Cronel? But I thought 'twas my f-

"Your father, too. In a different way. The only way left to me, as a dear and true noble friend. I have loved twice and ever lost. Guard your heart, child." She shuffled to the chamber door, then turned with a wry, sad smile. "Hardly that any longer, are you? Or

we'd not have spoken thus. Luncheon awaits you, milady, as does your new husband."

By the time Moreya ventured down the stairs, Tivershem had begun serving the midday meal. Several tavern patrons ate noisily at the crude tables dotting the taproom, but Preece and his knights were nowhere to be seen. When Moreya inquired about them, she was told they'd gone out for weapons practice and to await Sieffre's return. Moreya next sought Brother Fense and was disappointed to learn he'd departed hours before.

Her new husband burst in the tavern door. "Is my lady still-? Moreya." He crossed to where she stood, tucked her arm through his, and led her to a table off to one side. "You are well?"

She nodded, her mind swirling with a dozen unasked questions she did not dare put into words. His tunic was damp. "You're sodden. You went out for arms practice in the rain?"

"It had stopped at daybreak. I'd hope we could depart today, but it's yet too muddy to make any distance and now the skies weep again. We'll be here another night."

"Sieffre made it back safely, I trust. How's his shoulder?"

Preece turned his attention to the meat and cheese Tivershem's serving wench placed before them. "Haven't seen him yet. This accursed storm must have delayed him. But the monk's gone, so Sieffre can have his chamber when he returns. I did not send him a great distance. I'm sure he'll make it afore dusk."

But he didn't, and Moreya couldn't help but notice Preece seemed anxious. Distracted. He barely ate any of his supper and drank deeply of the wine Tivershem offered. Of course, Dugan and Lockram soaked up quite a few draughts, as well. Moreya noted Lockram and Preece seemed to keep apace of one another and she overheard talk that they'd crossed swords in the stable yard that day.

So at least part of their comradeship had been restored. Indeed, when Preece announced quietly that she was to retire with him abovestairs, he also turned to Lockram. "Summon me if Sieffre comes, whatever the hour."

"Do you fear something's happened to Sieffre?" Moreya asked as they reached the upper hall. "You seemed distracted."

"By more than Sieffre's whereabouts," Preece admitted as he slid the bolt home on his chamber door behind them. "We are not yet lifemates. I am . . . unsettled by this. Being joined in your way, but not in mine own."

Moreya took a slight step back. A shuffle only, but he noticed. "You fear me? What happened to yestereve's trust?"

She never intended to, knew it was a breach of confidence, suspected it was unwise to reveal so much, and yet couldn't stop herself from blurting out Glaryd's horrific tale of abuse and female castration.

Preece paced the length of the chamber as she digressed, slowing and coming to face her

only when Moreya had run out of words and begun to breathe too quickly and shallowly. She'd made herself overset and then some.

"This is indeed most unfortunate. That such occurred to a woman you value. I believe the tale, for I've heard foul whispers of such activities in the bastard's keep. But her timing, in revealing aught now, has only frightened you as it relates to the carnal behavior of women and men. This is why you are chary this eve."

"How can I help but be?" Moreya demanded. "Lockram says your kind cannot love."

"We have no concept like that of which your poets and minstrels speak," Preece agreed, squatting before her to take her hands in his. "Meseems that is but a flight of fancy, a sweven, to credit that one's heart can leave the corporeal body and be given unto another's keeping. Such is not Waniand."

"There is no caring, even within a family? What of your own parents, did they not love and protect you?"

"They were slain when I was yet a lad. I had no elders of my kind to teach me the ways of my bloodline. I lived with the mage, Bourke, enchanter of bat amulets."

Moreya managed a tiny smile. Preece's manner softened. "He had ancient scrolls and texts with Waniand lore. However, the texts do not address the matter of lifemating outside our own race. I know many of the remaining Waniands in Glacia and other Known Realms interbred, which is why I am so detested. I am trueblooded, which is now rare. And hated on sight-which is not."

Despite her misgivings, Moreya reached out to caress the side of his face. His ruggedly handsome face. "You know I do not share that prejudice."

"And though I do not share this understanding of the love you spoke of, I assure you it is unfair to believe we do not care about kin." He dropped her hand and rose to his feet. "I am trueblooded, a direct descendant of the great man-bear of the far northern climes. Like a bear, I have a strong will to survive, to mate, to fight and protect, to assure Waniand blood remains strong for the future."

"A bear?" Moreya choked out. She'd dismissed the half-beast rantings long ago, told herself it had all been distortion and bigoted lies. Now he'd just proclaimed himself some distant relation to a huge animal. "Do you hibernate a portion of the year?"

"Nay, that was bred out of our kind centuries ago." When he realized she stared at him with something akin to repulsion, he waved his hands in front of his body and speared her with a challenging look. "Am I not the same man who melded his flesh with yours last eve? Did you not waken this morn in my bed, sit at my side as we broke bread at noontide and nightfall? What has changed?"

Nothing.

He was right. Nothing had truly changed, except she'd been fed too much dark

knowledge too fast by those around her, who'd obviously sheltered her afore now. Afore her marriage and ascension into this . . . misery.

"Everything has changed," she snapped peevishly. "I am maiden no longer. One of our men is missing. My trusted servant has withheld the truth of her past for years, and my husband has just announced he is ursine."

"Ah, and you are upended by the discovery. As I was to find the woman entrusted into my care-who'd entered my chambers uninvited, kissed me, proclaimed me handsome, and tried to use her own bewitching beauty to bribe me-was also a beacon for firedrakes. Adjust your wits to encompass the truth. I had to."

With that, he stalked out of the chamber, leaving Moreya alone.

Chapter 12

Preece lay rigid on the bed with Moreya asleep a mere foot away from him.

He'd stalked out of his chamber in righteous choler over her words, over his own stupidity in thinking she'd accept what he revealed about his Waniand trueblood roots without qualm or distaste. He should have known better. Particularly as her maid had chosen the day after Moreya's introduction to bedding to reveal such a foul and terrifying secret.

What female would not be afraid of the man she'd let sheathe himself within her after being told such an awful history?

He understood that Moreya was overwrought. He'd tried to speak calmly and slowly, yet somehow everything had come out wrong and only added to her distress and distrust.

And reading it in her eyes was more than he could stomach.

So he'd sulked, visited his tahr, had a tankard or two with Lockram and poured Dugan into bed, then given up the pretense of avoidance and returned to his chamber.

At least Moreya hadn't bolted his door.

But now, lying nude beside her, wanting her to understand and interact with him in unspeakable ways . . . *necessary* ways . . . ah, this was torture, worse than that he'd suffered in a Krymore dungeon. At least when he'd been a war prisoner, he'd known his comrades might save him.

Now only one person could stop the torment, and he'd no assurance that easing his burning lust would soon be part of her plans.

He was fully in rut. The scent of her fear and the underlying sexual desire she'd tried to cloak had driven him beyond his ability to control his rising blood.

His skin was clammy, his manhood rigid and ready, his sac heavy and aching with the need to empty his seed. He should have anticipated his cycle might arrive early-after all, he'd been aroused enough to mount Moreya the eve before. He'd been partially bestirred all day remember their coitus. Weapons practice and a long run in the sleeting rain hadn't eased the mounting heat in his loins. But he'd embraced it, planning that this night he would perform the ritual.

Yet he could not unless Moreya gave a sign of willingness.

A warrior did not impress his lifemate into the union. To do so-to commit what she had called rape, whereby a male forced his rod into an unwilling female-was condemned by Waniand code. He had never taken any female against her will, even during past ruts, when he'd copulated like a dog with any bitch who bent over before him.

They showed him their buttocks and damp slits eagerly enough. He had never coerced or brutally demanded coitus with them.

And willingness was more crucial now, for he'd not been entirely forthright in his explanations thus far to Moreya. While the written records of his ancient race did not directly instruct or address the matter of mating with other humans, Bourke had verbally cautioned him that females not of Waniand blood themselves sometimes balked in the end and refused to complete the ritual.

No fruit usually resulted from such unions. And in some instances, a terrible sickness had taken root instead. In order to live and procreate united with Moreya in his ways, she must embrace him and all that he was: warrior, bear-male, protector, implanter of get. She must desire his flesh, seek to know his mind, meld with his soul, willingly draw his blood.

Moreya abruptly rolled over and tossed an arm across his belly. His cock leapt up and thumped back against him; Preece groaned aloud in misery.

Her arm was like a hot brand searing already livid, quivering flesh.

"Moreya, move over. Do not touch me. I am . . . unwell."

She stirred, pressed the flat of her palm over his navel and jerked upright, tearing the covers away. "For pity's sake, you're burning with fever! Why did you not awaken me if you were ill? I'll fetch Glaryd and have her bring a basin and cloth."

"Nay! It won't help. Not ill, as you know it. In rut."

She scrambled from the bed and threw open the casement window. Preece closed his eyes as a damp coolness swept over his naked flesh. It assuaged his agony some. But not enough.

He gritted his teeth. "I was uncharitable earlier this eve. I should not have spoken thus when you were obviously distressed. I frightened you. Mayhap even now, even worse. I am a beast. Here is your proof."

He knew what he looked like: every muscle tensed, his manhood straining, sac nigh to bursting with fullness, eyes wild.

"Nay, you are still the Warmonger, expecting hate and derision so much you defend even before attacked. I was . . . disconcerted." She returned to the bed, reaching out to lay both palms against his bare chest. His nipples instantly beaded, his cock burned all the worse, but he forced himself to remain absolutely still.

Everything depended upon what she said and did next.

He held his breath.

She began to slowly rub his flesh, easing the cramping in his upper abdomen, working her way lower, until the fiercely tight band gripping his belly began to release its vicious hold.

Preece was too stunned to move now.

He'd suffered through occasional bouts like this, when his season had befallen him whilst in some remote barren locale, with no females nearby to ease his loins. At such times, he'd stiffened like a fool with the sinew-stretching disease. His body had drawn tight as a bowstring and there was no salvation except to bring himself to climax with his hands.

He had never known female hands, for as soon as he sniffed out an available wench, he'd quickly divested her of her garments and set to mindlessly thrusting within her. So he'd never yet discovered this strange sensation of warmth and uncoiling. Of still being ready, yet being able to abide and enjoy the caress of fingers stroking his flesh.

As he'd stroked hers the night before.

As if her concern for his ailment had pushed chary fears from her mind. He glanced up at Moreya's face. She frowned slightly, worked his belly with longer, wider strokes, until he could not hold back deep growls of sensual enjoyment. "This is better?"

Satan's own prick, how could he explain how very much better? The terrible fear and anguish was gone. She still found him easy to gaze upon. She willingly caressed his body. It was the sign he'd desperately needed. He wanted to weep with relief, to seize her in his grasp and roll her onto her hands and knees, rut until daybreak and beyond.

Instead he opened his eyes and spoke to her soul.

"You must not fear me again, Moreya. Ever. To cause harm to befall one's lifemate is the ultimate betrayal of our code. Always I must place your life and welfare, and that of our future children, above mine own. You must be willing to defend me just as fiercely. You must want me like this-" he gestured toward his erect and pulsing cock, "beyond rational thought, with bone and heartbeat and breath."

"Aye." It was the tiniest whisper, and the room was dark but for the faint glow Preece ever detected around her. He stared into her eyes. Had he never really looked deeply into them before, never noticed the loneliness in their purple depths, never read the secret longing there? She felt profoundly alone, unique because of the dragons-a cruelty had it been, to harshly remind her of them-and she reached out, pleading for communion with a human who forgave and understood. Who accepted.

As did he.

She needed the very union he alone could give her.

He gathered her into his arms and exhaled sharply as she eagerly puddled over and around him, enmeshing him in her arms and long tresses. "Moreya, hearken," he breathed into her ear. "Lifemates are bound closer than husbands and wives. We will be one in flesh, one in spirit, two halves of a fearsome whole that can surmount any obstacle, face any challenge. Cows and dragons will not matter. The world beyond that door does not matter."

He knew she'd begun to silently weep. He also sensed it was not out of fear or pain, but

liberation. "Mate with me. Repeat the words I tell you now as you taste of me, and again as I take you. Tell me this is what you want, to mate with me."

It *was* what she wanted, Moreya realized with a shock.

Somehow, lying there naked and suffering, his limited words and the expression in his eyes had given her the reassurance she needed. The bond he spoke of truly was forever, with no legal dissolution or nullification possible. He would never look upon some newcomer with lust and cast Moreya aside. He would join his fierce strength and protectiveness with her, tempering her penchant for speaking too boldly, unleashing her need to act out passionate desires and challenge her natural curiosity.

They had been very good together last night. It was the fear she might lose that, never taste of it again, that had most distressed her. To lose Preece after knowing him so intimately, after coming apart between his strong hands, after soaring aloft to heights beyond any dragon's lair-she could not have borne that.

"I want to mate with you."

He shifted on the mattress, guided her around to kneel in front of him. Then she was on all fours, gasping as his tongue trailed wetly over her left buttock. One powerful arm crossed under her stomach, anchoring her. The other hand cupped one of her breasts, kneaded and teased, and Moreya could feel his shaft sliding along the length of her cleft, taunting her.

She moaned as he guided her to open, to arch back, to beg him to fill her.

Then he did, and Moreya would have shattered if he hadn't anchored her in place with that sword arm of his.

The ecstasy was immediate, gratifying yet spiraling, burgeoning, expanding until she imagined their combined need encompassed the heavens and all its sparkling stars. She rocked, he moaned. He grunted and thrust, she sobbed and writhed. She whimpered and keened until she feared she'd wake the sleeping dragons and one might attempt to fly in their open chamber window.

Then he spilled himself within her.

She repeated his sacred name, the sacred words he'd given her, whose meaning she did not know. He withdrew, still throbbing, still fully in rut, and commanded her to remain as she was.

Prostrate and benumbed.

He rummaged in his pack and padded back to the bed with his razor in his hand. "Place your left hand atop mine," he whispered. "You must guide my stroke, for I am forbidden to look. Trust is everything. You may slay me, do you misguide the blade. But you will not. You will only slice me, the barest cut. And then catch a droplet of my blood upon your tongue."

Moreya stirred slightly, enough to gaze up into his face. "You said you would reveal the mysteries. This is the rite that makes us lifemates?"

"Yes. Will you draw my blood?"

"It is required to form the bond?" He nodded. "And if I would refuse to hurt you?"

He sat on the mattress. "Long ago the warriors of our clans were much more animalistic than today. Over time the elders realized nature had designed inequity between the genders. A woman is much bloodied in mating and childbearing. She voids blood in cycles like the phases of the moons. Yet there was never bloodletting or pain for men."

Moreya shrugged. "It is so for all human races."

"But with the disparity in their the bonding, males did not feel compelled to defend their mates or offspring. Females alone could not always protect and defend as well as provide sustenance. The Wise Ones devised rituals that unite us more fairly. Now it is Waniand code that both male and female must shed blood. Both are present during birthing and rearing of children. Only by adherence to the rituals can our race survive. I am trueblooded because both my parents were Waniand blood. My get will not be truebloods. They will be part Yune and part Glacian, as you are. But I would rear them in the ancient ways."

Moreya could feel an odd tingling in her nipples, a warm spreading throughout her body. "You see the effect of the bond?" he asked quietly. "To speak of such things already has the ability to arouse your flesh. You have only to guide my hand and apply your lips to the cut. It is quick. Painless. How many times have I known the bite of bigger blades? I cannot count them. You will not harm me, but give me joy. I wish to share my blood with you."

She moaned and fell back onto the mattress. She felt as though his hands were everywhere, teasing and inciting her to wickedness. Delightful pleasure. "I'm not certain I can hold . . . steady," she panted, flushing.

"Ah."

He skillfully used his mouth on her breasts to bring her to a climax. As soon as her breathing slowed, he stood before her, eyes closed. He extended his arm, his razor firmly clutched in his fingers, and whispered for her to place her hand on his.

She did, and watched in horrified fascination as together they nicked his manhood low near its base. Moreya did not even think. She leaned forward to suck at the redness even as it formed before her eyes. A moment later, Preece had pulled her into a passionate embrace and fiery kiss.

Before she'd caught her breath, he turned her within his arms, bent her over the edge of the bed and thrust himself deep within her once more.

"Say the words I taught you. You must speak the phrase and my sacred name now."

"Yes, Kaelan." The mystical phrase came to her mind effortlessly.

How many times and ways they joined that night, Moreya could not remember by the time she finally collapsed onto her pillow. She was utterly exhausted, sore in places she wouldn't mention even to Glaryd, and reveling in a newfound sense of peace and power.

Lifemated to a Waniand.

It was more exhilarating than soaring with dragons.

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She was roused by loud rapping at their door. "Preece!" It was Lockram's voice and fist. "Sieffre's back. He says the roadway is passable, though slogged yet. We should depart."

Moreya glanced around in confusion. She was alone. Preece unbolted the door and exited into the hallway. He'd been fully dressed, left without so much as a glance over his shoulder.

He's worried .

Odd how she knew that without hearing him say a word, without seeing his face. But as she sat upright and discovered the tenderness between her legs, everything came back to her. The way he'd mounted her repeatedly in the rear-entry way of a forest animal. The intense, unbelievable pleasure. His hands on her dangling breasts, thick sac softly thudding against the sensitive flesh of her nether parts, penetration so deep and total, he'd plumbed to her very soul.

Gasping, Moreya fell against the pillows, overtaken yet again by a swift, sweet climax. Merely from reliving memories of their lifemating! Lord of all Lords, she'd never imagined anything like this.

And if she'd harbored the tiniest lingering doubt she'd made the right choice in accepting Preece's offer to sail away from Greensward instead of wedding its prince regent, she doubted no more. Velansare would never have given her a tenth of the pleasure she wallowed in now.

And the thought of what else Preece would give her, children spawned by such intense couplings

"You cannot lay abed all day entertaining such wicked thoughts," came a deep voice as Preece suddenly returned. He grinned at her and slammed the chamber door shut behind him. "I nearly embarrassed myself out in the stable and was hobbled until I realized the source of my problem. My lifemate is yet in need of another good bedding."

He grinned. He stripped. Oh Good Creator, how she did love the sight of him. And the feel of him inside her, deep and throbbing.

But he did not tarry. He withdrew from her damp body and poured water from a pitcher into a basin. "No tub today, so wash quickly and have your maid help you pack. We

leave for Zankarat within the hour. Sieffre and Dugan are preparing the pack horses. Lockram's belowstairs jesting at my . . . attentiveness."

Moreya had the grace to blush.

"Are you-oh, how foolish of me, of course, you would not know. You never lifemated before. So how long does your-I mean, how long will you be able to-"

"Tonight with certainty. Mayhap several more nights. But I will try to control my lust 'ere I cripple my sweet lifemate with my excesses." He'd donned his garments once more, and now crossed to the bed, pulling Moreya up and out of it, into his embrace.

"You are sweet. A little purple jewel, all glister and warmth, which tastes like the veriest fruits of high summer. If your spigots truly gave the juice they remind me of, we could bottle it and monger it as potent Yune wine."

Moreya suspected she might have fainted, had he not been holding her close. Preece had both jested and offered a flowery tribute to her. Like some poet or jongleur.

He was different today.

As she herself was, she reflected after he left her to dress and pack her things. Mayhap they would each take on part of the other's qualities. In which case, it might be possible for Preece to one day understand and feel affection, just as she did.

There was a notion, she considered again, as the long day of traveling dragged on with one frustrating problem after the another.

Preece normally would have cursed and broken something by now. He was churlish and abrupt as ever, but his voice seemed a little softer. Or maybe it was her own foolish imagination that she read warmth and something undefinable in his eyes when he happened to glance her way.

She turned her attention back to straightening her skirts and returned to the coach. Everyone had rested long enough. They were sorely behind schedule.

Lockram's mount had balked and behaved oddly until they discovered a pebble under his saddle. Sieffre had become confused and pointed out the wrong fork in the road, costing them over an hour as they backtracked. Then the young knight had collapsed and slid from his saddle into a puddle of mud.

Preece at last gave up and declared they'd camp out of doors that night and press on in the morning. Glaryd tended Sieffre while Lockram and Dugan built a small fire. Moreya studied Preece's grim face when he approached the coach. As usual, she dared not leave it to risk joining the others at the campfire. Not until it was full dark.

"Lockram and I were nigh fed up with all this foolery today. Either of us might have bashed Sieffre in the skull. His faint saved us the effort."

"That's unkind, Preece. You know he was wounded. You should have sent one of the others to bargain for our passage. Sieffre rode in poor weather and has likely overtaxed

himself."

"The lad rode on a simple errand, to deliver a message and hie back. Dugan is too easily tempted by ale kegs to entrust such a task to him. If we encountered another ambush, I wanted Lockram's blade at the ready. Mayhap I should have gone myself, but I was not wont to leave you. And you knew it, preyed upon my weakness, and wed me."

He'd all but growled his words, yet it was a sweet confession. She smiled. "You'll join me in the coach?"

"Not initially. I'm taking first watch. Later." His arm shot out and wrapped around her waist, pulling her close against him. "But don't expect me to mount you again."

Her eyes widened. "Done already? But you said-"

"I can and I would, but I watched you back behind the trees. You're wincing and sore, and too stubborn to admit as much."

"But I must learn to cope with a rutting warrior, must I not? You will have several seasons each year. I must become accustomed to them."

"In time. Tonight I'll share with you different pleasures."

Those last words kept her awake, waiting in the darkness, clad only in her thinnest shift. It seemed forever before she felt the coach shift as someone mounted its steps and a faint rap sounded against the door. "Moreya."

She admitted her husband and lifemate, shivered with anticipation as he undressed himself and peeled away her gown, kissed him with fervor when his lips sought hers.

Hours later he lay asleep beside her on the floor of the coach and Moreya was still reeling from his demonstrations of what he could do with those angelic lips and that devilish tongue of his. She'd protested at one point that she was certain she would die of pleasure if he suckled a moment longer on her nipples.

He replied that it also was part of his duty, another sacred ritual. He must work to prepare her body for childbearing. He would frequently stretch her nipples and suckle, massage her stomach muscles, stroke intimately between her legs.

Then he said the strangest thing.

That he was fascinated by the fur growing there. "Do not all women grown have a thatch of hair at the top of their thighs?" she asked.

"Aye, but the texture is much different. Coiled and not nearly so soft. Yours is like a luxurious pelt. As rich and shiny as the tresses growing from your scalp. And this is different, he informed her, pressing slightly at her most sensitive flesh. "Your pleasure seems heightened due to its increased size."

"How many have you measured?" she demanded, peevish of a sudden.

"You see what I meant about faithlessness?" he whispered, sliding his bare body against

hers. "You grow jealous at the thought of me gazing upon the attributes of other females. I warned you I'd not abide you speculating about other men."

"I am not jealous," she argued. "Merely curious. How can you be certain I'm formed any differently than-"

"Trust me, lifemate. Indeed you are. And no dead bat's hindquarters could have spared me from being enraptured once I discovered it. 'Tis still hard to accept that I could have won and wed a Yune," he yawned.

"Or that I'm married to the Royal Blade, the dark knight who never let himself be seen without his cowl because he was so horribly misshapen and ugly." She laughed and snuggled against his chest. His broad, smooth, perfectly wonderful chest. "If only my father could see me now."

But Preece did not hear her jest, for he was dead asleep.

She awakened hours later to find the camp stirring, the sun up, and preparations underway for the final trek to Zankarat.

She felt a welcome mix of nervous apprehension and excitement at the thought of what awaited them there: the harbor, crew, and the vessel that would sail them Ataraxia to begin their new life.

Her life in the sun.

Chapter 13

Moreya had barely spoken to Preece the rest of the day. She didn't need an explanation for that. He'd already given her one. He was trying to rein in his constant lust and likely avoided her deliberately. He'd pushed them at a relentless pace in an attempt to make up for time they'd lost yesterday. Finally they'd made the port town of Zankarat in the late afternoon.

They boarded the vessel purchased with her terrestar. It was not large, but seemed seaworthy-though, in truth, Moreya had no criteria on which to judge a ship's merit. She'd never seen the ocean afore today. It was awesomely vast.

Preece had instructed Sieffre to hire a man known by reputation as a decent captain, and he, in turn, hired a crew. Zarankat bustled with activity. Everywhere Moreya looked were seafarers and merchants, wainwrights, carpenters, wagons and carts.

Once the tide turned at midday on the morrow, the ship would set sail across the Great Seas, making for the warm waters and shining sand of Ataraxia.

For tonight, though, Moreya was restless. She'd left a single candle burning in the master's cabin, where she and Preece would reside until reaching the distant shores. She'd raided her bridal trunks, wearied as she'd become of donning the same few traveling shifts and gowns.

And she was a new bride, in truth, though not the royal princess her new garments had been designed for. Still, she wanted to witness Preece's reaction to her wearing a more traditional Yune design. This was something her own mother might have worn.

Preece stepped inside the cabin and froze. His gaze swept her length, then slowly rose. "You'll not wear that again until we reach Ataraxia. If you've others so fine and similarly sewn, leave them in your trunks. Every man aboard will fall prey to your attraction in such garb. If you force me to slay the crew, who'll sail this damned tub?"

She would have laughed if he'd smiled. His talk of mayhem was no jest.

"Preece, you are horrid. I wore this to please you, yet you mislike it."

"*Kaelan*," he corrected softly. "I do like the gown. Too well. I can view your every treasure right through the cloth." He moved forward, staring at her breasts, which began to ache and tingle.

Moreya felt a surge of dampness between her thighs. She'd worn the filmy gown hoping to arouse Preece, but she was aroused, as well. As if he'd kissed and caressed her instead of staring at her and chastising her. How odd.

She reached up and released the tie at her shoulder. The gown dropped to the floor. Preece blew out a breath to extinguish the candle, swept her into his arms and deposited her on the bunk. He stripped away his garments and joined her. She sensed his hunger

and need, his struggle to control them, the moment he correctly read her willing capitulation and he surrendered control.

She knew the heated looks he gave her, the way he did not speak in words, but immediately kissed and held her when they were again alone stemmed from the fact he was in rut. She also knew his cycle could not last more than another few days. She hated wasting even an hour of precious time.

She yearned for him to plant a child within her. She had ever wanted a family, but this was not the same desire at all. This was an imperative, which she realized had come from Preece himself. He'd told her more than once that Waniands lived mainly to procreate.

So she had been altered with the formation of their lifebond, become attuned to the arcane ways of Waniands.

And yet she also accepted that she had come to love him in the way of Yunes.

Did he now understand her without words, too? Did he know she harbored such a powerful, tender feeling? He'd had a savage mistrust of marriage and she'd fretted that he would never accept her vows as Of course he wouldn't. She regarded her vows as sacrosanct. To break faith in her pledge would be to break faith with the Creator Himself. She would never think of committing such a sin.

But she now understood that in the Waniand code, thought was immaterial.

As if reacting to her troubled musings, Preece murmured in his sleep and curled his naked body around hers protectively.

She settled close against his heartbeat, let herself be lulled into drowsiness by it, and told herself to be patient. As her father had oft repeated, time helped in coming to an understanding of other customs and ways. One taste of Waniand blood and one archaic ritual did not make her any less Glacian or Yune. They had the rest of their natural lives to learn a feasible way to accommodate their cultural differences. An ambassador's daughter should find it easier than most.

" *Moreya* ."

Her name was spoken in the merest hiss. Her ears barely caught the sound, but her mind had already sensed urgency and struggled to consciousness. She opened her eyes. The cabin was flooded with daylight and Preece approached the door, still naked, but his broadsword hilt was gripped tightly in his hand.

A commotion of some kind had broken out on the decks above their heads.

"What is it?"

The door crashed open before Preece reached it. Guards armed with swords and lances surged into the doorway. "Preece the Warmonger, you are under arrest by joint order of Queen Vela and King Cronel of Glacia. The charge is treason. Lady Fa Yune, you are to

be taken into custody until the royal tribunal."

Preece relinquished his weapon. "She's innocent of any wrongdoing. I abducted her. You saw my glaive. I locked her in the cabin and forced her into my bed. I am in rutting season." The men glanced at his swollen erection. "Lady Fa Yune gave herself to me under duress."

Moreya dragged the sheet up to cover herself. "Nay, I came willingly. We are man and wife."

Preece spoke to the soldier brandishing the warrant. "I would speak to your queen's chancellor or reeve. I have that right under the laws of the either realm. Take me to whomever can get a message to Queen Vela."

Moreya realized she'd heard Preece tell a deliberate falsehood. Apparently Waniands were able to speak mistruths, after all. Too bad he'd wasted his breath with this one. She would not allow him to lie to protect her.

"You'll be given a chance to speak at the tribunal," the guard answered. Preece and Moreya hurriedly dressed. "The queen and prince regent arrive tomorrow. King Cronel is en route even as we speak. Take them," he barked at two of his comrades.

As Moreya passed the guard and started up the steps to the main deck, she heard the soldier grumble, "I hope for your sake you are not truly wed to this traitor. You're accounted to be the future bride of Prince Velansare."

Moreya did not bother to turn around. "Why don't you wed him in my place? He'd much prefer you, anyway."

A snicker rippled across the deck. Moreya stayed behind Preece and kept her eyes averted. They fell into step with Lockram and Dugan, then passed rough-looking sailors, more soldiers, and the inevitable curious gawkers gathered near Zankarat's docks. Preece halted. So abruptly Moreya nearly plowed into his back.

Sieffre stood beside a contingent of guards in the royal purple of Cronel's court. While the king himself had not yet arrived in Greensward, his troops preceded him and had already seized the young knight. Moreya had hoped he might escape, for he alone had not been sleeping aboard the vessel. He'd been left at the stables with Preece's tahr and the horses. He was to help load them onto the ship later that morning.

"They found Sieffre," she whispered. Preece did not react.

Then Sieffre pointed at them. "That tall one with the white hair. He is Preece the Warmonger, a known mercenary in the employ of King Cronel. He was ordered to deliver the Yune to the Greensward Palace for her marriage. But once we reached Dredonia, he instructed me to come here and secure a ship. He claimed the Yune for himself and means to take her to a far-off land. She agreed to go, rather than wed your prince."

"You baseborn clump of dung!" Lockram spat. A guard silenced him with a blow to his belly. Dugan swayed on his feet and frowned as if he couldn't quite put matters to rights in his mind. Moreya couldn't blame him. She wished she did not understand, but it was clear to her that Sieffre had betrayed them.

After she'd defended him to Preece, insisting he'd been weakened by his shoulder injury. She realized now he'd feigned the weakness and his irritating bumbling had been staged to create delays. Similar to his two-day delay in returning to Tivershem's.

He'd purposely slowed their progress so they'd still be in port when Cronel's guards arrived.

Another pair of guards marched up, Glaryd held fast between them. Moreya started to reassure the older woman, but held her tongue. If a murderous glower could fell a man, young Sieffre would already lie bleeding to death. Glaryd had never given anyone a look so unforgiving. As they were hustled forward into a waiting wagon, Moreya saw that Glaryd kept her eyes fastened on the traitor. The lad she'd fussed over and tended. The lad who would repay that kindness by watching them hang before the week was out.

Unless Preece got his audience with Queen Vela's advisors and somehow worked a miracle. Just what message he thought could salvage the situation, Moreya could not guess. Mayhap he would elaborate on his fabricated tale of abduction. A hostage-taking might bring leniency for the women, but it would condemn Preece and the men. Lockram and Dugan would be denounced as accomplices. The monarchs would say the knights could have ridden off when Preece declared his intention to take Moreya away. They could have done as Sieffre did, and saved themselves. But they'd chosen to support Preece.

Who had indeed married Moreya, made her his Waniand lifemate.

They'd all known the tremendous risk, yet Moreya had never accepted the possibility that the span of their "lifetime" bond truly could be so short.

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Moreya paced to the small window of her chamber again and peered out.

A grisly scene greeted her eyes. Carpenters had erected a huge platform stage, complete with a large chopping block. Now they were hammering wooden steps in place at two corners. One near the dais they'd built to elevate a trio of high-backed chairs, the other at the diagonally opposite end of the rectangular platform.

She'd been locked in this room for two days. She had not been allowed to see the others, had merely been told that Glaryd was in the room next to hers, the men in similar cells on the floor somewhere below this one. Her repeated requests to see or speak to her husband were flatly denied.

A rap sounded at the door. Moreya did not bother turning to face it. She had no appetite. "Take the food away. I'm not hungry."

"I've got fresh water and towels, milady. You must need to bathe and refresh yourself."

Before she could answer, the door swung open. An elderly woman shuffled in. The poor thing moved stiffly, as though each halting step pained her. Moreya glared at the male guard who stood with his back against the open door. "Send my own maid. This poor woman has bad joints. My maid can help me bathe."

"Nay, I wished to serve you, milady," the old servant asserted. Bony fingers shook slightly as she laid out towels and fumbled for a crust of hard soap from one pocket of her faded kirtle.

Moreya closed her eyes against the sight. Everything she'd ever heard about King Cronel's brutishness must be true. He allowed this pathetic crone to spend her days climbing stairs, lifting, scrubbing. Or mayhap no one younger and more capable had been willing to attend a Yune traitor to the crown.

A Yune who'd copulated with a Waniand.

Oh, Moreya had heard every bit of the crude talk and wicked speculation.

She only now fully comprehended how ridiculous it was. The tales spanned all measure of depravity: stories of her husband forcing her to mate with his tahr while he watched, reports he transmuted into such a beast himself whilst rutting, or murmurs of unholy demon worship. One guardsman was sure that Waniand men could not spill their seed unless fed honey beneath the light of the fifth moon. Just where this fellow believed Moreya had found a hive in the Dredonian wastelands wasn't clear.

But that Moreya was a pariah was abundantly so.

From the moment of their arrest at the harbor, the people of Greensward had gathered in throngs to stare at her. Should she gaze directly at them, they invariably gasped in horror and made a gesture warding off evil. On the brief journey from the harbor town of Zankarat to whatever city this was, Moreya had seen dozens of villagers lining the streets and square, murmuring and shaking their heads.

She might have been a captive firedrake for the morbid curiosity she inspired.

While Preece provoked a mixture of hatred and envy-from the men. He aroused a different sort of interest from the women.

Moreya had oft wondered how other females would react to the sight of him without his cowl. Now she knew, and didn't care for it one whit. Had they not been planning to leave this realm, she would have wished to, after what she'd witnessed. Too many women gave her husband looks of sly invitation.

"Welladay, has it ever been," came a voice intruding into Moreya's thoughts. "A dairyman's wife stripped her bosom bare and bade him sample her charms when he was but a callow stripling who'd barely reached ten and three winters. I knew then he would ever draw wenches like jackals to fresh meat."

Moreya whipped around in confusion. A man had spoken, but the guard had left and bolted the door behind him. There was no one left in the chamber but the old serving woman . . .

Who straightened her spine, fluttered for an instant like a hopping pigeon, and became a wizened old man with a flowing white beard and glinting malachite eyes.

"Who-what h-happened?"

A gnarled finger rose to his lips. "Unclothe yourself and get into the tub, Lady Preece. We will speak, but should they spy-and they will, rest assured-they must see what we wish them to see. A noblewoman at her bath with a clumsy old chambermaid."

"You are not a woman, though. Now." Moreya frowned at him. He looked well pleased. One might even say amused. "You can make them see you as one, though- can you not?"

"I can make myself look like any object I wish. For a time. Altering my physical appearance is my most useful power yet remaining. I had others, long ago, which are mostly faded now. Your bath, mistress," he reminded.

Moreya glanced over at him to chastise him for watching as she'd begun disrobing.

He was gone. The chamber was empty.

"Proof they detain my body, but not my mind. My wits must have deserted me, for I've begun speaking to myself," she muttered. But as soon as she sank into the water, a ewer rose from the floor, tipped over her tub and poured a fragrant oil into the bathwater. The pitcher returned to the plank floor, stretched and grew from a modest pewter ewer into a long gray robe. The sorcerer's arms popped from its sleeves. His beard slithered out of the neckline, followed by his smiling face with its sharp green eyes.

Not a dream or some bizarre quirk of her imagining.

Her skin was wet. She could smell the odd scent he'd added to her water. Something like night blooming starpine. She snatched a cloth to press against her bare breasts and recalled his earlier comment.

"A woman sought to bed Preece when he was but a child?"

"Not *a* woman. *Many*. The males of other races seek to frighten their women with warped tales of monsters and bestiality. However, our Waniand has the visage of a hallowed saint and the lithe body of a trained warrior. Whispers of mysterious evil do not make women fear Preece. To the contrary. What woman doesn't secretly long to either corrupt a pious mortal man or be corrupted herself by a handsome devil?"

Despite herself, Moreya had to laugh. "Neither will happen."

"Nay. The wiliest of females gained but a brief hour of mindless copulation and were promptly forgotten evermore. But not you."

She began to bathe herself, as if doing so before a total stranger was the most natural

thing in the world. "You are the wizard he told me about."

"Bourke, at your service, my lady," the elder said with a grand wave of one gnarled hand. "I raised him from a toddling youth. He was only a few summers when his parents were slaughtered. Somehow he escaped their attackers and made his way into Ambrill Forest. I found him wandering there, dirty, frightened, yet determined to avenge his parents. He was sharpening tree branches into spears."

"Why have you come to me? Is Preece . . .?" She rose to her knees, heedless of her nudity or the water that splashed from the tub. "Nay, I would know if he'd died. But I know the guards punish him. I have felt deep pain. How badly have they hurt him?"

The wizard leaned closer, peering into her eyes, and Moreya was frozen. "He must not die here. He has not yet fulfilled his destiny. That is why I've come. Preece's life cannot end in this place or time. You can help me guide him to what yet awaits."

Moreya had the very discomfoting feeling the mage already knew exactly when and where Preece's life would be forfeit. Her own, as well. But he revealed nothing. His eyes had clouded from shining green to the murk of a mist-shrouded glen. She found no answers in them, only more questions. "How can I help? They refuse to let me see him. I'm not even allowed attendance by my own maid. She's been taken prisoner also, each of us to separate quarters."

"Preece has told me of your rare gift."

Oh, Good Creator! Moreya became instantly indignant. "Do you suppose I've not fretted for hours, trying to think of a way I might use it? I've watched them building the platform." She gestured toward the window. "Yes, it is out in the open, but this is a city. There cannot be dragon lairs close by. Even if-" She shook her head and wiped the soap lather from her face with a cloth. "Even did they swarm, 'twould be disastrous. Untold people might be slain or injured, and I cannot bid the beasts carry Preece to safety."

"Can you not? Even if one of the flock only *appeared* to be a firedrake?"

Moreya gasped audibly. "Can you?" Of course he could. She'd seen what he could do. "But we must plan how you are to save him. Don't worry over me. The firedrakes do not harm me. But-"

"'Tis dangerous to plan further now," the wizard whispered. "Listen to the sighing of the night wind. Know always the walls have ears."

Moreya looked up from rinsing herself. Once again the chamber appeared empty.

Yet she somehow knew the sorcerer planned to be in place when the tribunal commenced. A public execution would be held on the morrow, no matter the polite lies the guards fed Moreya. She knew more about Cronel than they probably did, knew of his utter ruthlessness. He'd not tolerate failure, let alone outright defiance. The knights would pay with their lives. She and Glaryd might be condemned also.

If the fat bastard even recognized Glaryd, recalled what he'd done years ago.

Moreya did not take to her bed until past midnight. It was no struggle to maintain a vigil in the darkness, for in truth, she'd had difficulty sleeping without Preece beside her. Feeling his almost palpable distress, the sorrow of separation and failure. Their bright hopes for a future had been extinguished like the flame of a tallow candle, leaving naught but dissolving smoke and cold.

She waited by her window, unmoving. Listening and waiting until at last the darkling air shifted and swirled. It lifted tendrils of her hair and then was gone, the night once more still and solemn.

Dragons.

In her mind's eye came a vision. A nest clung high in a forest canopy, not many leagues from where she stood. She could almost smell traces of sulfur and spoor.

Dragons were near enough.

The rest was up to her.

Chapter 14

The next day dawned bright and crisp. Entirely too fine a day for public beheadings. Yet that was what the populace had come to see.

Moreya and Glaryd were the last prisoners to be escorted through the crowds to the tribunal platform. Moreya reached the top of the stairs and froze. She should not have been shocked, but she was. The trio of knights stood shackled one to another before the raised dais. Dugan was barefoot, his clothes bloody. Lockram's face was a mass of mottled bruises. He held one shoulder higher than the other in an unnatural stance. Moreya realized his shoulder had probably been dislocated-deliberately.

She turned her gaze to Preece.

The most well-favored man she'd ever met was unrecognizable now. His right eye had blackened and swollen completely shut. His lips were split. Blood caked his left ear and the side of his throat. He hunched and seemed to pant. The guards had broken his ribs, and likely done other damage too awful to speculate upon. She'd felt much of it and closed her mind against the knowledge.

She was rudely shaken out of her reverie by a soldier who ordered her to focus on the dais.

Utter contempt etched Cronel's features. He nodded to her in silent acknowledgment, wearing a sneering grin. Six grotesque, bejeweled fingers waved in the bright sun as he raised his right hand for silence.

The crowd immediately hushed.

"Lady Fa," he intoned, glancing at the other monarchs, seated to his left. "You will look upon the prisoners and confirm that these are the men I charged with seeing you through Dredonia to Greensward Palace."

Moreya could barely force herself to glance again at the battered trio. Preece's good eye caught the sweep of her gaze and held it for a brief instant.

Save yourself.

She heard the words in her mind as clearly as if he'd spoken them aloud. Shouted them. The intensity made her gasp. She could not doubt his sincerity. She felt the power of his stubborn determination like a blow. He seemed to stand a bit straighter, but Moreya was not fooled by the ploy. She did not look at him now, but at Cronel.

"I cannot answer with certainty, Sire. These men are dressed in pauper's rags and are unkempt and filthy."

The young man seated at the far end of the dais laughed aloud. "Perhaps the lady thinks we should garb traitors in satin and velvet."

He could only be Velansare.

One look and Moreya detested him.

She'd had weeks to form a mental image of the prince regent. Naturally, he would be soft and spoiled and pompous. In the flesh, he was all those things. She'd heard the men speak of his "preferences," and had expected from their derision that she'd know by his manner of speech or gestures that he desired to mate with other males. She saw that assumption had been wrong.

It was unlikely Velansare felt desire for any person, heedless of gender. He was far too fond of himself.

"My point, Your Highness," she said to Cronel, pointedly ignoring the younger ruler's outburst, "is that these could be any three prisoners from any dungeon in Greensward. They could be common thieves, or drunken sailors off the last vessel to put into port in Zarankat. I was never permitted to see the other prisoners during our confinement. I cannot attest that these men are indeed the knights who-

"The *un* common thieves who thought to steal my bride from under my very nose?" the prince demanded. He flung a hand toward the nearest guard. "Clean them up."

Soldiers produced buckets and unceremoniously tossed water over the shackled knights. A guard stepped forward to jerk Preece's locks back from his brow and face, which Moreya saw was more bruised than she'd realized. Preece stood unmoving, as if hewn of stone.

The prince regent nodded. "That tall one is unmistakably Waniand. Do you dispute his identity now?"

Moreya held her tongue, noting the woman on the dais scrutinized the prisoners before her. Queen Vela had dull reddish hair, beady eyes, painfully gaudy taste in gowns, and seemed excessively fond of jewelry. She wore a diadem in her hair, multiple bracelets, chains about her neck and throat, and rings on most of her fingers.

Oddly, she also toyed with a jeweled meat dagger, twisting its tip against the wooden arm of her tall chair. Mayhap luncheon was to be served after the guards cleared away the severed heads and gore. Moreya shuddered as the queen leaned forward with a glint in her eye.

"The tall fellow certainly has the look of a Waniand warrior." She sniffed at Cronel in disdain. "And you trusted such a man's loyalty? Gave him the task of escorting *my* future daughter-in-law?"

Moreya sensed at once where Velansare had learned his humility.

"He'd served me well in the past, and I had been assured . . ." Cronel paused to glare first at Preece, then at one of the advisors silently standing beside the dais, "that the man's very nature itself would ensure the maid arrived unsullied."

"Well, *are* you?"

The queen had barked that question at Moreya, but Prince Velansare straightened in sudden interest. Moreya suspected he relished her reply, for it would contradict his mother's wishes-if the rumors that only his mother sought the royal match had truth behind them.

Surely both the queen and her son had already been told Moreya was found nude in Preece's bed at the time of their arrest.

"I am maid no more," Moreya said with quiet dignity, "but fully his lawful wife."

A roar went up from the crowd. Soldiers raised their lances in warning and Queen Vela waved a hand. The people quieted somewhat. Vela turned to Moreya. "You knew you were to wed my son, a prince regent. The future king of the realm."

"I was told my father had entered a pact during a visit to your realm. I've not seen the betrothal contract itself, and my father never advised he'd considered an alliance with your son."

"I told you exactly what was to come, Moreya Fa!" Cronel bellowed.

"You told me your wishes, Sire," she corrected. "None of us can know what will come."

Queen Vela's eyebrows lifted. She gave her son a pointed look and then turned to Cronel, who'd turned purple and seemed about to burst. "This is no modest, biddable girl. It sounds as though she's indeed taken a Waniand sword into her scabbard. And probably enjoyed it."

"Mayhap," Cronel snapped, his eyes fastening on Moreya's face. "I call for the deaths of the three who attempted to flee with her. She is my subject, thus my property, now damaged and unsuitable for its intended use. She will be taken back to Glacia under guard. I shall decide her fate there."

Glaryd made a strangled sound and edged closer to Moreya. Moreya turned to find one of the Greensward guards clutching his privates. He crudely mimicked the "intended use" he'd put Moreya to. Glaryd hissed at him like a wet cat.

"Silence!" Vela commanded. She glowered at the captain of her royal guards. "Remove that lout at once."

As the troublemaker was dismissed, Cronel addressed Moreya and the assembly.

"You have not only dishonored your father, Lady Fa, but caused a spectacle that shall not soon be forgotten in this realm or our own. Perchance you shall be banished to a remote convent, wherein to contemplate the black sins upon your soul. If no nuns will abide an avowed harlot in their midst, I shall be forced to find a lowly station for you in my court. No nobleman will accept you now, but I am certain there must be some position menial and abasing enough to stamp out the wantonness-"

He never finished his sentence. Glaryd darted forward and grabbed the dagger out of Queen Vela's hands. With a wild shriek of rage and frustration, Glaryd flung herself at

Cronel and plunged the weapon into his neck.

A geyser of blood spurted onto a screeching Queen Vela. Prince Velansare bolted from his chair beside her. He tripped, careening backwards. Guards rushed to prevent him from falling off the high stage.

A guard in Cronel's purple drew his sword. Moreya screamed in helpless anguish as she watched him slice Glaryd across the chest. The maid collapsed. Onlookers began shouting and jostling. Guards fought to control the crowd.

The mood had been ugly from the first, but now the unexpected assassination of a monarch turned the ugliness into a thirst for more carnage. Anarchy threatened. The many-fingered ruler sprawled dead, awash in his own blood. His advisors shouted in heated argument with the Glacian guards, while the soldiers from Greensward dusted off their prince and surrounded their nearly hysterical queen.

Moreya pushed past one man, then another as the guards were diverted by onlookers trying to climb onto the stage. The executioner hefted his blade in ominous warning.

Overhead, the skies abruptly darkened as immense shadows obscured the sun. Pandemonium broke out.

Angry rioters became frantic potential victims, fleeing for their lives. Guards and ordinary citizens alike began trampling anyone in their way, panicked at the sight of three great firedrakes circling above the execution platform.

Preece strangled a nearby guard with his chained wrists. Lockram followed suit, struggling to disarm another soldier. He overpowered the guard, knocked him off the stage, and hacked the chains binding him to Dugan. "Free Preece!" Moreya yelled, ducking as a sword nearly smacked her in the face.

One firedrake plunged, talons open and grasping, to snatch Preece and Lockram. Moreya tried to rush forward, but someone grabbed the back of her kirtle. She pulled harder and the cloth ripped, baring her shoulder and part of her bosom, but she could not break free.

Several guards raised their lances as another dragon spiraled down toward the stage. Dugan picked up a fallen sword and turned it on a guard, only to be impaled by a lance cutting through his spine. A huge stone pelted the guards trying to fight off the firedrakes. Lances cracked. Bones snapped.

Moreya whirled and clawed at the man who held her. He wore Greensward colors and snarled as her nails raked his face. "The accursed bitch has lost her wits! Help me!" One of his comrades turned at the shout.

"Nay, let go, you fool! The dragons will take me and leave in peace. *They've come for me* . Let me go!"

She yanked again and once more heard cloth rend. Either the tearing of her kirtle, which

left her bared to the waist, or her seemingly mad words had stunned the guards momentarily. Moreya spotted a clear area on the platform and lurched toward it, but not fast enough.

She was blindsided by a guard, who flung himself bodily at her. Both of them went down sprawling. Her wrists were seized in a painful grip. Other hands clutched at her long hair, and she was quickly surrounded by Greensward guards. They dragged her down the steps and tossed her into a hay cart. The driver cracked his whip and spirited Moreya out of the city.

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Moreya had been brought from the dungeon up a winding stone stairwell, along a corridor, into an austere chamber in the Royal Palace of Greensward. By her own estimation—admittedly imprecise, as she'd been insensible at least part of the time during the harried journey here—four days had passed since Preece and Lockram had been swept aloft by the dragons.

Or more truthfully, by a wizard masquerading as a dragon.

Had they already reached the shores of Ataraxia? Moreya wondered. But before she could ponder the question, a door opened and Queen Vela swept into the room. Alone.

"My son has gone to Glacia," the queen announced without preamble, as if Moreya missed the royal whelp and had even the slightest interest in his whereabouts. She fervently hoped he'd fall victim to an avalanche while crossing the mountain ranges.

"Cronel's men have taken the body home for burial rites. Velansare will attend the funeral and meet with the high council in your homeland. He demands recompense. I demand truthful answers. There is no one else to hear your words, daughter of Anthaal Fa. I alone hold your fate in my hands."

What exactly did she mean? If an attempt to frighten Moreya, it was not altogether successful. She'd already reasoned the monarchs of this realm would have had her slain by now, if death were the sentence upon her.

"I do not know what more I can tell you. En route here, I decided to wed my Waniand escort. We are wed in the church and lifemated in the custom of Waniands. I had no wish to marry your son."

Vela smoothed vast, glittering skirts. Then she reached into her bodice and pulled out a tied scroll. "This was on my tray of food the evening prior to the tribunal. I discounted the words as the ravings of a desperate madman, but did not realize until I saw him myself that the statement came from a Waniand."

Again Moreya was at a loss. "I do not fathom what difference his race makes, unless you refer to the belief that Waniands are incapable of falsehoods."

"Indeed. But you imply such is not the case. Do you say the tale set down here is a lie,

then?"

Moreya recalled Preece begging for an audience or permission to get a message to the queen. She could only surmise he would have fabricated some wild story to absolve Moreya of any culpability for what had taken place.

Save yourself. She could still see the commanding look in his one eye, hear the words in her brain.

Instead she had saved him.

Love and duty made a woman do things that made little sense. Like speak the bold truth now to this heartless queen, who'd probably hang Moreya for it.

"I heard my husband speak falsely once only-when the guards came to arrest us. He told them he'd forcibly abducted and raped me. He lied to spare my life. It is part of his racial code not to speak falsely; however, it is also part of his code that a warrior must sacrifice his own life to save his mate's."

Vela unrolled the parchment and studied it a moment. "According to this, your marriage to my son might well have cost Velansare's life. And mine, as well. Your husband has here sworn that Cronel sent you knowing that your presence causes dragon besiegement. They would have attacked during the traditional wedding procession across the meadow beyond our gates and slain every person save you."

Moreya closed her eyes against the horrible images swirling through her mind.

Vela pressed her advantage. "He requested that I spare your life, such boon being his mercenary fee for service to the royal thrones of Greensward. He asserts he entered into carnal union with you expressly to forestall the royal marriage and admits treachery against Cronel. He swears Cronel's purpose in sending you was to weaken Greensward so he might vanquish it."

Execution would have been easier to face than this. Moreya bowed her head, refusing to reward Vela with any outward reaction.

"I confess, I laughed most heartily when first I read this," Vela went on. "But that was before dragons attacked the stage." Against her will, Moreya raised her face and met Vela's hard stare.

"I am not young," Vela said, narrowing her eyes even further. "I have seen dragons in the distance, watched them break through the clouds or circle a mountaintop. But I have never seen them swoop down to pluck humans from a place guarded by ready swords and lances. You summoned those reptiles. Your presence drew them, just as he warned."

Moreya saw no point in challenging that assertion. "Yes."

"You used them to aid your husband's escape."

Fool that she'd been. "I cannot force them to do my bidding, but I hoped they would save

him."

"Portions of this Waniand statement, fantastic as they sound, have been proven to be true," Vela concluded. "I see no reason to doubt the rest. The fat bastard tried to use you to murder my son and myself. But your maidservant seized my blade and killed him. There is justice in the outcome, do you not think?"

Recalling Glaryd's tale of mistreatment and permanent scarification, Moreya thought the fat king's end had been richly deserved-and far too quick. "I cannot feel pity for the dead king."

Vela smiled. Moreya might have guessed bitterness would please the queen. Vela then shook her head and seemed to muse aloud.

"I've a dilemma, though, daughter of Lord Fa. I cannot return you to your native land. His reeves believe you ordered your maidservant to kill the late king. For all I know, mayhap you did. I care not, but neither can I allow you to remain here. Velansare's pride would never condone it."

Moreya's mind raced, reviewing the tumultuous events of the past fortnight. She hit on a possibility. "There is a monastery back in Dredonia called Axcroft. A monk from there performed my marriage and said he'd enter it in the records of his order. I could seek political asylum from the brothers there. Unless you would provide a vessel and crew so I might continue on to Ataraxia."

Vela laughed so hard she choked. "A vessel and crew? For a known traitor implicated in regicide? You will be spirited away from the palace this very eve. You may take your trunks of garments; however, the chest of precious stones stays behind. Forfeited by the House of Fa as dowry for whatever maiden does become the next princess of my realm."

Moreya swallowed. In truth, she was benumbed and beyond caring about material goods or tomorrows. But Vela would expect dismay at her harsh decision. " *All* the terrestars, Your Majesty? Might I not be-

Queen Vela interrupted, waving impatiently. "You are in no position to make further requests of the throne. I shall provide armed escort to the abbey you mentioned. That is all. May the Creator speed you upon your journey," she pronounced, shuddering. "And may you take the swarming firedrakes with you."

Moreya smiled now. "They will likely follow me, all except for that very large, grasping one with the verdigris scales. He can be unpredictable. Changeable as the night wind."

"Ha! May it blow him and this entire distasteful episode away, like ashes from a balefire," the queen snapped. "Savor my leniency, but do not test it. Farewell, Yune."

Chapter 15

Bourke had never been so tired in all his four hundred and eighty-seven years.

Of course, a goodly portion of those years spooled out while he remained inert, silently awaiting the next turn of human events. Waiting did not sap his strength. Adroitly shaping human events wearied him. 'Twas the purpose of his powers, but also what withered and wasted him.

His burden remained ever baneful.

The filaments woven into the great destine had been threatened. Counter-weaving, deliberately altering the warp, would have eliminated much of the risk. But so, too, would it have destroyed human options. Bourke had been left no recourse but to split his quintessence into fragments, then recoallesce. A feat he'd not attempted in a long epoch.

Now he noted the results of his work. The immortal weave no longer showed a rend. His splices held.

Moreya had safely reached the small monastery, after selling most of her bridal raiment for traveling coin. The escorts Vela sent to lead her afield rode back even now to Greensward Palace. Bourke placed a weak spell upon the Yune, making her temporarily invisible to reptiles. It should remain unbroken until she ventured back to Glacia. Moreya was tenacious, a worthy mate to Bourke's stubborn, adopted son.

Who, as ever, proved recalcitrant.

Bourke had assumed the guise of a dragon and flown Preece and his cohort to Ataraxia. He'd cloaked himself from human sight, hovering over the Waniand's sickbed until he detected the glimmer of necessary anger that would heal Preece. Lockram had already rallied and remained at his friend's bedside. Bourke would return to Ataraxia soon . . . once he casually tickled matters in Glacia.

An interloper there had used forged documents falsely naming him Cronel's chosen successor to claim the crown. Bourke recognized this particular life-force as a suited to embodiment as a busy meadow spider or drone bee. The fool now revered as King Leif was a useless human whose forgery was the lone achievement he could claim in his miserable lifetime.

He presided over Cronel's funeral, surrounded himself with corrupt privy council members, worked at depleting the royal coffers, and had invited Velansare of Greensward to remain indefinitely as a royal guest.

Drone bees made very foolish rulers. The sodomite was arrogant, but not stupid. Not every baron and noble in Glacia embraced their new ruler. Every new king inevitably ascended to his throne amid grumbling. Velansare's presence might unsettle things further.

Which was all to the good, for a dramatic shift was inevitable . . . soon. After Preece was once more hale and contentious. Ready to fulfill the promise of his name and bring war.

Velansare waved a dismissive hand at the Glacian emissary who'd escorted a clutch of maidens to his royal guest chambers. "These will not do at all."

The emissary clapped his hands, signaling the silent ranks of court beauties. They dutifully filed out without so much as a murmur or backward glance.

"I've shown you the only two remaining Yune maids available, Your Highness," the man intoned when they were once again alone. "Along with any number of excellent Glacian and Aldean candidates. King Cronel favored women of superior beauty or excep-"

Velansare snorted. He'd been within these castle walls a fortnight and knew precisely the sort of females the late monarch favored. "He preferred wellborn lusty sluts. I do not require a Yune bride. Their exotic appeal was my mother's stipulation. My own tastes run toward a more . . . earthy type."

"Ah," the emissary nodded. "Good family lineage and excessive facial hair."

In Greensward, anyone who dared speak such words to the prince regent's face would have died for that transgression. His predilections were routinely indulged, yet Queen Vela demanded everyone feign ignorance of the truth. Velansare found honesty on the topic refreshing.

"Fie, but 'tis just as you say. Still, my inner cravings aside, Greensward law states their must be a royal heir before I can ascend to kingship. I need a brood mare."

Velansare idly toyed with the velvet sash about his waist. "Not some highborn harlot wont to pant neath a man nightly after vespers. My wife need not be a rare beauty, but should be wellborn, attuned to the workings of politics and regal matters, and less . . . eager than the maids you brought thus far. Someone modest and retiring."

"Ah." The fellow scraped the floor with a flourishing, dramatic bow. "I understand, Your Highness, and shall reassess the available maidens on the morrow. But . . ." He coughed as though clearing his throat. "It occurs to my mind that you may be feeling rather listless. After your long journey, the funeral mass and coronation, audiences with his new Royal Majesty and the high privy council. Your spirits might improve after a quiet respite here in your chambers with a tray, rather than another appearance in the great hall. I shall send someone to attend you here."

Velansare's pulse quickened. The man had finally seized upon the quickest way to rid the realm of their unwanted royal visitor. Placate his whims, whatever they might be. And Velansare didn't have to ponder long to decide his current whim. He'd taken notice of his surroundings.

"There is a young advisor I saw in the throne room with some of the council members.

Clean shaven, fair of face, tawny haired. A young lordling of sorts, would he be?"

"I believe you speak of Sir Sieffre Bryston," the emissary replied, looking ill at ease.

"Is there a problem? You did offer to send me someone for a 'respite'."

"I hesitate to recommend that particular fellow. He's not been at court overlong and I'm not certain he is . . . worthy."

An odd way of hinting he didn't know if the lad would agree to a dalliance. "Do you know naught of his family, his connections? Certainly he was fostered by someone highly placed or-"

"He only just returned from your own realm, Your Highness."

So had direct knowledge of the debacle there, Velansare reflected. All the better. "He was soldiering for Cronel?"

The emissary flushed. "I would venture to affirm so. But the circumstances are rather unusual in his case, and I do not think-"

"Nay, you do not overmuch, do you?" Velansare snapped. "Is your imagination so limited you do not grasp the possibilities? If he was present when your king was slain, he knows of the smirch upon my family name! 'Tis all the more imperative to assure his discretion. Send him here at once. And you are to return personally, along with several castle guards."

Less than an hour later, a sharp rap sounded at the chamber door. Velansare bade the emissary enter when he announced himself, and smiled as he saw the courtier had dutifully followed instructions. How nice to see a man who understood where true priorities lay.

Young Bryston had indeed been in Greensward. Velansare recognized him, and his delight trebled at the realization that the younger fellow had indeed been soldiering for Cronel. He'd been the spy who alerted the monarchs to the treason.

This young knight would do more than bend over and keep his lips sealed later.

He might just have to accompany Velansare back to Greensward as permanent lad-in-waiting. If Velansare was forced to thrust himself into a woman once or twice a fortnight begetting an heir, he should be allowed to thrust himself where he'd derive real pleasure after performing his distasteful royal duty.

Sieffre Bryston was lean and tender, humming with untried sensuality. "Sir Bryston, is it?" Velansare inquired politely.

The boy nodded. Oh, aye, little more than a boy. A distrustful lad, but ensnared all the same. "You were lately in mine own kingdom, were you not? Your service to the crown must have been exemplary. Still wet behind the spurs, as they say, and already a reeve. That is quite a feat." The boy had the grace to flush. Quaint. "A fellow of such

remarkable talent must have any number of vital uses to a monarch."

The wary eyes widened. Velansare watched as his suggestive words caused a deeper flush and tightening of the lad's jawline. "I did what was necessary out of loyalty to the throne, in the best interest of my sovereign." To his credit, the lad's voice did not quaver. "However, the new king did not send me here. I am under no command which requires accommodating court visitors."

Well! A bold stroke.

Velansare sighed. How tiresome. Visions of an exhilarating wrestling match in his bed with this bit of brawn winked out.

"I wonder in whose best interests do you speak, then?" Velansare wandered over to the servant bearing food and wine on a tray and sniffed at the fare. He glanced at the emissary.

"There are dissenters who do not recognize Leif's claim to the Glacian crown. This lad has stated a predilection for making his own mental determinations as to what is in his throne's best interests, as if a lowly youth at the base of council ranks has the discrimination to make such a judgment. He has also proven willing to forsake his direct commander, the very man he's sworn allegiance to."

"Sire?" The emissary frowned. The guards, who'd been lounging in the back-ground pretending not to eavesdrop, tensed visibly. Velansare had purposely allowed his tone to reflect displeasure.

"He was the accuser at the tribunal. I recall his face now. He informed against his own men, against the Warmonger, Cronel's Royal Blade. I was given to understand he was one of said Blade's own trusted comrades. 'Tis quite possible this one knew what would befall Cronel upon that platform. He might even have been part of the plot. Mayhap not, but-"

"Nay, Sire!" Sieffre exclaimed. He turned to the Glacian emissary. "His Highness is mistaken. I did not know the woman meant to strike at the king. I-"

"The fact remains," Velansare went on, his tone one of idle conversation, "that matters between our realms are as yet in delicate balance. The seat of power here is not yet firm. To have such a man here at court . . . a fellow whose trustworthiness might be questionable . . . Is that wise, do you think?"

The emissary stared at Velansare a long moment, resignation in his eyes.

"I deem it is not, Your Highness." He glanced at the guards. "Take him to the dungeon. The Prince has denounced him as a traitor and party to the slaughter of the former king."

"I do regret to be the one to inform you," Velansare lied. "If necessary, I'm more than willing to discuss the matter with King Leif. Not that he is likely to welcome another sovereign pointing out his weakness in discernment."

"We need not bring this unsavory matter to his attention, Sire," the emissary replied coldly. "I shall assemble another group of maidens after you break your fast."

With that the guards swept out of the royal guest chamber, dragging a protesting and sobbing young Sieffre Bryston in their wake.

The chamber door thumped closed. "So young and witless," Velansare announced, shaking his head in mock sorrow. "So dead. Now, what am I to dine upon this evening?"

The powerfully-built manservant set down his tray and began unfastening his leggings. Velansare watched the servant stroke his member to hardness and nodded with a smile. "Ah, my favorite."

Chapter 16

Preece squinted against the bright sunlight. Someone was headed their way. A lone man slogged along the wave-beaten sand toward where he and Lockram languished. The knights had taken over an abandoned shelter fronting a small, unpopulated cove. Their hermitage was situated a fair distance from the nearest Ataraxian village. By design.

Preece craved solitude. Lockram, his lone remaining friend and fellow Glacian expatriate, did not. They'd been in this tropical realm barely two cycles of the greatest moon. Lockram was already accounted a raider, a mawkish clown, and a favorite amongst the local womenfolk.

"The village elder comes." Preece nodded in the direction of the ambling man. "Have you been swiving his daughter or his niece yet again?"

Lockram lay sprawled on his belly, dozing beneath the pocket of shade under a nearby tree. He grunted and rolled onto his side. "Nay, more's the pity. Haven't seen either wench in a sennight. They found Ataraxian lads to the elder's liking. Horse dung and hot thistles, look at him!"

At Lockram's growl, Preece turned his head and saw the Ataraxian had dropped to his knees at the base of the shoreline. He held his walking staff balanced across his outspread, open palms, in a gesture the knights had come to understand was the equivalent of an elaborate courtly bow in Glacian terms. Humble submission.

"He's at your feet, judging by the inclination of his skull," Lockram pointed out. "What have *you* done of late?" He self-consciously dusted loose sand off his bare torso. He'd abandoned wearing shirts or tunics, and his skin was bronzed from the perpetual Ataraxian sun.

Preece sighed. He inwardly hoped the elder's visit wasn't some accolade to his recuperation. His body was healing slowly. He'd only been ambulatory for a fortnight or so, whilst Lockram had been hale enough to carouse almost from their first arrival. The day they'd been delivered onto a wide stretch of pearly alabaster shore by Bourke disguised as a great dragon.

The Ataraxians hadn't screamed or fled in panic. They'd calmly ascertained who their visitors were and from whence they'd come. Their reaction confirmed there was no need for Bourke to tarry overlong. He'd assured Preece that Ataraxians led quiet, simple lives, but they were by no means crude people.

Many were extremely learned. Most were skilled in hunting and gathering food. Others were trained in varied arts, healing and cabalistic studies among them. Their language was not dissimilar to Preece's own native Waniand tongue, thus Preece was better able to converse than his roughshackle friend.

"We have leequesh and plenty of food," Preece mused aloud. "I trust he hasn't come to

complain that you're hoarding wine casks from the temple."

Lockram had helped himself to sacred brew early on. They'd both nearly been roasted alive when the theft was discovered and attributed to the Glacian fool with the roving eye and jesting manner. Ataraxians were kindly, but not amused by blasphemy.

"I keep to what they give us." This Lockram asserted by hissing through his teeth. His lips wore a frozen smile.

Preece's own face bore a similar expression. Local custom required a prolonged message of welcome. Standing with a smile plastered upon his face in lengthy silence was a most unnatural behavior for Preece. His dark cowls had eliminated any necessity for false grins back in Glacia. His rudeness and abrupt manner had been legendary stamps of his ferocious nature.

But he could not treat his new hosts to rudeness and disrespect. Not after all they'd done to save his miserable life.

Lockram hissed again. "If it's about his wife's sister, I wasn't about to swive her. She's uglier than the hind end of a Dredonian ass. I was in the woods with my breeches undone because I had to piss!"

Preece couldn't help but laugh, which triggered a violent coughing spell. He'd suffered them numerous times, due to the damage to his lungs.

This time the elder rushed forward, flinging aside his staff. He laid his palms along Preece's ribs. The familiar odd prickling sensation of cold numbness set in, though Preece's thin shirt prevented direct contact with his skin. He closed his eyes in mortification. He had never before been coddled, which Lockram well knew. But Lockram himself had hovered over Preece in their first days here.

To Preece it had felt as though every human in this new realm had hovered around and pitied him.

Ataraxian priests and elders had worked to aid his recovery. Preece had arrived beaten and broken, feverish and out of his mind. The Ataraxians fed him, tended him, laid their hands upon his flesh.

The physical contact caused the peculiar, unwelcome prickling sensation of chilling coldness. Preece had welcomed it when he'd been racked with fever and pain. He endured it now because it brought relief and because he feared insulting the village patriarch. This man was the most powerful leader of the local Ataraxians.

Preece had lived too long with disdain, had tasted the bitterness of a ruler's enmity. He would not offend this leader. He needed no enemies in this place.

So he stood on the beach in full view, allowing another male to massage his chest and partially embrace him. Like some puling sodomite or hapless troubled child.

He longed for a deep, dark cowl.

For oblivion.

To forget.

Only a few nights past the healers had finally ceased their secret visits to his pallet. Lockram's eves were spent in bedsport or drinking. He rarely stumbled back to the shelter he shared with Preece afore daybreak. Even when Lockram lay on his own pallet but a few feet away sleeping, the Ataraxians were stealthy and silent. They always laid palms to Lockram's brow to send him into a deeper slumber.

Lockram did not know that Preece dreaded darkness. That he took to his pallet sweating and shaking, waiting for the abomination to begin anew. The shameful misery of lying stripped and helpless as Ataraxian male fingers stroked, massaged, and probed in order to restore his loins.

Cronel had personally come to the prison cell and gleefully squeezed one of Preece's ballocks in his meaty fist. The final humiliating agony to be suffered after he'd ordered the detested Waniand traitor to be starved, beaten and kicked by his royal guards.

"This is what happens to men who dare to bury their pricks in what is mine," Cronel had seethed. Preece spat in his fat face. Then Cronel closed all six of his fingers and crushed with all his might, until something popped inside Preece's testicle and searing knives of crippling agony ripped through his body.

As if reading his dark, rambling thoughts, the elder now slowly shook his head.

Images of the bleak past scattered. "You are strong, Warmonger. You can be whatever you will. Fight, as you were born to do. Not with sword or mace, but with Waniand determination. You must release the pain in your pride as you do the cuts of your body. Do not cleave to that which can only weaken you."

The tension in his chest was gone. The horrifying memory of Cronel's gloating, hateful face and his cruel fingers dissipated

Preece opened his eyes to find Lockram scowling at him.

"So ask why he's come! He awaits your pleasure, you know. Satan's horns, but you pick the oddest times for woolgathering."

Preece blinked. The elder stood before them, arms at his sides, an expectant look on his face. Preece raised his left palm to signal an end to the prolonged Ataraxian greeting. The natives of this isle seemed very fond of ritualized gestures.

"Great Warrior, word has spread of your brave act. The child you saved was that of Karnoo, a revered friend and advisor."

The elder spoke now in a weak version of the Glacian language, Preece realized when Lockram responded. "What child? What's he talking about, Preece?"

The elder smiled at each knight in turn. "You will come to the temple at dusk. The

village feasts in thanks, with esteem for the fighter who killed in defense of one he did not know. Warmonger feast."

The elder turned, took up his staff, and hobbled away. Preece suspected that part of the Ataraxian healing art involved taking the sufferer's ailments or pain within one's own body. The elders seemed weaker and less graceful after tending him.

"How could you save anybody, *Great Warrior*? You can barely walk to yon grove of trees and back to keep from befouling our hut."

Preece had a sudden urge to smash Lockram's face in. Instead, he merely punched him in the gut and watched him fall back on his rump in the sand.

Lockram shook his shaggy head of curls and glanced up at Preece in wonder. "You knocked me down. Preece! You knocked me down!" He nearly roared his observation the second time and leapt to his feet. "Do it once more. Go on. I'll be ready this time. Let's see if you can do it again."

Even though Lockram blocked the blow, Preece sent him sprawling.

"Good Creator, you might just be the old rogue Waniand I knew and loved again! I shall bring out more leequesh and we'll celebrate. A feast tonight!"

They split open some breadfruit, poured cups of leequesh, and Preece confessed that he'd recently been in the interior forest on a long walk. He'd decided to pass the time whittling tree limbs into lances and happened to have such a sharpened branch when a young girl child had run screaming into a clearing, a great snorting boar hard upon her heels. Preece threw the lance, calmed the girl, and sent her on her way.

To him it had been a rather ordinary encounter. Unfortunately, the Ataraxians did not view it that way. They planned a banquet to honor him. What that meant in their formal customs he did not know. "But I think we best bathe and don the good robes they gave us," he advised with a belch. "And no sampling female charms unless they're expressly offered."

Lockram grinned, seizing a square of cloth he used as a towel and a hunk of soap some woman had given him. Scented soap. "But they so frequently are, good fellow! A banquet for throwing a spear at a boar? These people will use any feeble excuse to dine and drink. I love this place, Preece." The smile left his face. "Dugan would have died here, would he not? Had he survived to see it, the heady brew here would only have been his undoing. In either case, he was doomed."

Preece knew Lockram referred to the powerful Ataraxian potables. Wine and more particularly leequesh, their strange brew that made a man's mind wander into splendid places of whirling color and ecstasy. Aye, Dugan would have drunk more heavily than ever, and likely besotted himself into deadly oblivion. Preece had been mightily tempted more than once himself, and Lockram drank more than ever he had in days past.

More than was wise, but Lockram was young and unfamiliar with sustained grief.

Preece had lost his parents and learned to live with a blackened, heavy heart.

Lived with it yet again now because of Moreya.

Another name, like that of their departed comrade, which was seldom spoken between them.

"Aye, but he had lived more years than either of us," Preece reminded softly. "Don't use up all that soap."

Lockram mumbled about heading to their bathing pool, then stopped at the doorway out of the hut. "It's good to see you regaining your strength and making weapons again. You never were one to be idle. I'm gladdened by your recovery. You need to eat. They were right to give you a banquet. Mayhap you'll not turn your face from food, then." He winked and was gone.

Preece sighed. He couldn't easily abstain from dining on the fare at his own feast. But truly he had little appetite, little interest, little desire to draw his next tender breath.

As soon as he'd been awake and alive enough to speak with them and they thought he would understand, the healers explained that he was fortunate. He had suffered massive damage to one testicle, but the other and his scrotum were intact. Had he been gelded with a blade, they could have done naught. As matters stood, they believed they could restore his virility.

He tried to tell them there was no point. He'd lost his lifemate. Seed would only be wasted. Procreation impossible. They'd ignored his protests. He tried to struggle, but they'd silenced him. Entranced him. Forced him to lie passively as they began to work their mysterious restoration, these Ataraxian men with their intimate, frightening, knowing touches.

Preece would sooner have been put to the sword or had his toenails ripped out than withstand such cruel "mercies."

And he'd discovered just yestermorn, awakening with a dream of Moreya evanescent from his mind, that he may have surmounted the rigors of proscribed rutting seasons. He could be aroused by memories of lovemaking.

With Moreya-wife and lifemate-who was either thousands of leagues away in some dank dungeon, or lying dead beneath the soil of Greensward. He prayed his instincts were yet sound, for they told him such had not befallen her. Then he prayed, oddly enough, that she'd somehow been allowed back into Glacia. It comforted him in some peculiar way to think of her dim purple glow reflected off frost and ice. He liked imagining her there, even if he could not be with her.

He took another sip of leequesh. If he'd been anywhere but in this bizarre realm, he would have rejoiced over a morning erection. A lifemated warrior's rutting seasons and arousal were closely tied to his lifemate's moon cycles and body energy. Obvious sexual arousal should prove Moreya was still alive.

But here in Ataraxia-where the priests knew mystical secrets and practiced healing beyond the powers of most mortals-it proved nothing. Except that he was alone and no closer to happiness or peace than he'd ever been.

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The village temple was the only stone structure Preece had seen so far. It gleamed like a giant pearl in the setting sun. He glanced at Lockram nervously. "I have misgivings about this. If I'd refused, 'twould no doubt have offended the old one, but-"

"It's not a royal palace or Cronel's castle," Lockram interjected. "The people don't gape at you or whisper behind your back that you must be some beast. They've no interest in your mating habits . . . beyond finding you a bit of a disappointment. More than one maiden's asked if you prefer boys. I simply replied that you've a woman far away and you miss her. 'Tis at least part of the truth."

He nudged Preece toward the open doorway. "They wait to show you they value your presence here. Let them give you this. When all is said and done, 'tis not such a very great thing, to drink and dance and be lighthearted of an eve. You might try it just this once."

They went in, to find a different mood than they'd expected. The temple was overcrowded. Ataraxians they did not recognize from the local village were present also, their robes of different hues, some embroidered with strange designs on the hems. The atmosphere was somber.

The feast itself also was no bawdy revelry, but an orderly progression through a series of courses and dishes the two Glacians did not recognize. The banquet culminated in a lengthy formal speech by the elder who'd come to invite them earlier that day.

He concluded his words of praise and thanks by calling Preece to the front of the temple, where the child and her family stood. They bowed and spoke to Preece in words Lockram did not understand, but it was clear the Ataraxians offered appreciation. Then another man approached in a hooded robe. The entire temple had grown strangely silent. As though every Ataraxian present knew something of great moment was about to take place.

Preece turned to face the stranger, even as the newcomer dropped his hood back onto his shoulders. Lockram choked on the meat he'd been idly chewing.

The two men were reflections of one another. Both were tall and lean of build, equally fair of face and coloration. Both were crowned with long, straight hair falling to their shoulders, hair that gleamed like freshly spun silver or eiderdown.

Another Waniand warrior lived here in Ataraxia.

Chapter 17

"Deeply honored am I . . . to at long last encounter the cousin foretold to me," the stranger announced in a voice that rang clear and pure as a clarion. He turned slightly, waving his hand, and yet another robed figure came gliding forward from the shadows.

Preece flamed instantly. This tattered robe, this charlatan trickster he knew only too well. Lecherous wink or inveigling mock innocence. *Bourke* .

"What is this, old one?" Preece demanded. "Your idea of a merry jest? No one laughs."

"Least of all my stalwart, war-making kinsman," the Waniand replied with a solemn nod. "I have been told it is against your nature to be jocular. I have been told you survived long years alone and are accounted a man of dark mystery. I approve."

"Change him," Preece snarled, turning away from the fair-haired stranger to glare at Bourke.

"He is-

" *Change him*, " Preece roared, his fists clenching against the burning need to murder someone. Something. Anything. Beginning with this cruelly foul wizard who dared to taunt him like this. "Turn him back into the sheep or dragonfly or gutfish the Creator made him and stop this pretense. There are no others of my clan left. He is not my kinsman."

"I come from the out-island near here," came the soft answer from the tall stranger.

"There are a group of Waniands there. We have waited for you, son of my uncle. I am not Preece, but Taroch clan. Did your father never speak of his clan roots?"

Preece glanced around and dimly realized the Ataraxians watched him with intense interest. Only Lockram looked uneasy. He did not understand what was being said. But the Ataraxian tongue was very similar to Preece's native language, the language his parents had used long ago. Which was spoken fluently now by this tall stranger . . . who claimed to be a trueblood warrior of the Taroch clan.

Tarochs were complements to the warbringers. Besiegers who swarmed enemy holdings and encampments, breached outer defenses, paved the way for their Preece cousins. Tarochs weakened the foe and made possible the lethal strikes from the Preece. The two branches of warrior bloodlines were hopelessly entwined. The individual warriors themselves so alike in devotion, intent, and aims that they were oft said to know one another's thoughts.

That could not be so, or this Taroch would know Preece wished for his swift dispatch to meet Satan.

"You are displeased," the Taroch said. "Your arrival stems from pain and bloodshed, as is right for your station and our purpose. Come with us. There are scrolls and tomes

prepared by the ancients that will help you understand."

"I do not wish to understand," Preece snapped. "I do not wish to know of these texts. I do not wish to be here, to hear any more of this. I am not a jongleur, traveling for the entertainment of others." He glared at Bourke again. "You have done this. Do not seal your fate with a lie, Bourke. You told me of this place when I was too young to know aught of the world. You swore it was beautiful. Aye, and miserable, too. Filled with treachery. No better than Glacia."

He turned and made for Lockram. "We leave this befouled place of worship."

"But . . . who's he, Preece? Waniands are rare. He-"

"Tal would not want this, Kaelan Preece."

The words were a rattling whisper that nearly shook the stone walls.

Instantly the Ataraxians fell to their knees and pressed their brows to the floor. Preece stopped and turned to glance over his shoulder. Bourke no longer appeared as a hunched old man, but as a tall, hale warrior. With a bright silver-gold beard and gleaming tresses beneath a thin platinum crown. Preece's father.

The anger retreated, displaced by shock and amazement.

One thing Preece had long understood about the wizard's shape-shifting powers: Bourke could only assume forms he could view and replicate. He could not now be the image of Preece's sire without having laid eyes upon the man at least once.

"When?" The question came out as a harsh croak.

"The day they begged me to take you from the forest. Tal lay mortally wounded, a pulsebeat from death. Your mother, Sarent, lingered perhaps an hour longer, his stiffening fingers clutched in her own. She told me who you were. That I must hide you and bring you here one day. Yes, I told you of this place and stoked the fires burning deep inside your heart. This place has ever been a large part of your future destiny. You must read the texts of the ancients . . . and the scroll left by your father."

The strange warrior inclined his head and gently spoke. "The loss of a proud and noble king must not go unavenged. This you know. And were he my sire, I would want to know his wishes and follow his command. I would bear the burden placed upon my shoulders proudly, for we are Waniand, cousin. One blood. One purpose."

Preece turned back to Lockram, who shifted his weight and looked from the Ataraxian elder to Bourke, then to the strange Waniand, then back at Preece. "Their speech is most odd. I do not understand their words, but you have never before worn your inward feelings for all to see. You are badly shaken, my friend, by what they have said. So, I think it best I find amusement elsewhere this eve. You must stay and talk with them."

Lockram summoned more dignity than Preece had ever seen him possess and strode from the temple. Several Ataraxians took his cue, murmuring, bowing. They slipped

away like moving sound-shadows, and soon Preece found himself alone with Bourke and the Taroch warrior.

Preece allowed them to show him into a connecting chamber. He eased himself onto a carved stone bench and perused the tomes and texts they set before him. The lore was Waniand, very similar to the tomes he had studied in Bourke's cave as a youth. The tale they revealed was one of sorrow. Of shining greatness and equality besmirched and ultimately destroyed by avarice, enmity and greed. His race, his people, had been decimated in purposeful mass genocide. Their scant remaining hopes were pinned upon a handful of carefully-chosen offspring.

The strongest. The fiercest. The sons and daughters of ancient, regal lines.

Resurgence was avowed, through a great battle to be fought in the distant realm that was once a Waniand stronghold within an arete of ice and snow.

"Glacia." Preece breathed it in wonder. He glanced up to find only Bourke left watching him. Waiting.

"It was Waniand. All of it. Before it was carved into small, petty kingdoms. My people once dotted the mountains like sheep. Gone. All of them. Slaughtered."

Bourke slowly nodded. "As your parents were. Out of fear. Greed and ambition, too, but mainly a jealous fear. Your people are all but invincible in times of war. Sharper minds cannot be found. The ability you Waniands have to divide and conquer or to surge together and fight as one . . . your hot blood and mysterious rituals. The lesser races feared what they did not understand. Coveted what they had not earned."

He sighed. A deep, rattling sigh like very old bones, bleached and dried by wind and sun. Preece wondered briefly exactly how old the necromancer was. *What* he was. What this fight had to do with him and his kind. "Your kind . . . smote along with mine?"

Bourke made a dismissive gesture. "I owed a penance from long ages past. I have paid it. You are here and the great wheel shall turn."

Anger sparked anew. A low flame flickered in Preece's belly. No matter the reason, Bourke had purposely deceived him-for years. "You let me believe there were very few others, that as trueblood I was nearly the last of a dying race. You made me want this place because . . ." He stumbled. It was hard to speak aloud.

Appalling, yet obviously true.

His entire adult life had been a travesty. Fighting and saving up coins to buy a vessel. Dreams of Ataraxia and its crystalline waters, bright sun, glistening sands . . . all just a wizard's enchantment.

Preece had been summoned to fight again.

He was still a mercenary-only this time he was offered no purse. No promised of gold or glory were dangled before him to purchase his blade. He was to unsheathe it out of some

unwanted sense of duty, His obligation to moldering antecedents, to his dead parents. To people he barely remembered. People he never knew.

A cousin he did not wish to know.

At the price of his freedom, his happiness, his lifemate.

His rage exploded at the thought. "Moreya Fa. Damn you, sorcerer! She was another bewitchment. Naught but a calculated entrapment. Satan's prick, but you're good! A beautiful Yune helpless against the firedrakes who find her as irresistible as most males. Save this one, who was fool enough to misbelieve I could not fall beneath her spell. Bat rumps! You know I detest bats. You knew I would refuse."

Preece snorted and began to laugh. The action brought slicing pain to his healing chest and ribs, tears to his eyes, but still he laughed. A horrible, acidic howl that was anything but merry. "What the hell *was* she? A lizard, a hatchling firedrake transformed to look human? Aye, that would explain why adult dragons kept trying to reclaim her. You disgust me, Bourke. I w-

"She was just a Yune maid, foolish knave! Forsooth, I did implant the dream of this place. I admit that. Not through spells, but simple word pictures. Tales afore bed for a lad who needed a dream."

"Aye, and a beautiful noblewoman as lifemate for a man all believed to be a misshapen ogre! My *lifemate* ! Can you not fathom how you've destroyed me? You might as well have torn out my still-beating heart or sliced off my cock! A warrior's lifemate becomes his reason for all else. You sent me to Cronel, knowing of his plot, knowing I could never have her beyond the brief time that would take me here. All of it was done solely to get me here. For my cousin. For him to be king."

Preece discovered scalding tears trickling down his cheeks. He did not care.

He could not draw a normal breath. His chest hitched, stung, screamed with each gasping sob. He did not care.

The sun could wink out on the morrow, the moons crash down like gigantic dragon stones and crush him. He did not care.

"She *is* your lifemate," Bourke insisted. "Merely a mortal woman, with an unusual attraction for firedrakes. You were not hired to bring her *here* , Preece. 'Twas still your own notion to come. Were she with you still, it would change nothing."

"Ah, but her very strangeness, her freakish nature made this all the better choice, did it not? *For there are no firedrakes here* . Do not lie and say you never considered that in your scheming, Bourke. You used her to get my cooperation. She bears no l-

Preece could not believe how low he'd sunk. Had he been about to say 'love'? Waniands did not espouse the ridiculous notion. He was losing his sanity, faster and faster, losing everything. He'd seize one or two last wits and try to rise above the disaster he'd made of

his life.

"I do not want to hear of her. The Yune was naught but one of your concoctions or spells. You can protest all night, but I'll never change my mind. You deceived me. She was an integral part of that deceit. I wish nothing more than to forget I ever met the witch."

"She is in your blood and sinews," Bourke argued, "With you always and ever, do you wish it or detest it. I'd naught to do with your choice of lifemate. I saw how you regarded her. I warned you away more than once. 'Twas no magician's trick. Moreya Fa Yune is just what she appears to be, and were you not such a half-blind, stubborn ox, you'd realize her caring is genuine. She risked her life for you, let herself be imprisoned that you might fly free."

"Carefully heeding your instructions," Preece snorted, wiping at his cheeks.

"Nay, dolt! But we shall argue no more. 'Tis simple enough to cast a spell of forgetting. Mayhap when you encounter her and know her still, when your body calls to hers, when your spirit recognizes its true home, you will see I had no part in the selection of your lifemate."

"Aye, cast such a spell!" Preece agreed too quickly. "Do it, and be quick about it! Know this, too. Once I leave this accursed temple, I never want to lay eyes upon you again, old man. I have asked you for little all my life. I ask for that. To never be plagued with your presence again."

"Beware such hasty declarations, my son, or-"

Preece spun and began stalking out of the temple. "I am not your son. I am Kaelan, son of King Tal and Queen Sarent. As you have succeeded in reminding me most painfully. I repeat myself very seldom. Do not make me say this again: I want no memories of Moreya. And it is my will to see or converse with you nevermore, wizard."

Preece awakened hours later to find himself sprawled on the berm formed by the exposed root of a twisted palm tree. His robe was torn. The gritty sand around him and beneath him had somehow gotten into his throat and inside his eyelids. He must have imbibed far too heavily of leeqesh the night before at the feast.

The feast.

He moaned as the memories rushed back, stirring the sour taste in the back of his throat. There had been another Waniand at the temple last night after the feast. A Waniand who proclaimed himself Preece's cousin. Preece had seen the scrolls and tablets, the texts of the ancient truebloods that told of a distant future when the leader of the Taroeh would join forces with the last of the Preece clan to retake the throne of Glacia.

The throne conveniently left vacant when . . .

Odd. He had the distinct feeling no ruler currently wore the crown in Glacia, yet Preece

couldn't say why or how he knew as much. His mind still retained dark images long associated with King Cronel: fat, overweening pride, lechery, the infamous bastard polydact. And as Preece wrinkled his brow, he grasped a faint wisp of teasing recollection. Something cataclysmic had swept Cronel from the Glacian throne. A servant . . . whose?

Why couldn't Preece remember? He'd not been here in Ataraxia so very long.

He got to his feet and stumbled down the strand toward the hut he shared with his friend. "Forsooth, but 'tis of no import any longer," Preece muttered aloud. "I must seek Lockram and fight him for the last sliver of soap. I smell like some accursed goat."

Goat. The word brought him to a halt. Not a goat, but . . .

Tahr. Aye, he'd ridden a great tahr into battle. He missed the animal. What had become of it? Another damned mystery. Why did it strain his faculties to recall even the simplest things of a sudden?

He took another whiff of his sourish garments and body stench and frowned at the obvious answer. He'd have to avoid leequesh in future. He'd drunk too deeply the night before, and clearly the Ataraxian wine had begun to rot his brains.

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Bourke tried to float back to the loose sands after Preece shambled off. Instead of settling easily onto his rump, the wizard tumbled from the tall palm headfirst and very nearly snapped the bones in his neck.

He was too old for tricks any longer, an inner voice warned. His time was nearly at its end.

Bourke sighed and stared at the Waniand's retreating back in the distance. Even for a wizard of inestimable talents, the warrior's boyhood had coalesced too soon into manhood and the supreme challenge Preece would soon face. A trick of the stars, the others had warned him. A ripple in the cosmos and a spirit's allotted time in a given sphere was done.

Bones and sinews withered and snapped.

Patience was sundered by frustration.

The solution was to let go the stubborn mortal frame.

Bourke would grant Preece's wish. They would nevermore meet face to face, never speak again. The knowledge was like a blade to the old one's heart, for Preece had badgered him into casting a malicious spell that could have untoward effects lasting for generations. An eon of mortal time.

"And the balking dolt is wrong. She *is* his rightful lifemate. He chose well in this. She is his best accomplishment, a prize beyond that of any he's attained in all his years as a

fighting man. Yet he will know her not, and eschew much of his past in Glacia. Out of spite. Accursed stubborn ass!"

A wild donkey somewhere in the island's interior objected.

"Not you!" Bourke shot back. "Somehow I must repair this madness. I must leave a clue, think of a way . . . Ah! I have just the thing!"

The wizard gave a last rattling chuckle that echoed through the grove of shoreline trees.

He bumped into something hard as stone, immutable, and realized he'd arrived at the place he'd yearned for with the last of his dauntless will. He stepped away from the source of the cold solidity. Yes, good. A wall. He peered through the darkness.

He seemed to be inside a small cell. A monk's cell, if memory served. Bourke smiled. Before him the faint purplish glow was barely visible as the sleeping figure rolled over in the narrow bed and burrowed deeper beneath the covers. The Yune woman was here, among clerics. Safe.

Just as he'd known she would be.

He wafted over to a small chest hidden beneath the bed, willed his vaporous essence to funnel itself into the chest's keyhole, and settled inside.

The contents of the traveling chest were but a few plain garments and one remarkable pinkish stone. As soon as he enveloped it, he sensed its origins. In the recent past it had been swallowed up and carried within the belly of a great winged beast. A terrestar. A rare, very valuable pink dragon stone.

No wonder she kept it hidden beneath drab kirtles and folded wimples.

She was indeed a clever girl.

Too clever to overlook a gift.

With the last of his powers, Bourke transformed his earthly shell into a small inanimate object. A smaller stone, nestled so it was half obscured by the pink one. A stone of brilliant green. The mossy green of a riverbank in shadow. The welcoming green of verdant meadows in springtime. The mysterious green of an old sorcerer's eyes.

Chapter 18

Two days after the banquet in the temple, Preece agreed to meet with Taroch. After less than an hour of intense conversation, he'd stormed out of the rough hut and gone in search of Lockram. To announce intentions to leave Ataraxia.

He intended to sail with his cousin to an outer isle lying a few hours away by boat, where an enclave of Waniands still lived.

"Waniands?" Lockram did not look so much stunned as dismayed. "A whole flock of them?"

Preece glanced at Taroch.

"The surviving clan members of Preece and Taroch. Also a few fractured tribal groups, whose members can no longer be traced to specific bloodlines."

Lockram snorted with disgust. "Clans and tribal groups. What would they make of me, do you suppose? A condemned outcast. A man with no proud family, no fortune, and a barren future."

"You wallow in kegs here, Lockram," Preece reminded in a low tone. "You're a soldier, a swordsman, not a-"

"Not a Waniand, though, am I?" Lockram shot back. "'Twas *your* lifelong dream to see these shores, not mine. Yet here I am, plopped like so much dragon dung. Ah, well. Even dung can have its uses. Mayhap without the Great Warrior, he of silver locks and rare golden smiles, I would be seen as a man of worth."

Preece had not anticipated his friend's reaction. Somehow he'd assumed Lockram would want to continue their adventure, would always fight at his side. The sense of loss pierced him, twisted his gut, and Preece was surprised by his own weakness. They'd both felt Dugan's death keenly, but Preece had banished Bourke from his life in anger, and . . .

What was that damned itch niggling at the base of his skull?

Preece was fed up with it, with the inexplicable feeling that a large chunk of his previous existence was just gone. Obliterated. He was equally fed up with Lockram's childish pranks.

"You're a worthy fighting man, else I'd not want you to come with me. You always knew I fought to make my way here, that for years I longed to visit Ataraxia."

"Oh, indeed! And after forsaking everything to come here, you leave after less than a year on these shores. Always you talked about it, dreamt of it. I'd grown ill hearing of its allure. You even promised Moreya a life in the Ataraxian sun, and yet it means naught. Go with your Waniands. Go in peace and find whatever meaning has thus escaped you. I will stay."

Preece did not understand the hostility in his comrade's tone, or one aspect in particular. "Who is this Mor-"

"The tide, cousin," Taroch interrupted, seizing Preece's forearm in warning. He nodded toward the shoreline, where a small sailing craft bobbed at anchor. "We must make haste or be forced to wait another day. There are rocks that make it unwise to land on the small isle after dusk."

Preece turned back to Lockram. "You're certain you wish to remain behind?"

"Remain in a place of tranquillity and ease, where the native daughters find me an appealing new flavor to tease their jaded palates? I'm certain enough."

Preece thrust his right arm forward and gave Lockram a hearty handshake of farewell. "Satan's horns, but I'll miss you, Lockram. Even the arguments."

Lockram's eyes were moist. "I'll die with a curse for your black soul upon my lips, do you never sail back here. I want you to see for yourself how I shall prosper."

Taroch nodded. "He'll be free to return here or visit any realm he chooses, once we've taken our stand in Glacia."

"*Glacia* !" Lockram sputtered. He tripped over a bit of driftwood and went sprawling facedown in the surf. He came back up, spitting and shouting angrily. "Are you mad, Preece? You can't go back there! They'll slay you if you set foot inside her borders! We're outlaws there. The new monarch may not grant a pardon. He may never lay eyes upon you, afore someone makes you a corpse! *Preece* !"

Preece heard the wail over the pounding swirl of the breakers. He glanced uneasily at his cousin. "He's right. I must have lost the last of my wits to even consider returning to Glacia. We were condemned to die, about to be executed, when a small flock of firedrakes attacked and liberated us."

Taroch frowned. "Firedrakes? I thought the wizard brought you to Ataraxia. I'm certain he said he'd-"

"Aye, the damned sorcerer. He altered his shape to look like a dragon and swooped down. Then he joined the others in the flock and flew aloft with me and Lockram in his talons."

"Others? He commanded firedrakes to do his bidding? A most talented wizard, indeed."

"Nay, the dragons came because . . ." Preece felt like the world's biggest fool. Trouncing out into the battlefield of passionate speech, only to founder and forget what he'd meant to say. He honestly had no notion what dragons had to do with anything, or why they were even discussing the accursed beasts. "There are dragons in Glacia, but they seldom pose a threat."

What did *that* have to do with anything?

Oh yes, he wasn't supposed to go to Glacia. That's what was so important, what needed to be clarified. Taroch had to listen. "I cannot return to Glacia. I can train your men, draw a map, but I cannot go myself."

"The wizard could have drawn us maps or told us tales. Nay, Preece. Do you still not fathom the way of this thing? Waniands should rule Glacia. *We* were the great race before the genocide. Bourke told me of you living beneath a cowl, hiding the truth of your blood. You will hide nevermore. We will hide in seclusion no longer, but take back what is rightfully ours! Your father and mine died because of the greed and ambitions of usurpers. We will take back the throne and vanquish our enemies. You are the key to the rebellion."

"Taroch, I-"

"You will meet my lifemate. My closest friends and best fighters. You will see the hope in their eyes, the fire of longing on their faces. We will never let you be taken. You have been alone, my cousin. You do not understand what I know-what it is to have Waniands at your side, fiercely determined as you yourself are. Do not fear the weak knave sitting on the throne. His time will soon be at its end."

Preece started to argue, but something in his cousin's fervent homily had sparked that niggling itch once again. Talk of Glacia and kings, even the firedrakes, had him searching his mind in desperation for a vital link. Yet he could not find it. He sensed instinctively that he'd played a pivotal role somehow in what had taken place.

Lockram reminded him they'd been condemned, sentenced to death. Knights were not executed for minor offenses. A king would not cull his own fighting ranks save for the worst of crimes, yet there was again that huge blank *nothing* when Preece tried to recall the details of what had happened.

He watched his cousin adjust the sails and test the wind. Taroch was strong, proud, apparently seeing himself and his cause as invincible.

Preece still had scars and ebbing pain in his chest to remind him that Waniands could be defeated. Soundly.

Yet he knew Taroch would never accept nay as an answer. Preece would go back to Glacia. And whatever his role had been in the murky events of the realm's past, he would play a similar role in its stormy future.

The knowledge was oddly reassuring.

f

"Abbot Zadok."

Brother Fense nodded as he entered the elderly monk's private domain. The room was no bigger than any other cell within Axcroft, indeed seemed much smaller, as its walls were densely covered with shelves displaying bound tomes, loose sheaves of

manuscripts, tallow candles, and numerous holy relics. Dust motes swirled about the room as Fense took the empty chair across from his superior.

"I have brought you here to discuss the woman," the abbot announced need-lessly.

Fense had guessed why he'd been summoned. He had his arguments well thought out and ready. "You granted asylum, Father," he reminded first.

The abbot sighed. "Temporary asylum. With King Leif upon the throne in Glacia, it is unclear whether she would be at risk to return there. It is, after all, her rightful homeland."

"She has a home there no more," Fense reminded secondly. "Upon her father's death, the king rescinded his leasehold on the residence where the Fas resided and had her forcibly removed from the property."

"Brother, surely you can understand my concern. It is most irregular for a married woman to remain indefinitely amongst an enclave of men . . . even be these celibate, pious men. If her husband does not come to claim her, she should be taken to a convent, where she might live amongst sisters of one of the holy orders."

"Her husband has not publicly denounced her," the younger monk parried. "I have sent a missive to the distant realm of Ataraxia, where Lady Preece believes her husband would have been taken. I've not yet received a reply. As you instructed, I seek to ascertain whether verily the man is alive. If he is, and seeks to return to claim his wife, would it not be a sin were we to cast her out with nowhere to go? She will not be accepted into a nunnery if she is not taking the veil and forsaking her spouse. Or he his wife."

The abbot scratched his chin. Always a sign of indecision, as Fense knew. In this case, a sign Fense's persuasions brought the desired effect. "I have trained her to copy text, Father, and she shows great promise. She has completed a manuscript in less than a fortnight."

The abbot's brows rose. He was clearly impressed. "Can she not remain to aid in transcription? With Brothers Alphar and Densman working in the garden since Brother Cosmo broke his hip, we can use another scribe. She is quiet and keeps to herself. She has caused no disturbance. Indeed, I would remind you that she is more than willing to remain cloistered indoors, and has asked no boons whatsoever, other than to be granted a cell here."

The abbot rose. "You will advise me at once when you receive a reply from across the seas."

The interview was over. Moreya would be allowed to stay for the nonce.

Fense hurried away from the abbot's office to find her and relay the good news. But she was not in the high garret, busily copying the new manuscript he'd assigned to her. Neither was she in the kitchen or chapel. After looking everywhere else, Brother Fense found her at last in the small monastery garden.

She was huddled beneath a drooping elm tree, staring at the twilight skies.

"My lady, are you unwell?"

She turned and offered a thin smile. "I am . . . wistful, dear friend. Sometimes it is very hard to keep my thoughts from turning backward. To the darkness. And wondering if he looks up at these self-same evening stars. If he thinks of me and feels the same . . . misplacement."

Fense thought it was perhaps her words even more than her woeful posture and somber eyes that struck him. She took great care in choosing her words. Unnatural care. Any other woman would wail, beat her breast, openly weep for her lost husband. Even had he spurned her, she would gnash her teeth, tear at her hair, rail and sob in anguish.

Moreya Fa Preece delicately stepped over her pain.

The good news he'd wanted to share no longer seemed such gladsome tidings. He cleared his throat. "It's nigh time for us to sup and say vespers. Will you come inside?" He offered his arm.

She turned her face back up toward the heavens. "I'm not hungry this eve. I think I shall speak with the Creator here in the garden for a few more moments, then look in on Brother Cosmo."

Her nursing skill and kindness would have been additional points in Fense's arsenal, had the abbot needed further reminding of her usefulness. Fense bowed his head. "As you wish. The Lord give you peace and good rest. I will look for you at mass on the morrow."

He turned back to glance over his shoulder one last time before leaving the deepening shadows of the narrow walled garden. The woman stared at the stars once more. She was still as a statue, equally fixed and preternatural, lovely and unfathomable. Her eyes gleamed in the half light. He could not read their depths, but they were wide and clear. And dry.

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Moreya hadn't been able to shake her melancholy all evening.

She hadn't confessed as much to Brother Fense, but she'd been shaken by a passage she'd copied from an ancient manuscript. A parable related by a devout pilgrim who'd traveled throughout the known realms.

If his writings were accurate, he'd encountered Waniands.

He'd called them Wintren, or "people of the winter," and described them as being unusually fair of face, sporting hair and beards the color of hoarfrost. Their eyes he described as a cold, bright blue. Remarkable fighters and warriors, their strength and fierce determination made them the most formidable of opponents. Yet they were

brutally honest and made equitable rulers.

He described one such man as having the "noble mien of a great bear reigning from a mountain pinnacle, though his throne actually sat in the base of a deep natural bowl."

Moreya was certain he'd written of a noble Waniand leader. Ruling Glacia.

She'd desperately tried to harden her heart against Preece. To tell herself he was but a mercenary, opportunist, cozenner. A knight who would deftly manipulate any situation to his advantage. That his written oath proclaiming he'd wed her to foil a complex political plot had been nothing more than shrewd exploitation.

But now, tonight, as she undressed and crawled into her narrow, lonely bed in the bleak cell she'd occupied for weeks, she could not shut out the haunting truth.

Preece was trueblooded Waniand. Fighting for survival was instinct, both human and animal nature. He'd been scorned and maligned and made the object of horrific, appalling jests. He'd been forced to hide his face in shame.

Knowing that once, long ago, his people had ruled the very realm that so despised him. His parents had been murdered before his eyes. His was likely very thick, noble, if not royal blood. Yet he'd been treated like a leper and forced to sell his sword.

Would such a man not also sell his honor, his very soul?

And as she clutched her pillow to her breast and stifled a sob, Moreya accepted yet another unpleasant truth: she'd willingly bartered her own from the first moment she'd glimpsed the stunning face beneath the black cowl. Without full knowledge of the man behind that face. Without thought of what cleaving to him might cost her, until she was far too caught up in the pleasure and mystery of all he represented to care.

She had brought herself to this pass. And whatever he was, wherever he might be-longing for her as he gazed up into the night skies or not-she missed him and loved him still. She was his wife and lifemate, and he had taken a part of her with him into the sky that horrible day.

A part she could only now search the heavens in hopes of reclaiming, knowing it might remain far, far beyond her reach.

Chapter 19

Seventy-nine Waniands: a dozen or so of them mere children, too young to fight; a handful too elderly to withstand a battle; sixteen females.

Preece counted again, including himself, and groaned out loud. "Tarochin!" This was the appellation he used in referring to the cousin who'd brought him to this small outer isle, for there were a number of Taroch clan members present. All knew the affectionate suffix meant both "head" and "dearest" in their tongue; therefore, it was understood Preece addressed his cousin, their tribal leader.

The madman who misbelieved he could take Glacia's royal castle with less than fifty men.

"This will never succeed. The Glacian royal castle has more servants within its keep than our number, and ten times as many armed men in its garrison. You might as well line up behind me to place your necks upon the high executioner's block. The new king will have all our heads on pikes."

A woman laughed with a throaty sound. "I told you he was chary, and even more stubborn than you are." This observance came from Vulpina, Taroch's lifemate. She was but half Waniand, with fine yellowish hair framing a face that suited her name. Her bright eyes and pointed nose reminded Preece of a forest vixen.

Taroch merely grinned at her taunt.

He did so far too often and far too easily, in Preece's opinion. Most of the Waniands spoke little and maintained somber miens. Not their leader. He was convinced the battle was already joined and won. But he had never set foot in Glacia, never seen the thick stone walls he proposed to scale . . . had never yet fought on a battleground or tournament list in his young life.

Preece had so far tried to convince him-through arms practice, through various tests of swordsmanship and fighting dexterity-that he stood a poor chance for securing victory. Nay, worse than a poor chance. No chance at all.

Taroch merely nodded or pleasantly smiled. Then shouted for his men to line up and undergo yet another brutal round of punishment. However brutal weapons practice could be with wooden shields and swords.

Preece's patience had reached its end.

"You will all die if you attempt this!" he exploded now. Enough with his cousin's winning smile and easy charm. Charm did not keep a man whole when faced with armed and merciless adversaries.

"Why do you refuse to heed me? Before I was taken prisoner and . . . " Preece's voice broke and he flushed. This was part of the difficulty. With the passage of time, he'd

found it harder to speak plainly of his arrest and imprisonment, not easier. The painful memories prickled. Mayhap his pride had outgrown reasonable size, now that he'd finally found himself a man admired and respected. He could not speak easily of the broken warrior he'd been.

He cleared his throat and tried again. "Before my injuries, I practiced nearly each and every day. I fought for years. No man, even the most ferocious Waniand, develops the necessary skills and instincts in only a moon cycle or two. Even with the best weapons, and we have none."

Someone grumbled in assent. Preece spoke louder. "In Glacia, you will be up against royal archers with deadly aim. Swordsmen who've spent years honing skill with their blades. Brutes who swing poleaxes and maces, who delight in splitting skulls wide open. You cannot hope to prevail."

Taroch waved a hand to dismiss his troops. The motley assemblage of warriors dispersed in search of midday food and drink. Taroch approached Preece and tossed a casual arm around his shoulders. "You do not see, do you? We have the only weapons we'll need: the element of surprise, and you, cousin. I've fostered arms practice because it bolsters morale, gives them a way to channel their restless energy. I know it serves no point. There will be no ground fighting, no direct combat. We shall take the castle and spill very little blood."

Preece plopped down on a nearby rock. His cousin remained standing and smiling. Satan's hoofprints, but Preece detested that damned smug smile. "You still do not grasp what I've told you. The royal castle squats amid a bowl of solid rock, ringed on all sides by steep glaciers. You cannot tunnel under the castle walls. Even had we a force of a thousand, and a dozen catapults or trebuchets, a siege to those walls would take long, brutal weeks. *We have no war engines and too few men* ."

"Ah, but I have what I need. The perfect war engine within the deadliest man. You. You will capture the monarch on a moonless night."

Preece spat at his cousin's feet. "A distinct lack of wits allows you that grin. I'd wondered since first we met, but your scheme proves it. *I cannot dare show my face anywhere inside the border of Glacia, as you've been told. Five times or more, yet you ignore that fact.*"

Taroch snorted in what Preece suspected was a failed attempt at stifling laughter. His young cousin had not yet learned better than to openly laugh at Preece.

"You are infamous for not showing your face," Taroch said, "Or so I was told by the wizard. Would a man hidden beneath a black cowl not be just another shadow in the dark of night? Could a stealthy man garbed all in black not slip unawares to a vulnerable spot and scale the walls?"

"It might be possible, but-

"You need only find that vulnerable spot. The others will create a diversion to draw the guards away." Taroch warmed to his tale. "Once inside, since you know your way about the castle, you can get to the king's private chambers. A dagger to the monarch's chest might force a peaceful surrender. Particularly as the king shall misbelieve you're one of a thousand, not fifty, Waniands. Waniands who've come to demand what is rightfully theirs."

Preece firmly shook his head. "The sun has broiled your sanity. The odds against such a ploy succeeding are so--"

"Are we wagering, then?" Taroch's eyes danced with mischief. Preece did not care for the way that mischief slipped up his back and wrapped around his spine. Damn Taroch for his willful determination. It was the very quality that made him best suited to lead the Waniands, made him best suited to wearing a crown, yet Preece was older and more experienced. He knew their situation. He knew better than to listen to Taroch, yet in his breast he felt a tiny kernel of hopefulness take root.

Would it not be amazing, should they defeat the odds? Would it not be the achievement of his life to see Waniands rise to prominence in the land where they were scorned and hated, where they'd been all but extinguished?

Taroch suddenly lost his smile. He straightened and spoke in sober tones. The most sober he'd used since their initial meeting in the Ataraxian temple.

"I'll wager it can succeed. I risk my own life and that of every Waniand on this island."

"But for a few nomads in the known realms, we are all who remain of the true ancient race," Preece reminded ominously. Despite the longing in his soul, they both had to face the harsh truth of reality.

"Should we fail, our race may be annihilated. Your few females cannot produce enough young to guarantee a future generation of sound warriors, Tarochin. Too much is at stake. Do we die in Glacia trying to take the castle, so dies the Waniand race."

"As it dies here, even now!" Taroch ranted in frustration. "As you say, we've no weapons forged of iron or steel. Our forefathers, in desperation, fled the larger realms in small boats to these tropics, but you know we do not thrive here. Our people are meant for snow and frigid climes, not this sand. We are warriors by blood, not fishermen! And you, cousin, brave mercenary knight, how many children have you begotten?"

Preece blinked at the odd question. "I've not yet taken a lifemate, so I cannot have fathered get."

"Vulpina and Zade say you have. Zade thinks you're lifemated."

Zade was a full-blooded Waniand, and the most voluptuous maiden Preece had ever beheld. He'd noticed her immediately, but dismissed any thought of taking her. A warrior did not dally with ripe Waniand females. Besides, when once their hands brushed casually during a meal, he'd felt no spark of heat.

She gleamed pale and cool; was assuredly beautiful; looked at him with open interest. But she wasn't a maid he'd consider for a potential lifemate. Preece sought heat and fire.

"How would they judge I've taken a mate?" he snapped in irritation. "Because I've not tried mounting any Waniand maiden yet? I'm not in season."

"Zade went to your pallet late one night. You tossed and thrashed, showed stiffness enough for mounting. You shrank from her touch, but not before she glimpsed faint scarring."

Preece lifted his brows. Taroch had the grace to flush. "She related the episode to Vulpina. Do you deny having a lifemate, because she's not of our race? We know you've lived amongst strangers. We do not condemn you for taking an outsider."

"I tell you I have no lifemate! Tell Zade to ply her wiles on someone else. I bear the scars of my ordeal during the tribunal. Tell Zade to stay away from my pallet. Surely there must be some warrior here itching to claim her."

"Aye, several, in truth. The clashes can grow ugly when two go into rut at virtually the same time. Every unattached man has sought Zade during his season at one time or another. She must choose someone soon. I had hoped if 'twas untrue that you might be interested. But-

"I'm not, Tarochin. Leave it. " Preece rose, uncomfortable with both the topic and the piercing way his cousin studied him. Taroch knew better than to accuse Preece of lying, but seemed to mistrust he'd been told the full truth.

Preece knew why Taroch was so intrigued. Zade's accursed tongue and report of a nighttime erection. Behavior that did not conform to Waniand ways.

He could not look at his cousin as he made his awkward confession. "The Ataraxians healed many serious wounds to my flesh. I was nearly castrated by the old king. I do not fully understand how or why, but during the restoration, I have been changed."

" *Castrated* ?" Taroch repeated in a choked whisper.

Preece lifted and dropped his shoulders, hoping Taroch would see only a careless shrug, not the difficulty he had in speaking plainly. "You mayhap understand why I felt no sorrow at the polydact's murder. I know not who sits upon Glacia's throne now, and despite the prophecies the Old Ones left that I am to serve as your guide, I've no wish to return to Glacia."

"You are even more wasted here than the rest of our warriors, my cousin. To have skill and knowledge such as you possess . . . Where would you go?"

Preece turned back to his cousin. In truth, he did hate the aquamarine lapping waves. He disliked finding sand everywhere-between his toes and buttocks, in his hair, even his food. He was fed up with squinting in glaring sunlight, being buffeted daily by endless balmy breezes.

He was by nature a man who liked to sulk. This clime did not foster sulking.

Yet he had no idea where else he should go, or what to make of his life. For as long as he could remember, his one and only goal had been to come to this realm. That dream now achieved, he had no purpose.

Taroch knew this, and stood calmly watching Preece. Not with his previous intensity or any baldly speculative look, just a quiet openness.

Another pair of eyes had regarded Preece that way. Someone else had looked at him with forbearance and understanding. But those eyes hadn't been blue, like Taroch's . . . damn it, *whose eyes had beheld him with veneration* ?

He'd made few friends, given every human around him little enough cause to admire him. The list of those who could have borne him such esteem could not be long, so why could he not summon a face or name?

The sinews of his body grew taut and more powerful than ever with each passing day. Strength returned to his arms, legs, chest. At the same time, his mind seemingly sprouted new leaks; his memory, raveling holes that daily grew wider and bleaker.

"If you wish to attempt a Glacian siege, I suppose I must accompany you." Preece sighed at last. "The royal keep lies hidden behind a ringed wall of mountain peaks. We must sail to Greensward, where I'm likewise decidedly unpopular, then cross westward into Dredonia. If bounty hunters don't fill my chest with arrows and blades first, I might survive to guide you through the pass to Inner Glacia and the royal residence."

"I look forward to the adventure. The women have spent years weaving and sewing. We have sails."

"But no ship with masts on which to mount them."

Taroch's grin widened. "Bourke worked a bit of magic before taking me to the temple that evening for the feast. On the far side of the islet is a cove, with a ship waiting. He laid his hands upon a fallen log and transformed it. 'Tis a fine ship."

Preece did not even bother showing surprise. Why? Bourke would have left naught to happenstance. "To a fine voyage, as well."

Taroch nodded and strode away. Preece remained near the shore, staring at the empty azure horizon.

Taroch's optimism would drive him mad. Preece told himself the only solution was to mentally translate whatever the Waniand leader said into more reasonable terms. Starting with that last comment. "Look forward" could only be Taroch's way of saying he dreaded the adventure before them.

They would all very likely die for their ambition. The odds of a Waniand victory were infinitesimal. Yet as he mentally reviewed the details of the siege plan Taroch had outlined, Preece's own lips quirked upward.

Donning his cowl again, slipping back inside the castle walls at Glacia, where he'd ever been distrusted and unwelcome. This time arriving as conqueror.

There was an undeniably sweet flavor of vindication to such an image, a sweetness Preece could almost taste. 'Twas both unlikely, and damned fair that he should go back and vanquish.

He'd spent far too many years alone and hungry.

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Taroch grunted and lowered himself onto a bench in the dingy tavern. "I'd doubted the Ataraxians when they suggested people of distant realms would trade for the fruit of tropical trees. Perhaps 'tis only that Vulpina has a gift for negotiation."

Preece shrugged and took the cup of ale his cousin proffered. Fortune had been with them thus far. The voyage across the Great Seas had been smooth, the trek through Greensward uneventful. Dressed as traveling peddlers and minstrels, no one had questioned them or impeded their westward progress.

However, now they'd entered Dredonia, and he was wary. He kept his eyes moving and ears cocked, and bade the Tarochs and other Preece clansmen to stay watchful.

Taroch reached below the table and began scratching. "Devil take me, but my crotch is afire. A war campaign to lead, and I'm going into season!" The complaint was a mere whisper, hissed at Preece in the Waniand tongue.

None of the other tavern patrons appeared to take note of his remark or predicament. "You'll keep the men away from trouble here? You were right about the coarse travelers in this realm."

Preece was swathed and muffled beneath a great cloak and furs, dressed like any ordinary Aldean nomad. Aldeans were a tall race, much like Waniands, and their menfolk often traveled into this region. Aldeans sold hand-crafted wares to the dark Raviners working in the Dredonian mines. Preece almost regretted his successful Aldean guise at the moment. He would have liked Taroch to read the amusement in his eyes.

There was something to be said for his altered virility. He thought about the conversation with Tarochin on the subject that afternoon some weeks before, back on the beach. There had been no more personal questions or talk of Preece mounting Zade. She'd avoided Preece as much as possible in the ensuing days. Which was a blessing, for he was usually hard as stone upon awakening, and had no wish to explain to anyone the reason: peculiar, accursed dreams.

He'd suffered them with increasing frequency. Visions almost nightly of a mysterious female creature clad in gossamer gowns that revealed even as they swathed her willowy body. Her flesh was not the pale cream of a Waniand maiden, but colored like that of a ripening orchard peach. Her eyes and hair shone with an unholy purplish glow, a fire Preece could not gaze upon without longing to touch. Yet when he drew near and

reached for her shift

Nay, allowing his thoughts to continue along that path would get him scratching like Taroch.

"Go," he bid his cousin in a low voice, replying also in their native language. "Take Vulpina, long and well, again and again until the fire is out of your blood. I'll not hold back the caravan because your wagon's rocking on its springs."

No sooner had the words left Preece's mouth when Vulpina appeared in the doorway to the taproom. Several masculine gazes promptly swung to where she stood, and Taroch surged to his feet with a growl.

Vulpina's eyes boldly caressed her mate-first his loins, then they brazenly flitted up to his stern face in age-old female invitation. When a thick-armed, bald fellow scraped back his bench and sought his feet, Taroch turned to glare a challenge. "She is my woman. Look at her with lust and your ballocks will soon be as hairless as your pate. " The hat Taroch had earlier pulled low on his brow fell, forgotten, to the floor.

"Saint Dismas, a Waniand about to rut!" The bald man swayed, gaping at Taroch. Taroch caught Vulpina in his arms and stalked out of the tavern. Preece knew the pair would lock themselves inside their wagon.

The bald behemoth turned his astonished gaze to Preece.

Preece sipped his ale calmly and shook his head in slow denial. "Waniand? They left this realm long ages past. He hails from Ataraxia. Sold me these peculiar fruits. Taste like figgerts, only sweeter. Take a bite."

As the big fellow bent forward to sample the dried date Preece extended in one hand, he struck with the other. The bald shiny pate struck a bench and crashed senseless to the filthy plank floor.

Preece nudged the unconscious man aside with his boot. "Barkeep, this one's had too much ale. I'd banish him afore he befouls your floor. Bad for trade, vomit is."

Preece glanced over at the tables occupied by more of his warrior brethren. Every Waniand had altered his appearance. Some used plant dyes to darken their locks or skin. Others hid pale features and hair neath the garb of Aldeans or Dredonian nomads. All moved out at Preece's signal.

He spent the night propped against a cow Zade had insisted they bring on the journey to provide fresh milk. In the next stall, two drunken Waniands dressed as common goatherds snored loudly. Preece could not sleep, tortured by the mental image each time he closed his eyes of Taroch furiously thrusting into Vulpina's plump backside.

Preece recalled his own randy past, wild nights in mindless rut, when his scrotum and cock burned until he'd used some woman's dew to smother the flames. He'd been known to rut with several females in the span of a single night and be scouring his surroundings

come daybreak in search of more. His brethren, island bound all their young lives, had eagerly listened to tales of Preece's wanderlust. Literally *wandering lust* .

Yet he could not conceive of mindlessly copulating like that now, which troubled him deeply.

Why were images such as that clear in his mind, when he was unable to remember more recent events? He couldn't even gauge when last he'd taken a woman. It had to have been months ago. By his reckoning, he'd been banished from Glacia more than a year. In the months he'd spent with Lockram in Ataraxia, Preece knew he'd never taken a native girl. He was certain he hadn't so much as kissed a willing wench in

Abruptly he *was* kissing a woman, the demon woman who haunted him. He groaned and wrapped his arms around a bundle of stained blankets. Helplessly, he felt his hips buck against the lump beneath him. His body sought release that would not come from moldy blankets, while in his mind delicate hands found and caressed his shaft, warm lips opened beneath his, and his flesh was enveloped by a pulsating purple glow.

He was appalled to realize his own fingers fumbled beneath his stinking traveler's cloak. They sought his straining manhood, fisted around it until he bit his tongue to keep from crying out and shaming himself.

He roused before dawn and went off to wash all traces of embarrassment from his body. Soon he'd be forced to visit a Dredonian bordello to rid himself of his growing obsession. It seemed to wrap tighter and tighter around his mind the closer they got to Glacia. And he could not afford such a distraction once they reached it.

Mayhap if he spent every drop of his seed and part of his coin with an eager harlot now, he'd be freed of the bizarre visions.

He snorted aloud, no more believing that than he saw himself standing beside the throne in Glacia. But once a man's sanity was forfeit, what difference did it make what he believed?

He took up his pack and set out for another long day on foot in the wastelands.

Chapter 20

Their campaign might have failed even before they reached Outer Glacia, if not for two things: Waniand blood thickened quickly in response to cold, and Preece's hidden cache remained intact at Farule.

Preece had years before made an agreement with a sniveling innkeeper in the Dredonian outpost known as Farule. Not far from a deep mine, awash in gamblers and cutthroats, no one had paid Preece any heed when he'd visited the tavern for a few days or weeks. The innkeeper had been too afraid to challenge a Waniand warrior to risk tampering with the lock Preece placed on the trapdoor in the tavern floor.

Preece had needed a convenient place to stay between mercenary forays, a place where messages could be left during his absence, a place to hide tangibles he did not wish to carry on his person.

The fat bastard king must not have discovered Preece kept anything of value in Farule.

So Preece's extra swords and shield, a bag of coins, and a couple spare tunics had been right where Preece left them.

Ah, but it felt blessedly right to heft a sword again!

Preece thrust, feinted, thrust and parried once more. He allowed himself to spar with his own shadow for an hour before mounting up and heading back to the Waniand encampment. He'd left the caravan in a sparse grove some leagues southeast of Farule.

Now he reined in his horse and tied it to Taroch's wagon, thumping a fist against the wooden side of the conveyance. The rear door swung open.

"What is it?" Taroch hissed, peering out into the gathering dusk. "Ah, you're back. Good. Keep your voice down. Vulpina's sleeping."

Preece frowned. Abed so early? "The sun barely went down an hour past. Has she taken ill?" He prayed the woman hadn't fallen ill with a fever or ague, as had many of their party. Most of the Waniands reared in island warmth had suffered bodily ills now that they found themselves in this bitter climate. And the weather would be harsher still once they began the ascent to the higher wintry climes of Glacia.

Taroch leapt nimbly to the ground, eyeing Preece's pack as he unloaded his trove from behind the horse's saddle. "She's merely tired. What have you brought us?"

"She's always tired lately. Is she suffering chilblains?"

"Nay, she bears my young in her womb."

Preece muttered the ritual congratulatory phrase he'd heard other Waniands offer at such news, but felt an odd detachment. A queer pang of pain . . . or something akin to jealousy.

Why he'd experience such emotions, he could not begin to fathom. Taroch would have his nightly rest disturbed, be forced to aid his mate in the birthing, and find his next rut cycle prolonged in arriving. Taroch himself would not suckle at Vulpina's breasts any longer, his child would.

What was there to envy in any of that?

Preece shook off his errant notions and opened his pack. "I used my coin to barter for a handful of swords. They're not the best of any armorer's craft. One's half rusted. But even a dull sword-"

"Can be knocked against thine enemy's skull, hilt first. Or might trip him as he advances, or skewer his liver in a well-aimed thrust," Taroch finished, grinning again.

For once Preece welcomed the sight of that damned grin. As much as he was gladdened by hearing his arms lessons recited by rote. "I thought you discounted the value of arms practice, Tarochin. Meseems you hearkened well enough."

"I want the Glacian crown, Warmaker."

In the language of Glacians, Preece was called Warmonger-meaning a seller, peddler, bringer of war. But in their native Waniand tongue, Preece *made* war.

Not a subtle difference. One that could mean life or death to his adversaries. Preece smiled back, as wickedly as he knew how. "You will show me just how much, young cousin. And soon."

Some few days hence, Preece ordered Taroch, Jareth, Kluft, and Bevan-those enclave clan leaders Preece determined were in possession of the sharpest wits or fighting prowess-to ride with him into Crispin's Cup.

"What manner of strange name is that?" Bevan asked.

Preece lifted an eyebrow. "The religious zealots aver a martyr called Crispin rode for twenty days and nights through the Dredonian wastelands-before the warren of outposts and mine shafts which now exist around us had been established-with naught but a stale loaf of bread. This hovel we visit was the only place at that time where a thirsty man could get a drink."

"Amusing tale, First Preece," Taroch responded, using his equivalent of the appellation Preece had given him, a title of respect and clan honor. "But why do we visit this accursed outpost now? We have cow's milk and plenty of fresh water."

"You will soon discover my reasons," Preece replied.

Taroch still appeared vexed as they tied their mounts to a long rail and Preece gestured for them to precede him into a raucous gaming tent.

"We've no disguises!" Jareth hissed, jerking back on Preece's arm.

"None. For it is time my followers learned how to dominate in an unfair fight. And time

for Tarochin to show us all how well suited he is to being king."

The instant the five Waniand warriors stepped through the sagging tent flaps, conversation and wagering ceased. Through a haze of grimy smoke, stony eyes-dozens upon dozens of them-signaled hostility. And the short Raviner who ran the gambling pits scrambled down from his tall stool, scowling ferociously.

"Out! I don't abide you white Worm-iands in my place!"

Preece leaned down to squint into the short fellow's beady dark eyes. "Grubs and maggots are pale white. Worms are dark, like pig dung. As you should well know, shit breath."

Fists, knives, cups, and chairs began flashing and flailing. Preece stepped on splayed fingers here, thumped a noggin there, but never once pulled his blade. The others in his company threw themselves wholly into the fray.

'Twas a sorry band rode back to the wagon camp late that night, but Preece had the proof he'd needed. His long-lost brethren were fiercely determined, if graceless, battlers. What they lacked in finesse, they made up for in spirit. And they were mayhap just hardy enough to win back a crown.

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Preece raised his left hand, signaling the riders behind him to halt. He inched forward, sniffing the frosty air as his eyes scanned the horizon. The new Glacian ruler must be incredibly arrogant or a soft-headed dolt. At least the fat bastard Cronel had possessed sense enough to keep guards posted near all the mountain passes-even those on the far side of the glacial ring, away from the denser settlements of Inner Glacia.

Preece had deliberately led the Waniands around the arete to the least inhabited section of icebound peaks. Not that it seemed to matter. No guards blocked the narrow gorge ahead. And no one waited behind the outcropping that marked the bottom of the wide cirque where a rock-strewn path eventually led to Inner Glacia's citadel and royal castle itself.

He lowered his arm and started forward, twisting his head left and right. No sounds reached his ears but the stealthy rustle of his horse's padded hooves and those of the other Waniands riding behind him. He could see the unbroken layer of recent hoarfrost coating the landscape ahead. No one had passed this way in the past few hours.

He left his comrades hiding behind a natural stone outcropping and made his way on foot toward the hulking stone battlements of the castle. He was within fifty yards of the sealed castle gates before he spotted a guard-slumped against the stone curtain walls, fast asleep at his post.

Preece peered along the width of the battlements and caught a bobbing shadow moving off to his right. A guard paced the perimeter there. The watchman's counter-part stood to the left of the central gatehouse. As Preece watched, the second guard reached around

with his sword to scratch the middle of his back. The Warmonger crept closer, waited until the flanking watchmen passed him, then darted into the shadows.

He moved slowly and silently along the outside of the curtain walls, seeking the hidden exit, recalling Lockram said he'd used it once. It was located not more than seventy paces from the gatehouse. Preece pressed the stones with the flat of both hands, moving and testing until a slight give and crack in the mortar confirmed he'd found the postern. He slipped his sword blade in the vertical mortar crevice and raised slowly until he encountered resistance.

Within seconds, he'd unbarred the gate, soundlessly slain two guards, and made his way to the dark alcove leading to the north passageway. Taroch followed close upon his heel. Behind them, a dozen other darkly-garbed warriors infiltrated the bailey and blocked the entrance to the garrison.

Preece unerringly moved forward. He skirted guards arguing over a serving maid in one alcove, ducked into another as a drunken courtier burst out of the garderobe. At last he showed Taroch the double doors they sought-leading to the king's own private chambers. A loud cry rang out.

"Lord Above, it's an evil spirit walking!"

The affrighted serving woman screamed, blanched, and dropped her armload of linens to the stone floor before turning to bolt down the nearby stairwell.

Preece shoved Taroch back into the shadows just as a pair of muttering guards came stomping up from where she'd disappeared, grumbling about excitable womenfolk sending them on a fool's errand to ferret out a ghost.

"Ghosts and befouled spirits? Last week 'twas a spider big as your ass. She's ever complaining of something," the older man said with a scowl. Preece knew both of these men.

"Everard and Vandlest. You seek the Warmonger, returned from the dead?"

Vandlest was a spindly-legged youth, barely old enough to grow sparse whiskers on his chin. He'd delivered Preece's noontide food tray the last time Preece had stayed here at the castle, and several other times whilst Preece had been at court. The lad volunteered for the task, eager to be rewarded with another of the Warmonger's harrowing tales of bloodshed.

The youth had dreams of conquering challengers in jousts, of single-handedly defeating all other knights in a grand melee, of hearing himself called Glacian royal champion. His actual demonstrations of fighting prowess were generally restricted to bashing in empty milk pails with his guardsman's lance. And Preece had seen the occasional milk pail win.

"My knobby knees! 'Tis it really you, Sir Preece?" the boy gasped. "Aye, I remember seeing you once or twice whilst you were washing up without your dark head covering. The Warmonger's come back, eh, Everard? *Everard*?"

His stalwart elder companion seemed to possess neither the boy's curiosity nor stomach enough for clandestine meetings with evil spirits. Everard lay collapsed on the passageway floor in a dead faint. He might have cracked his noggin, but for the bed linens and toweling the maid had spilled before his arrival.

"Your cohort seems most weary," Taroch observed aloud, stepping out of the shadows behind Preece into the light beneath a wall sconce.

The lad turned and swung his lance up and to the left, breaking off its tip as he misgauged and struck the stone wall.

"You're still tugging to one side as you heft, Vandlest," Preece chided, easily disarming the foolish guard altogether.

"You don't feel dead to me," the lad noted, reaching out to squeeze Preece's right arm-which now held his broken lance. "They said you'd been beheaded in Greensward. I was awful dismal after hearing the story, I must say."

"Thank you," Preece replied. "But you know the tales about me are ever cross-told. I was taken aloft in a dragon's claws to my cousin's island realm. This is Taroch. He was just in a glorious brawl a fortnight past with two dozen Dredonians. Broke three noses, crippled a fellow for life, and maimed all the horses."

"You're jesting. He don't look-" Vandlest seemed to take his first good look at Taroch standing beside Preece. "Why, you could be two sides of the same gold piece, I vow. Cousins, say ye? Well, I can see he's cut from your same cloth, aright."

He glanced at Taroch and squared his shoulders. "You must be some tale-spinner as well, then. Sir Preece is ever one for a good fable. 'Course I ken he misthinks I'll swallow any nonsense and call it pretty. Flying off with dragons now, is it? Well, whyever not? His head's grown back onto his neck." The boy began to giggle.

Taroch glowered at him. "First Preece is a trueblooded Waniand and clan leader, as I am. He does not weave stories. What he says, is what has been."

Vandlest faltered, leaning back against the far passage wall as he gaped at Preece.

"Three dairymaids in one bed for two nights? That was *true*?"

"Aye, and King Leif wants me to examine his royal bedstead to see if it can withstand similar service. He wishes to attempt five. Noble ladies, that is," Preece added. "Not goat girls."

"Welladay! That old blotch-skin?," the lad scoffed. "Five, you say? Too bad Everard's missing this."

Taroch pretended to check on the elder guard, but merely banged his skull against the bare floor to ensure him a long rest.

"I best get on about the monarch's bed frame," Preece said at the same moment, keeping the lad's attention distracted. He held out the damaged weapon. "And you best hie to the

weapons cache for a fresh lance. You know what the captain will say, does he espy this one."

"Swive me, but I do," the lad mumbled, heading down the passageway into the gloom.

Taroch grinned and quietly cracked open the doors to the royal bedchamber. No servants loitered within. The large canopy bed had its curtains drawn shut. He slipped across the room, jerked open the velvet hangings, and had his dagger pressed to the throat of the bed's lone occupant before the terrified elderly man was fully awake.

Preece stepped over the unconscious Everard and skulked down the stairwell to where Jareth and Kluft had waited. He stationed them strategically to keep watch and disable any Glacian servants or guards who approached, then joined his cousin and King Leif in a short, tense conversation.

An hour later servants scurried about the castle waking royal council members and advisors. The captain of the guard was summoned from his garrison, looking furious at being escorted by armed Waniand warriors to the privy council chamber. Everyone Leif had summoned stood in astonished silence as he confessed to his forgery and formally relinquished the crown to the Waniands.

The Glacians immediately protested loudly and began arguing hotly.

Taroch banged the rusty sword onto the long council table, startling the entire assembly into a deadly hush.

"You will sit down and listen, or you will die where you stand." He inclined his head toward Preece and the handful of Waniands who'd invaded the keep itself. "There are more such warriors without these walls, none timid about drawing blood."

The council members sat and a short while later, voted to uphold the Waniand claim to their realm's throne.

Chapter 21

The bells of Axcroft Abbey knelled ten times in rapid succession.

Moreya laid down her quill and scrambled to her feet. She was accustomed to the bells summoning the monks to prayer, to dine, announcing funeral masses or special assemblies in the walled garden. But ten rings signaled utmost urgency. Possible danger.

Even as she hurried down the winding staircase from the dusty library, she saw robed monks abandoning their assigned chores to hie to the chapel. The monastery residents arrived in a matter of minutes, all of them wearing expressions of concern.

Abbot Zadok swept into the chapel with Brother Cosmo and two strangers in rough peasant garb hard upon his heels.

"Everyone, I have great tidings!" The abbot normally spoke in a loud voice. Today it fairly boomed off the chapel walls in the expectant hush. "As you know, following Cronel's assassination, King Leif ascended the throne of Glacia. Word has just reached us with these weary travelers that Leif has relinquished his claim to the crown. He surrendered rule to a group of Waniands, one of whom is now the ruling monarch of Glacia."

"Another new king?" someone muttered.

" *Waniands* ?"

The flabbergasted whisper rippled across the crowded chapel. Moreya felt her stomach clench. She quickly lowered herself onto a nearby pew, even as Brother Fense rushed forward. "Are you all right, Lady Preece?"

"Yes, certainly. I'm only taken aback by this astonishing news, as we all are."

Brother Fense shook his head. "This strange turn of events means more to you than it does us clerics. We were not wed to a Waniand warrior. These tidings transform your personal circumstances, dear lady. You must make a pilgrimage to Glacia and petition this new Waniand monarch. He may pardon you, even have word of your husband."

The same thought had already occurred to Moreya. But before either she or Brother Fense could form the inquiry, Abbot Zadok pointed at her and made another surprising announcement. "As you also know, we have these past months hosted a very gracious young noblewoman. I am sending my personal letter of congratulations and official greetings to the new Waniand king with Lady Preece, Brother Fense, and two other of our brethren."

This brought a murmur of approval. "Whomsoever believes himself hale enough to spend several days traveling to bring my salutations and the Lady Preece to the castle in Inner Glacia, kindly step forward."

A pair of monks shifted their gazes toward Moreya, then approached the abbot to be

recognized. The following morn, Moreya was once more part of a traveling company riding across the empty expanse known as Dredonia.

She mounted the donkey Brother Fense had saddled, grateful that no one questioned her mode of dress. She'd swathed herself beneath layers of garments: a wimple, flowing cloak, and thick scarf that nearly obscured her features. Rather too many garments for moderate weather, but she couldn't bring herself to tell the poor monks about the dragons.

The monks accompanying her and Fense were new initiates, and sufficiently nervous already about making their way safely to the Glacian border. She knew only too well their concern about marauding raiders and outlaws was not without foundation. She could hardly tell these poor unarmed men that they were in mortal danger from great winged beasts because she rode in their midst.

She could only keep silent, well buried beneath obscuring garments, and secretly pray they might safely reach their destination. What reception awaited them was yet another troubling matter.

She could only hope she'd be granted the royal pardon the abbot requested in his missive, a pardon to end her exile from Glacia. She had two terrestars left, a fact that partly befuddled her. She'd always kept the pink stone hidden amongst her garments, not with the other terrestars in the jewel chest. Which explained why Queen Vela had not confiscated it.

But Moreya had discovered a green one beside it. A peridot.

She couldn't recall ever seeing it until she'd inventoried her garments in her cell at the monastery. She'd checked her stones in Dredonia, when she'd selected the one to give Preece. She was sure the peridot had not been there, prior to her arrest.

Yet to have obtained it afterward was impossible.

She'd barely escaped the firedrake attack upon the tribunal in Greensward with her life. She'd had no brief instant in which to scoop up a new stone, had been fighting with the guards trying to break free from the moment she first saw reptiles darken the sky.

So where had this troubling green stone come from?

She gave up trying to solve that riddle, and averred to sell it as quickly as possible. Once she'd cleared her name, she could barter for her own passage to Ataraxia. She had to find out what had become of Preece. As weeks turned into months without word, Moreya perversely became all the more firmly convinced he was very much alive somewhere. She also believed, without knowing why, that circumstances somehow prevented him from sending word to her. He was enmeshed in *something*.

That same mysterious something kept him from sailing back to Greensward to confront Vela or the prince regent-who'd recently wed an Aldean woman of little comeliness and even less courtesy . . . if the rumors that had reached the market square outside Axcroft

Abbey were true.

Moreya sighed in disgust. She knew better than to trust gossip. Even the report of a Waniand ruler might be false, or a gross distortion of fact. As Moreya and the monks headed into a scraggly wooded area to encamp for the night, she warned herself not to pin too many hopes on the story of a Waniand monarchy.

Certainly she ought place no faith in Waniand largess.

Glacia's new king might be just as surly and unapproachable as Preece was toward strangers. The new ruler could refuse her and the monks audience, even refuse admittance beyond his gates. He might be a dreadful person. Or absolutely opposite in nature to her missing husband and lifemate. Who could guess?

How much of Preece's choler was inbred, how much the effect of living as an outcast mercenary?

Against her better judgment, recollection of the prejudice against Preece buoyed Moreya's heavy heart. Mayhap the new ruler would be pleased to learn that at least one Glacian had treated his kinsman with dignity and respect. He might even repay Moreya with the same and grant her petition for a royal pardon. After all, her failure to wed Prince Velansare had not been in defiance of this Waniand king, but a predecessor.

Predecessor.

That word conjured questions about King Leif, who'd held the throne only a matter of a few moons before relinquishing it to invading Waniands. From whence had such invaders come?

Waniands were rare throughout the known realms. This Moreya's father had reported, and she now knew firsthand. She'd seen how they were shunned and derided. But word of an invading army aroused suspicions. Could there be a hidden stronghold in one of some realm? Or could an unknown land be populated by the ancient race? Was it possible, then, that Preece could be amongst his own kind?

Her stubborn will took over her musings. She must close her eyes, sleep, forget him. She had enough problems of her own for the nonce, without conjecturing about his.

Yet she might as successfully imagine the ground dissolving beneath her as she slept, the earth itself swallowing her whole.

That was as likely as forgetting Preece. She could never forget.

f

Taroch scowled at Jareth. "You still have not mastered the written language?" He heard the irritation in his voice and reminded himself that they'd not inhabited this icy realm so terribly long a time. Jareth had always been a bright fellow, quick to learn new tricks. But understanding the written language of Glacians was harder than learning to speak the tongue. His cousin had proven a better weapons trainer than language tutor. Not

surprising, since Preece was first and foremost a mercenary.

Nay, *had* been a mercenary.

His sworn oath of fealty and allegiance bound him for five winters to Taroch and the needs of the new monarchy. He had no reason to sell his sword now, for Taroch had named Preece Lord High Chancellor of the Unified Glacian Realms.

A noble title, one befitting his cousin, for in truth, Preece might have had as much right to the throne as Taroch. The crucial difference between the men was Preece evinced no desire to wear the crown. He was world-weary and beyond even that . . . distanced from events in a manner Taroch couldn't quite absorb and comprehend. Physically tired? That seemed unlikely. He grew stronger and bolder with each passing day. Bored? Preece might have named any price, yet hadn't sought personal reward for himself after aiding the clans in reclaiming the throne. He hadn't even sought the chancellorship, but Taroch had insisted upon it.

Preece was the sole Waniand amongst the enclave clans who could read and speak fluent Glacian; the only Waniand known to many of the Glacian nobles; the Waniand whose dark reputation preceded him and had grown to mythic proportions since he led the assault upon the royal castle.

Taroch still reflected upon the scene in the privy council chamber that portentous night with some amazement. Several courtiers, castle guards and pages had voluntarily surrendered their weapons and wills, professing admiration for the stern Waniand who had once walked these same royal halls neath a dark cowl.

Preece had been just as stunned, for he'd never believed any Glacian regarded him with more than disgust.

More surprising still, to all of them, was the discovery that many men of Glacia, some even within its royal castle walls, now openly admitted to being partly of Waniand blood. They'd all known the races intermingled, but now they had men of flaxen and golden hair and beards with blue or grey eyes admitting they had ancestors of the ancient race. With Taroch and Preece, the former tyrant king's so-called "Royal Blade" on the dais, men were wont to stop hiding their heritage.

That Preece had won the respect of such mixed bloods still unsettled him. He knew some of the men, had ridden with them upon occasion or fought at their sides in Cronel's endless campaigns. They had not forgotten, either.

For even though now officially installed as Lord High Chancellor, many stubbornly referred to him as the Royal Blade.

The Blade was busily sharpening his broadswords and honing his skills in preparation for the upcoming tournament. Taroch would not summon Preece to read some missive from a Dredonian friar. He barked at Jareth to spell out what he could.

"If I read this aright," Jareth responded, "the monks have brought a woman here with

them. She was declared an enemy of the old king, Cronel, and was afraid to return to Glacia. But she belongs here . . . was born here . . . to the king's own ambassador. Her father is now dead. Her husband is missing and believed dead. By the monks. She does not agree." He looked up at the king and shrugged. "They want you to formally forgive her transgression."

Taroch could see no harm in that, particularly as he had a soft spot for young maidens since the birth of his infant daughter. Vulpina would want him to grant the lady's request. "I will see them. Have the woman and her clerics brought to the throne chamber."

Taroch had ceased using the old marble-floored chamber where the obese polydact had conducted his audiences and hearings. First Preece had such a powerful aversion to the room, he'd convinced Taroch there was wisdom in altering much of how the kingdom would be ruled-beginning from the very chamber wherein the throne sat. Now it loomed before the great hearth, in the chamber that was formerly the royal hall.

The previous throne room was now the private chamber of the royal family. Vulpina liked the marble floors, and was pleased when a screen was erected to cordon off a nursery for their newborn child.

The rooms occupied by both fat Cronel and lazy Leif now belonged to the man who'd wrested power away from them. To the victorious Warmonger had gone the spoils. The High Chancellor lived in a suite truly fit for a king. Taroch smiled, amused again by his own wry sense of justice.

Whatever this ambassador's daughter had done to cause her fall from grace with a predecessor could only heighten her esteem in Taroch's eyes. He liked her already, and he hadn't even met her. Still, he wouldn't allow her or the clerics to sense easy victory. If he'd learned anything from his cousin, Glacia's redoubtable Warmonger, it was the value of showing the world only part of the whole truth at any given time.

f

When the page appeared at the gate telling the guards to admit their party, Moreya's knees nearly buckled with mingled terror and relief.

The new king would see them. She would have a chance to plead her case.

During the past few days of travel through Inner Glacia, she'd heard many tavern tongues, and the tales they wagged over had Moreya quaking to her very core. According to the local populace, the band of Waniands who'd taken the Glacian crown were led by a warrior raised in the realm. A man once known to the monarch he ultimately betrayed in an act of brazen defiance. A Waniand condemned to die for that defiance, yet who'd escaped to wreak black vengeance.

The dark knight, they called him. Warmonger, the Royal Blade.

It was unclear how he'd amassed a Waniand army or financed a revolt. All anyone could swear was that he'd either escaped the grave, or risen from it-to snatch the crown right

off King Leif's head in his own royal bedchamber! Only the Waniand of the dark cowl would be so insolent, so successful in his mockery.

It sounded just like Preece.

What did not sound like him in the least was the rumor he'd gone from leading the insurrection to donning courtly robes and serving as the new high chancellor. Moreya knew from her father's explanations that the high chancellor was the most powerful and respected judge in the land.

Preece threw his fist and broke furniture. She could not imagine him silently nodding and assessing the claims of various petitioners, imagine him adjudicating complex issues or resolving conflicts without violence. Mayhap all of this was but a case of mistaken identity. Hadn't Preece said all men of his race looked essentially alike?

Not at all certain the answer could be that simple, Moreya swallowed and trailed after Brother Fense. The page escorted the group to the great hall. Moreya remembered the chamber well, but now it held fewer long trestle tables and housed the intricately-carved Glacian throne. She moved closer to study the carvings.

"Did you know these symbols were carved by my forefathers?" a male voice abruptly inquired.

Moreya stopped staring at the elaborate chair and gazed instead at the man standing behind it.

Lord of Heaven and Earth itself, but he resembled Preece!

She had tried to prepare herself for whatever she might find here. She'd bolstered her resolve with pragmatic reasoning. But reason was no proof against the vision before her eyes. Another saintly, breathtakingly beautiful male face. Pale blue eyes, a straight nose, high cheekbones, long argent locks. A combination so like Preece's, Moreya could only stare.

Brother Fense discerned the reason for her silence. He stepped forward to cup her elbow. "Your Majesty," he said, bowing quickly, "Lady Preece has been in exile for long months. She has awaited news of her husband, to no avail. Being faced with the noticeable resemblance between you and her missing spouse, she is--"

"I resemble a man who abandoned his mate?"

"Lifemate," Moreya heard herself mumble. "But he did not abandon me, Sire. He was taken away by . . ." Nay, she could not tell him that! She must appear witless enough, without launching into an incomprehensible tale of a shape-changed wizard.

She started fresh. "He was captured and taken to a distant realm. He was also banished from this realm, as I have been. We displeased King Cronel by ignoring his edict that I wed Prince Velansare of Greensward. I married and became lifemate to Preece, instead."

The young king barked a command in a strange tongue, and two more tall blond

warriors appeared. They conferred with the monarch in hushed tones. There seemed little point to their hushed whispering, since Moreya and the monks could not understand their language. The page abruptly gestured for them to follow him.

"You are to follow him and await my instructions," the king said. Then he turned and quit the chamber.

Moreya threw Fense a questioning look. The monk shrugged and inclined his head toward the other clerics, already hastening after the royal page. "Our visit has either stirred unusual interest or unwittingly insulted the monarch. We can only wait, and pray 'tis not the latter."

Moreya nodded and fought to regain her composure. Even after hearing a Waniand warrior was the new Glacian ruler, she hadn't been prepared for the sight of Taroch. He stood so tall, was so pale and well favored-nay, the bitter truth was he so closely resembled Preece she'd been temporarily stunned. And was all the more disheartened to realize that large numbers of these handsome people had been deliberately slaughtered.

By tyrants like Cronel.

She trailed behind Brother Fense, not seeing the back of his dun woolen robe. Ignoring details of the solar in which she and the monks had been left to wait. Her vision turned inward, recalling the last time she'd gazed upon Preece. Beaten and chained, humiliated, his features all but unrecognizable after severe beatings and torture. Cruelty ordered by Cronel.

Once she had lived such a sheltered life, she'd envisioned all men to be like her father . . . genial, effusive, open-spirited. But the girl who'd naively believed in human kindness had learned much darker truths about the ways of men. That they would maim and kill in pursuit of power. That they could desire other males above females. That they were capable of utter devastation, wicked plots, lies, abuse, viciousness she never would have suspected possible.

A sudden chill stole over Moreya. Their audience with King Taroch had ended abruptly the moment she announced she'd wed and been lifemated to Preece. The king knew something significant. The chill deepened as she realized what had escaped her earlier notice.

The king's throne was located now in the great hall, not in the marble-floored throne room where she'd first met Preece. Taroch had studied them with keen interest lighting his intelligent eyes. Blue eyes several shades deeper in hue than Preece's. She'd seen intelligence and curiosity in the new king's eyes. Not haughty disdain, no definite air of superiority. The feeling here inside this keep was formal and disciplined as ever, but not vainglorious.

Things had definitely changed in Glacia.

And mentally reviewing the list of sins men might commit, she recalled one which

would be difficult for the new ruler. He was Waniand; therefore, he would not speak falsely. Preece had lied only the once, with Moreya witnessing his prevarication about raping her. He'd told the bitter truth to the queen in his secret message.

And now, after so many months of confused and lonesome silence, Moreya feared she would have her answer as to what had become of her missing husband.

The man who'd wed her to spare royal lives.

Even though she'd told herself a dozen times or more he'd likely died from his injuries, or chided herself that their escape plan had been ill-conceived-with far better odds for failure than success-even though after all that had befallen her, she'd be a fool to even *care* what had happened to the bastard called Preece the Warmonger, she still needed to know.

Despite repeated appeals to sanity and reason, despite the need to mend her womanly pride, she had now glimpsed his brethren. Seen again the ethereal, powerful, entrancing Waniand physical beauty. And remembered. Too much, too well.

The pang of loss was fresh and raw once more.

f

Taroch paced impatiently, irritated that his lifemate seemed preoccupied by the nursing demands of their greedy infant, instead of focused upon the fact that they faced a personal crisis. "Vulpina, you told me Zade was positive he has a lifemate. You yourself insisted this, more than once. In all this time, he never appeared to go into rut, although he gave me personal reasons which might explain his difference from the rest of our males."

"Yes, and we cannot rush to take this woman's words as fact. That she comes with a band of clerics proves naught, for all might be no better than troubadours with costumes and clever tongues. Word spreads quickly after a rebellion. Always with change come those who seek to profit by it, oft claiming to have been wronged in the past."

"So you assert she misspeaks."

Vulpina swaddled the babe and tucked her into the center of their wide bed. She scowled at Taroch. "I merely preach caution. The tale of your cousin's exploits is hardly fresh. Anyone might have heard it. Have other nobles not traveled here to meet with you and your chancellor, spurring fresh rumors that might have spread into Dredonia and beyond?"

Taroch hated to admit that often Vulpina was more sensible than he was. Yet that practical side to her nature was what caused him to offer her lifemate status years before. She had the requisite ability to stir his blood, but nice asscheeks alone were not enough. He'd wanted a mate he could rely upon.

Vulpina was sensual and sharp-witted as her forest vixen namesakes. Wily and

bewitching. He spoke quietly now and waited for her reaction.

"I've sent them to the solar annexing the hall."

Vulpina offered her warmest smile, the one that said he was not such a thick-headed dolt, after all. "The one with the secret viewing hole. Very good. Find Preece and have him take a look. One glance will provide the answer to your dilemma."

"Aye." Taroch quickly crossed to their bedchamber door and was about to exit the room when he heard her voice, slow and thoughtful, behind him. He paused, listening intently. At such times Vulpina could offer gems of wisdom.

"He has repeatedly denied the existence of a female in his past. Is she shrewish or somehow displeasing to the eye? Would she shame him?"

Taroch stopped to consider. The woman was not of their race, but he'd accepted any mate Preece would have taken would not be Waniand. He'd told Preece as much, knowing the man had lived in virtual seclusion here in Glacia afore, the rarest of Waniands amongst foreign races. A pariah.

The woman today had spoken courteously, dropped her gaze in appropriate humility at times, yet been brave enough to meet Taroch's royal stare and hold it when directly questioned. He'd seen no evidence of a shrewish nature.

As to the question of form and face, how should he reply? Honestly, as ever. "I could see only her basic features. She is swathed in bulky garments, her hair modestly covered. Her eyes are violet. Her lone remarkable offering. Her other features appear consistently balanced. Mayhap she is grossly fat beneath the muffling."

Vulpina tittered. A musical sound. Taroch smiled even as he reproached her. "We must not laugh at my cousin's embarrassment over a fleshly lifemate. Some warriors recommend humping overlarge buttocks. Some say the rutting is-"

He wisely did not complete that statement. Vulpina's eyes had darkened threateningly. She was an extremely jealous female. The one quality undesirable in a queen. "I must find my cousin," he ended lamely.

"Do that."

But instead of leaving, he abruptly pulled Vulpina into his arms and gave her a hot, brazen kiss. "My blood warms when you give me that fiercely possessive look. I will be in rut again soon, do you gaze upon me so."

Vulpina growled and nipped at the soft flesh of his throat.

Moments later, the king went off in search of his cousin, heading first for the weapons yard. Preece spent hours in unrelenting arms practice. Many of the other warriors sparred with him regularly and flourished under his instruction, but none had bested the erstwhile Warmonger yet. Privately, Taroch was slightly abashed at having a Lord High Chancellor who spent most of his time shirtless, reeking of sweat and dried blood.

Still, the upcoming tournament at least had brought a spark of interest to Preece's eyes. He seemed otherwise steeped in ennui. But the unexpected arrival of a lifemate-if, indeed, that's what the female was-must terminate Preece's cool apathy. Few things could snap a warrior's control like a woman.

Mayhap her appearance was a blessing, Taroch thought with a grin as he beckoned to a scullery maid. "Take his customary draught of cool water to my cousin in the tilt yard, and tell him I need to see him at once." The girl hurried off, her backside twitching beneath her skirts.

Oh yes, Taroch would be going into full rut any day now. He could already feel the distinct tingling in his loins. The thought of his cousin succumbing likewise amused him. Preece had been able to snort in derision as the other Waniands around him itched and howled after females.

But if this female truly was Preece's lifemate . . .

Taroch's smile widened. His cousin had quite a surprise waiting.

Chapter 22

Preece was actually glad Taroch had summoned him.

After the insurrection and coronation, Preece had agreed to take the position as Lord High Chancellor only so long as Taroch also allowed him to serve as military advisor.

In Preece's hard-won opinion, years of Waniand oppression and scorn could not be erased merely by the reinstatement of a Waniand upon the Glacian throne. Indeed, Preece feared Taroch would not long be able to hold it, unless they proved to the populace that these young fearsome Waniands would be neither defeated nor ignored. Preece had recommended a royal display of power and unity.

The council members decided upon a grand tournament, which would be held in less than a sennight.

Preece had been practicing nearly every waking hour the past weeks, yet it seemed his instincts and reflexes would not cooperate to best serve him when he needed them most.

He'd been troubled again by the erotic dreams. He'd diligently spent hours with a sword in each hand, parrying, thrusting, feinting, yet a vague unease distracted him. Just enough to be lethal. A warrior had to keep his mind focused, his thoughts solely on the foe at hand. He could not let his mind wander to night demons and sensual pleasures. He must not spill his seed, for it weakened his sinews and heart, wasted his most valuable resource.

He needed to be strong, to fight demon visions with his mind and other warriors with his body.

By Satan's forked tail, but Preece was glad he'd never spoken of his strange visions. Had Lockram been with him still, Preece might have told his longtime friend about the dreams. But he could not admit his deficiency to Taroch or any of the other Waniands. How could the men follow him, continue to train with him, if they knew his wits were hopelessly scrambled?

He gratefully drank the cold water the servant girl offered, wiped his torso with his soiled tunic, and donned the chancellor's robe the maid held out to him. Preece inwardly hated being clad in the pretentious garment, but Taroch was exceedingly stubborn about his chief advisor looking the part of a noble sage. Preece snorted as he slipped the robe over his head and strode quickly toward the keep. Taroch was fool enough still to value sages. He'd never placed utter faith and trust in one like Bourke.

"There you are. We have visitors," Taroch offered in a low voice, tossing his arm around Preece's shoulders.

The vague, niggling unease surged threefold. Taroch used that brotherly gesture when determined to sway Preece to his way of thinking on some topic or another . . . or when he sought to stress their kinship for the benefit of strangers. His words and manner now

suggested a bit of both.

So the opinion of their visitors mattered, on some personal level that could ultimately also matter to Preece. Who the devil were these strangers, then? Fighting men from Dredonia? Emissaries from the northern provinces?

"I've had a page show them into the solar next to the great hall. They are clerics from Dredonia . . . from a place called Axcroft. Their superior sent me a letter of welcome and goodwill. He also sent a woman with a petition for clemency. She has been with the monks for long months under political asylum. She feared Cronel."

Preece grunted and shrugged the arm off his shoulders. That a female should have sought a haven from the late bastard polydact was unsurprising. "Cronel misused females, particularly those of other regions."

"Nay, this one was banished by Cronel. This is her rightful birthplace."

Again Preece gave a grunt of disinterest. Normally *he* should have heard the woman's plea, in the course of his duties as chancellor. Was Taroch chastising him for spending so much time at weapons practice?

"I devote hours to arms practice because I'm to serve as your champion in the tournament," Preece reminded his cousin. "Do not lapse into complacency. Your foes will try to defeat me, as the first step in besmearing your right to the crown. Do not let carvings in the throne falsely assure that your place upon it is secure."

"I know you speak the truth," Taroch replied, pausing in his sure strides. His voice dropped. "The woman claims Cronel banished her for refusing to wed Velansare of Greensward. She avers she took you to husband, instead, and proclaims herself your chosen lifemate. She is a Yune, I believe."

Preece choked on his own tongue, momentarily unable to think of a response to such an outrageous statement from the king's lips.

Taroch scowled at him. "We spoke long ago of the possibility you had taken a mate not of our kind. Is her race why you've disavowed such a union? I would know from your own lips, First Preece."

A direct blow from the strongest steel would not have sent Preece reeling as Taroch's words did. Some Yune bitch claimed to be his lifemate? Of all the possible races, a *Yune*, the most sought-after of all females?

"I disavow such a union because none exists! I've not taken a lifemate, on my sword and honor, Taroch. How can some bitch dare to-"

"Becalm your ire," Taroch chided. "I had to ask. Vulpina warned the girl's claim might be naught more than skillful weaving of local gossip and a desire for coin or some sort of recompense from an ignorant new monarch. The clerics with the Yune appear genuine, but I cannot be certain until I've sent word to their superior and receive his

answer. Look you through yon peephole and tell me if you know this female. Mayhap she has reason to seek reprisal for some slight or past encounter."

Preece could scarce believe it, the utter audacity! For some lightskirt to pose amongst clerics, and make such a boldly false claim! He pressed his face to the wall and strained to catch a glimpse of the strangers in the adjoining chamber. He espied one monk, two. Another was speaking in low, soothing tones to someone he couldn't see. If that damned fool pouring wine would get on with it, and move aside . . .

Just then the man did, and Preece went granite still.

The harlot was . . . He rubbed his eyes, pressed his face to the wall again and peered closer. His mind was certainly playing a cruel jest on him now, for at first he'd thought-
Satan's prick!

She was completely, chastely clothed, the only skin visible being the center of her face. She looked up at the monk and Preece saw her eyes. His mind screamed. His body tensed in immediate reaction. He tried to deny the faint nimbus of light around her. Light that could not come from the solar window, as she sat in the furthest place from the only source of daylight. Light like that which suffused her could not come from the window, in any case. Ambient daylight 'twas not *purple* .

Helplessly, Preece began to stammer that he did not recognize the woman. "I know not why she'd come here . . . why she would say-I can put no name to that face," he choked out. His knees felt perilously close to giving out beneath his weight.

He could barely make out Taroch's grim visage beside him. It was as though gazing upon the purplish glow surrounding the demon in the next chamber had robbed the hall of its own illumination. Preece was in a dark tunnel, gasping, lost, clutching at his vitals in terror.

The woman who haunted his erotic swevens had now invaded his waking hours. He'd lost the very last of his wits. He was doomed. He ought not to fight at his peak performance level, but allow some lucky knight to put him out of his misery during the tournament. At least he could suffer a glorious defeat, not allow the others to discover the miserable truth.

The Ataraxians must have put some secret curse on Preece's male parts, only pretended to heal him. His groin swelled even as Preece closed his eyes and fought to sponge the gleaming she-devil from his mind's eye. The tip of his man lance threatened to bend and snap off as young Vandlast's lance had broken in the stone passageway. Or mayhap Preece's lance would make a new peephole.

"Are you unwell?" There was genuine concern in Taroch's voice.

Preece quickly seized on the offered excuse. "I did not sleep soundly yestereve. With all the weapons practice, I am overtired with a pounding in my skull. Not so unusual, since my injury last year. A few hours alone in my chambers. I shall be fine by time to sup this

evening," Preece muttered, departing as quickly as his tottering legs would allow.

He could not collapse here in front of Taroch.

He could not admit he'd seen a glimpse of hell.

He had to stay strong, defeat all comers in the tournament. He had to secure the crown that now sat so precariously upon his cousin's brow. Waniands had not survived these long decades, come such a distance, forsaken everything to take back the ruling status that was rightfully theirs only to have a lone madman among them jeopardize their cause with his idiot's ravings.

Preece had to forget he'd ever seen the bedamned witch.

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"Kindly forgive the delay," Taroch requested as he handed one of the monks a sealed parchment. "I've penned a missive to your abbot. I ask that you deliver it with all haste and send back his answer."

The monk nodded, then bowed. The other men likewise made gestures of obeisance. All save the one called Fense, who lifted the woman's hand to his arm and drew her forward. "Your Highness? About Lady Preece's pardon?"

"Ah. I'm glad you asked," Taroch replied in half sincerity. He would grant the political pardon, but he did not relish discussion of the more sensitive subject that would surely be broached. He poured himself a goblet of wine and pulled a signed writ from his tunic.

"This is a royal pardon, excusing any and all transgressions against former rulers of this kingdom. I have no reason to support Cronel's edicts. The lady was born here, and as I'm given to understand by my privy council, her father had a long record of service to the realm. She may reside anywhere within the Unified Glacian Realms she wishes."

She lifted her gaze to his face and Taroch immediately reassessed his opinion of this stranger. He'd told Vulpina the girl was not ill favored. That mayhap her form was too fat, or even too thin. That she was ordinary.

But a courtier had whispered that she was Yune, that always they were willowy and thin, considered by men of all races highly desirable bedmates.

Now Taroch saw gossip in this case ran truer than his initial impression. The daughter of the former ambassador was anything but ordinary. Deep pain welled in the depths of her violet irises. A strangely urgent flush lit her peachy cheeks, and her teeth nibbled at a lower lip that looked sweet as a ripe summer plum.

Only the veriest fool would denounce such a beauty and bar her from rolling in his bedsheets.

And while Preece was unfathomably stubborn, Taroch knew the harsh warrior was no fool. Something was amiss here; Taroch could taste it.

"Sire," the woman said at length, "I do not know whence you came before your arrival here in Glacia. I heard someone proclaim you were from a land near the place called Ataraxia."

"An islet not far from its main shoreline, aye."

"Have you not heard of a warrior like yourself called Preece, the Warmonger?"

Taroch silently cursed his bloodlines. At this moment, he would open the royal coffers to be able to speak a simple, soft-hearted untruth. But he could not lie outright, so part of the truth would have to do.

"I have heard of many such men. In our tongue, the clan name Preece means 'he who makes battles.' There are several warriors here of that clan. None, however, professes to be missing a lifemate. I am sorry I cannot aid you."

The last words were truest of all.

Taroch inwardly winced when he saw the effect they had upon her.

Twin beacons of faint hope had lit her amazing, gemlike eyes. Now they'd gone dark and empty. He could offer no explanation, for in truth, he did not understand the mystery here himself.

He was certain she referred to his cousin, First Preece. He felt it with a certainty that seemed to come from deep within his bones and sinews. He would wager every jewel in his crown there was a connection between his recalcitrant cousin and this beauty.

Yet Preece had steadfastly denied knowledge of her, insisted he could put no name to her face. And Preece was trueblooded as Taroch himself was, son of King Tal. As incapable of deliberately speaking falsely as Taroch or any of the high clansmen were.

Besides the fact that a trueblooded high clan warrior would never forsake his lifemate. To do so brought an immediate death sentence and every warrior knew it.

A single teardrop glistened on the woman's face as she dropped into a curtsy. "Thank you, Your Majesty. A long and peaceful reign. I . . . Fense? I-"

"Yes, madam. I understand." The little monk hurried her out of the solar.

One of his brethren reached for the pardon. "Brother Fense is extremely fond of the Yune. She has been a boon to us, sewing and copying texts. She told us of how a monk long dead had encountered proud Waniand rulers in this realm some centuries past. I think discovering that passage encouraged her hopes her husband had somehow survived. And Fense married them at an inn, knew the fellow himself, you see, so he also prayed she might be reunited-"

"What is this? Why did no one tell me this afore now?" Taroch demanded.

The monk dropped to his knees. "I'm sorry, Your Highness. We meant no disrespect. You yourself said that no man here was missing his wife, so-"

"I do not care what I said!" Taroch roared. "I do not always know what I'm talking about, a failing I endeavor to rise above. Fetch that fellow back here without delay!"

Long moments passed, then the one called Fense came scraping and bowing back into the solar. "You wished to speak to me, Your Royal Highness?"

"That other monk claims you performed a marriage between the girl and a Waniand called Preece. When and where was this, and why did you not offer proof of this union?"

The monk was young, despite his balding state, Taroch realized, as the wiry little fellow straightened his spine and let the hood of his robe fall back. "It was a year or more gone, in Dredonia. There was no document signed at the time, due to unusual circumstances, but I dutifully registered the marriage in the records at our abbey. To be forthright, Sire, I did not expect we would find the lady's errant husband."

Ah, so he knew something was awry with the union! "Why is that?" Taroch snapped.

"The man was condemned to die. According to Lady Preece, he was spared beheading by a firedrake, who flew him to distant tropics. I am genuinely fond of the lady, Sire, but I am also aware that such a fantastical tale can hardly be true. Mayhap the man lost his head upon the block that day," the cleric mumbled with a sad shrug, "and she cannot bear to accept it. I sent missives to this land she speaks of, Ataraxia, but received no sensible answer, merely some rambling missive about a golden fellow and boars in a forest. I fear her husband perished. Mayhap in time she will come to accept it."

But she should not, Taroch silently protested, for it was untrue. He started to form a carefully-worded reply when the cleric spoke again.

"And, in truth, Sire, we did not expect that you would give much credence to her plea of marriage. I was told by her bridegroom-a most fearsomely disagreeable, if handsome fellow, whose comeliness I now see is universal amongst your kind-that you do not acknowledge our sacred bond of matrimony. *Marriage*," he clarified.

"We do not feel bound to honor such rituals, but neither do we disrespect the traditions of other races. The woman claims dual status: both wife and lifemate. Lifemating requires a . . . private ritual performed where none other can witness or later speak of it. Would the female and the Waniand man you speak of have had the opportunity to perform such an intimate act?"

The little monk flushed to the tips of his ears. "They had a chamber above-stairs. I slept in the common room below and left at daybreak. They had not come out of the chamber when I departed, but I believe their union was consummated. It is the way of our people also, for physical intimacy to follow ceremonial vows."

Copulating was copulating-no matter the formal speech used to describe it. Taroch felt the net around him close and grow denser. "The hour grows late. Your party may remain here in the castle this night. A suitable chamber shall be prepared for the lady. After breaking your fast on the morrow, I command you carry my message to your abbot and

make a copy of the marriage record of the man called Preece."

The monk bowed and hurried out, only to return a scant moments later. "I humbly beseech your pardon, King Taroch. My brethren from Axcroft are here and grateful for your hospitality. However, the lady was overset and has already fled the castle grounds."

Taroch dismissed the monk, and gave orders for a page to send riders after the woman. He commanded them to fetch her back, could they manage the feat without creating a public disruption in the outlying town, or follow to learn her whereabouts. The young king stalked off to his chambers for another discussion with Vulpina.

The debate and confusion over marriage and lifemates had given him a ferocious headache. Which eased only marginally by supper in the great hall.

Taroch and Vulpina had just convened the evening meal when Preece entered and took his accustomed seat at the right hand of the king. "You are hale once more?" Taroch asked, tearing the leg off a stuffed pheasant to pass it to his cousin.

Preece still looked oddly pale and sweaty. For a man who'd been resting quietly in his chambers alone, he had dark circles beneath his eyes and seemed edgy. He'd just taken a bite of the bird when the clutch of monks entered and were shown to a trestle table. "I thought they'd have gone by now," Preece said, dropping the leg back to his plate.

"Fense," the king called loudly.

One young monk glanced at the head table and gaped in astonishment. He rushed forward and extended a hand toward Preece. "You are proof of the power of faith, good and noble sir! I told your monarch I'd been certain you were dead, but my fervent pleas were answered."

Preece frowned, but shook the cleric's hand briefly. "I cannot imagine that you should care, but I accept your good wishes on behalf of my cousin, the king."

Taroch glared at him. "Preece! You border on discourtesy."

"How so? A stranger professes to prayer on my behalf. I accepted his hand in friendship. What more must I do? I did not ask him to pray for me."

"Are you saying you do not know this holy man, either?"

Preece hesitated to reply, thinking his supposed restorative nap had only set him further adrift. He'd lain hot and hard and sweating in his bed, able to think of nothing but the freakish appearance of the purple demon here at the keep. Amid a band of religious men. And the strange tale that she avowed carnal knowledge of him, knowledge supposedly sanctioned by a recognized union.

Oh-ho, they'd had carnal experiences aplenty, he and the female demon! But only in his wicked visions.

He cleared his throat and made a safe observation. "You say he's Dredonian. I passed

through that miserable realm more times than I care to count. Our paths may have crossed."

"Indeed they did, at a tavern operated by a man who seemed a friend of yours," the monk pronounced. "Tiversham, I believe his name was."

"Tiver *shem*," Preece corrected. Why did the mere mention of that name start up that niggling itch again? That maddening sensation there was something critical Preece should know . . . He tried again, as ever when the itch struck, but couldn't lay a finger upon a specific occurrence or face. "I've stayed in his tavern many times."

"But you were only wed there once," the monk argued. "By me. To the Yunish woman who was here earlier. A rough place for such a ceremony, that. Your cohorts were none too pleased by your choice of wife, as I recall. Well, mayhap the drunken fellow had no strong feelings either way, but the other one . . . that young one, with the unruly brown curls, was wroth with us all. For good reason, it seems, when I later learned your act of defiance brought about arrest for the lot of you."

Preece bolted to his feet and speared the fellow's woolen robe to the table with his meat dagger. "You pious little fool. Do you seek my liver on a lance, enter the tournament Thursday next, like any other challenger. You defile this hall with your slanderous lies."

"But-"

"Return to your chambers, cousin," came Taroch's soft warning. "At once."

Preece was only too glad to oblige. He couldn't have eaten another morsel with that bald-faced liar in their midst. A marriage ceremony at Tivershem's! Any fighting man knew the place. Tivershem poured watery ale liberally, leased out serving wenches for a pittance, and hosted the dregs of every realm's population. His customers were cutthroats, mercenaries, thieves. He operated an alehouse one step shy of a brothel-not a *chapel* !

Preece stormed into his chamber and began ripping the linens from his bed, flinging his belongings to the polished floors, and cursing fluently in a smattering of different tongues. He'd never been so foully frustrated in his life. It was all he could do not to take up both swords propped in a corner and slay both the evil sorcerer posing as a monk and his gullible cousin. Mayhap there would be an end to his madness, did he eliminate the fools and enemies pressing him from every side.

"Cousin, try to calm yourself and listen to us," Taroch said, gesturing toward the little monk, who'd accompanied him.

Preece snarled and grabbed for his broadsword. When he turned around, Taroch held a short sword against Preece's belly. "I asked you as your kinsman. Now I command you as your sovereign. Disarm yourself and sit!"

His chest heaving, Preece perched on the edge of his bed, glaring hotly at the pair of them. Why hadn't Taroch simply slit his throat while he slept? Once Preece had secured

the keep, Taroch had no further need of him. The post of high chancellor was a tawdry jest, and both of them knew it. This heinous pretense galled and deeply infuriated Preece.

To cut a man during a fair fight was one thing; to slowly drive him mad while pretending friendship, quite another.

"I do not know this stranger," Preece seethed. "And he cannot know my face, for I kept it covered." He glowered at his cousin. "You know as much."

"But not then," the monk smoothly disagreed. "Moreya Fa Preece abhorred that you'd done so before. She spoke of cruel rumors that you were deformed, some ghastly misshapen fiend, but-"

"*She's* the fiend, and you're in league with her! I never set eyes upon her afore today. I have no wife."

Taroch spoke quietly. "You know I can learn the truth easily enough, Warmonger. I have only to give her royal and clan permission to speak your sacred name. If she can, that will serve as proof enough. You would not tell any but your chosen lifemate the sacred name first spoken by Queen Sarent. The name was part of the prophecy. I am the only living Waniand who knows it."

"I have lost my mind." Preece announced it, clearly and succinctly, then waited to see what the two men would do. If gaining such an admission was the final pronouncement that would bring about Preece's demise, Taroch now had what he wanted. Before a credible witness.

"Er, methinks nay," the cleric said with a cough. "Not lost, so much as had it beclouded." Both Waniands turned hot eyes upon him. He made a helpless gesture towards Preece and spoke again, with increasing certainty. "From what I understand, you truly were about to be executed when firedrakes attacked. Somehow one of the reptiles took you far away, to a realm across the Great Seas."

"Ataraxia," Preece verified, tilting his head to indicate the king. "Where he and the others had an enclave on a small island. That is how I met my cousin. My father and his were brothers, offspring uniting previously separate clan lines."

"Lady Moreya says you'd been tortured and beaten afore your scheduled beheading."

"Cronel and I were never on friendly terms."

"He was beaten badly," Taroch confirmed, nodding. He appeared deep in contemplation.

"Considering a chain of such extraordinary events, I do not find it strange you would forget having met one unassuming monk," the cleric asserted with a humble smile. "One can even excuse your lapse of memory as it extends to the young woman. Torture, shame, the misery of such nearness to death can be buried away, deep within a man's mind. So deep he cannot easily recall it . . . or his own recent past. Might that not

explain his lack of recollection, Sire?"

Taroch studied the monk a moment longer, then glanced over at Preece. "Indeed, you may have hit upon the root of our problem. I could not fathom how both could speak truthfully, yet remain so far apart in their assertions. I believe you must grant the lady private audience, Preece. That is the only equitable way to settle this dispute."

"Taroch, she may have come seeking coin or the prestige of an acclaimed union to your high chancellor. Demote me to common knight and see how quickly she makes her retreat."

"Actually," Taroch sighed, "she's already departed these walls. I tried suggesting that many men here are of the clan Preece. I did not admit any was referred to particularly as Warmonger, but I suspect she knows better."

Preece was burning to ask the monk if he'd noticed a purplish halo about the female in question. If she'd ever spoken of . . .

"Did she reveal details of our supposed union? Did she, a proper noblewoman, perhaps bemoan consummation of the ceremony you say you performed? Accuse me of mistreating her, subjecting her to carnal excesses which might have driven her to confess her sins to you?"

Taroch's eyes widened. The outward appearance of congeniality vanished from his features. Clearly Preece's questions offended the king. Good. Preece was insulted that Taroch seemed willing to accept the assertions of the monks and the woman. Yet they'd brought no proof. And now it seemed Taroch suspected his cousin was a witless buffoon.

Of a certainty Preece could not openly admit to engaging in depraved fantasies about a glowing woman with silky violet-hued fur covering her-

"She seldom spoke of you," the cleric replied with dignity, "except to ask if I'd received word from Ataraxia that you were safe. She often sat in the abbey garden, gazing at the night sky and the stars. She wondered if you felt the same sadness and longing. She never spoke directly of marital intimacy between you, yet I believe she loves you as only a wife can love her husband."

Preece cleared his throat. Certain words and phrases he'd heard troubled him. The mention of the girl staring up at the stars at night . . . the term "love." Why such points should deepen his distrust and unease, he couldn't readily explain. But he wanted to understand more of what this holy stranger seemed to know that he himself did not.

"How does a wife show evidence of this deep feeling? By sharing her flesh and bearing a man's offspring? Has she birthed my get, then?"

"Nay, by the Good Lord. 'Twould only have increased her hardship."

Taroch spoke now. "We do not have a word in our tongue for this term you use, to 'love.' To what does it specifically refer?"

"We use that word to indicate many forms of endearing attachment. I feel a great love for my chosen work, for the holy faith. A man feels love for his native land, his people, his kith and kin. Between a husband and wife, it often takes the form you describe. Physical desire."

"Then you believe I mounted her, but do not know her?" Preece rose and moved to confront the cleric.

"First Preece-

"Nay, Tarochin, I asked *him* ," Preece snarled, pointing at the solemn little cleric. "He says he was there, that his words joined us before the Creator. In the way of Glacians, we would next have joined our flesh. In the way of Waniands, we would have joined our flesh yet again and performed the lifemating ritual."

"You took her alone into a bedchamber," the monk replied. "It stormed fiercely that night. The tavern was filled with the sounds of snoring travelers and I sleep heavily. I cannot claim I saw or heard what took place abovestairs." He paused and smiled indulgently at Preece. "However, the lady has very rare violet-blue eyes and tresses. She is among the sweetest females I have ever known. I am sure you would have found husbandly duty no hardship."

A hot spurt of jealous fury told Preece what all the theories and rationalizations had not: He'd tasted her flesh, reveled in it. Not just in dreams, but in truth. He hated the thought that any other male knew of those unique tresses. In his night visions-memories?-he'd felt them wrapped like silken threads around his naked chest and stiff cock.

He nearly groaned aloud at the very thought.

Taroch folded his arms. "There is a record of the marriage at the monastery. I've asked Brother Fense to make a copy. And I've sent someone after the girl. I shall ask for your sacred name. We will put this matter to rights with all due haste."

"You reign supreme," Preece said.

The cleric shuffled out of the chamber, Taroch on his heels. But Taroch paused in the chamber doorway and turned back to Preece. "This has troubled you for some time, I think. You could have confided in me, cousin."

"What? That your chief advisor, your Lord High Chancellor has a lifemate he no longer knows? If indeed she is my lifemate and bride, *I denounced her* , Taroch."

"I am the only one of the blood who knows that," Taroch replied softly.

"So you will begin a just reign by hiding my sacrilege?"

"I will do what I must. For the nonce, I must unearth the truth. There may yet be some mistake. As you have said, and Vulpina cautions, we cannot take the word of strangers in such matters. The realm is yet rife with rumor and murmurs of potential unrest. Which is why we have a tournament to stage . . . and win."

"Aye. Good night."

Preece stared thoughtfully at the closed double doors after the king departed, reluctantly considering he might have been looking at this from the wrong angle. Taroch's concern proved this was most likely not a personal attack against Preece himself. More likely, Preece was a pawn in some larger scheme. A plot to discredit Taroch and Waniand leadership.

Forsooth, that was far more likely than a warrior losing his memory because he'd been tortured. Waniands did not buckle and crumple from physical pain and abuse. They were raised to expect and welcome it. 'Twas part of their nature to be fierce and ruthless, to expect like treatment by their enemies in return.

And Preece knew far better than his kinsmen how sentiments ran here. That Waniands had rightfully ruled here for long ages did not mean all accepted Waniands holding reign again now. Their arcane ways were misunderstood and still gave many Glacians pause. What they did not understand, humans often feared. What they could not defeat outright-like an armed Waniand in direct combat-they sought to undermine.

Was it not significant that whoever plotted against the king sought to drive the king's advisor mad with sexual visions? The sexuality of Waniand males had ever been at the core of Glacian and Dredonian hatred toward them.

Preece stretched out on his bed, actually welcoming sleep. Let the sensual delights come. He no longer feared the woman . . . and that's what she was, not Lucifer's sister come to steal his soul. She was human, thus could be defeated.

Whatever false documents she and her clerics produced, it would not gain them what they truly sought. Did she try tears, drag out some bastard get, scrape and beg, 'twould gain her naught. He would get to the root of her duplicity. There had to be an explanation. Some evil spell or trickery, and Preece would find it, seek whatever method necessary to destroy her and the men she conspired with.

Aye, he would destroy her.

She would not break him.

Chapter 23

Moreya had been too mortified to think what to do-beyond getting away from the royal castle as rapidly as possible. She'd muttered some vague excuse to Brother Wickham about having to water her donkey at the well at Inner City. He'd naturally pointed out the castle bailey itself had a well. Pretending she hadn't heard him, she dug her heels into the sides of her mount and called back over her shoulder that the monks should meet her in the market square of the realm capital.

She knew Fense had lingered behind.

Brother Wickham said Fense had received a belated summons.

Moreya did not care. She couldn't tarry. She couldn't spend another second anywhere near the royal residence.

She'd overheard a hushed conversation on her way out of the great hall. Several courtiers dallied near the main doors, openly staring at her and the Axcroft monks. She'd noticed them and the curious looks thrown her way upon her arrival. But now, as she'd taken her leave, she noted the same men now gazed at her with something like derision . . . or pity.

When she heard an overdressed Aldean talking to the knot of men around him, she discovered why they stared at her so.

What King Taroch had not said was that Preece the Warmonger, erstwhile outlaw, was the monarch's first cousin. He served as primary military advisor, as well as Lord High Chancellor. The chancellor had spied upon the party of visiting clerics as they waited in the solar, and a castle page reported the chancellor patently denied ever having laid eyes on Moreya before!

Preece- *her* Preece-was here in Glacia, very much alive and well.

Cousin to King Taroch. As rumors had forewarned, his powerful right hand and chief advisor.

Undoubtedly now a man of wealth beyond the average mercenary's wildest dreams. Now also privileged resident of the royal keep. With unlimited access to its bountiful feasts and numerous humble servants.

Moreya had been standing right in the very building that housed her missing husband, pleading, her heart in her eyes, while he disavowed any relationship with her. He'd been too craven to even face her as he disowned her!

Lord High Chancellor, was he? She could scarcely credit it. The realm's highest-ranking judge and civil official. Who would take the word of a perfidious Yune female over his?

Moreya tore away her excess garments, unwilling to swelter beneath layers of cloth a second longer. She removed the restrictive wimple, but kept a scarf tied over her hair, recalling the niches she'd glimpsed in the high mountain passes. Furious as she was, she

dared not risk another swarm of firedrakes over the Inner City.

She waited near the well, forcing herself to sit quietly and unobtrusively. No easy task, when she longed to pace, throw market wares in every direction, and rant to anyone who passed by.

Instead of ranting, she forced an air of meekness when Fense and the other monks rode up. She thanked them for their escort, untied her chest of belongings, and accepted the parchment with Taroch's pardon. Then she calmly informed Fense that she would remain in the capital until she decided where to go next. She asked that he extend her appreciation to the abbot, but reminded them all that the monks need no longer assume responsibility for her welfare.

"Lady Moreya, the king asked that I obtain a copy of your marriage record from the abbey. He sends Abbot Zadok a message requiring swift reply, so it should not be more than a fortnight or so before-

"Excuse me," Moreya interrupted, turning away from the agitated friar. She knew Fense might take affront, but she truly did not care where his explanation was leading. Inevitably, back to Preece. A topic she did *not* wish to discuss. . . .

And two large men in hauberks had lumbered into the square. They stood dickering with a merchant over a dagger and whetstone. Their topic of conversation interested her greatly. She addressed the pair, who were garbed like seasoned fighters. "Did you say aught about a tournament to be held hereabouts?"

The older of the two soldiers nodded. "A grand competition like that of olden times. Waniands are born fighters. They love to spill blood. The new king seeks to fatten his coffers with tourney fees. First matches are to be held Tuesday next, on the heath yonder. Final rounds by Thursday."

He pointed to a wide open area beyond the last row of shops and market stalls.

Fense broke in. "Er, mistress, the king has offered chambers for the night inside the keep."

Moreya offered a shrug. "Take them. I'll find something here."

"Where?" The monk's eyes rolled, sweeping past the taverns and inns which fronted the market district. "Surely you don't mean to take a room in a place such as those?"

The younger fellow at last settled upon a price and paid the vendor for the dagger. His friend shook his graying head at Moreya and the clerics. "The inns here along the square be full up, each and all. Mayhap you could share a tent. Any number of folk will begin pitching tents around the perimeter of the lists come dusk."

Fense's eyes nearly popped from their sockets. "My lady, you know what sort of 'folk' he means, do you not? Keg masters, dicers, camp followers . . . all manner of misguided souls! You cannot remain amongst the depraved-

"Here now!" came a loud male voice from behind Moreya's shoulder. She turned to find a hefty man pushing past the blade vendor's stall. "You've no grounds to insult the lot of our citizenry with your preaching. Some of us are devout believers and . . . Why, a Yune! A Yune lady is welcome to a place in my good tavern. I'll make space for the likes of her."

He all but shoved Fense and his timid brethren aside, then seized Moreya's hand and brought it to rubbery lips. "Abel Duitt, at your service, my lady. Owner of the Fatted Goose, and no finer establishment is to be found w-"

"Can! She's few winters enough to be your daughter!"

At this shrill pronouncement, the fellow Duitt dropped Moreya's hand and spun to face a ruddy-faced woman. "I was merely offering her a roof o'er her pretty head, mother. She's here for the tournament and-"

"As is everyone else about."

"She needs but a modest bit of space, and if your worthless nephew hadn't promised our garret to his threadbare friends without two coins to rub together, we'd be full to the rafters."

Moreya couldn't help but smile. These two were better entertainment than some of the acrobats and minstrels performing across the square. "I'm sorry, but my own funds are low. I can't-"

"She's *Yune*, mother! Look upon her fair figure, those eyes like two gleaming purple gemstones, and tell me we'll not sell thrice the ale and wine of Bumgaard."

The innkeeper's wife grabbed both Moreya's hands, squeezing them in her own. "That's my man Abel, but we hail him as Can. *Duitt*, you see! You'd never guess such a thick-looking skull could hide such a quick set of wits, but that's my Can." Now her voice dropped to a whisper. "He's right, you know. Free room from now 'til tourney ends. My nephew won't be using the garret, as Can said, and with a Yune smiling in the taproom . . ." The woman's eyebrows rose suggestively.

"There you have it!" Can boomed with a hearty laugh.

Moreya made a snap decision. These folk seemed kindly enough. She pulled away from the older woman and approached Brother Fense.

"I was serious, Fense. You and the others should take the king's generous offer. After all, you need a place for this one eve only. You'll be off tomorrow. They'll stable your mounts and feed you. Go. I'll be fine with these people. Like a niece or daughter."

Fense studied the tavern owners critically, then sighed. "You should come back to the castle with us, Lady Preece. I hadn't wanted to tell you this, but your husband's there. He's not well, but, I think honestly, were you to remain as a guest of King Taroch for a time, Lord-er, Chancellor Preece would make a faster recovery."

"Dear Fense." Moreya swallowed, blinking eyes that suddenly were misted with tears. "You've done so much to help, everything you could in the matter of my marriage to Lord Preece. I know he renounced me."

"Mistress, did you not heed? I'm to get proof of the marriage! The young king harkened well. I was granted audience with him in your husband's chambers. Preece is addled, Moreya. Truly. Bemused in some fashion. He did not recall having met me afore today, either. Mayhap the torture affected his reason. Beseems his tumultuous past has disrupted his memory."

Moreya hesitated, then decided Fense was a close enough friend to be told the hard truth.

"He swore out a statement in Greensward and had it sent to Queen Vela. In it, he vowed he'd only wed me to prevent my marriage to Prince Velansare. Preece claimed I was part of some evil scheme concocted by Cronel. He asked Queen Vela to grant my freedom as his mercenary fee. She took most of my dowry. I don't know what portion he saw, but note, Fense, that somehow an outcast mercenary has become the second most powerful man in my home realm. It appears to me his reason has stood him in excellent stead."

Poor Brother Fense was truly at a loss for a reply.

"I am free to live in poverty. He is rid of me and lives in opulence."

Fense seemed to shrivel before Moreya's very eyes. She was truly sorry for the pain she'd caused him, sorry she'd destroyed his illusions about the Waniand. Fense tried to see the good in everyone and everything. Moreya would miss him.

"My lady, I do not know how to answer such an accusation."

"'Tis not your deed to answer for. Fare thee well. Take my donkey. Give the abbot and the others my best wishes for long life and good health." Moreya turned to where Abel Duitt stood waiting. "I don't have much beyond what's in this traveling chest. If I could have your garret for a sennight, I'll gladly offer labor in exchange. Perhaps I could mop tables or fetch victuals from your kitchens."

As they made their way toward the Fatted Goose, Moreya smiled up at the kindly fellow toting her chest. He'd just set it down inside the door when a quartet of boisterous young knights came in behind them. "I'm sure you can use an extra set of hands," Moreya said, nodding in the direction of the new arrivals. "Looks as though you're to have a bustling evening."

After several hours on her feet, toting pewter mugs of ale and platters of meat, Moreya was so tired she could have slept propped in the corner next to Mother Duitt's twig broom. But she crept up to the attic and its sour-smelling straw mattress, noting the surroundings with a rueful smile. Once she would have been appalled to find herself in such quarters. Now she was so weary, the thin straw ticking seemed fluffy as a cloud.

Her exhaustion was so complete, she'd no strength left to think about Preece or the

morrow. Which was just as well. She didn't want to end up weeping herself to sleep. She'd done that oft enough in her cell at the monastery. She was finished sobbing over the Warmonger.

She rolled over and let her mind wrap around a single thought. Her night of menial labor left her weary to the bone, reeking of spilt ale, and had left the soft skin of her palms chapped and reddened. She must look like a bedraggled beggar, which she supposed, in a sense, is what she was.

However, she was at least an uncommon beggar, in possession of an interesting bit of information gleaned whilst sopping up ale. Fighting men talked quite freely while deep in their cups, and several wagers were placed that evening. Most on King Taroch's champion-who'd agreed to face any and all challengers in the upcoming tournament. A warrior knight called by some Preece, the Warmonger; by others Lord High Chancellor; and by others still, the name of awe and mystery: The Royal Blade.

Chapter 24

The tournament's third day opened with night mist still lingering deep within the mountain cirque. The royal castle and Inner Glacia's citadel lay cushioned by a wispy blanket of fog that promised to lift by mid-morn, when the heralds would blow their trumpets to announce the first joust in the final matches.

Already Moreya heard the sounds of competitors stirring. Ostlers were busy in the stables readying mounts and saddlery, shopkeepers and vendors began rolling out their carts, overflowing with tempting foods and pretty wares. Minstrels tuned lyres and tested flutes while the whetstone in the market square screed a fresh edge on daggers and swords. The odor of freshly-baked bread clung to the entire bustling square, and Moreya took a deep bite of her own hunk as she gazed about.

As she'd expected, this morn the local armorer was too harried to pay even scant attention to the willowy young squire who came to fetch the hauberk of fine-gauge mail specially ordered for his mysterious master.

No one gave the "lad" chomping on a hunk of bread a second glance. Moreya had hired a village lad to order the chain-mail shirt several days before. He'd advised that his master was no a large fellow, thus could not carry the bulk of thick links. His master also needed a short dagger and sheath. He'd sent his lackey to pay for the special order with a peridot as large as a walnut.

Moreya felt an odd ruefulness when she'd bartered away the gemstone. She'd assumed the feeling was a touch of guilt about her resolution. Certainly she was glad to rid herself of the green stone. She was still puzzled as to how it had come into her possession to begin with. Touching the stone also caused a vague disquiet. She should have been relieved to place it in the armorer's palm and watch his eyes widen in surprise.

And she was, but felt uneasy, too.

Not that she hadn't traded terrestars for essentials or clothing before. Mayhap because she'd never traded them for weapons. But she did now, just as she'd bartered in the past for coin or garments, in order to survive.

Preece left her no choice.

She tamped down the low whisper of self-reproach in the back of her mind and focused again on the facts. She was deeply, hopelessly, irreversibly in love with him. She was his lifemate and lawful wife, joined by arcane ritual, religious ceremony, and civil law.

He'd told her faithlessness was nigh impossible, and she knew he'd spoken true enough in that regard. Glacia's main city was overrun with menfolk of every size and description, but she'd been unable to summon feminine interest in any of them. Inn patrons winked at her and openly sought her favors, but she'd spurned one and all.

She could think of one man only. He was imprinted in her blood, her very soul. He'd

betrayed her, renounced her, disavowed knowledge of any espousal between them. He'd told her the ultimate lie, in making her believe Waniands were incapable of falsehoods and deceit.

He'd promised her a future wherein they would be together, bear and raise children. He'd promised her a life in the sun.

Then he'd taken her virginity, helped bring about her arrest and banishment, cost her most of her dowry, and risen to a position of prominence . . . while she was left to fend for herself. First with the monks, now as an indentured tavern servant.

The only accurate truth he'd spoken was how completely she would be enmeshed by the Waniand lifemate bond. For months she'd railed against it, prayed for an end to it, searched her soul and the night skies until at last the answer crystallized in her mind. It had taken his cruel renunciation at the castle for her heart to accept the inevitable.

She knew what must be done. There was no way around it.

The only way a lifemate bond could be severed was for one of the pair to die.

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He should not fight this day.

That knowledge had been the first thought in Preece's mind when he'd awakened after a fitful night's sleep. He'd trained hard, driving himself to spend endless hours on the practice field, swinging a broadsword or mace in each arm until the muscles cramped and his whole body shook. He'd practiced on horseback with the quintain, broken half a dozen lances during practice jousts with accomplished knights of the Glacian realm. Yet he wasn't ready for combat this day.

The purple she-devil of his dreams had him unsettled and half aroused.

He'd thought his rutting cycles had ended in Ataraxia, but now wondered if his injury and recuperation hadn't simply thrown off his natural cycle. He itched and burned, felt the familiar low heat in his belly that signaled the onset of rut. This time, with the damned dark erotic dreams tormenting him for weeks, he was bound to experience a particularly violent season. His blood was already reaching a fever pitch.

Any trueblood with half his wits would avoid bloodletting now, for the heat of armed combat only bestirred hot blood further. Which could prove unintentionally lethal. Fighting also spurred nearly relentless sexual arousal.

On both counts, Preece knew ignoring the signals his body sent his brain now was utter folly.

Then there was the nagging mental distraction of the mysterious female who'd falsely claimed to be his bride. She'd gone to the citadel-so castle spies reported- and had taken a chamber at a local inn. The tavernmaster boasted of having a Yune beauty working in his taproom. His coinbox overflowed from the influx of knights and wayfarers eager to

gaze upon Yunish charms.

So seemed she'd abandoned her claim to Preece's name and support. Almost too easily. Preece did not trust this apparent alteration in her schemes. Taroch hadn't yet received written proof that a marriage was recorded in the annals at Axcroft Abbey. Preece still had not learned who might be behind the plot to discredit him.

Mayhap he should have been glad the slut had taken herself off to peddle ale and her peach-tinged flesh to whichever strangers had coin enough to purchase her favors. Yet somehow he was not relieved. He was vexed at the thought that if she truly was his wife, she'd dared conduct business in Inner Glacia like any other common lightskirt. It infuriated him all the more to think she plucked customers from the very ranks of fighting men *he'd* lured to the realm with posted notices of a tournament!

Buckling his scabbard around his waist, Preece took a last glance around his private chambers. Following the competition, he'd confront the bitch and settle an amount upon her to leave Glacia permanently.

He had enough responsibility, serving as high reeve to Taroch, without having the ever-present worry that the Yune might reappear with some further outrageous pretext. He had enough disturbance to his sleep with the nocturnal visions still taunting him, the hidden worry that he was neither the usual trueblooded Waniand nor typical human male. He didn't know if his potency had been fully restored or if he'd been left sterile by the torture he'd suffered. Or whether the Ataraxian healers had helped or further harmed him with their hermetical care.

He did not need that particular Yune woman within five hundred leagues of his castle or his life. He had to be rid of her, once and forever.

But as he strode onto the lists at the clarion call, he told himself none of those concerns mattered. He would not think about the girl, his dreams, his personal struggles. He was not here as Kaelan Preece, but as the king's champion. A high clan Waniand leader, born and bred to fight. Make war and claim victory he would. So that no man, whatever his race or belief, would dare question Taroch's right to the Glacian throne.

Taroch's reclamation of the Glacian crown had been prophecized long ages past. Preece's role had been foretold, as well. He was meant to aid his cousin in taking and holding the throne of the icy lands that had once been a Waniand stronghold and now would be again.

For this reason Preece had been spared when his parents were slaughtered. This glorious fight was why he'd been saved from the executioner's axe, why a wizard had spent years training him in Waniand lore and dark mysteries. Even if Preece left no offspring, he would fulfill his divine purpose today. He made a sweeping bow to his monarch and turned to acknowledge the first challenger.

Moreya saw her chance after the sixth round of ground combat. It was late afternoon, but nightfall was still hours away. Preece had fought valiantly, proving himself as adept on horseback as he'd been riding his great battletahr. He'd ridden in several jousts before unseating a wily opponent, who rolled into the dust and came up swinging a poleaxe. The two men fought like demons, neither willing to give nor seek quarter.

Preece had emerged victorious, only to face another swordsman, then a tall Aldean wielding a spiked mace. Preece was still on his feet, but near exhaustion, the strain evident to all who watched the spectacle. Men switched their wagers from favoring the Royal Blade to heavy odds on the next challenger. An oddsmaker got into a loud disagreement with several men-at-arms, which caused a delay in the proceedings.

While the next knight prepared his weapons and Preece leaned on his sword to catch his breath, Moreya ripped the coif from her head and strode onto the battlefield.

"Warmonger, I challenge thee!"

The feminine shout effectively silenced the crowd. Then a low murmur rippled around them as Moreya marched closer, purposely tossing her head to free her long tresses. The light mountain breeze caught several gentian wisps and sent them swirling around her face. She glanced up and scanned the horizon, already detecting a dark speck approaching from beyond a crag in the arete.

"You have publicly repudiated our lawful marriage, openly denied that I am your Waniand lifemate. By the code of your own kind, the lifemate bond cannot be severed by verbal renunciation. It cannot be legally nullified by court decree or invalidated by holy clerics. I am forsaken, yet still not truly free. Unless one of us is slain. I demand that honor be served, and I be given the right of trial by combat."

"You are a madwoman!" he snarled. "I knew you would not leave me in peace, Yune witch! Someone drag her out of here."

"Nay, 'tis my lawful right to demand combat and royal resolution of my claim. You know this, High Chancellor." She glanced over at the king, who glared back at her with icy eyes as hard as those of her furious husband. Taroch rose to his feet and slowly nodded.

"The choice of weapons is also mine by right," she called out. A dark shadow blotted out the sunlight directly above her. Moreya did not flinch, did not turn, did not in any way show the slightest surprise when a young firedrake landed a few yards behind her and began to hiss. "My dragon against whatever weapon you think can save your miserable hide, Warmonger!"

The dragon growled and whipped its tail, which almost knocked Moreya off her feet as it passed within inches of her body. She knew she would be safer if she actually backed closer to the animal. She glanced over her shoulder at the beast, then turned back to her opponent husband.

But he was not where he'd been standing before.

He'd also moved closer to the firedrake, circling around to place himself where he could draw the beast away from Moreya. The dragon spat a glob of acid spittle at Preece and snapped its jaws in warning.

Other knights took up swords and lances. They slowly edged closer, began forming a circle around the beast. Preece's focus never left Moreya or the firedrake, but his voice rang out with harsh authority. "Nay, do not interfere! The dragon will not harm her, but will attack you, do you approach any nearer. Retreat."

Preece laid down his broadsword. The dragon hissed once more.

Preece stared at Moreya for a long moment, then spoke low so only she might hear his words. "I . . . I *remember* ." His entire body shook.

"We tried to sail to Ataraxia," he rushed on, "But Sieffre betrayed us. We were arrested on the vessel. You used Bourke and the firedrakes to save me and Lockram, but you could not break free."

"You freely admit then that I've spoken only the truth? You *do* know me?"

"The dragon brought back all of it. I know you are Moreya Fa Yune, my wife. 'Tis true you are my chosen lifemate. We blooded one another, maidenhead and man pouch."

Moreya began to tremble. Preece was too close to the panting beast, only mere feet from its head and baleful eyes that glowered with hostile distrust. Moreya should edge closer to the dragon. Mayhap it would leave Preece and only seize her, or take to its wings without capturing either human. She stepped forward one pace.

Then from the corner of her eye saw King Taroch leave his high viewing dais. He thrust guards and tournament participants aside. He walked directly toward the lists. And the crouching firedrake.

"No, Your Highness, go back!" she cried out.

"Tarochin, hearken to what she says," Preece shouted. "He's come for her, but I'll not let him take her away. She is my lifemate. 'Tis true. I have regained my memory, and all is as she swore. I must give my life to protect her. You must not approach the monster."

The king did not bother to acknowledge either Moreya's caution or Preece's assertion. Taroch strode within a few yards of the young firedrake and spoke in a strange tongue. The dragon ceased whipping its tail, and gave a soft snort. The king repeated his unfamiliar phrase again. The firedrake shuffled away from all three humans, beat its powerful wings, and soared aloft.

The king turned to Moreya and Preece. "A most remarkable ending to our royal tournament. I declare my high chancellor once and still Glacia's Royal Blade, honorable champion of the Waniand throne. I caution all present here to note what they have witnessed. The chancellor's lifemate summoned a firedrake as her weapon of choice. Do

you raise arms against me and mine, the mightiest of all beasts shall be our allies."

Several noblemen from adjoining realms began ordering their servants and squires to pack and prepare to journey home at once. More than one highborn lady had swooned. Maids-in-waiting waved fans or clumps of bitter herbs in attempts to revive their mistresses. A few knights stood rooted in place, hands still on the hilts of their weapons, gaping up at the now empty, placid skies.

Moreya stared at the king, astonished anew by his close resemblance to her husband as they stood together. She was even more astonished to accept that whatever Taroch said to the dragon, he'd accomplished what she never had in all her years of dealing with the creatures: he'd inspired the beast to leave them in peace.

She turned her gaze to Preece and saw his thoughts mirrored her own. He studied his cousin as though seeing the man for the first time, then swung his eyes to hers. He walked up to her, then fell to his knees in the dirt before her.

"I am most humbly sorry, Moreya. There is much I've lost. Confusion still beclouds my mind. But I recall saving you from a firedrake's aerie in Dredonia. 'Twas when I found you there, bedraggled and so unblenching, that I chose you for my lifemate." His lips quirked. "You and your bedamned glow."

The king scowled at them, then waved a hand to summon a flank of guards. The men loped quickly to his side. Taroch kept his voice low so the spectators still clogging the stands could not hear his words.

"You will take my cousin to his quarters and confine him there under arrest until further notice. The woman comes with me."

Now Taroch glared at Moreya. "Do not open those lips of yours until I give you leave to speak, lady, or I will have your tongue cut out. I wanted a day of glory, not havoc. I heard the tale of the scheduled execution, how firedrakes decimated the stage. I should be grateful you summoned but one to slay my cousin. But he is your lifemate, as you both now affirm. Intent to harm Preece is a violation of our blood code and the laws of this realm. How quickly you abuse my royal pardon."

Moreya stared after him. She allowed herself to be dragged in his wake by a pair of royal guards without offering the least struggle. She would have been frightened, if not for the strange glint in the king's eyes. She'd glimpsed the same look once or twice in her husband's. The gleam of secret amusement.

She'd tried to kill her husband by summoning a dragon to a tournament. Their new ruler-her husband's first cousin-seemed to find the attempt diverting. His tone had been harsh, but Moreya knew he intended no genuine harm should befall her. How she could be certain of that, she couldn't explain.

Except that, in retrospect, perhaps it was not so very odd. She was led off to greet whatever punishment would be meted out, thinking all the while that she and the young

Glacian sovereign had much in common. She smiled even as she was escorted to a solar deep within the heart of the keep, there to await private audience with the king.

Dragons. The Warmonger.

Very strange topics on which to build mutual rapport.

Either would make a fair enough place to start.

Chapter 25

"My cousin told you Waniands are forbidden to make deliberate false statements, did he not?"

Moreya spun at the unexpected question. The king entered the chamber where she'd been held for the past hour without a sound. She saw he wore soft leather slippers that would be soundless on the stone floor. She'd not been watching for anyone, but wool-gathering, staring out the narrow wind slit as the tournament visitors dismantled their tents and straggled away from the lists.

"I never did understand why Waniands should be different than people of other bloodlines. Truth can be warped or inverted to suit the moment."

"Not by Waniands," the king said. He reached into a bowl of fresh fruit on a side table and plucked out an apple. "We do not distort or speak what we know to be untrue. That is not acceptable in our code."

Moreya answered, "Mayhap Preece's years with other races taught him to alter his ways."

"I spent months with him in Ataraxia before sailing here. He trained my men in combat, led the assault on this castle, and continues to serve as my most trusted advisor. When you and the clerics presented your petition for a pardon, Preece surreptitiously gazed upon you. He avowed he'd never before met you. Fense tarried to protest that, insisting he personally had performed a ceremony uniting you and Preece in marriage."

"He did."

"And there is a record of this ecclesiastical ceremony. I shall soon receive written proof by special messenger."

Moreya curtsied, aware belatedly that she'd never treated this Waniand monarch with the respect she'd grudgingly shown Cronel. And that fat monster had maimed and ultimately destroyed Glaryd, possibly murdered Moreya's own father. He'd never done a thing to earn Moreya's homage. Taroch *had* granted her a pardon. And she had greatly disappointed him with the scene today.

She rose slowly, her gaze remaining fixed on his face. "I do not know what you want from me, Your Highness. I already told you of my history with your cousin, the Warmonger. He told me Waniands do not lie, yet he lied about knowing me. We met inside this very keep. He was ordered to escort me to Greensward. His failure to do that is why he was arrested and taken before the royal tribunal."

"He not only failed to deliver you as bride to another, but wed you himself," Taroch said. Moreya nodded. She was certain Fense had already explained the complicated tale so King Taroch would understand it. Yet it seemed he was at least partly confused. "Did you wed him only to thwart the prince?"

Moreya stiffened. Despite the fact she knew most would view her motives in so simplistic a light, she knew there was more underlying her reasoning. "Nay, Sire. I had made the choice to sail with Preece to Ataraxia. I chose a new life in that realm over an arranged marriage in Greensward. Not to spite Velansare, but to better my own circumstances. I wed Preece because it is the way of my people to join in matrimony, a rite proscribed by law and the holy church to sanctify the bond between man and woman. I did not wish to be regarded as Preece's harlot."

The king took a healthy chomp out of the apple and chewed thoughtfully for a moment. "To be wed is your kind's version of lifemating, is it not? Forgive my ignorance, but the cleric gave me a lengthy and befuddling explanation having to do with brimstone and eternal damnation and sacred rites."

Moreya tried to suppress her smile. The young king spoke up again.

"My skull pounded when he was finished and I still did not fathom how all of that applied to my cousin. Residing my entire life with other Waniands, I have only vague understandings of such racial differences. Explain something further. If my cousin said he would make you his lifemate, why did you also marry him? Do you believe the ratifications of your people are superior to ours? If so, why taint yourself by association?"

Moreya vehemently shook her head. "Nay, Sire. Not at all. I sought to marry your cousin because I loved him."

She realized that explanation would be of little help. Waniands did not understand the concept of romantic love any better than they did clerical and civil laws on marriage.

"I was drawn to him: as a man, as a knight of strength and honor, as a friend, and as a lover. A husband is all such things to his wife."

"So this 'love' means you wished my cousin to mount you?"

They were alone. No one else heard the question or would hear her answer, but Moreya was still mortified. One did not tell a monarch that he was impertinent or that he had no right to ask such personal questions. Neither did one refuse to answer one's sovereign. Particularly one who was kin to one's spouse.

"Yes," she murmured.

"But you no longer desire such mounting?"

She'd turned her back on him. She knew it was a breach of etiquette, possibly itself another punishable offense, but she couldn't bear to meet his inquisitive gaze. "I . . . " Best she be as plainly honest as Waniands were. "I do not truly know, Sire. He abandoned me and caused me grief. Deep heartache," she added when Taroch's expression remained stoic. Mayhap Waniands did not know grief, either.

"So your intent today was to retaliate, even slay him," the king mused. "Unless my ears

deceived me, you claimed the choice of weapons as challenger, then stunned all and sundry by selecting a live firedrake."

He reached inside his tunic and withdrew a sealed parchment. Moreya looked about frantically for some convenient crack in the floor where she might sink straight into the castle dungeon. Surely his warrant would send her there.

"How do you summon dragons?"

That accursed question! "By drawing breath," she blurted out. "They come when I am in the open, out of doors. I've never known why. But that is why I would go to Ataraxia. There are few dragons there. How did you send it away?"

"The wizard taught me an incant-"

The king's answer was abruptly lost as a swordblade ripped through the wooden door. The portal splintered and crashed open amid shouts and vicious curses. Preece stumbled in, bodily dragging four guards behind him.

"Tarochin, she misbelieved she had no other choice! I beg you, do not punish her! The fault in this is truly mine." Preece's blue eyes, hot with anger, yet weary as she'd ever seen them, pinned Moreya. "Mine, not hers."

Taroch looked most displeased. "I vowed you would be given audience-by Satan's spiked tail!"

Preece collapsed at his cousin's feet.

Moreya dimly heard the king bark orders at the guards and footmen who rushed forward. She felt hands grip her upper arms, knew strangers jostled her, vaguely recognized one was addressed as royal physician. When he seized Preece by the shoulder and turned him over roughly, Moreya pulled the dagger she'd bought that morn from the armorer and held it to the back of the physician's hand.

"If you wish to keep the use of all your fingers, you will gentle your touch. This is no ordinary man, but the lord high chancellor. The king's own cousin and my husband."

"Yes, my lady. If you will allow us to take him back to his personal chambers, we may attend him there."

"What ails him?" the king demanded.

The healer cocked his head, studying the patient before him. "He fought long hours in the sun and exhausted himself further wrestling with the guards. I have three men in the infirmary in need of stitching, thanks to your Royal Blade here. He's suffered a few cuts himself and lost some blood, but he should heal well enough with proper rest."

"He was tortured and severely weakened a year past," Taroch announced softly. "You are certain 'tis naught more serious than overexertion now? My cousin's welfare is of utmost concern."

Moreya was startled by the rough tone of the king's voice, by the fondness she read in his eyes and manner. Waniands might not have words for benevolent emotions, but it was clear they nonetheless experienced them.

The physician cleared his throat. "Your champion engaged a legion of armed men in combat this day. That he could yet walk, let alone batter down yon door and best a phalanx of guards attests to his rare strength and valor."

Moreya had to admit that was certainly true. She felt a swelling of pride in her own breast. Preece deserved the title of royal champion.

"Nay, rare untowardness," Taroch replied. "He is stubborn enough for a legion of men." The king glanced at Moreya and tucked the bit of parchment back into his tunic. "Go with these men to your lifemate's chambers, Lady Moreya. You shall be confined there to watch over my cousin while I decide your mutual fates."

Mutual fates?

Moreya's heart lurched. Earlier that same morn, a fate interwoven with Preece's was the last thing she'd wanted. Now, having witnessed for herself his enraged brawling . . . seeing him openly defying the Glacian throne-his *cousin's* throne-she couldn't help the surge of empathy she felt.

Whatever his reasons for denouncing her previously, he'd admitted that afternoon before hundreds of witnesses that she was his chosen lifemate. He'd made the admission whilst surrounded by dozens of other Waniands. He'd crashed through the solar door to come to her defense.

He loved her, whether the concept itself had meaning in his lore or not. Whether he could put a name to the feeling or not.

Preece remembered her and loved her.

She just had to make him see it.

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Preece awakened, nerve ending by nerve ending. He lay in his wide bedstead, unclothed and sprawled on his back, with a light covering of bed linens across his lower body. His forehead throbbed. Aye, he'd been struck there-first by the butt of a guardsman's lance, then by plummeting face first to the solar's hard floor. He'd broken into the chamber because Taroch had been interrogating Moreya in there.

Moreya .

At the remembrance of the name, the absolute disaster that had been his life of late fully unveiled itself. He'd argued hotly with Bourke and taunted the mage into casting a bygoness spell to erase all knowledge of Moreya Fa Yune. The strange memory gaps surrounding Glacia, Preece's arrest, and Cronel's assassination stemmed from that malevolent incantation. Fortunately for Preece, the wizard's spell was powerful, but not

immutable.

Memories of Moreya had still intruded during his sleep, misleading Preece to believe he'd slowly been drifting into madness. Until that afternoon, on the tournament lists, when a dragon appeared out of nowhere and landed at the feet of a slight challenger with incredibly long, flowing purple hair.

He groaned and felt moisture behind his eyelids.

Spell or sorcery, murky as a mage could spin one, how could Preece have forgotten the incredible female who'd become his mate for life? His little purple jewel, the only woman to ever befriend him, the noblewoman who'd given up a prince and the wealth of Greensward's kingdom for a grim outcast? A heartless mercenary and a worst of all, a *Waniand*?

"Kaelan? Can you hear me?"

He jerked open his eyes, distrusting his ears. But they'd not played him false, for there Moreya sat, keeping vigil at his bedside. He stretched out his right hand and felt her clasp it. Her flesh was warm and swamped his being with a dozen sensations at once.

How could anything have sponged his brain of all the conflicting feelings Moreya evoked? Gratitude, shame, anger, lust, sorrow, bone-deep belonging and satisfaction. Swamping him at the same moment, clamoring for expression.

Shame won out.

"You must listen," he pleaded. "I do not ask that you excuse my denial of our union. It is a matter of public record and shame. I cannot be exculpated, but I would have you understand the reason for my confusion."

"So, you maintain you were confused?" She did not sound particularly forgiving. Nor was her facial expression the soft, endearing smile he longed to see. But she looked at him intently and he knew she would weigh his words carefully. He could expect no more.

"I argued with Bourke in Ataraxia. He had . . . deceived me for long years. It seemed you might have been part of that, and in unreasoning fury I spoke rashly. It was, I freely admit. I witlessly averred that I wished I'd never met you and would know naught about you. I banished Bourke from my life. I've not seen him since I left Ataraxia."

She blinked her violet eyes once, then again, then swallowed a visible lump in her throat. "You banished Bourke? And you think he made you forget me, with one of his incantations?"

"'Twould have taken less effort for him to weave such a spell than for me to squash a beetle. His powers are beyond the ken of most people. But mayhap he'd not counted on the effect a dragon would have. The instant the firedrake descended, I knew you, knew the reptile came at your behest. That knowledge in turn bared all that had been cloaked

from my mind."

She pulled her hand free. "Why would an argument with Bourke make you sorry you met me? You regretted that Bourke and I conspired to save your hide?"

Preece sighed loudly and drew himself into a sitting position. "Taroach and the others had been living on an outer isle near Ataraxia. There was a holy temple with ancient scrolls and texts which foretold of a deliverer. A trueblood raised within Glacia's borders. The son of King Tal and Queen Sarent." When she merely stared at him expectantly, he clarified. "My parents."

"You? The redeemer named in some hidden prophecy?"

"As you might guess, I did not eagerly embrace the idea. I fought against it with what little strength I had, but Bourke colluded with the Ataraxian high priests and Taroach. The Waniand enclave had been told I would come. Bourke ensured it, by enchanting me to yearn for the island realm from the time he first found me beside the slain body of my mother."

"Oh, Preece."

Absurdly, he was stung by the change in address. She had first spoken his secret name. Now he was back to Preece.

"Bourke hated Cronel. It seemed more than convenient that Cronel asked me to escort a Yune who happened to draw firedrakes like a beacon. A Yune who would jump at the chance to accompany me to Ataraxia as a way of avoiding dragons. I began to see webs within webs."

"He seemed like such a kind soul. Now you make him sound evil."

Preece shook his head, wincing as the motion renewed his headache. "Nay. He believed it was his divine duty to raise me to manhood so the prophecy could be enacted. And so it has been. I led the Waniands back to this castle. Taroach reclaimed the throne for our kind."

She'd risen to her feet and now paced the length of Preece's bedchamber. His heart thumped the first time she crossed to the doors leading to his sitting room and bathing area. He feared she might stride back out of his life after what he'd revealed.

But she turned back and furrowed her brow, skirted furnishings without really seeing them, and he realized she was deep in thought. He slid his feet to the floor and quietly drew on the long robe he found at the foot of his massive wood bedframe.

Moreya stared at him as if seeing him for the first time without his damned cowl.

"So . . . you believe you were lured to me by the same sort of captivation? More of Bourke's conjurings?"

Preece did not nod again. He dropped his gaze. The shame grew in his breast, made him long once more for a dark, obscuring cowl. He had wounded her womanly feelings

enough. It could not please her to learn his desire arose from a magician's enchantment curse or potion.

"That might explain your actions, but it does not justify mine."

She did not sound angry. Neither did she look it, when again he raised his gaze to meet hers. It was direct, reasoning, mayhap just a little warm. Hope-astonishing as it was to acknowledge such a need inside himself-surged to the fore, smiting common sense and every other emotion.

Even as he cast about for a reply, though, the surge of hope dwindled. Bourke had been in the throne room that day, hovering and hidden, from the very first time Preece had beheld Moreya at the foot of Cronel's dais. The wizard had said as much.

"He was the chair to which I pinned your skirts."

Something crumpled and died in the back of her eyes, and Preece fought his instincts. They screamed at him to go to her, enfold her in his arms, deny that her tenderness for him could be pure artifice. He remained where he was and spoke softly. "We can never know. I'll never lay eyes again on Bourke. He has forsaken me."

She openly wiped at her cheeks and Preece felt another stab of conscience. To cause one's lifemate pain was another violation of the Waniand code. "Amongst my people," she mumbled, "if a union comes about through guile or duplicity, or should one party learn salient facts the other withheld, it is grounds to have the marriage revoked."

Preece clutched the bedpost, reeling so hard he had to fight for his next breath. She wanted the bond severed. Nay, she *still* wanted the bond severed, as she'd claimed on the lists earlier. She knew what termination required. Preece had failed her. The entire kingdom knew now of his grave transgression. His life would be forfeit.

"What is it? Should I summon the royal physician?" She rushed to his side and pressed a palm to his brow.

"Moreya, you know there is only one way to permanently sever our lifemate bond. You wanted the fire Drake to kill me."

"Nay, 'twas a cruel and foul lie. One I almost believed myself. But I was thrilled when the king got the dragon to leave. I couldn't watch the beast hurt you, and I realized I could never have let it slay you. Even when I thought you'd used me and cast me aside for the sake of your own ambitions, I loved you. I still do. Whatever spawned it no longer matters. I can't change how I feel."

"My only ambition was to find peace. I've yet to achieve that life's dream."

"You swore out a statement to Queen Vela that you'd wed me to spare her life and Velansare's. That Cronel meant for me to be some secret weapon of mass destruction. What of that, of how you've become so powerful here?"

"That was true in part. Bourke warned me of Cronel's plan. I did not tell you at the time,

Moreya, because you had only just lost your father. I would not add to your burden by telling you I believed he was poisoned by the king; that your betrothal was something Cronel engineered to serve his thirst for new realms."

"You truly believe all that?" She sounded surprised, but not as stunned as she might have been long months past. They had both had time and hard lessons since.

"I believe it. And I am powerful here now because I helped Taroach, because there are some who did not truly detest Waniands but professed to in defense of their own skins . . . dark or fair."

"Oh, Preece, it all seems so heartless still. Thinking that your people have been oppressed for generations harkening back to some genocide no one truly can support. That greedy bastards like Cronel could harness power and abuse it, while all look on yet do naught. I-"

"We can right things now, Moreya. As I must make amends for what I have done." He took the hand she'd pressed to his brow and clasped it firmly between his palms.

"Renouncing you, even though there was good reason for doing so, is a punishable offense. My cousin bears me affection, but that changes not his royal duty. He cannot ignore what I did. He may ask you-"

"No, I'll not see you condemned all over again! Kaelan, I could not bear it. I would have us both slain or banished. Would he do that, send us both away?"

"I do not know. Is that your choice, to remain lifemated and wedded?"

She flung herself at him with such sudden ferocity, they both fell back onto the bed. Preece found himself buried amid her gentian locks, her arms clinging to his neck, her tears trickling down onto his bare throat where his robe gapped open.

Need for her pushed everything else from his awareness.

Preece rolled, sweeping her beneath him as he sought her mouth for a desperate kiss. Their mouths came together and he surrendered utterly to the wash of feelings whelming him. The frantic need was still strong, but no more essential or true than the sense of unity, of reunion, the recapture of something lost, the precious, inexplicable *rightness* .

No sorcerer could command such cognizance. Magic and trickery could change the appearance of objects, ripple time, make distances huge or nonexistent, spark a longing or thirst. But no magic could utterly slake that thirst.

And in all the years he'd yearned to see Ataraxia, he could never explain why. Wherefore was often the clue to enchantment. Empty desires with no reasonable explanation might come from drinking a potion, from a secret spell.

But the explanation for what he felt toward this Yune had solid reasons. Hundreds of them. Every bone in his body, every sinew, every loop of intestine. His blood recognized hers, heard the echoed call of her being and rejoiced in it.

She was his lifemate, his chosen female counterpart. The woman who would bear his children, did the Creator gift him with offspring. The body and soul he needed for inner peace and completion. The reason for his life.

"Moreya, do not weep," he whispered, stroking her hair. "You are exhausted. I am weary, also. Of the world, of the duties pressed upon me. Of being so long without you here in my arms. Rest with me. We will speak more anon. For now, just stay close to my body and permit me this. Please."

"Oh, Kaelan! I was so alone and frightened."

"Hush, lady mine. You are no longer alone. I reclaim you." He tucked her into his bed and pulled the covers over them both. He cradled her against his chest, slowing his breathing in the old Waniand trick he'd mastered as a young boy. They no longer hibernated unless they sought to. And they did not enter deepest slumber for days or weeks, only hours. But Preece had heard lifemated pairs could suspend their functions and take such rest together. So he willed it, and at last Moreya quieted, drifted, followed him into slumber . . . sweet, dark and deep.

But Preece stirred not long after dropping into the old sleep, realizing someone rapped upon his bolted outer doors. His heart immediately pounded as he recalled that Taroch would send a summons.

Questions of law and equity had not been answered yet.

But it was not an order from the king, merely an eve servant with a tray of food. Preece accepted it, rebolted his doors and threw another hunk of wood on the low brazier. He climbed back into bed, pulled his lover into his arms. The demon lover who'd so terrified him for night after night. The glowing purple female some distant corner of his mind had never truly forgotten.

She curled against him easily and Preece closed his eyes.

He was no madman.

He was not wroth with the world this night, not vexed or confused. Nay, he was just the opposite. Sure of himself, of his innermost desire and its origin. No outside persuasion had given him this particular need and longing. Bourke had not made Preece choose this woman to clutch to his breast.

Preece had freely done so, just as he'd recalled whilst staring at her across the lists that afternoon. Preece wanted the cherished unity and serenity he knew with Moreya, wanted it to last forever. Bourke had sworn Preece would always recognize her, come to realize he'd chosen the female best suited to coexist with his own male essence.

In that, at least, Bourke had spun no web of trickery.

Moreya was in Taroch's royal keep, in Preece's personal chambers, in his arms, in his blood. And there she would remain this time. Whatever Preece had to do to ensure it.

Chapter 26

Moreya lay awake, savoring the discovery she was neither in her narrow cot in the monastery at Axcroft nor curled up on her rotten straw pallet in the attic over the Fatted Goose. She lay in a very opulent, very wide bed . . . on a fine, thick feather mattress. A dim glow came from the wall brazier. A tray of food and pitcher of wine or mead sat nearby.

Along her left side she felt a very firm masculine thigh.

She propped herself on her elbow and swept the hair from her eyes. The darkness was speared by a shaft of moonlight. It streamed in through a high arrow slit in the stone wall. A castle wall. Her heart leapt.

Yes! She was in Glacia's royal keep. She followed the beam of moonlight to where it glistened on strands of silver. She at last shared Preece's bed. "Kaelan."

He grunted and drew her into his arms. "If I'm bewitched, I care not. What say you, lady? Will you still feed my entrails to one of your dragons?"

"Nay," she answered slowly, wondering at the truth she was about to speak. She could not seem to stop herself. "I still love you. If Bourke gave me this love I feel, I shall cherish the gift until the day I die."

A long forefinger traced along her chin. "I am no longer certain sorcery was involved. I remember more, some of what Bourke said. He vehemently denied being involved in our attraction, and wizardry does indeed have limitations. When I held you, it was as though I'd found sustenance after a long siege."

He drew her close and kissed her, and Moreya felt again the low, searing heat between them. It spiraled down to her core, set her to trembling. "My very pulse matches yours. I was able to draw you into the deep sleep of Waniands by timing my heartbeats. Yours matched of their own accord. We are wed in the ways of your race, forever bound in the way of mine. I would not change what is, Moreya."

"I'm glad," she whispered. She was, and would have shouted it from the battlements had it not been the middle of the night. "I will beseech the king to find an acceptable sanction. You were punished enough by Cronel. He had you tortured. You didn't think-"

"We will not speak of the dark past, Moreya. We have survived and found our rightful places, been reunited. We must look to the future.

A thought struck Moreya and she rose from the bed. "Why do you occupy these chambers? A servant said this was the king's sleeping abode before Waniands came to the realm. You sleep in a royal chamber, yet you are only chancellor? If Taroach is your first cousin, you are of royal blood, Kaelan. You sh-"

The strike of flint broke off her words. Preece had left the bed also. He used a thin

burning reed to light a brace of candles on the table. He stood tall and naked and still very handsome, but there was a hollowness to his frame that she did not like. He had suffered more than he would admit.

"You were bruised and bleeding just hours ago, " she reminded gently. "Go back to bed. You'll take a chill."

He shook his head, his shoulders, his entire body and donned his chamber robe. "Sup with me."

When she'd seated herself beside him and they'd both begun to eat the cold meat and cheese the servants had left them, Preece began speaking quietly. "Taroch's father and mine were brothers. The same royal blood courses through Taroch's veins. He likes crowds and fawning attention. He has an innate charm and affinity for other humans. You know what a beast I am. Intimately."

She did. But he'd not mated with her this evening. She was yet fully dressed in her leggings and shirt. Perhaps Preece was still weak after the long days of fighting. Or even more likely, his Waniand rutting season had not yet begun and he was incapable . . .

"Preece, if we kiss and remain near to one another in these rooms, I suppose you will go into rut again without long delay."

He crossed to the barred doors and opened them, set the tray outside for a passing servant. Then he locked his doors once more, but did not turn back to look at Moreya. She could make out his silhouette there by the dark portals, and for an instant she rushed backward in time. To when he'd loitered beyond her chamber doors, keeping himself aloof. Hiding inside a black cowl.

What did he hide now?

"You mentioned the tribunal and my torture."

"Yes, but if you've no wish to speak of it, we can talk of other things. Surely there must be a good many things we might discuss. We have been months apart."

"Cronel had me tortured while we awaited the tribunal. He visited me personally the last day, and grabbed my ballocks in his fist. Do you recall his hands, the surplus digits?"

Moreya shuddered with revulsion. She remembered Cronel's disgusting hands quite vividly. "Too well," she whispered.

"They gave him unusual power when he made a fist. Whilst holding my male parts until he partially crushed them."

Moreya gasped aloud. "I'm glad Glaryd murdered him. He had tortured her, too, viciously maimed her. He deserved to die for his cruelty and unspeakable deeds."

Preece gave what might have been a nod. Moreya still could not see him clearly, but understood in some unspoken way that he needed to cling to the shadows. To remain apart just a bit longer.

"The Ataraxians are very strange people. Very intelligent, far superior to the people of other known realms in every respect. Their healers and priests have perfected the healing arts so that they can channel their mental will through their fingers and alleviate suffering. When I was first brought to them, I was beyond my own threshold for pain. I wished only to die."

"Kaelan, please do not speak of such things. It hurts me to hear you say that."

"I regret that the truth wounds, but you must face it. Taroch will come seeking answers. You alone must decide what response to give him. I was . . . fondled by other males. Made to endure their invasive touch. There is no inch of my flesh they did not explore. They seemed to take a perverse pleasure in devouring my suffering. I was helpless against them. I needed their secretive visits, became attuned to their ministrations. I . . . welcomed their aid, needed it. As offensive as it is now to admit as much to you. But you are my lifemate. You have a right to know."

"They were not touching you for gratification, but to heal your wounded flesh," Moreya contradicted gently.

"There is more," he said with a heavy sigh. "My cycles have been altered. I do not know if I will again experience true rut. I had dreams and visions . . . of you, I realize now. I would find myself hard and aching. Bewildered. I thought I'd left my mind on that island."

"And then your wife tried to murder you on the tournament lists."

"My cock functions, but I do not know about my seed. I may have been damaged beyond the ability of any high priest. I may be unable to father get."

"Ah, finally I see." And she did. He thought she would forsake him now, ask Taroch to banish him, as Preece himself had banished the old wizard. Or as he'd forsaken Moreya when he had no memory of her.

She began to undress. When she was at last nude, she crossed to where he waited in the dark corner.

"Once again I ask you to come out of the dark and show yourself. We live together or we die together. But I would know the pleasure of your bare flesh touching mine before I perish. And it is possible that if you lie with me, your loins will burn and lust will take over. Then we might learn if all is well . . . or mayhap even better."

He led her back to his bed. "I seldom wager, but better than what we knew before might be impossible. Were I judging by my erotic dreams."

Moreya smiled and eagerly welcomed him into her arms. They kissed for long moments. Preece kneaded her breasts, suckled, reached between her thighs, and Moreya came apart in his hands.

But he did not mount her, even though he was erect and seemed ready.

When she touched his hot, hard flesh, he stopped her fingers from caressing him. "Not until I know what I face on the morrow. I would not repeat the past, Moreya. I recall how we coupled and reveled in the sharing of flesh and delight only to find ourselves torn from one another's arms. I must know Taroch's decree."

Moreya turned away from her husband, physically pleased by a man at long last, inwardly miserable as ever. Preece was right and yet he was wrong. Taroch would not see them riven again. She could not believe that. Sighing, she closed her eyes and willed the morrow to come on fleeting wings.

They were awakened by a Waniand pounding on the chamber doors. Moreya could hear the stranger's voice, heard Preece reply in their odd native tongue, and thus determined it was a friend, not foe, at the door. She pretended to be too deeply asleep to be disturbed when Preece slid her head off his naked belly.

He crossed to the doors. "Bevan."

"Nice garb, Chancellor," his cousin replied, noting Preece stood there stark naked. "Might take a chill, though, dressed only in bruises whilst breaking your fast with Taroch and the visitors."

"I cannot endure fat noblemen and their whining squabbles this particular morn," Preece grumbled, drawing on the robe he'd abandoned on the floor near the doorway the night before. "Send my apologies. Explain I'm still recuperating from the tournament yesterday."

"Not to mention your joust with a bolted door and that hen's egg you won as prize," Bevan observed, lightly brushing the lump on Preece's brow. He glanced toward the great bed. "Remarkable female. A spitfire striding onto the lists to challenge you, with those long purple tresses streaming out behind her, and a firedrake as her weapon . . . To say she has fortified this keep would be a vast understatement. You fell at Taroch's feet, but he avows every man here should be kissing your lifemate's!"

It was early and Preece was still partially befuddled. He was still coming to grips with all that had taken place yesterday and his reunion with the spitfire Bevan referred to. One remark in particular struck him as odd.

"Fortified the keep?"

Bevan laughed out loud.

"Keep your voice hushed," Preece hissed. "My lady is yet resting."

"And you shall do likewise, upon her laurels! She brought a firedrake down from the very skies in front of hundreds of fighting men and nobles. She challenged the king's champion and would have bested him, of a certainty, if Taroch himself had not smoothly intervened to dispatch the accursed beast. You may wager there is no man who bore witness to such a spectacle who yet doubts Taroch's right to rule this kingdom."

Satan's horns, but Bevan was right! Why hadn't Preece stopped to consider that? The entire tournament had been staged in an effort to bolster public opinion in Taroch's favor. The bizarre turn of events would only have brought about the desired result-tenfold.

"Dress yourself," Bevan urged. "Taroch has assembled some of the high barons in the great hall. They await the chancellor, and mayhap his Yune mate."

"So we might be publicly chastised for the hobble we brought to the crown?"

Bevan gave Preece a quelling look. "You know Taroch better than that, surely. He will *say* publicly that you were confined to your quarters and rebuked for the grand display you and the woman put on. But-Preece?"

Nothing Bevan spouted had inspired Preece to take himself off to the great hall except that last comment. Taroch could not lie; Preece would not permit him to begin his reign with a sullied partial truth. With Bevan sputtering in surprise, Preece swept past him into the passageway and marched, barefoot, unkempt, still wearing naught but a dressing robe right into the hall and upon the dais.

"Your Majesty," he nodded.

Taroch spat out the hunk of venison he'd just slipped off his meat dagger into his mouth. "Cousin! We would have waited until you properly garbed yourself. Did Sir Bevan not advise we had visitors taking refreshments with us?"

"He did, Your Highness. And I came straight-away to accept your judgment before them." Preece let his gaze sweep the trestle tables. He saw many faces he recognized from the tournament stands, even some he'd last viewed on the lists from beneath a coif of chain mail or atop a warhorse.

"I humbly request that you forgive my lifemate. She is not of our race and does not fully comprehend our ways as yet. I ask no clemency for myself. I was ensorcelled by a bygoness spell. The wizard's spell was broken upon the firedrake's appearance. Still, I denounced my lifemate. I accept your wisdom and will abide by your ruling in this matter."

Preece had given Taroch a golden opportunity. A means to enhance his own prestige and resolve any lingering questions of family bias . . . or Waniand maleficence. Taroch let the moment stretch out, until a few coughs and mutters indicated their guests suffered growing unease.

"I cannot fault actions which resulted from sortilege. Your mind was not fully within your own control. I also have noted that your lifemate is Yune. She appeared to seek either reunion with you or redress. Having achieved the former, I trust you will ameliorate the misunderstanding within the confines of your chambers."

Preece had never heard coitus described in such gracious terms. When several knights shouted "To the Royal Blade!" and several barons and nobles also offered their support of the Lord High Chancellor, Preece had a most difficult time suppressing the urge to

grin like an ape.

Grin .

Sometimes he desired to be naught other than pure, obstinate Waniand.

That realization abruptly led Preece to yet another: he'd had enough of this posturing and too little of the kind Taroch referred to. He needed to return to his chambers and sheathe that blade of his in the willing female who awaited him there. He feigned a momentary passing weakness and braced himself with a palm on the long dais table.

Taroch immediately picked up the cue. "You are flagging after your many valiant conquests, cousin." He waved a hand at a nearby servant, then at Preece. "We shall speak again at supper this eve. See Lord Preece back to his chambers and make sure he has food and drink, hot water for bathing, and any other comforts he or his lady require."

Thank the Powers Above that Taroch had spent little time around Bourke, else Preece suspected he'd have been subjected to another licentious wink.

Preece strode from the hall, instructing harried servants to fetch steaming pails and towels, bread and eggs, fruited wine, and deliver all promptly to his private chambers. He found Moreya there, awake and fully dressed in her battle garb in the sitting room. He promptly began stripping it from her body.

"Preece, I've naught else with me! My other garments are in a tavern beyond the gates. In the citadel market square. I took the attic room in a place known as the Fatted Goose."

"I know. Spies reported as much to us days ago. But how came you to be adorned like some callow squire, out to have his blood spilt for the first time?"

"I bought this mail from an armorer."

Preece jerked the offensive garment from her body, ripped away her leggings, and bodily carried her back to his bed. "The king has decided to overlook your foolishness upon the lists, but you'll not appear dressed for warmaking again. I'll have someone fetch your things and have other garments sewn, do you have need of them. Stay right here until they've drawn our bath."

"Nay, I-"

"Gainsaying me so soon? Shall I have another word with Taroch? He sent me back here to make amends. The word he used was 'ameliorate.' I like to be clean when doing that."

She'd tried to kill him with a damned dragon. He was entitled to a little righteous indignation. Even if he felt not the least indignant, but actually pleased by the spark of temper in those violet eyes.

They broke their fasts and took a leisurely bath in the chamber's massive tub. Preece dried himself off first, and left Moreya to follow his example. Meanwhile, he disappeared into an alcove off the bathing chamber used as a storage area. This was

where Preece had relocated articles of decoration or furniture left from Cronel's reign that displeased Preece's tastes.

There was one item stored here, though, that did not offend Preece. Rather it fascinated him. Had ever since his dreams had provided numerous clues to its varied uses. It was a long bench covered with thickly padded fabric, which boasted a raised wing-like projection at one end. Preece dragged the bench out near the brazier beside the cooling tub.

Moreya fluffed her overlong tresses, ignoring his actions entirely until she heard him flip the lock on the door leading from the bathing room to the adjoining bedchamber.

"I don't wish to be disturbed for the nonce," Preece said, in perhaps the single greatest understatement of his life. What he truly wished was to discover the answers to questions which had plagued him since Ataraxia. He wanted to explore the myriad possibilities the healers suggested whilst treating him with their mysterious arts. He'd found that Waniand lore dealt extensively with procreation, but skipped entirely descriptions of varied means to obtain sensual pleasure.

If he was no longer purely Waniand, could he not explore some of the things the priests had shown him in his mind's eye? Beginning with assorted uses for Cronel's infamous tugging bench?

He and every other male court visitor had heard rumors of its applications. Cronel's sexual appetites had been legendary. But Preece was certain Moreya had no idea about such matters. Had he personally not remained outside her door all night long to ensure her innocence?

"What strange manner of couch is this?"

Preece purposely kept his voice casual. "A special sort, indeed. I've found 'tis quite comfortable. You see how it's designed with a thickness of pillowing along the length? Join me." He lowered his body onto it and beckoned to her. "You don't need the towel. 'Tis plenty warm here beside the fire."

She gazed at him warily, but left the section of toweling and perched her bottom on the edge of the couch.

Preece felt the first tinglings of arousal in his manhood. He shifted slightly, so he was more sitting than lying back. He gazed into Moreya's violet eyes. "Would I hurt you, Moreya?"

"There is a peculiar look on your face. You want something . . . something I cannot define, but I feel it."

Preece smiled. Ah, she still felt part of what he did. "Madness. Pleasure madness. I want to give it to you, until you can accept no more, then have you return it." She looked at him with more wariness than ever. She was unused to his smile.

"Does that distress you? Yestereve you wished to mate with me. Now I am ready. "

"Oh." Such a small, meaningless answer. Yet it told him all he needed to know. She was amenable.

"Lie at the opposite end, like this," he directed, rising to stand beside the couch. Moreya's tresses spilled to the floor in a shimmering ripple. Preece sucked in an unsteady breath. He'd been told a Yune female's entire body was capable of shimmering before a man's eyes in times of intense arousal. Satan's cloven hooves, but he longed to witness that phenomenon and know he'd caused it.

He reached down and gently captured a silken thigh in each of his hands, then slid Moreya toward the upward-curving end of the bench. She did not hesitate until he had her pelvis elevated, her knees bent and hooked over the couch's winged arm. " *Preece* ."

"Lady wife, my name for such times is Kaelan, as well you know. Relax. Close your eyes. I want only to kiss you."

He planted kisses on her bare knees, on her dangling ankles, then bent low over the bench to speak so close to her flesh, she'd undoubtedly feel the heat of his breath. "The Ataraxian healers gave me many erotic visions, of men and women coupling in unimaginable positions. I watched as they pleased one another in ways completely unknown to Waniands. This too, was part of their healing touch, the gift of such visions."

"But you were distressed by their touch."

"Aye, but not the images which accompanied their hands on my flesh. I found the pictures in my mind most inciting. I want to kiss you as males of the island realm do their females. Everywhere. *Here* especially."

She closed her eyes and gripped the sides of the bench, writhing with a low moan as his tongue flicked over her nub. He laved in a spreading circle. The tension eased in Moreya's thighs. Preece caught her pelvis in his hands and pulled her hips higher still, until they were all but resting on the very top of the curved wing of the couch. Moreya's hands let go. Her mind let go.

He knew when she instinctively admitted she was in no danger, needed no further reassurance that he would not let her slip from her perch, and simply soaked up the pleasure he gave her.

He guided her higher and still higher, leading her to her inevitable crest. She sobbed aloud as he continued to savor her intimately and stroke her love point with his tongue. Then he slid it lower, plunging it as deep as he could into her welcoming wet cavern.

Moreya came apart in his hands and rippled in trembling waves, like the quivering eddies of a swirling purple sea.

Preece had never seen anything more amazing. He eased her back onto the flat portion

of the bench. She lay sprawled like a hapless puppet whose strings had been cut. He hadn't claimed it was a swooning bench, Preece thought wryly. Moreya seemed devastated by the sensual delights she had just experienced for the first time.

But not quite razed, for she gazed up at him and a jolt of heat blazed between them. He guessed her intent even before she spoke, saying she wished to try the same delights on him.

And Satan's pointed chin, but he longed for such wicked enjoyment. Had dreamt of it so many times, he had only to close his eyes and he could watch the scene unfold. Yet his Waniand nature conflicted with this erotic vision in a fundamental way.

"Moreya, believe me, I want exactly what you offer now. I've found myself hard and panting, aching for dreaming of just such an indulgence. But our code forbids a Waniand warrior to purposely spill his seed in denial of procreation. You cannot taste me as I have tasted you."

"Your code has far too many rules. How will anyone ever know what we do in this chamber, Kaelan? You bolted the door."

He captured her chin in his hand and drew her up to kiss him. "Lifemate, yours is indeed the heart of a dragon. You would risk all again and again."

"Because I love you, and in the ways of my people what a man and woman do out of shared closeness harms no one. Benefits both. Is solely their own pleasure to share and is outside the bounds of law and judgments by others."

"There may be a way," he whispered. "I told you a dark secret."

She nodded. "And still I say you were beaten and helpless. You needed the healing, whatever form it took."

"I have now another secret. A need which arose out of the treatments I received. I do not believe other warriors of my blood are aware a male's essence can be trammled even as he reaches pleasurable culmination. The Ataraxians showed me such is possible."

Moreya gave him a dubious look. "I swear. They made me experience such a peaking . . . and others of the usual variety later, to test my restoration. Constriction here," he drew an imaginary circle around the base of his cock and scrotum with a forefinger, "keeps the seed from erupting. Yet the feelings are equally intense, the throbbing pleasure-moreso."

Moreya leaned closer, running a hand across his chest. "More? In truth? You would wish for me to-"

"Aye, fervently. There was no harm that I could discern. Once the ligature is removed, bodily fluids spew again. Mayhap with all the more force, for having been curtailed."

Moreya slowly rose and went to pour a cup of wine from the ewer he'd kept in the bathing chamber before sealing the room. She brought the cup to the couch and

proffered it to Preece. "Meseems we should drink and consider this. I know what passes between us is sacred above all. I suspected I could prove myself your lifemate if I offered the king knowledge of your sacred name. But you told me never to speak it except to you, when we are alone as now. That is the only time I have allowed it to cross my lips."

He took the cup and sipped slowly. He did not need spoken words now to follow the workings of her mind. She was beautiful, but so much more: wise, honorable, unbelievably kind when coping with humans and situations which did naught to merit a kind, generous spirit. All of this was Moreya Fa Y-nay, now her name should be, must be *Preece*.

She accepted the cup, set her lips where his had been, and drained the last of the wine. Preece bit his lower lip to keep from gasping his relief and sexual excitement. She would make his dream real.

And he could not make himself admit it, could not find words to describe to her fully how imperative that had become to him. For reasons he did not understand.

Waniands were sexual beings. Their rutting frenzies were well known and feared, if misunderstood. A Waniand warrior with an erection was considered by anyone a fearsome sight, for never were Waniands closer to their primal animalistic roots than at such times.

Yet they lacked the finesse, the interplay and courtship other races were capable of and engaged in with regularity.

It was the hot rut which made other humans fear them.

It was the cool delight Waniands needed to understand and assimilate.

Moreya could give him both within the constancy of their lifemate bond.

He stretched out full length upon the bench and reached for a loop of her shiny hair. Moreya slowly knelt and began using the strand to constrict his flesh.

Preece gripped the sides of the padded couch so hard his knuckles went white.

Whatever he'd expected, this searing white-hot fire was beyond his weening desire. He groaned aloud, repeatedly, without shame or hesitation, letting the last dark memories of his torture and reconstruction play through his mind at long last. Every ounce of pain and agony, every flickering tremor of arousal and sensual bliss.

The slick travail of Moreya's tongue sent flames licking along his naked shaft. She became scourge and whip, oppressor and fiendish purple demon in truth. He labored to breathe, gulping at the warm air of their bathing chamber as if he'd just come from the battlefield.

Strange words whispered in the back of his mind and abruptly Preece relaxed. This was what he'd asked for, longed for. She was his lifemate, his wife. She held his very

maleness in her hands and took him deep within her mouth. To give him extreme pleasure.

Because the purple demon he'd been fascinated by and so feared was human and frail, solace and hope, need created and fulfilled. She *cherished* him.

He understood as he had not when he'd wed her, even when he'd first taken her. She truly cherished his flesh, his life, his soul. He had only to accept it.

He saw himself alone on a high rocky peak, saw his arms open, and saw himself go spinning downward into a dark, seemingly bottomless abyss even as he felt the throes of ecstasy overtake the nerves of his body.

He cried out and thrashed, twisted, pleaded for mercy.

Still Moreya kept his manhood trapped in the warmth of her lips, forced him to endure the powerful stroking and suction of her tongue, and he could do nothing but lie there helplessly. Stunned.

At length she released him and began to unwind the bright tress she'd used as a ligature. Preece grabbed her arm and pointed to his razor, croaking out two harsh words. The words mandated by his race and lore.

Moreya obeyed and pressed her lips once more to the base of his cock, rubbing with her tongue to catch every droplet she'd spilled.

He had to mount her. He would go mad if he did not.

And the bench was designed for the Waniand preference. He could simply bend her forward over the projection and thrust himself into her. This was the way of his people, the way of the man-bears for centuries.

But he drew Moreya to where he lay, still supine, and thrust himself up inside her while she crouched above him with her knees bent. "I am not like the others," he panted, guiding her hips with his hands. "I cannot be like them. Will not. I could not rule. I am Waniand, yet still do not feel one of my own kind. Help me."

"Stop fighting, Kaelan."

Could the answer be so very simple? He wrapped his arms around her torso, pulling her down onto his chest as he surged upward, straining against her hot, sheathing flesh. He watched the joy billow and swell in the depths of her violet eyes. She had always held the answer locked away inside her soul. Mayhap he'd known the answer all along, but been afraid to look hard enough to see it.

Stop fighting .

They wrestled as one in the way of impassioned lovers, rolling, competing for supremacy, surrendering, then vying once more until they both let the pleasure sweep them into the next dark abyss.

A long while later, he carried her back to his bed and took pleasure with her once more. They dozed, awakened in wonder, explored, and finally lay completely spent, listening to the crackle of the wood in his bedchamber brazier and the low thudding of one another's hearts.

"You are different now, Kaelan. The tenacity and grimness is . . ."

"Gone?" His question was a low rumble that seemed overloud in the chamber. Preece realized it had been hours since he'd spoken a single intelligible word. "You knew all along, methinks. Why did you not tell me from the first?"

"Like the firedrakes? Some miracles must be witnessed. Lived. They cannot be explained. They cannot be drawn with ink and parchment or parabled beside a fire until repetition makes them valid. I had feared you might never understand."

They both had become cognizant in myriad ways this day. Beyond what she said, Preece knew she had a need for him to put it into words. Words that had the power granted them by her people, her ways. "I love you, Moreya."

"I have known it since you crashed through the door of the solar," she whispered, snuggling close to him. "But it pleases me that you have said so, for Waniands do not tell lies."

He could not help himself. By Satan's horns, he had to laugh out loud.

"There is another you love, as well," she whispered, pressing a tender kiss to the underside of his throat. "The most unlovable, unworthy of men. Yet always have I borne him great affection and devotion, and it pleases me you have decided to join the ranks of the devoted. The Warmonger is a most honorable, fierce, staunchly loyal fellow. You simply must look beneath his dark cowl. His soul is not black, you see, but shining, like molten silver."

He lost the Glacian words. His mind just refused to sort them and assemble them into logical strings he could rattle off his tongue. The Waniand phrases and words came, so he used them. He told her of his childhood, of the day his parents were slain, of his loneliness in Ataraxia, how he'd saved a child and been honored with a banquet. How he'd met Taroch.

She fell asleep at some point in his long tale, but he took no offense. She fathomed most of it whether she comprehended his foreign speech or not. She slumbered in his arms, warm and faintly evanescent, and again he marveled that he should call this female his own. Marveled at what had passed between them and the strange prophecy which had led him to this place and time.

At length he reflected on his surrender that day.

He felt no shame, no anger, no hurt or misgivings of any kind. Always he'd felt apart from Bevan and Taroch and the others. Like them, yet never truly one with them. He'd naturally supposed it was due to the long separation. The others had been raised together

from childhood; he'd been misplaced and shunned for his bloodline.

Yet he knew now it was not that, but something else which had kept him so fierce and surly. He was just as strong, just as talented as ever with a sword or shield, outwardly no different than the Warmonger they all knew. Only Moreya knew that the true tournament had been held on a tugging couch that afternoon. He had been challenged and met that challenge.

He had both won and lost.

And in defeat found his greatest triumph.

Chapter 27

Vulpina sent one of her kirtles to Preece's chamber with a serving maid, who insisted on helping Moreya try the gown on while she adjusted the fit. "The queen says we have many guests in the great hall. It would not do, to have the chancellor's mate appear in male clothing or ill-fitting female garb."

The gown the queen had chosen was gilt-trimmed, shiny satin in a greenish-blue summery shade. The hue clashed against Moreya's hair. She frowned, then braided her tresses into a long single plait and wound into a coil atop her head. She'd just secured it with the maid's assistance when Preece entered the sitting room.

Her husband had donned his long chancellor's robe.

He stood so proudly tall and regal before her, Moreya could scarcely credit this was the very same man who'd nakedly offered himself like an imprisoned slave just hours before. But he had, and just the memory of her power over his flesh and feelings, the melding of their desires and thoughts, made Moreya's breasts tingle anew.

She met Preece's blue gaze and held it. A silent affirmation passed between them. They'd crossed a threshold; tasted new pleasure, finding with it a bittersweet remorse; forged yet another link in their lifetime bond.

This night Moreya would appear publicly at Preece's side for the first time and forge another: the public persona of the lord high chancellor's lady.

Her hand on Preece's arm, they strode confidently into the great hall just as the tables were being laid with the evening feast. Moreya hesitated, uncertain what response her presence would bring. The last time some of these noble guests had seen her, she'd been stalking onto the tournament lists with a dragon behind her. She had never deliberately caused a public display of her unique "talent" afore and could only recall the times in her past when her father had berated her. When he'd hidden her away in mortification after firedrakes appeared above her.

What must these people think?

But as she and Preece stepped onto the dais, she heard only the scraping of benches and chairs. The gathering had fallen oddly silent. She glanced about quickly and discovered every nobleman in the hall had risen to his feet. With their wives or courtesans beside them dropping into deep curtsies, the men bowed toward her. In obeisance, she was stunned to realize.

She glanced up at Preece, who nodded solemnly. He reached for the full chalice of ale before him and hoisted it symbolically as he spoke.

"I present my wife and lifemate, Moreya. Formerly of the House of Anthaal Fa, trusted ambassador to the Glacian crown. To the Lady Moreya Preece."

She nearly gasped aloud. Even as the words had registered in her mind, she'd seen the startled looks on several Waniand faces.

Their kind did not recognize matrimony, nor did female mates of Waniand warriors change their names to that of their lifemate's clan. For Preece to boldly announce her birthright and attach his surname to her given one was tantamount to commanding those present to acknowledge her marriage to Preece as superseding their Waniand lifemated bond.

The king, charming as usual, stepped into the breach. Taroch cleared his throat and raised his own cup in toast.

"My cousin was fortunate enough to win himself a Yune beauty. How the Warmonger accomplished such a feat still remains a mystery, but as he also secured the bejeweled crown I so proudly wear, I've no quarrel with the methods of my Royal Blade."

A ripple of benedictions swept the hall, then the king commanded everyone to be seated and the feasting to begin. Moreya noticed the wary looks a few servants gave her husband. From the tone of conversations as they supped, Moreya realized several of the nobles at court respected Preece, but as yet seemed bemused by his presence . . . as well as his dark past.

For 'twas no secret, but openly discussed. That he'd always lived in Glacia, traveled through Dredonia, often been at court before. Just never at the long tables freely eating and drinking with other guests. Preece was still an enigma and likely always would be.

The man who was once scorned until he dared not show his handsome face now sat tall and imposing beside Moreya. Agleam from head to foot in flowing silvery white, he looked like an angel from the distant heavens. Not an ogre. A pristinely rugged and beautiful avenging angel.

As the trenchers were cleared away and dancers filed in, Preece turned to Moreya and was about to speak when he was interrupted.

A stranger approached them. "My lord? I have a matter of some difficulty weighing upon my mind. It requires wisdom and the instincts of a trained fighter. Might I beg a moment of your time?"

Before he could reply, the doors to the hall opened with a resounding thud and a hush came over the sprawling chamber. A group of strangers entered, at the forefront a pair of elderly men with stooped shoulders. They shuffled to the bottom of the dais and raised their faces to Preece and King Taroch.

Moreya gaped in amazement. Like Preece and Taroch themselves, these men were nearly exact duplicates of one another. They both had deep furrows around their icy blue eyes, balding pates, long and straight locks glistening like new snow.

"Son of Tal," one of the elders said, nodding and bowing to Preece. "I misthought never to gaze upon you, for we feared you were long dead. I knew your father. This is my

youngest brother, Ovmer. Four other warriors sprung from our father's loins, but the others passed away over these last winters. Only Ovmer and I remain, each the first of his respective triad, and your most humbly devoted servants. I am Sennock."

Ovmer looked at Taroch and frowned. "You are not Preece clan. Why do you sit on the throne?"

"He is Tarochin," Preece replied. Moreya was belatedly stunned to realize she'd understood every word. Though they all were clearly of Waniand blood, they spoke perfect Glacian. Mayhap so all present would understand their words. "First of Taroch clan and first cousin to me, he is the son of Tal's brother and begotten by a female of Taroch blood. He is king. I am high judge. You honor us, Old Ones."

There was yet another surprise in store for Moreya. Her husband, the stern warrior who seldom laughed and socialized, left the dais and openly embraced the pair of Waniand elders. The one called Sennock wept and gripped Preece's upper arms so tightly, the knuckles of his gnarled fingers seemed ready to burst through his thinning pale skin.

"Sit and eat with us," Preece offered. The two sank onto a nearby bench and nodded grimly to a hovering servant. The fumbling youth nearly dropped the platter of meat he carried in his haste to place food before the hunched old visitors.

Taroch called the hall to attention and spoke at length in the strange tongue Moreya had come to recognize as her husband's native speech. The Waniands around her listened attentively, stared at the newcomers, then at Preece. Preece also offered what seemed to be a lengthy oration. When he stopped speaking, the hall was silent for a moment, then the odd tension eased and most of the guests resumed drinking or eating and visiting with those seated around them at the many tables.

It was as though the stilted interlude had never been.

"Who are those old men?" Moreya asked quietly when Preece turned his attention back to her at last. "They knew your parents?"

"Very well. The older one, Sennock, in his youth trained as squire to my father before he became high clan ruler. It is a great honor they bestow upon us, to have come here. They walked the last sixty leagues through hip-deep snows to pay their respects."

Another Waniand-the one called Jareth, Moreya thought she recollected-leaned down to speak to Preece. His eyes captured Moreya's gaze and held it as he explained to her, "They pay your lifemate the greatest honor a man can earn. Because he assures them his hand rests evermore on the back of the throne, they will go back to their people and forestall war against us."

"War? But you're all Waniands! Why would they want to-"

"They are elders, Moreya," Preece reminded kindly. "They follow the ancient ways, live by rules fixed and unyielding. We are a new regime, children of a new dawn, and they wished only to see for themselves that we are strong and deserving. If they did not trust

in us, they would tell the leaders of their small clans to band together and wrest the throne away from us. Taroch's father, mine uncle, was a warrior quick to boast and slow to act. I assured them his son shows no such failing."

"I see," Moreya answered. She didn't really, but another nobleman was even now edging toward the table, looking at Preece with beseeching eyes.

"They enjoyed the story of the tournament very much," Preece whispered, the hint of amusement gleaming in his eyes. "They had never before met a young warrior who could get firedrakes to do his bidding. They look upon Taroch with awe."

"And this gentleman looks upon you with impatience. I fear he also wishes audience," she warned.

Preece noted the fellow had another man behind him. "You see my lot now in this keep," he mumbled in her ear.

"Ah, but you must speak with them," she encouraged. "Do you not appreciate the irony? Once the nobles here spat upon you. Now they seek your counsel and show you utmost reverence and respect."

"The chancellor is not alone in garnering such, madam," came a deep voice from her left. Moreya turned to see an elegantly-dressed nobleman bowing before her. "I likewise beg audience. With you."

Preece had convinced his gaggle of supplicants that it was most difficult to hear their complaints over the music and whirling dancers; they'd gone to a quiet chamber off the great hall. She could not use her husband as an excuse.

"Forgive me," she demurred. "Lord . . .?" She lifted a brow in question, certain she had not before been formally introduced to this particular person.

"Baron Exleigh," he supplied. "I reside along the farthest northern border of Outer Glacia. There is a strange orelike substance my workers have dug out of the snow and rocks on my demesne, and I was hoping you might come look at it and decide whether I must tithe a portion to the crown, should ship it as the Dredonians do their ores, or what course I should pursue."

"I would offer you assistance were I able, sir," she responded in confusion, "but I'm afraid my expertise is--"

"Exleigh, this is a feast!" King Taroch announced, scowling. He strode to Moreya's bench and offered her his hand. She placed hers in his palm and dropped into a deep curtsy. "Lady Preece has only just been reunited with my cousin, and I assure you he is extremely watchful over her. I could not permit her to travel to your demesne, for he would insist upon accompanying her, and--"

"Don't blame him one whit!" some man shouted, "Look at what happened when Velansare let another escort her!"

Moreya blushed bright pink as the jests continued, growing more ribald in nature. But ever the charmer, Taroch easily turned the topic away from bawdy speculation as to the depth of her attachment to Lord Preece and back to the matter of Baron Exleigh's request. "I have other advisors with knowledge of metalworking and smithing. Mayhap this Glacian Rumwaldt I've heard so much about could be sent back with you to-"

"Forgive me, Your Highness, but I want Lady Preece. You did say she was late Ambassador Fa's daughter."

"Yes."

"Well, you see, my problem is more a social than economic question. I know the material has value. Raviners stole a fully laden cart yestermoon and have attempted raids since. They are proof of the commercial value. But it is the Far League Consortium which concerns me. They may help or hinder, and I would design some feasible arrangement whereby they are allies and see benefit from my trade activities. This is why I ask for Lady Preece."

"Ah, madam! I too have a fraternal matter I would explore and discuss with you."

"Hear ye!" Taroch suddenly roared. "Lady Preece does not have my leave to travel for the nonce. She is cousin to me by First Preece's lifemate blood bond with her. A most gracious addition to my royal emissaries, but-"

"Will you not name her Royal Ambassador in her father's stead?" Exleigh demanded.

"Glacia has been without an ambassador since Anthaal Fa's sudden demise. No one can be more qualified than Lord Fa's own daughter. We have all witnessed her rare talents. The woman has befriended firedrakes, the most feared beasts in all the known world!"

This brought other shouts of acclaim, and Moreya turned helplessly to her monarch, clutching his hand now in desperation. He'd asked her how she summoned the dragons. She'd admitted the freakish truth. What would he do about this?

"She will serve as Royal Ambassador, but here in my keep until I decide she may travel. Were she to venture about the unified realms now, my high chancellor would go with her, and I cannot spare him until many aspects of my rule are clarified. Look you to the gathering awaiting his verdicts."

To Moreya's mind, she and Preece were suddenly both entirely too popular. Still, Taroch had firmly forbidden her to travel . . . the main consideration. "Your Highness is most benevolent. Forsooth, I am weary of travel just now, having come across Dredonia to attend the tournament and greet my husband."

"Damn me, but my wife has never welcomed me so boldly," an elderly fellow chuckled. "Mayhap I'd yet take notice of her more often, were she to don a hauberk and point a dagger at my belly."

"I note you well enough now, Cyrus," his lady snorted. "You make a fool of yourself before our new young majesty and his lady cousin."

There was laughter and more toasting and merriment then. Taroch had bidden Moreya join him and his queen, so she was seated on a tufted pillow near the king's feet. Minstrels sang a long, exaggerated ballad about the Warmonger's defeat the prior afternoon on the tournament lists, by a woman-child with flowing violet hair and purple sparks bursting from her eyes.

Moreya bent low to whisper to the king. "Did Preece help write this fable? I vow, he's the only person I've ever known to talk such flummery about sparks and a violet nimbus glowing around me."

"Truly? Well, how much more straight-spoken would you have him be? Vulpina mentioned it earlier, and I noted it when you initially appeared before me with the clerics. I mistakenly assumed it was the aura of holiness surrounding the monks or the reflection of those garnet beads they worried upon during prayer. Have some more wine, Vulpina."

The queen smiled and drew Moreya into a conversation about her new babe.

Moreya gave no further thought to politics until more than an hour later, when Preece returned to the hall and Taroch abruptly announced he was retiring for the evening, leaving his high chancellor to preside over the festivities. "Lady Moreya." The king beckoned to her as he started for the exit doors. "You will come with me. We have much to yet discuss."

Chapter 28

Taroch led Moreya to the small solar where he'd recently questioned her. The broken door had been replaced. "Vulpina wants another babe," he sighed as Moreya closed the door behind them. "She can send me into rut merely by taunting me with her eyes. She knows it, too, my wicked queen. She kept her hand on my thigh through the meal this eve to irk me into retiring afore midnight. Despite our hall filled with guests."

Moreya laughed. "Yes, Sire, she did tell me how fond she is of your young one and that she very much wished to birth another child soon."

"Do you vex my cousin thus, leave him chafing with want of your flesh?"

Thinking of their long afternoon of intense coupling and loveplay, Moreya answered as honestly as any Waniand. "There is little chance of that, Your Highness."

He cocked his head. "I take your answer to mean you still wish him to mount you. This is good, for I've never known his eyes to linger upon any female's as they do upon you. I fear, were you to venture forth as my subjects desire, First Preece's wits would become addled."

"Nay, Sire. He shall serve you well as high chancellor, I think. But as to becoming royal ambassador myself, I fear 'tis quite impossible. If I attempt to cross open terrain, the-

"The dragons might descend upon your entire party. I understand. And dragons are the reason for this private audience with you. I told you Preece's wizard instructed me how to address a firedrake, should the need arise."

Moreya nodded.

"I was also entrusted with a special parchment," Taroch went on. "Bourke said if your appearance and that of a dragon coincided here in the Glacian realm, I should give you a special missive. I intended to confer it when we spoke here before, but Preece arrived to batter down my door."

He pulled a sealed parchment from a writing desk in one corner of the solar. He handed it to Moreya. "I would be remiss if I did not thank you, Lady Moreya. My cousin is very important here, to my future plans for the realm, to me as a person. I consider First Preece more brother than cousin. My mentor. It aggrieved me from the moment I first beheld him in the Ataraxian temple to see the deep sorrow within him. He was a man adrift. Until this eve. Ask whatever boon you will of me, and I shall grant it."

Moreya swallowed as her eyes filled with tears. Another Waniand who could not speak of abiding love, but felt it for his cousin just the same. "I would ask patience, Sire. Preece needs our esteem and time. Only those things. He is a noble man and will serve you well."

"I have never doubted it." With that Taroch left her to her reading.

Moreya settled herself in a chair near a burning rushlight and broke the seal. The parchment was a lengthy missive from Bourke, penned in what resembled human blood. She read an astounding fable. Bourke admitted casting a spell of forgetfulness upon Preece, with said enchantment to be broken only by Moreya's act of will. If she was privileged to read the parchment now, the bygone spell had ended.

Thus her first challenge had been met.

"First challenge?" she whispered aloud. Then she quickly perused the rest of the wizard's message.

Mere moments or several hours later she lifted her head. She was still alone in the small solar. The rushlight had burned low and would soon wink out. She'd not been reading so very long

And yet she was so profoundly affected, she couldn't possibly return to the hall and pretend naught of consequence had taken place during her audience with the king. She rolled up the parchment and shoved it into the bosom of her gown. She left the solar, found the nearest exit from the keep, and dashed into the open bailey.

'Twas a moonless night. Waniand time, according to legend, a night when evil spirits might walk the land beside mortals. When ill fortune was said to be the lot of any hapless human who dared venture out into the deep murky darkness.

Moreya welcomed the gloom.

She spied a set of stairs leading up to a nearby watchtower and scaled them, announcing to the guard that she sought the keep's highest vantage point. If he found her request odd, he did naught to show it, but led her through a twisting maze of catwalks and stairs to a high parapet. "Leave me," she ordered, "but send word to the Lord High Chancellor where I can be found."

She stood beneath the ebon skies, drinking deeply the crisp night air, pondering the distant stars and what the wizard had revealed. The sordid truth about her father's death, which Bourke had proven to be no accident, but murder. Just as Preece had claimed.

And Bourke confirmed that Preece was indeed a prince, last of a venerated ancient clan. His parents had ruled a land north of Glacia, had come to Glacia on a mission of goodwill, and were slain by a fanatic intent upon destroying all Waniands. The same fanatic who had illegitimately sired Cronel, the polydact usurper who never had legitimate claim to the throne.

The charismatic, naturally persuasive Taroch, while suited by personality to leadership, had little more right to the crown. He was a second son, whose elder brother had perished as a sickly infant. Both males were begotten of Tal's younger brother. Another minor son.

Preece alone truly bore the blood-stamp entitling him to a kingdom.

His father had been firstborn male in his generation. Preece was Tal's only offspring. Preece should be king of Glacia-should have claimed the throne, not only for the Waniand race, but for himself.

Yet Bourke had known Preece nearly all of the young Waniand's natural life. Bourke knew Preece would refuse to wear the crown. He was not a forgiving soul, not a warlord to forget old wrongs. He thirsted, not for glory, but for harmony and repose. Two things he'd known little of during his years in Glacia.

So Bourke fabricated an elaborate presentiment. By painstakingly lettering texts and scrolls, using a wily mage's powers to alter the wording in venerated sacred tomes. He tampered with the lore of the Ataraxians, an offshoot race. The Ataraxians of the islands embraced the prophecy and gave sustenance to the legend.

It foretold of a deliverer, a lone Waniand who had lived his life amongst the Glacians and knew its corrupt monarch. A knight who had served that monarch only to be condemned by him. This brave redeemer would lead the righteous Waniand return to the frozen lands of exile, show his brethren the way through the high mountain arete, reveal the secret weaknesses of the royal keep.

Preece would be seen as the power beside the throne and accepted as such, while in truth he was the power steering the throne into a brighter future.

Moreya had wondered more than once about what compelled Bourke's involvement in Glacian politics and the struggles of mortal fools. Surely a conjurer of his unquestionable skill could find myriad ways to apply his talents. Moreya knew from her father's wanderings that there were distant lands of wealth, other places where the balance of power teetered upon some narrow precipice. Why the intensely burning interest in an orphaned Waniand lad and the bloated greed of a fat polydact? What made any of this worth Bourke's vision and personal strife?

The next line told the answer.

He was the seventh son of the Great *Be-a-re-si*. Which made Bourke himself a Waniand trueblood. In his fighting youth, his eyes had been turquoise blue, not moss green. From his loins had sprung a long line of agile warriors. Though armed with occult knowledge and a full arsenal of arcane powers and spells, Bourke was doomed to live out an epoch watching his race decline.

His various schemes and incantations had not been sufficient to hold back the tide of manic genocide that nearly destroyed the Waniands. He had foreseen disasters, tried to avert them, but had been reduced to helplessly guiding the last of his progeny into seclusion on the outer isle near Ataraxia. There, he knew, the few precious truebloods would be safe. Ataraxians naturally kept to themselves and did not encourage trade or visits from quarrelsome foreigners.

But Bourke knew one day the Waniands must rise up and return to their rightful place.

For this they would need strong leadership.

Troubadours regaled the masses with ballads in which a benevolent redeemer rose to prominence. With forbearance and a kind heart, those who waited long years in darkness would at last be led into the light. Docile and humble people would one day be granted a just reward.

Bourke cursed such cowardice. No saintly deliverer could restore order with words of peace and promises for the morrow. Waniands would never follow such a redeemer. They were a pale people of darkness. Both ice and fire. As nature had made them, they brought damnation with their angelic countenances.

They needed a blade, not a branch.

So Bourke chose the child whom cruel circumstances helped fashion into such a man.

An implacable force, a warrior of strength and invincibility, who would be taught the ancient rituals. He would be raised alone, but raised in the ways of the oldest of his kind. He would practice the ritual cleansing essential to reinforcing his lifemate bond and siring healthy get. And he would need to choose a lifemate worthy of bonding with him, powerful of heart and mind and spirit herself.

She would need to be as rare a creature as Kaelan Preece was.

No magic had been involved in the choice of mate. None was needed. Preece made his choice, according to the tenets of his kind, and Bourke saw the young prince had chosen well.

So well that Bourke had forfeited his essence, relinquished his mortal shell to become a green gemstone. The same stone Moreya had used to barter her way back to confront the man who had forgotten her. Thus proving the strength of her spirit, the perpetuity of their lifebond.

Bourke had maintained the vigil over his bloodline for long eons. But he'd known he must eventually choose a successor. Another must take over the task, safeguarding the endurance of the precious noble race long into tomorrow.

He chose Moreya.

She was female, and not of the ursine clans. She had no black arts, no skill with a broadsword. But she could give the rightful king strong children. Preece's royal seed should produce forthright warriors with quick, generous minds. The sons and daughters of Moreya and Preece would be inherently tolerant; would welcome differences in people they encountered, whether the variation be in outward appearance, customs, religion, bloodline, or speculative thought. They would welcome what they did not understand and seek to gain knowledge and wholeness by embracing it.

As Moreya had welcomed Preece and embraced him with her body, her mind, her heart.

"Why are you out here, Moreya? Did Taroch order me thrown from the bastion? He

knew I spent the day copulating with my lifemate rather than hearkening to the complaints and tales of his barons."

Her reverie broken, Moreya turned and gazed into her husband's eyes. Glacial blue eyes that somehow looked softer on this moonless night. This Waniand night.

"I was looking at the stars. Taroch is spending his eve in the same manner as you whiled away your afternoon, my lord."

Preece stepped up behind her and wrapped his arms around her. They gazed up at the dark skies together. "You seem bemused, lifemate. Or should I say, lady wife. Both roles suit you. I was surprised to learn you'd come here, out of doors. But I recalled that you're safe from the firedrakes at night. Mayhap our evening in the hall overwhelmed you. I understand. One adjusts to the sheer numbers of guests, the constant activity and bustle. But 'tis not what you bargained for, is it? I promised you a quiet life in the sun."

"Tell me about Ataraxia," she murmured, content to snuggle within his arms and suspend the moment. To keep the astounding truths at bay yet awhile longer and just be with Preece.

"It was all I'd been told to anticipate. The clime is warm, balmy. The seas are blue-green and full of life, the island lush and peaceful. I hated every moment there."

She turned within the circle of his arms and touched his cheek. "You hated it? So you would not return?"

"I hated it, first because I felt I'd been cheated and tricked into going there. Then because I'd left the best part of myself behind in Greensward. I promised Lockram I'd return one day, so mayhap we'll sail there eventually. But Tarochin needs me here now. And you. We cannot abandon this king as we did the old ruthless one."

"Nay," she replied.

"I heard the nobles implored Taroch to make you Royal Ambassador, to serve as your father did for many years."

"He was rarely home. He liked strange places and foreign peoples. But you know I cannot possibly-"

"But what they suggest is not without merit, Moreya. You have the rare ability to accept others without prejudging them. Even when all the world condemns, you do not. An open mind is perhaps the most essential quality for an ambassador of the crown."

She remembered the dark knight standing in the passage outside her chamber. She'd been furious that Glaryd had summoned him, been timid, but determined to try to befriend him. He'd ignored the hand she offered. Then. But it had profoundly affected him.

Or had it all of it been naught but a wizard's sorcery? The letter also might be another subtle trick.

Or it could be the veriest truth.

Somehow, gazing up at her tall, ethereally-pale husband, his proud head and broad shoulders framed by the night firmament and its dusting of stars, she could believe in the future. And the past. Accept the torch. Accept that the dragons made her unique, and that, without them, she might not be standing here with the man who was true royalty.

"I love you, Lord Chancellor. Warmonger. Preece. Kaelan. By all those names and more will I love you beyond the last beat of my heart. Until the last star falls from the sky, until the last dragon withers and dies."

He set her back from him and stared into her eyes. "I love you, Moreya. When I lay upon the couch and surrendered myself to you utterly, I recognized the feeling within my soul as that your people had described. A deep, possessive sense of longing and belonging, wanting only your happiness, trusting that you equally seek mine. I'll not fight against it or my own Waniand nature, but seek harmony between them. That's why I introduced you as I did. You are my wife, my lifemate, my love. Every man in this keep and every visitor to it shall recognize and honor you as such, or answer to the Royal Blade."

She'd forgotten that name. Or mayhap purposely blocked it. Her never-to-be, beautiful, proud king. "I want to go to bed, Kaelan."

He turned and led her back to their chamber, where he helped her undress. They were entwined beneath the furs with a fire burning hotly in the brazier when Preece heaved a sigh and spoke at last.

"The task you've set yourself is not an easy one."

Could he know what Bourke had written? How? Moreya had pushed his hands away from her bodice, begged him to stoke the chamber fire so he'd not see her pull out the parchment. She was certain he hadn't noticed her toss it into the flames as he took off his long robe.

"What do you mean?" she asked carefully.

"I am not a patient man. I am thoroughly unlikeable at times. Unreasonable, unmoved by jocularities, and I do not enjoy listening to both sides of a petty quarrel. Yet I am chancellor. As you saw this eve, it is ever my duty to rule upon matters small and sometimes large, or make recommendations to Taroch. I will rant and scowl and need you."

"Ah," she sighed, snuggling closer.

"I will want you pliant and crazed with lust as I am, as you were on that bench today. There may be times I'll abide no refusal, no excuses that you're tired or in the midst of your woman's cycle. I can only endure interminable days in that hall knowing I have you awaiting me here each night." His hands moved to lightly cup and caress her breasts.

"You've always been churlish," she said with a yawn. "It's part of what I love about you."

"That makes no sense, Moreya. You should want me-"

"Oh, I do, my lord. Clothed or naked, as now. Smiling or grim. Listening or ranting. Hidden beneath a cowl or standing tall and proud for all the world to see."

"You have always seen more to me than is warranted, little jewel. You are Yune and could have wed a noble of any race. Instead you are bound to me, a soldier falsely proclaimed 'lord' only by virtue of his cousin sitting on the throne. You might have ruled an entire royal household instead of residing within these private chambers."

"You won the throne for that cousin. I cannot believe he'd deny you a manor house and servants, did you request such. We shall need them when we begin raising a family."

There was a long moment of silence. Then Preece gently laid a warm palm over her navel. "We have already begun, Moreya. Do you not feel it? The difference?"

In truth, she had noticed a vague shift, but attributed it to the whirlwind events of the remarkable day and evening.

They'd explored one another's bodies in an entirely fresh, intensely private manner. She'd been introduced publicly as his bride. She'd been given a parchment proclaiming her the torchbearer for an entire clan. "It is not because of that . . . couch?"

Preece smiled. With a warmth and indulgence she'd never glimpsed before in his eyes. "A triad grows within you, lifemate. I am virile still. Three seeds have taken root within your womb."

"Triad? But-You cannot possibly know so soon, Preece."

"Triads were born to every generation in my mother's line until my own. If she had lived beyond my early years, mayhap I would have had other siblings born three at once. Those Waniand elders were also the eldest of triads. They are common amongst my people."

"*Triads*?" Moreya bolted upright, her heart pounding. Why did all this strange talk make perfect sense?

"Bears usually whelp a single cub, upon occasion, two. But the great northern icebears Waniands descend from rutted less often, hibernated longer, and produced get in spates of three. A number of great portent."

"Lord Above."

"Ssh," he whispered, his hands moving on her body with renewed urgency. "Wait until we delve into the breeding rituals. You will like them every bit as much as you enjoyed today's adventures."

She settled back against the pillows. She wanted to hear of these other delights. It might

be worth swelling up like an overfed goose to be pampered by more of his sacred rites.
"What happens if I am breeding?"

"Your belly will swell and the babes will press against your spine. It is a warrior's duty to bathe his female mate, rub warm oil into her stomach to anoint her, and ease her burden with caresses."

"Ah. Can you demonstrate?"

He began rubbing in slow, delicious circles.

"I do like your arcane ways, Warmonger."

"There is more. A nightly ritual which must begin soon."

"You are truly certain-"

He growled. "I am, and if you do not stop arguing the point, I'll merely take you again to assure my potency."

"You could, anyway."

"Mayhap I shall. *After* the breeding ritual."

He was so very incredibly stubborn. Moreya pushed the furs down, baring her flesh in the firelight. "What is this one? Do you rub your staff over strategic places or grasp my left knee while I count backwards from a hundred five?"

His teeth flashed white and then he captured her right nipple and drew it fully into his mouth and began suckling. Firmly.

Moreya felt the hearth flames leap out and sear her from the center of her breast down to the core of her womanhood. She writhed and moaned, realizing she'd soon be begging him to possess her fully again. She'd never become aroused to intensely quite so fast. Could she truly be carrying his get so soon?

"This will incite you," he murmured, moving to her other breast, "but you must learn to lay still. We practice so that your tender flesh may be ready for my sons. Waniands are oftentimes very healthy babes who suckle at length. You are not of our blood. Your nipples are most sweet and pretty to gaze upon, but much too soft. I will make them tougher."

Oh, he did. They became hard little nubs of burning desire. And she sobbed his name in all its variations three times before he granted her satiety. He took her once more then, saying he could not assure how long he might remain in rut-if, indeed, he was still capable of such a physical state.

Then he drew her close, whispering his immense happiness at the realization he'd not been left sterile. Happiness in the sacred knowledge he would soon have fine sons, and was asked now to use his wits, not his sword arm. Moreya kissed him and shared in his quiet joy. She rested in his arms, mind churning, long after Preece had fallen into what appeared to be a most restful sleep. He did not toss or turn. His chest rose and fell

evenly, slowly.

He was so very dear to her.

She thought back to the lonely nights without him. Considered how he'd suffered for years, still and all had persevered. She thought about how by rights he now should wear a crown with kingly, not merely a chancellor's white robe. Ah, but Preece's children might yet one day be kings . . .

She touched tentative fingers to her belly.

When he'd asked her to sail to Ataraxia with him, he'd promised to get babes in her belly. He'd promised her a life in the sun. Someday she wanted that second promise fulfilled, but she accepted that he'd already achieved the first.

Preece had pointed out Moreya's small storage chest, brought back from the Fatted Goose during the feasting that night. He'd made certain the servants placed it in his bedchamber before he'd sought Moreya out on the battlements. She'd checked her things as they were undressing for bed.

She still possessed her large pink stone. The last terrestar. They might use it for a vessel and crew, take the voyage they'd been denied together, and see Lockram in Ataraxia. Preece did not speak of his rough-hewn comrade, but Moreya sensed he missed the clownish friend from his past. Lockram would taunt Preece, get him to drink and cross swords and scowl in that secretly good-natured way he often did when he didn't realize anyone was spying.

Lockram would be good for Preece, Moreya decided. These Waniands were entirely too serious a great deal of the time.

Waniands . Even lying abed with one, she had to admit they were a race of fey people, surrounded by mysteries and arcane knowledge others did not fathom. Preece accepted laws of nature above those of men. He adhered to his race's rigid cabalistic lore. Truebloods like Preece honored superstitions and ancient beliefs.

Why should it surprise her that he claimed to detect life from tender unborn babes planted only hours ago in her womb?

She was torchbearer. The next generation mayhap had already been spawned. The thought did not daunt Moreya. She stroked Preece's smooth torso and was rewarded with a deep answering murmur. He did not move, though. He slept on, her beautiful warrior king.

Moreya smiled and closed her eyes. She embraced the Waniand once hated and feared as the dark knight, the Warmonger. She had befriended a young king and flown aloft with dragons. She had met her first challenge and was preparing for her second. Whatever might come, she would face it. She did not fear the future.

There was no reason to fear it.

Somewhere the Ancient Ones looked down upon her, watching and waiting. They had chosen her to safeguard an entire race. A fierce race which would overcome its dark, turbulent past and make a future brighter than the fifth moon.

Somewhere the Ancients knew all that could be known, saw what would be, and waited for the new children of the last great king . . .

Somewhere the Ancients smiled down upon them from the backs of great winged dragons, or from thrones in the Creator's Great Heavenly Hall. Out yond afar, there amongst the glittering stars.

THE END