

# Torin and Sunshine



C. E. Barrett

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Torin and Sunshine  
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*To Torin's fans at Opendiary, whose  
encouragement helped make this book  
happen.*

## Introduction

Torin's Tales began as a single novel written for my own enjoyment some years ago. In September of 1999, an online acquaintance introduced me to Opendiary.com where I transcribed the parts I had and then began to wing the story as I went along.

To my great delight, many readers became caught up in Torin's story, and I started a companion diary to fill in the blanks of his life which I couldn't fit into a work told in first person. This book is one of the companion tales.

Torin is a lusty young man, and more than a little willing to engage in lusty behaviour with a willing partner, especially one of whom he is particularly fond. Since I wrote this as a companion piece, readers of the original form were already well-acquainted with Torin, his people—the Forest Dwellers—and the Forest Folk of Destrain. The Folk are the wolf-people; shapeshifters who are born wolf and learn to assume human form as they grow. Their personalities and intelligence remain unchanged

regardless of the outward form, and since they are wolves first, many of their customs derive from wolven society. For instance, if one of the Folk is showing teeth in a smile, you might want to consider running away.

Torin, having spent much of his childhood among the Folk, tends toward Folk behaviour and customs, although he, himself, is a monoshape human. I don't want to bog the story down with the history of Destrain, the customs of the Folk and the Dwellers, or even the rest of Torin's busy life. Those details will come out in subsequent works, and over time, you will see the tapestry of his life take form.

In the meantime, I hope you enjoy this frankly erotic story of his romance with Sunshine.

# Chapter One

The tall soldier strolled among the Traders' wagons and stalls, dark eyes taking in everything. The summer sun glinted off his metal helmet. He felt sweat trickle down his back beneath the silk tunic he wore under leather armour. Metal greaves protected his shins and a skirt of leather strips overlay the skirt of the tunic. A sword and dagger hung to either side of narrow hips. His black braid was wrapped around his throat and fastened to its base with a sturdy leather thong. He nodded to many of the Traders as he walked past.

"Good day, Captain," called one. "Can I offer you a meat pie?"

"Thank you, no," he replied. "I have plans for my supper." Appetizing smells wafted from the stall and he felt tempted to stop and sample the wares. Perhaps tomorrow, he would.

He weaved his way through the throngs of people headed home after a day of shopping and haggling. Brightly coloured canvas awnings gave shade from the late day sun. All around him,

shoppers and Traders called out to each other, the noise rising into the clear blue sky. Aromas of food, of spices and incenses, mingled in an almost intoxicating blend, covering the underlying smells of food that had gone bad and dung from the horses and oxen which pulled the Traders' wagons and caravans.

The day was winding to a close and already many Traders had put their goods away until the morrow. Some of the permanent stalls had sturdy shutters up; the temporary ones had been emptied and their contents stowed away in the Trader's wagon. A few were still open for business, offering a last handful of wares for half price. He stopped at a stall that sold grains and vegetables.

The woman behind the stall straightened from picking up an escaped onion. "Be right with you," she said, tossing the onion into a basket, then turned to look at the customer. "Oh! It's you." She smiled and held out her hands. The soldier smiled back, taking her hands in his and bowing over them.

"Mistress Sunshine," he said. He touched his lips to the backs of her hands and let her go.

"Lieutenant... no, I'm sorry, Captain Torin," she replied. "I heard of your promotion. Congratulations."

"Thank you," he said. "Although, in truth, I would prefer to have Ardan still here. Something

about his exile rankles and I doubt it was deserved. But..." He shrugged eloquently, then looked around. "Where's Rancid?"

Sunshine smirked. "It's 'Ranid', and I have no idea where he is at the moment. The last I heard, he was headed for a new tavern to try their latest ale or gin or whatever it was. I really don't know."

Captain Torin removed his helmet and cradled it on one elbow. The huge scar that disfigured the right side of his face was pale in the sun. "It's gin. It's cheap and quite dreadful. But if you're looking for a quick drunk, it'll do the job. How long has he been there?"

She looked up at the late afternoon sun. "Oh, since just after midday, I would guess. Quite some time."

He barked short laughter. "Then I will guess he's lying under a table somewhere. He might be in one of our drunkard cells, sleeping it off. In either case, you're not likely to see him tonight." He looked at her for a long moment. "I can try to track him down, if you like. Have him brought back here to his own bed, as it were."

Sunshine folded her arms across her chest and stared up at Torin. "No. Leave him wherever he is. Serve him right to wake up someplace unpleasant. I'm tired of rescuing him, Torin. I really am. So tonight, let him pay the price for his drinking."

She went about putting the rest of her goods



away for the night. Torin pitched in, passing her baskets to stow away and helping to take down the striped awning above the display. Before long, the work was done, the stall shut down. Sunshine blew out a breath. "Well, that's done. Thank you, Torin. You didn't have to do that."

"It's all right. I'm off duty for the rest of the day and what better to do than help a friend?"

She smiled, reached out and squeezed his hand. "Would you like to stay and share some supper with me? It looks like I'll be on my own tonight."

Torin gazed at her. "I have a better idea," he said. "Why don't I take you to supper?"

"You mean at an inn or some such?"

"Exactly. I know several that serve excellent food and you won't have to cook or clean up."

"I like that part." Her eyes gleamed. "Oh, but who will watch the caravan for me?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Sunshine, I have several hundred men under my command right here in the city. It will be the matter of moments to set one to guard things until you return."

"I need to freshen up," she said. "I can't go out in these dusty things."

"Then you go tend to that; I'll get a guard and a carriage and we'll go in style." He smiled, bowed and strode away before she could come up with another argument.

When he returned with the carriage and a

guard, Sunshine came out of the caravan, patting her hair into place. "I will leave the door unlocked for your man, in case he would like tea or something," she said to Torin. "And in case Ranid comes home, by some miracle."

Torin smiled. "He might. As for the guard, well, I will leave it to his discretion. He's reliable and discreet." He turned to the soldier. "Harley, you know Ranid by sight, do you not?"

"Oh, aye, yes, indeed, Cap'n. If 'e turns up, I'll jes' put 'im to bed, like, 'n' if'n 'e arsks about 'is missus, well, she's out wiv you, en't she? An' if 'e'd bin 'ome, like, 'e'da bin able to come wiv? Right?"

"Exactly so. And now, Mistress Sunshine, shall we?" Torin held out a hand to Sunshine and helped her into the carriage, then climbed in beside her. He tossed a light rug across their legs to keep the dust off and spoke to the driver. The driver nodded and flicked the reins.

"Where are we going?" Sunshine asked.

"I thought we might have a tour of the city for a bit, and then we're going to an establishment I'm rather fond of. Or would you rather go directly there?" He reached behind his head and untied the end of his braid from its base and let it hang over his shoulder, down his chest.

"No, a tour would be nice," she said. "I never seem to have time to look around the city beyond

the Market. We get here, set up and the next thing, Ranid is gone to sample the wares here, there and everywhere, and the only places I ever get to see are the Market and the roads to Emeera and Rojer's house."

"Then it is high time you saw more of the city." He studied her for a moment, frowning. "Sunshine, may I ask something rather personal?"

"I suppose. I can always not answer. But I get to ask you something in return."

"Fair enough."

"Now, what's the personal question?" She wriggled on the seat and rearranged her skirts, putting her hands demurely in her lap.

"Why do you put up with Ranid?"

"He's my husband," she said. "I took vows with him before a Holy Man in front of his family and friends." She looked down at her hands. "Vows are sacred things, are they not?"

"You took vows before Ranid's gods?"

"Yes."

"And when did you Dance?" He gazed at her, and when she didn't answer, he took one of her hands and asked again. "When did you Dance with him? When did you make your Promise to him in front of your Creator, your family, your friends?"

Her fingers linked with his and at last she looked up into the dark eyes. "Never. We've never

Danced. Folk customs are meaningless, you see." Her smile held a touch of bitterness.

Torin smiled and brought her hand to his lips. He kissed her fingers. "So you are bound to him by his rules, his customs?"

She gazed into the black depths of his eyes. "Yes." Her own eyes widened suddenly. "Torin! They're your rules and customs, too," she said.

He kissed her hand again and released it. "I am a Dweller, dear Sunshine. A boy of the Forest primeval. Ranid and Rojer are from Braindead or wherever. I assure you their customs are not *mine*." He gazed at her, a mischievous light in his eyes.

"It's 'Brinded'," she said. He shrugged dismissively and she laughed. "My turn," she said.

"Go ahead." He straightened up, looking at her with an attentive expression.

She half-turned toward him, narrowed her eyes and asked, "Why aren't you and Emeera lovers?"

Torin's eyes went wide and he laughed softly. His gaze slid over the top of Sunshine's head for a few minutes while he chewed on the corner of his lip. Then he looked back into her eyes. "She takes her vows very seriously," he said. "I have never asked — not when I was sober, anyway, and she ignores me when I'm drunk — nor will I as long as she is married."

"What about before she got married? She told me you and she came close once."

"Very close," he said. "Too close. She was supposed to go to her wedding bed a virgin and well, she went to him intact. But it wasn't easy."

"It was hard, was it?" She smiled up at him with wide, innocent eyes.

He gazed back, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Very. Extremely, in fact."

"I see." She cleared her throat. "Well then, since you and Emeera aren't lovers, surely you have someone or several someones?"

"You're asking more than one personal question," he said. "Isn't it my turn?"

"Oh look at that house! Isn't it pretty?" Sunshine pointed past Torin at one of the elegant houses set back from the street. It had a wide garden in front, with climbing roses hanging over an archway.

Torin turned to look. "Yes, it is. There are quite a few lovely homes along here. Mostly petty nobility and a few wealthy merchants."

Sunshine gazed around at the large houses. Many of them had timbered fronts and stone roofs. More than a few had flowers growing in profusion. "Oh it is lovely. Imagine living here." She sighed.

Torin took her hand again. "You're not going to let me ask, are you?" he said, his fingers lightly

caressing the back of her hand.

She smiled. "After supper, perhaps," she said. She squeezed his hand and moved a little closer on the seat.

They drove through the streets of the wealthier part of the great city. Sunshine exclaimed over the parks and open areas, the wide streets and bright shops dotted here and there. "I never realized there were so many green places in the city," she said. "I've seen small areas near the Market and along the river, but I didn't know about these. Can anyone visit them? I see there are fences around them."

"The fences are mostly to keep carriages and riders out of the parks, and yes, people are welcome to walk through and enjoy. Remind me to take you to the Royal Gardens some day. Have you ever been?"

"No, never. Someone told me I should see them, but I told you already, I never have the time."

"Then we will make the time one of these days," he said. He leaned forward and spoke to the driver. He sat back.

"Where to now?" she asked.

"Supper," he replied. "I think you'll like the establishment I have in mind." He smiled mysteriously. She gave him a suspicious look. "Trust me," he said.

"I do," she replied. "I think." They drew up outside a tavern with an elaborately carved and painted sign out front. Sunshine looked up at it. "*The Dancing Wolf?*" she asked. "What is this?"

"It's one of my favourite places to get away from it all without actually leaving the city," said Torin, stepping down from the carriage. He held out his hand to Sunshine.

She gave the sign one last look, then took his hand, gathered her skirts out of the way and climbed down to the street.

"Shall I wait, Captain?" asked the driver.

"No, thank you, Wil," said Torin. "Although you can come back in a few hours, if you like." Wil touched his forehead and drove away. Torin offered his arm to Sunshine, who tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow and let him lead her inside.

## Chapter Two

The entryway was a squarish room with stairs at one side, an arch in the opposite wall leading to a large and crowded room, and several other doors. A young woman bustled by carrying a tray laden with platters of steaming food. Sunshine and Torin sniffed as the tray went by.

"Be right with you," the young woman called back over her shoulder. She threaded her way among the tables and benches in the large room.

"It's busy," said Sunshine. "Are you sure there's room for us?"

Torin covered her hand, still resting on his arm, with his free hand. "Absolutely sure. You'll see."

The young woman bustled back. She smiled at Torin. "Well, it's about time. We were starting to wonder if your promotion had made you too high and mighty for the likes of this place." She dimpled and winked at him and gave Sunshine a frankly appraising look. "And you've brought company! Well, well, well." She went to one of the



doors, pushed it open and called through. "Mother! Torin's here." An unintelligible reply issued from the room — a kitchen, to judge by the sounds and smells. "I said it's Torin!" The girl rolled her eyes. "Hang on just a tic. D'you mind?"

"No, Abby, not at all." Torin said. Abby smiled again and disappeared beyond the door. A few moments later an older woman came out, wiping her hands on an apron and muttering to herself.

"Hurry on out there, she says. He's here, she says. Who? That's what I'd like to know." She stopped, noticing the couple waiting in the middle of the room. "Torin! Oh, and with company, yet." She studied Sunshine. Her eyes widened. "She's one of us. How'd you do, young Miss? I'm Melina of Caigh."

"Sunshine of Lorca," said Sunshine. "And it's 'Mistress'."

Melina gave Torin a stern look. "You're not bringing a mated woman here for trysts, are you?" She moved closer to him and looked up into his face. "I see lust in your eye, Torin. Just behave yourself."

A dimple appeared in Torin's left cheek. Sunshine's cheeks glowed. "It might just be a speck of something else," he said.

Melina snorted. "I know lust when I see it." She turned to Sunshine. "You'd best keep an eye on him. Nothing else, mind you, just an eye." She

shook a finger at Torin. "You know better than to be interfering between a Danced couple."

"Now before you embarrass her into leaving, Mel," Torin said. "Let me just say that we have come for supper only. And furthermore, Sunshine is *married*. Vows before a Holy Man and everything."

Melina looked up at him, then back to Sunshine. "You're married to one of them?"

"Yes." Sunshine flicked a glance at Torin. "My husband and I have never Danced. He considers our traditions silly."

Melina pursed her lips. Her eyes half-closed. "I see. And just supper? Well. Hm. I rather doubt that, but I suppose that I might offer you your usual room, Torin, if you want it."

"Yes, please, Mel."

She turned and led the way up the stairs. Torin gestured to Sunshine to follow. He brought up the rear. Melina led them to the second floor, down a wide corridor to a door at the back of the building. She opened it, taking a candle from one of the wall sconces to light the lamps in the room.

"I'll send Abby up in a few minutes to take your supper order." She paused at the door. "Try to keep your clothes on at least that long." She winked at them and left, leaving the door open.

Sunshine stood staring at Mel's retreating back. "What is that all about?" she asked. "Do you bring

women here often?"

"No. In fact, I have never brought anyone here before. This place is my Folk refuge in the city. It's the next best thing to going to Tirna." He went to the window and looked out. "I usually come for supper and a night with friends. Sometimes I eat down in the big room but more often I have this room to myself. I like it here." He turned back and looked around at the familiar furnishings.

The room had a polished oaken floor that glowed in the lamplight. An oval rug lay before the hearth; another in the middle of the room. A small table, covered by a linen cloth, stood with two chairs by one wall. Comfortable stuffed chairs flanked the fireplace where two lamps squatted on the mantel. Another lamp hung from the ceiling on a chain. Opposite the fireplace, the far wall had a curtained nook that held a long, wide couch, with a multitude of pillows on it. Near it was a washstand with ewer and basin and towels. Heavy draperies hung on either side of the window and matched the equally heavy curtains of the nook.

"It's very cozy," Sunshine said. "I can see why you like it so well." She walked across to him and looked out the window at the walled garden below. Shade-loving plants and flowers filled the spaces between tidy stone paths. Sunshine sighed. "It's lovely here." She turned her head and caught

Torin gazing down at her with an odd expression. She looked back, then raised herself on her toes to stare deep into his eyes.

He half-smiled. "What are you doing?"

"Looking for the lust in your eye that Melina saw. I want to know if she was right or just imagining things." She continued her search of the dark eyes, a mischievous glint in her own.

Torin laughed; a low, soft sound. "Keep looking," he said. "And you very well might find it." He bent to her, his lips close by her ear, barely touching her skin. "But only if you truly want it to be there."

"Oh, good. You're still dressed." Abby breezed into the room. "Mum thought you might be tearing at each other by now and I'm awfully glad you're not. It's embarrassing as anything to walk in on people when they're mating."

Sunshine jumped at the unexpected voice. Torin straightened and turned slowly.

Abby grinned at them. "Not that he's ever brought anyone here before," she said to Sunshine. "And I suppose it might be interesting to walk in on him sometime." She rubbed her hands together. "So, Mum sent me to find out what you'd like for supper, and to ask you specifically, Miss, if you would like the special meat dish for Folk. We have it completely raw and also very rare."

"It's been so long since I've had raw meat, I'm not sure I could digest it any more. Rare would be lovely, though, thank you. And it's Mistress." Sunshine moved away from Torin.

"Oh, pshaw. Mum said you haven't Danced, so it's Miss in this house." Abby turned to Torin. "And you, Captain? Or do you trust us to know your tastes by now?"

"You know me very well," said Torin. "A skin of Husin's white, if you have it, would go well with me right now."

Abby bobbed a curtsey. "I'll be right back with that. Do you want supper now or much later?"

"Now is fine, thank you," said Torin. The dimple in his left cheek winked and vanished.

"Control yourselves, then," said Abby. "Wine right now, supper as soon as it's ready. Shall I leave the door open for now?"

"Open is fine."

Abby bobbed again and hurried away. Sunshine sank into one of the armchairs. Torin took the other. They gazed at each other.

"Your friends seem determined that we are up to more than a meal," she said.

"Whatever we're up to is entirely your decision," said Torin. "If you want a wonderful supper and a moonlight carriage ride back to your caravan, then that is what you shall have. If you want something else as well, I'm sure I'll be able to

accommodate you."

"You're saying you'll be up for whatever I want, is that it?"

"More or less. Rather more than less." He leaned forward in his chair and gestured for her to do the same.

"What?" she asked, as she bent toward him.

"Just thought I'd look for a mote of lust in your eye," he said. "Just in case."

She moved closer. "You shouldn't have to look too hard," she said, opening her eyes wide.

"No. I think I see it right there." He slid to the edge of his chair and took her chin between thumb and forefinger. He tilted her head. "Yes, there it is." His face was close to hers.

"Wine's here," said Abby as she sailed back into the room.

Sunshine jerked upright in her chair, pulling back from Torin's light touch on her chin. Torin's shoulders sagged a moment, then he sat back and held out a hand for the wineskin. Abby gave it to him and passed two goblets to Sunshine.

"I think I'm going to close the door this time," she said. "And I'll be sure to knock when I bring the food. Listen for me, would you? And if you're in bed by then, just draw the curtain and shout out for me to bring the tray in." She winked at them and left, closing the door behind her.

Torin laughed softly and unstopped the

wineskin. "Hold out the goblets, dear Sunshine," he said, and poured generous amounts when she did. He put the wineskin on the floor next to his chair and stood up. He held out his goblet. "To dear friends," he said.

Sunshine rose and touched her cup to his. "Very dear friends," she said. They drank to the toast.

Torin took Sunshine's goblet and set both on the mantel. He put his hands on her waist and looked down at her. Amusement danced in his eyes. "At least with the door closed, Abby can't sneak up on us," he said.

Sunshine's hands rested on his upper arms. "Good thing, too," she said. "I don't think my heart could take another start like that."

"I could put the bar across," he said. "Just in case she forgets to knock."

Sunshine shook her head. "It should be all right," she said. Her hands slid up to his shoulders. Torin took a half-step closer and wrapped his arms loosely around her. He bent his neck, touched his left cheek to hers and rubbed his face gently along her cheekbone toward her ear. He touched his lips to the place just below her ear, the corner of her jaw, her cheek and then pulled back to look at her.

Her eyes were half closed; her lips lightly parted. He bent again and kissed her mouth

tenderly once, twice, again. She leaned against him, returning kiss for kiss. He raised his head and blew out a long sigh. Sunshine's arms went around his neck. She looked up at him. He smiled at her and tightened his arms around her, pulling her closer.

"That mote of lust in your eye seems to be growing," he said.

She smirked at him. "Yours seems to be growing, but it's moved from your eye." She pressed against the hard ridge beneath the skirt of his tunic.

He laughed softly and kissed her again. This time, his tongue traced her lips then dipped between them. They tasted each other with slow, tantalizing licks and brief touches of tongue to tongue and lips. A sound of desire came from Sunshine's throat as the kisses became deeper and more demanding. Their bodies pressed tight together. Their kisses were hungry, devouring, urgent.

One of Torin's hands slid down her back to hold her as close as he could. The other went up, cupped the back of her neck as his kisses moved from her mouth to her cheeks and temple, down to her neck. Her head dropped back allowing his lips access to her throat. He murmured against her skin and his tongue flicked out, tasting and savouring her. Her breath became ragged.



Suddenly, she pulled back. "Stop. Oh, Torin, stop. I can't."

He stared at her, his hands dropping to his sides. "What?"

"I can't. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, but I...I...can't."

A soft and shaky laugh escaped his lips. "What do you mean you can't?"

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth and shook her head. "I mean I can't." A tear slid down her cheek. "I thought I could, and I want to, but I can't." She dashed the tear away. "I'm sorry. I should just leave now."

She turned to sidle past him. He caught her arm and drew her to him. "Sunshine," he said.

"Please don't," she said.

He took a deep breath and let it slowly out. He took her by the shoulders, cleared his throat and said, "But I did promise you supper. And it's on the way up." He put a finger under her chin and raised her face. He smiled gently, if somewhat ruefully. "And I did say whatever happened was up to you. If you can't, you can't." He kissed her forehead.

She put her arms around him and rested her head on his shoulder. "But I want to," she said. "I want you to hold me and touch me, but I can't..."

He held her and stroked her hair. "Shhh, it's all right. It's all right." A slow smile spread across his face. He kissed her hair. "In fact, I have the

answer. It'll be better than all right."

She gave him a puzzled look. "What?"

"Dinner's here!" Abby's voice called through the doorway. "Close the curtains. I'm coming in." The door opened. Abby looked in. "Oh, you're still all dressed." She took the tray from the table in the hallway. She had set it there to free a hand to knock and open the door. "Here you are, dear Captain and Miss. Supper for two. More wine. If you want anything more, just ring. I'll collect the dishes in the morning."

She set out supper on the small table and winked at them. "That means no more disturbances tonight. Enjoy."

She grinned and left, closing the door behind her.

"Shall we?" Torin waved toward the table. The delicious aromas were not to be denied.

Sunshine waited for Torin to pull out her chair and seat her at the table. He sat himself down after collecting their goblets from the mantel. He smiled at Sunshine across the table.

"I want to know what you thought of earlier," she said. "You said you had the answer. What is it?"

"Supper first," he said. He took a bite of his meal. Sunshine studied him for a few moments. He looked up from his food and reached across to take her hand. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

"Then enjoy the food and I'll tell you my idea. If you don't like it, why then, when we're done with supper I take you back to your caravan. If you do like it, then we stay a while longer and let supper settle." He released her hand. She frowned a little and gave in to the tempting meal.

Sunshine ate in silence for a few minutes, except to exclaim over the quality of the special Folk dish. Finally, she took a drink of her wine and looked at Torin. "I can't stand it any more," she said. "What is your solution?"

Torin chewed, swallowed, drank some wine, wiped his lips with a napkin and smiled at her. "It involves you getting naked," he said.

"Torin!" Her tone held anger and disappointment.

"Hear me out, Sunshine," he said. "I turn my back. You get undressed and Change. Then I can lie with you and hold you and caress you and you don't have to worry about my doing anything more than that."

She stared at him. He smiled back. "Do you get undressed, too?" she asked.

"It's up to you. Fur on skin feels very nice."

She went back to her supper, her brows drawing together. Torin watched her, resuming his own meal.

"It could work," she murmured. "Let me

consider it."

He nodded. They finished their meal in a comfortable silence. Torin rose to his feet, pulled Sunshine's chair back and took her hand.

"Well? What do we do now? Shall I go see if Wil is back, or would you like to Change?"

She reached up and touched his scarred cheek. "I want to Change," she said. "And then I want you to get undressed and lie down beside me."

"Before you do," Torin said, drawing her closer. He bent and kissed her lips. "Can't do that when you're wolf," he said. He released her hand and turned around. He heard her draw the curtains on the bed nook, and the rustle of clothing.

When Sunshine wuffed softly, Torin took off his clothes, folded them and put them on a chair. He turned and went to the bed nook. He slipped between the curtains and sat on the edge of the bed. He looked at the pale wolf who lay with her chin on her paws, hind legs tucked underneath her. He touched her neck. "I can see why your parents named you 'Sunshine'," he said. He stretched out on his side, facing her and propped up on one elbow. Her face was turned toward him and golden eyes watched him. He rubbed her neck, scratched her ears and smiled at her. "I assume if I do anything you don't like, you'll just bite me," he said. She twitched an ear in response. "Then I'll be careful," he said.

He ran his hand down her back in long slow strokes, sinking his fingers into the thick, pale, almost golden coat. He paused long enough to grab a few pillows to tuck under his head, and then lay down all the way. With both hands now free, he continued to pet her back and used his other hand to caress her face and neck. She sighed and stretched out her hind legs. Torin moved closer to rub his face against her cheek. "If you roll over onto your back, I can rub your tummy," he said. She gazed at him. He continued his gentle caresses. "If you like," he said. "But you don't have to."

She flicked her tongue at him and rolled over onto her back. Her front paws hung limply by her chest, while her hind legs dropped to the sides. She twisted her neck to continue watching him. "Silly Miss Wolf," he said. He scratched her neck and chest and then stroked her ribs and belly. "Is it all right if I get closer?" he asked. She clicked her teeth at him, growled and seemed to reconsider. She wriggled nearer to him. He smiled and put one arm around her neck. The other hand kept up its idle wandering over her belly, pausing now and then to circle the small nipples.

Her head fell back, exposing her throat. Torin scratched under her chin and jaw. He kissed her cheek. "It's been a long time since I've cuddled a wolf," he said. "When I was little, Osgoode and I

used to snuggle together often. I miss the feel of wolf."

He caressed her belly again, this time taking in her inner thighs before touching each nipple with a fingertip.

She sighed again and writhed. He smiled to himself. "I'm afraid that's all you get, Miss Wolf. I love cuddling wolves. I love sleeping with one in my arms. I will happily kiss wolfen faces, but I don't care for wolf tongue in my mouth, nor will I play with anything more intimate than nipples. And I am not interested in deeper contact." He pressed his face against her neck. "So as long as you're wolf, you're safe."

He trailed light fingers along her ribs, then put his palm flat on her chest. As he started another long stroke down her body, he saw a ripple go through her skin. He paused, smiled and moved his hand so a moment later, when her Change was complete, it cupped a breast. "I don't like being safe," she said.

## Chapter Three

Torin kept his hand on her breast. His thumb teased the nipple. He moved closer and kissed her. "Thought you couldn't," he said.

"I thought so, too," she replied. "But then you started what you were doing before and it felt so lovely that I decided I probably could." She touched his face, the beard that edged his jaw. "I haven't had anyone caress me like that in a long time — not when I was wolf. Not since before I ever met Ranid. I had forgotten how nice it can be." She pulled his head close for a kiss. "How did you know?"

He spent a few pleasant moments kissing and tasting her before he answered. "My very first ever was a Folk girl," he said. "She taught me a lot of things about pleasing her in either form." He laughed, remembering. "That's how I know I don't like wolf tongue in my mouth. We were very young and we tried a lot of new and exciting things together."

"Is that how you know you're not interested in, what did you say, a deeper connection?" she asked.

"I suppose. We never tried doing it when she was wolf. I just couldn't bring myself to join with her like that." He moved his hand to the other breast. "But you're not wolf anymore, are you?" He pushed himself up on one elbow again and looked down at her. He kissed her mouth, her neck and the soft hollow at her collarbone. With every kiss, he tasted her skin with a soft lick.

Her hands went to his head and neck as he continued his slow journey. He took one nipple into his mouth, nibbled it, ran his tongue over it and suckled gently. He kissed his way across her chest to the other and repeated the performance. Sunshine's fingers clutched at his head. She arched her back, pressing her breast more firmly to his mouth and made soft sounds of pleasure. Her hands slid down the back of his head and met the beginning of his braid.

"Torin?" she said.

"Mmmmm?" he murmured against her skin. He lifted his head.

"Would you loose your hair?" She tugged his braid.

He bent to kiss one of her extra nipples, then sat up. He pulled the braid over his shoulder, untied the small leather piece that held the end and put it



on the floor where he would be able to find it later. He combed his fingers through, shaking and loosening his hair. When he was done, a black curtain hung about his shoulders and arms.

"Oh, my," she said. She ran her fingers from temple to the end. "It's beautiful." She took a firm handful and used it to pull him down again.

He went willingly, sliding his arms around her as he stretched out beside her again. "*You're beautiful,*" he told her, and kissed her. They lay on their sides, kissing and touching each other, hands wandering over new territory, exploring and learning. He pushed her onto her back and returned to his attention to her nipples. Having paid proper homage to her breasts, he continued down her belly, nibbling and suckling each of the extra nipples.

When he reached the bottom pair, his hand continued down her body to her thigh. A light touch was enough for her legs to drop open. Torin's trail of kisses followed soft contours to where leg and body met. He nuzzled and licked and nibbled her, tongue and fingers probing gently. A shiver went through her entire body. Her legs trembled and the sounds of pleasure she made took on a new urgent tone. He made his own sounds deep in his chest. She cried out – a wordless sound followed by his name. She clutched at the blankets beneath her, lifting her

hips and pressing against his mouth, his hands. She panted and cried out again. He smiled and began to kiss his slow way back up her body. He leaned over her, his long hair trailing down to her body. He watched her trembling from the intensity of her orgasm and when her eyes fluttered open, he smiled at her.

She smiled back. "Great Creator, Torin, what did you do to me?" she asked, laughing softly.

"Made you ready for this," he said and lowered himself to her.

As he entered her, she cried out again and raised her knees. She wrapped her legs around his waist. Her arms went around his neck. She tightened her legs to lift her hips to him and he groaned as he sank deeper into her.

"Gods, Sunshine, you feel so good. So good." He gave a hard thrust, seeking deeper penetration. His hands slid under her shoulders and he held her close. He kissed her mouth, his kisses alternating between tender and demanding. To his delight, she responded with as much passion and enthusiasm as he himself felt. She kissed him, bit his shoulders, and dug her fingers into his back. Her body lifted to his as she met his thrusts and several times she jerked and shuddered beneath him, crying out.

He felt himself approaching the brink and every time Sunshine bucked beneath him and the

muscles deep inside her squeezed him in the most delightful way, he fought to keep from going over the edge. But at last, he could fight no longer. His hips moved in short urgent jerks, hard and fast. He panted and groaned and strained and then, oh then, he gave one last deep thrust, throbbing deep inside her. He shuddered and trembled for what seemed an eternity before the jets diminished and stopped. His chest heaved and his skin gleamed with sweat. He hadn't gone over the brink alone. Sunshine met him and toppled with him, clawing and biting him as she went. She too gasped for breath and gleamed in the light that fingered its way between the curtains. When his breath had calmed somewhat and his heart rate had slowed to a less alarming rate, he rolled from her and lay on his side looking at her.

He ran a dry tongue over dry lips. "Gods, I'm parched," he said. He tried again to wet his lips, to no avail.

Sunshine laughed, turning her head to look at him. "I'm not surprised. I feel as if you poured an ocean into me. I can feel it sloshing around."

He chuckled and kissed her. "It felt like an ocean pouring out," he said. He kissed her again. "But it felt wonderful." He rolled away and sat up, pushing the curtains back. "Just let me get the wine and I'll be right back." He collected a wineskin and came back to the bed.

Sunshine had pulled the blankets back and scrambled between them. Torin climbed in beside her and offered her the skin. "Ladies first," he croaked.

She giggled, drank from the skin without spilling a drop, and passed it back to him. He drank deeply, restoppered it and put it on the floor. He turned toward her and took her in his arms, snuggling down under the blankets. She put her arms around him and wriggled close against him.

"Mmmmmmmmm," she sighed. "You're nice and warm and mmmmmmmmm." She kissed a spot on the front of his shoulder where her teeth had left a bruised ring. "I seem to have been a little too enthusiastic," she said.

"I'll survive," he said. "I'm tough."

"And tender." She kissed his chest. "And passionate." She kissed his arm. "And mmmmmmmmmmm."

"You're rather mmmmmmmmmmm yourself, Miss Wolf," he said. One of his hands wandered over her back and buttocks. He kissed her lips. "And I believe I detected a little passion in you."

"That might just have been your passion you were detecting in me." She rubbed her cheek across his chest.

"No, I'm pretty sure it was yours." He nibbled at her lips.

"Are you sure? I haven't had any for a long time. I was quite sure mine was all gone." She put her hand on his chest and toyed with his nipple.

He sighed. "I don't think so," he said. "Maybe Rancid just doesn't know how to find it."

She tweaked his nipple again, this time eliciting a small sound, not quite a moan. "You like?" she asked.

"I like," he said. "Please continue." She pushed him back and sat up, pushing the blanket down. She studied him. With the curtain half open, the lamplight shone in and cast some of his scars in bas-relief. She followed the line of a long one that ran from his breastbone down his belly and disappeared into the thatch of black hair. "How did you survive this?" she asked.

"Luck. It scored the skin and the muscles, but my guts stayed inside where they belong." Deep sadness came into his eyes. "My brother wasn't so lucky."

She bent to kiss the scar. "I'm sorry to hear of it. I didn't know."

"It's years past now," he said. He touched her hair. "And we have more pleasant things to think of."

She kissed his belly. "Yes, we do." She kissed his chest and experimented with his nipples, nibbling and flicking her tongue over them. He made appreciative noises, his hand still in her hair.

He propped his head with more pillows so he could watch her more easily. She kissed his chest and ribs, running light hands over his belly and as far down his thighs as she could reach. He bent his knees and let them fall open to give her more ease of access. He caressed her hair and ear until she moved too far for him to reach.

She rubbed her cheek over his warm skin closer and closer to the black hair at the base of his belly. She ran her tongue down the narrow line that led from his navel downward. He sighed and smiled. She ran her fingers over his inner thighs and smiled at the slow surges that brought him steadily more erect. When she tickled him, circling his erection and its companions, his hips lifted and fell back. He groaned and laughed softly.

"You're a wicked woman," he said, smiling at her.

She smiled back, dipped her head and touched her tongue to the drop of clear liquid at the tip. He groaned again. She licked the head, nibbled gently, and began to lick the entire shaft.

His head fell back. "Oh gods," he said. "Oh, sweet Sunshine. I knew there was something I loved about Folk women." He writhed under her hands and mouth. She lifted her face.

"You mean our wolfish tendencies?"

"Mmmm, exactly. Don't stop." She smiled and went back to licking and nibbling him while her

hands cupped and caressed. She took him into her mouth and he closed his eyes, his attention focused on the intense pleasure. His breathing roughened.

"Sunshine?" he gasped.

"Mmmm?"

"You might want to stop soon unless you want that ocean going down your throat." He panted. "And I mean very soon."

Her hand squeezed the base tightly and she lifted her head. She flicked one last lick at the tip. "My choice? In that case..."

She rose over him, straddled his hips and lowered herself onto him. He opened his eyes, put his hands on her hips and lifted his own hips to her. She leaned forward, squirming on him, moving in circles, side to side. She arched her back and pressed closer. Torin lifted his head to kiss the breasts so tantalizingly close to his face. He slid one hand from her hip down between her thighs and found the source of her most intense pleasure. He circled it with his thumb, pressed it and grinned against her breast when she called his name and ground herself against him. They panted and heaved together. She laughed as she kissed him.

"I thought you said 'soon'," she said.

"It will be soon," he kissed her back. "Very soon. Gods! Now." His buttocks lifted from the

bed, jerked and subsided slowly. Sunshine collapsed on his chest, her arms around his neck. His arms slid around her and he held her, kissing her temple, her cheek. "Have I told you how glad I am you decided you could?" he asked.

"No, you haven't," she said. She lifted her head and looked at him. She traced his lips with a fingertip. "I'm glad I could, too." She kissed him. "You, um, you've reminded me that I haven't lost all my passion and that there is pleasure in having a man inside me. I had forgotten how sweet it can feel." Her fingers traced the scar on his right cheek, from his forehead, around the corner of his eye, zigzagging to the corner of his mouth. "Every woman should have a friend like you," she said. "Just so she doesn't ever forget how to make love; how to enjoy her own body."

Torin ran his hands from her shoulders down around the soft curves of her buttocks and back again. "And here I thought *I* was the one enjoying your body," he said. He hugged her. "Gods, but you're beautiful."

She smiled. "D'you know I don't think Ranid has said that to me since we took our vows. He used to. Before. He used to make love with me and then we took our vows and I don't know what happened." She sighed.

"There are ways to untake vows," he said.

"I know." She gave him a rueful look. "This is



where my stubborn streak causes me trouble." She slid off him and hung over the edge of the bed, looking for the wineskin. She sat up, struggled with the stopper, won the struggle and spilled wine on her breasts. "Oh!"

Torin sat up and leaned forward. "I can take care of that." He winked at her and licked the few trails of wine from her skin. They shared the wine and put it back on the floor. "You were saying you have a stubborn streak?" he said.

"Yes. And most of the time, it serves me well, but with Ranid..." She blew a short, hard breath. "When we took our vows, his family — his mother, the harridan from the darkest places of the Afterlife, to be specific — said, 'Oh those heathen Folk. I don't know why you want one of them. It'll never last, Ranny. You should have married an equal.'" Sunshine's eyes narrowed.

Torin lay back, laughing softly. He pulled her into his arms. "He should have married an equal," he said. "Not someone so far above him."

Sunshine kissed him. "Thank you, dearest," she said. "Anyway, after she said that, I promised myself that no matter what, I wouldn't undo the vows." She looked into the dark eyes. "Of course, I also promised myself I wouldn't break them and be unfaithful to him. That pretty much seems to have flown out the window." She sighed. "But I can't stand the thought of giving her the

satisfaction of being right."

"Well then, I suppose you'll have to stay married to the brute," he said. "But I will be happy to make it as bearable as I can, when I can. If you want me to." He kissed her; a soft kiss that became deep and lingering.

"Mmmmm, yes, I think I do." She rested her head on his shoulder. "How many others do I have to share you with?"

He brushed her hair back from her forehead. "Why are you asking that?" he asked.

"Because I'm quite sure I'm not the only one, and I want to know for certain. I want to know exactly where I stand with you." She kissed his shoulder. He gazed at her, brushed her cheek with his lips.

"Shall I include Yumi in Chav, or just the ones who come to Destrain?"

"I'm only worried about ones that I have to compete with directly. I would hate to arrive here one day thinking that I'm going to have a repeat of tonight's activities only to learn that there are seven others in front of me."

Torin laughed. "No, not seven. Only three...wait...no. Two. Willow found herself a wonderful husband and is happily married. So she and I are back to being friends only."

"Two? That's all?"

"Mmhmm. Both are Traders of one kind or

another. One comes to the city every three months or thereabouts. The other is here more frequently, but I never know when she'll arrive. It's always a pleasant surprise for me when she does."

Sunshine snuggled closer. "Don't you have anyone in the City itself?"

"No." His dimple appeared. "Not a true lover. Not for making love like this."

She frowned. "And what does that mean?"

"It means that when too much time goes by between visits from my dearer friends, and I haven't had a trip to Chav, then I take myself to a brothel and pay for what I want. It's not the same as what you and I have been doing, but it serves to tide me over."

"You pay a woman to lie with you?" Sunshine's voice held more than a tinge of doubt. "You. Why?"

He laughed softly and kissed her. "Because the women I know who would give themselves to me for 'free' are mostly the sort who would make demands on me that I cannot fulfill. It's less difficult to hand over a few coins, have my pleasure and leave and know that the woman in my arms expects nothing more from me."

Sunshine pushed herself up on one elbow. "And where do I fit into all that? Haven't I just given myself to you for 'free'? Should I start making unreasonable demands now or later?"

He blinked at her, mentally reviewed what he had said, and tried to clarify, "I meant the women I know who live in the City."

"Oh, so you don't expect trouble from us country bumpkins?" She pulled away from him and sat up, glaring down at him. He lay on his back, gazing at her, wondering where and how things had started going wrong. He frowned as he struggled to make sense of Sunshine's growing anger. He reached for her hand, but she pulled it away.

"I think you should take me home now," she said as she stood up. She began to get dressed. Torin sat up in the bed and watched her.

"Sunshine, what's wrong?" He was fairly certain that he hadn't really said or done anything to deserve the current treatment.

"Nothing," she said. "Nothing at all. It's late and I should be getting back just in case my husband comes home." Her voice was clipped and emotionless.

Torin sighed, slipped out of bed and put on his clothes. He went to her and put his hands on her shoulders.

She tensed under his hands. "I think we've had enough, don't you?" she asked. She stepped toward the door.

Torin bent to retrieve the leather strip from the floor by the bed. He pushed his hair back from his

face, and with practiced ease, quickly restored the braid. He almost wrapped it around his throat for protection, but caught himself. It wouldn't do to add more insult to a difficult situation.

They left *The Dancing Wolf* in silence, meeting no one on their way out. Wil waited out front, a warm blanket over his horse to keep it from getting a chill from long standing. Sunshine allowed Torin to hand her into the carriage, but moved to a far corner of the seat.

"Back to Market, Wil," said Torin. He sat at a distance, studying her from the corners of his eyes. She stared in the other direction, apparently watching the city go by.

When they reached her caravan, he helped her down. Harley came from the shadows. "Good evenin', Cap'n, Mistress," he said. "I 'ope you 'ad a nice supper. No sign yet of the Trader, though."

"Wait a few minutes for me, would you, Harley?" said Torin. "I won't be long. Go wait in Wil's carriage."

Harley touched his forelock in an almost salute. "Yessir, Cap'n." He turned and went to the carriage.

## Chapter Four

Torin followed Sunshine into the caravan. "I want to know what went wrong," he said. "Something did, and I don't know what and I can't make it right until I know."

"Nothing went wrong," she said. "We had our pleasure of each other and now we're done. Isn't that what you said you liked from harlots? To have your pleasure and be on your way? Well, now you can be on your way."

Torin rubbed his forehead with a weary hand. "Yes, I did say that." He moved closer to her. "I also said that it wasn't the same as what you and I were doing. At least, it didn't feel the same to me." He tried to put his arms around her, but she evaded him.

"Please don't," she said. "It makes me uncomfortable."

"It made you very comfortable a little while ago," he said. An ache began in his chest and throat. He drew a deep breath.

"That was before I realized how close I had come to becoming a whore. For the price of a good meal and fine wine, I'd roll over for you. I don't think I want to be your *friend*, Captain. I was wrong to think I did." She kept her gaze averted the entire time she spoke, looking at the floor, the furniture, the walls, instead.

"Do you mean that, *Mistress Sunshine*?" he asked. "Be absolutely certain that you do." His voice had taken on a cold tone.

She kept her eyes on the floor. "Yes, I do," she whispered.

"Then I am sorry that I bothered you tonight, Mistress. I am grieved that I mistook raw lust for deeper affection, for genuine caring. You needn't worry that I will make the same mistake twice." He spoke softly but with ice coating each word. He felt the ice spreading through him, walling him off from the deep hurt her words had caused. The cold numbed him and let him function. He turned on his heel and left, pretending he didn't hear the soft sob behind him as the door closed.

He stalked to the carriage, climbed in beside Harley and gave instructions to Wil. Harley looked at him in some surprise.

"Why we goin' there, Cap'n?"

"The lady's husband is still missing, most likely drunk on gin from *The Wall-Eyed Weasel*. Where do you think we're most likely to find him?"

"He might still be at the *Weasel*, mightn't he? Depends 'ow much money he was willin' to spend, like, dunnit?"

Torin looked at Harley sidelong. "We're talking about Ranid. He wouldn't have been willing to spend much. Certainly not enough for a bed to sleep it off in. No, I think we'll try the drunkard jail first."

"Well, orl right then, Cap'n, iff'n you says. You ort to know."

"Oh give it a rest, Harley. I'm not in the mood to decipher your whatever-the-hells accent that's supposed to be."

Harley shrugged. "Sorry, Cap'n." He grinned. "You 'ave to admit, it throws people right off. They think I'm as dense as they come."

"Just don't do it until *I* think you're as dense as they come. You'll end up patrolling the royal piggery." He folded his arms on his chest and dropped his chin, lost in thought. The ride continued in silence to the drunkard cells closest to the new tavern.

Harley waited for signs of life from Torin and finally said, "Cap'n Torin? We're here, sir."

Torin lifted his head and looked around. "So we are." He blew out a breath. "You know Ranid...go in and see if he's here, would you? I think it's best if I'm not overtly involved."

Harley sketched a salute and jumped down.



Torin's chin sank to his chest again. He sat and pondered the night's events, still trying to pinpoint what he had said or done to make Sunshine turn on him. He kept hearing her say she no longer wanted to be his friend and the whispered assertion that she had meant it. He clenched and unclenched his jaw, wishing the heaviness in his chest and throat would go away. He closed his eyes, but the image of her lying beneath him, clutching at him and calling his name drove them open again. He took a mental grip of the memories of the night and buried them all in a back corner of his mind.

Harley came back out to the carriage. "Well, Cap'n, you was right. He's here, drunker'n three Lords. What d'you want to do now?"

Torin grinned, showing white teeth. "Why, take him back to his wife," he said. "Is there anyone can help you with him, or can you manage on your own?"

"Oh I think I can sling 'im on me shoulder, right enough." Harley disappeared back into the jail and came out a short time later with Ranid draped across his shoulders.

Torin jumped down and together they dragged Ranid onto the floor of the carriage. They climbed back in, minding where they put their feet, and headed back to the Market.

"Stop here a moment, Wil," said Torin. He

hopped to the ground. "You can take it from here, Harley. If she asks, tell her I told you to bring him home for her." He slipped into the shadows and watched the carriage roll on to Sunshine's caravan.

A light still shone in the window, and when Harley knocked, there was a brief hesitation before the door opened. Torin moved closer, still hidden from sight but able to listen.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Beggin' yer pardon, loike, Missus, but I 'as yore 'usband in the carriage." Harley tugged his forelock and bobbed his head. Torin bit back a snork of laughter.

"My husband? Ranid? Where...?" she came down the steps and went to look into the carriage. "Oh, I see. Can you bring him in?"

"Oh yais, I c'n do that fer ya, Missus." He grabbed Ranid's arms and dragged him rather unceremoniously out and hung the limp body across his shoulders again. He carried Ranid into the caravan. Sunshine followed and paused on the top step, looking around the Market.

Torin watched from his place in the deep shadows. She turned and went inside. Moments later, Harley reappeared and rejoined Wil. Torin caught them as they went past. "Home, Wil," he said. The carriage turned down a street making its way to the Castle itself.

Several times Torin almost asked how she had seemed, but stopped himself. She had been quite definite that their friendship of the past three years was done. He would respect her wishes. They rode in silence.

## Chapter Five

A sharp autumn wind tugged at the heavy cloak Torin wore over his leather armour. He walked with the Healer Emeera through the Market; her bodyguard against anyone who might try to steal her medicinal purchases. Emeera caught her hood with one hand and held it.

"Oh, that wind. If we could just get out of it for a few minutes," she said. "Can't you feel winter's teeth in it?"

"Just a nip," said Torin. "Don't hurry it along, Meera. Winter will be here all too soon. At least the sun's out."

"For all the good it's doing. But I suppose you're right. It would be horrible if it were raining, too."

They reached the end of the row of caravans and went around to the next line. "Torin! Look who's here!" Excitement brightened her voice. "Oh, a place to get out of the wind for a bit. Come on."

Torin's gaze followed Emeera's. He frowned as he followed her to the familiar caravan. The stall had not yet been set up and no one waited outside for customers. Emeera hurried up the steps, knocked at the door and opened it. "Sunshine? Are you here? Can we come in to warm up a little?"

"Emeera!" Sunshine smiled widely at her sister-by-marriage. "Yes, of course. That wind is savage today. Come in."

Emeera looked over her shoulder. "Well? Come in and get warm." She reached out, grabbed a handful of his cloak and pulled.

Not wanting her to hurt herself, he allowed her to drag him into the small room. He closed the door and stood with his back to it.

"Mistress Sunshine," he said politely.

She stared back. "Captain," she said at last. She gazed at him a moment longer. "I've just made tea, if you'd both like some."

"Yes, oh yes. Please and thank you," said Emeera. She took off her cloak and sat near the small clay stove, holding out her hands for its warmth. Torin stayed by the door, his face half-hidden by his hood. Sunshine busied herself pouring tea for her guests. She passed a mug to Emeera, hesitated, then held out another to Torin. He stared at it as if it had teeth, then took it from her, careful not to touch her hand.

"My thanks," he said. His hands circled the mug.

Emeera glanced at him with a puzzled frown. She shook her head. "And what brings you back to the city so soon? I wasn't expecting you for another few weeks? What's going on?"

"Ranid has a new idea for making a sort of gin. I'm not really sure what he has in mind, but he needed something we couldn't get in Brinded, and at the same time, he couldn't leave his brew. I told him I would come to the City myself and fetch it, if he would just tell me where to find it. So here I am."

"You came alone? Isn't it a bit dangerous?"

Sunshine smiled. "We Folk women are not as easy prey as some might think."

Torin huffed a short laugh.

"Well, then you'll come for supper, won't you?" said Emeera. "I'd love to have you."

"Yes, thank you. That will be lovely."

"What about you, Torin? Will you join us?" Emeera turned to him.

He shook his head. "No thank you, Meera. I have plans for the evening." He smiled briefly.

"Oh, yes, I remember seeing a certain silver-smith's caravan this morning." She shook her head in mock-exasperation. "Torin and his women friends," she said to Sunshine. "How many now, Torin? Eight, twelve, fifteen?"

Her smile was mischievous. Torin leveled his gaze at her. "Two. Only two, not counting Yumi."

"What happened to the other one? Oh, that's right, she got married several months ago. I had forgotten."

Torin stared at her, debating internally whether to say anything more. He darted a glance at Sunshine, whose attention was on Emeera. "There was almost another third one," he said. "But something went terribly wrong. Terribly, terribly wrong, and not only did she decide that she didn't want me for a lover, but also that she no longer wanted to have me for a friend, either."

Emeera looked at him with raised eyebrows. "What went wrong?" she asked.

Torin shrugged. "I don't know. I never exactly found out beyond the fact that she seemed to believe I thought her a harlot and then, when she said she didn't want to have my friendship any longer, I went rather cold." He looked down at his tea.

"Cold with anger and then stormed out, I suppose," said Sunshine.

Emeera shook her head. "No. No, when Torin goes cold at someone he loves, it's because he's deeply wounded...not angry."

Torin kept his gaze on her and nodded, smiling sadly. "You know me well, Meera."

Sunshine looked at him. "Wounded? Truly?"

"Oh, yes. He doesn't like to admit that he's hurt, so he goes all cold. Don't you?" She patted the bench beside her. He left his position by the door and sat next to Emeera with his elbows on his knees, mug of tea cradled in his hands. Emeera patted his forearm. "You know, Torin, you might want to seek out your friend and try to make things right again."

He shook his head, staring into his tea. "No. It's too late now. We haven't spoken to each other since before the very beginning of summer. I can't imagine she would thank me for turning up now." He glanced up at Emeera, then Sunshine, and dropped his gaze back to his tea. His jaw clenched.

"Perhaps you should try, anyway," said Sunshine. "Perhaps she spoke out of anger at herself, never thinking she was close enough a friend to be able to hurt you."

"And if she took your coldness for anger, she might be afraid to reach out to you herself," said Emeera. "You can be quite frightening, you know."

Torin twisted his neck and gave Emeera a wry smile. "I know. It comes in handy in my line of work." He drank down the entire mug of tea and twisted the mug between his hands.

"You miss her," said Emeera. "It all still hurts and you miss her."

He nodded, clenching and unclenching his jaw.



He cleared his throat. "Yes, I do. I used to enjoy afternoon tea with her sometimes when she came to Market. I used to enjoy her company, just sitting and talking and laughing together. She was very dear to me." He gave Emeera a brittle smile. "And yes, the wound is still raw." A clearing of his throat. "I haven't looked at the memories of that last night for some time. I thought the hurt had passed." He looked into the empty mug. His voice dropped to a near whisper. "I was wrong."

Emeera put her arm across his shoulders. "All the more reason to seek her out and try to make it right. You might not gain lover number three, but you might get your friend and companion back. Surely that would be worth the effort?"

"You might find she misses you, too," said Sunshine quietly. "You might find she wants to make things right again as much as you do."

Torin looked at Sunshine from under his brows without lifting his head. He gazed at her for a long moment. "I don't know," he said at last. "Maybe I will the next time I see her caravan here." He stood up and put his mug on the small table. "Are you warm enough, Emeera? We should finish your shopping and get you home."

She drained the last of her tea and handed the empty mug to Sunshine. "He's right. It's getting late and I don't want to miss the Traders I need to see." She hugged Sunshine. "Don't forget —

supper tonight."

"I'll be there," she said, hugging her sister-friend back.

"Thank you for the tea and a chance to get out of the wind," said Torin, standing by the door.

"You're very welcome," Sunshine said. "You're always welcome here, Captain." She offered him a tentative smile, her eyes bright.

He nodded curtly, then ushered Emeera outside. They hurried through the Market. The wind had picked up and was even colder than before. When Emeera's purchases were done, Torin hailed a covered carriage. They climbed in and shut themselves away from the wind. Emeera pulled the warm rug over her legs and tucked her hands beneath it.

"She misses you," she said. Torin looked down at her.

"Who?"

"Sunshine. She misses you and you miss her, and you really should go back there tonight and talk with her." She looked sidelong up at him. "I think you'll have your friend back, at the very least."

He laughed softly. "But I have plans for tonight, and you are having her to supper," he said.

"You can go back as soon as you drop me off," she said. "Then you should have time before supper to work things out and you won't even be

late for your silversmith."

Torin shook his head. "No. I think whatever we have to say to each other will take longer than an hour or even two. I have a feeling it's more of a sit-up-all-night-over-pots-of-tea sort of talk."

Emeera smiled at him. "You can tell her I was suddenly called away to a sick patient and I don't know when I'll be back," she said. "Oh, but that won't help with your other engagement."

Torin sighed, thinking. "I suppose it comes down to deciding which is more important: a night of pleasure and passion with Bell, or setting things to rights with Sunshine." He fell silent.

At Emeera's home, he escorted her inside and waited while she locked up the drugs and medicines she had bought. They looked at each other. Finally, she went to him and put her arms around his waist. He hugged her close and kissed her hair. He looked down into her eyes.

"I suppose I should be getting back to Market to tell Sunshine you've been called to a sick patient," he said. "She'll have to sup with you tomorrow."

Emeera smiled and kissed his cheek. "Good luck," she said.

He went out to the carriage and gave the instruction to return to the Market.

## Chapter Six

He stood by the caravan, thinking over what he should say. Finally, he climbed the steps and knocked.

"Who is it?" asked the woman from inside.

"It's me," he said. He waited a moment, pulling his cloak closer around him.

The door opened, and Bell, wrapped in a blanket and nothing more, peeked through. "I wasn't expecting you till later," she said.

"I know, and I apologize for interrupting, but something rather important has turned up and it needs my attention."

Bell looked at him intently. "It wouldn't be that woman friend you were moping about the last time I was here?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. It is." He half-smiled.

She opened the door a little farther and leaned out to kiss him. "Good. Sort it out with her and I'll have to see you next time. I'm leaving in the morning." She kissed him again and grinned a

wicked grin. "I guess this means I'll have to keep my current company a little longer."

Torin grinned back and returned the kiss. "I'll do my best," he said. "And perhaps when you come back, I won't be so..."

"Wet-blanketish?" She grinned again. "Mopey?"

"Exactly." He kissed her once more. "Thank you, Bell. You'd best get back before the cold wind takes him down to nothing." He winked at her.

She laughed as she closed the door. Torin jumped lightly down to the ground and strode off through the lanes of the Market. Rain had begun to sleet from the darkening sky.

Torin stood huddled in his cloak, staring at Sunshine's caravan. At last, he went to the steps and started up with all the anticipation of a man going to his execution. He knocked on the door. Sunshine opened it and looked at him. "Torin. I didn't expect to see you again tonight. Is something wrong?" The wind blew a spattering of icy rain in the door. Sunshine stepped back. "Come in out of the cold, first."

He stepped inside and went to the clay stove where he held his hands to the welcome warmth. "Nothing is seriously wrong. Emeera asked me to stop by to tell you she's been called away to a patient and doesn't know when she'll be home. She asks if you will join them tomorrow for

supper."

"Oh," Sunshine sounded disappointed. "I was looking forward to an evening with her. Oh well." She pushed the door closed and stood with her back against it. "It's very kind of you to come out in this weather to tell me. You're welcome to stay and warm yourself until your other engagement tonight."

"It turns out I am free this evening," he said. "I offered the lady a chance to spend more time with another companion and she accepted the offer." He looked over at her. "I felt I had something more important to attend to."

"I see." An uneasy silence fell. They gazed at each other, neither speaking, neither moving.

Torin took a deep breath and let it slowly out. "I don't know where to start," he said. "I don't know how to undo anything; how to fix any of it. I don't know where or how or why it all fell apart, so I can't make repairs anywhere." He looked down at his hands. "Perhaps I should leave well enough alone."

"But it's not well enough, is it?" She swallowed hard. "And it didn't exactly just fall apart, Torin. I broke it on purpose."

He raised his eyes to hers. "Why? It was so lovely, Sunshine. So wonderful and lovely...why?"

"I was afraid," she said. "So afraid that I would become demanding. Afraid of falling in love with

a man whose heart belongs to someone else. Afraid of needing you. Afraid of everything." Tears sparkled in her eyes. "So I ran. I struck out at you and ran and then chased you away. But I never meant to hurt you." The tears spilled. "I never dreamed I *could* hurt you. You're always so strong and you take everything in stride." She paused and went on. "I remember Emeera telling me once that the only people who could really hurt you, hurt your heart, were those you loved, and I never imagined that I was one of them."

He almost smiled at her. "You were. You are."

He pushed his hood back. He took a step toward her. Another. She looked up at him. He held out his hand. She stared at it and put hers in it. His fingers closed around hers and he pulled her toward him. When she was close enough that their bodies were almost touching, he wiped her tears away with his other hand. He kissed the hand he held and put it behind his neck, then put both arms around her. She pressed her face to his chest as she wrapped her other arm around his neck. They stood in the embrace for long minutes, not speaking, not moving. She lifted her face then from his chest and looked into the dark eyes.

"Are you still afraid?" he asked. She nodded. "Should I leave?" She shook her head. "Can we be friends again?" She nodded. He smiled and kissed her forehead. "Good."

She tightened her arms around his neck and pulled his head closer to hers. She drew a shuddering breath and trembled in his arms, then kissed his mouth. "Can we be more?" she whispered.

He rested his cheek on her head. "I don't know," he said. "Perhaps someday." He closed his eyes, all too aware of the soft press of her breasts against his chest, the gentle caresses of her fingers on the back of his neck. His hands wandered slow paths up and down her back. He kissed her hair and pulled his head back just far enough to look down into her face. "I don't want to do anything that will drive you away. I missed you, Sunshine, and I don't want to lose you again." He kissed her forehead.

"I understand," she said. "I'm disappointed, but I do understand. And I hope 'someday' comes around soon." She hooked fingers into his braid and tugged it. She bit her bottom lip and stared at his beard. "I've relived that night a thousand times, Torin. Every kiss, every touch, every sweet detail — and when Ranid touches me, climbs into our bed, I close my eyes and remember, and when he lies on top of me, pushes himself into me, I'm wet and ready for him because in my mind, my heart, it's you." She raised her eyes from his chin. He traced her eyebrows with gentle fingertips, slid lightly down her cheeks and touched her lips.



"I haven't been able to think of it at all," he said. He pressed his lips tightly together. "Every time I try to look at it, remember the joy of it, I hear your voice telling me that my arms make you uncomfortable and that it's time for me to be on my way. And the joy vanishes and I am left with only the pain of it all gone bad." He tried to swallow past the sudden painful lump in his throat. "Now and again the other memories strike me and take my breath away...the softness of your skin, your scent, the way you taste, the sounds you make when you're close to the edge, your smile...memories that leave me hard and aching with wanting you. And then the rest rears up and tears me apart. So I try very hard not to remember any of it."

He put his arms around her again and held her. She moved her arms from his neck to his waist. They stood silent for a time, each lost in thought.

At last, Sunshine asked, "Where do we go from here?"

"I don't know," he said. "I can't choose from all the clamouring in my mind. One voice is saying, 'You've laid the groundwork for repairs. Get out now before you ruin it again somehow.' Another is saying, 'Stay and chat and enjoy her company like you used to do.' A different one is telling me, 'She wants you. Take her. Consequences be damned!' A fourth one wants me to take you out

to supper, since Emeera cancelled on you, but I think that one and number three are bad ideas."

"I rather like number two. And instead of going out for supper, I can make us something here. You can stay, keep me company and we can talk and do some more repairs. What do you think?"

"It's a good start," he said. "A very good start." He released her and stepped back. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No, thank you, Torin. I think I have everything I need." She smiled at him.

He took off his cloak and hung it on a peg near the door. He sat on the bench out of her way and watched her with appreciative eyes.

"I'm afraid it won't be anything very fancy," she said. "Mostly bread and cheese, but I have three different kinds of cheese."

"Add tea to that for warmth and I'll be happy," he said. She smiled at him and opened a cabinet door. He watched her cutting the bread and slicing pieces from the different cheeses. When it was ready, and the tea had been poured, he moved to one end of the bench. "If you bring that one platter over and put it between us, we can share from it and it'll make cleaning up after easier."

"I can do that," she said. She put the platter on the padded bench and sat at the other end, one leg folded under her. They reached for the same bit of

bread at the same time. She pulled her hand back. "You're my guest," she said. "You take it."

He picked it up, broke it in half and offered her a piece. When she took it, he caught her hand and leaned forward, pulling her toward him. She gave him a surprised look, but gave in to the gentle tug. He kissed her cheek. "I've missed this," he said.

"My bread?" Her eyes were wide and innocent. The dimple appeared in Torin's left cheek.

"Yes," he said. "I love your bread. It's so firm and round and nice and soft inside." He dropped her hand and stuffed his bread into his mouth. His cheeks bulged as he tried to chew without being overly rude.

Sunshine laughed at him and shoved her own bread into her mouth. A race ensued to see who could chew and swallow the chunk of bread first. It ended with both of them laughing and trying not to spray crumbs all over each other.

Torin gazed at her, enjoying the sparkle in her eyes and the sound of her laughter. He lifted the platter. "Come sit beside me," he said. He shifted to the very edge of the deep bench. Sunshine hesitated, then gathered her skirts and climbed to sit between Torin and the side wall of the caravan.

He put the platter in front of them, picked up two pieces of cheese and gave one to her. She accepted it with a smile and nod of thanks. They took turns choosing morsels from the plate, each

sharing with the other. Sunshine put a hand on Torin's shoulder. He turned his head to look at her. The expression in her eyes made him sit back and slip an arm around her waist.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded. "I'm fine," she got out at last. "I...I just realized how heavy a weight has left my heart. I didn't even know it was there until right now." She brushed the backs of her fingers along his cheekbone.

He smiled and the arm around her drew her closer. "I know exactly how you feel," he said. He looked into her eyes. He touched her hair with his free hand, then tipped her face up. She smiled as she leaned toward him, lips lightly parted. "Silly Miss Wolf," he said. He kissed the waiting mouth.

She smiled against his lips as she returned the kiss. They gazed at each other again. He kissed her nose and she slid her arm around his neck. She thumped the leather breastplate he still wore. "It would be more comfortable if you took this off," she said.

"But likely safer if I leave it on," he replied. "If I take my armour off, then my boots will follow and I'm not entirely sure how much self-restraint I actually possess." He kissed the tip of her nose. "I may have already used it all up."

She rested her hand on the armour. "Would it be so terrible?" she asked.

His hand cupped her cheek and he gave her an odd smile. "It might," he said. "Not that lying naked with you would be terrible — I know it would be quite the opposite — but what might follow could be very terrible. I don't ever want that again. Not with someone so dear to me." He kissed her forehead.

"Nothing terrible will happen," she said.

"But it was your fear last time that brought us to that ugly pass," he said. "And you said you're still afraid, and in truth, Sunshine, so am I."

She sighed. "So we're back to being friends and nothing more?"

"For a time," he said. "Until we know for certain that we won't hurt each other."

She kissed his cheek. "I'd like more. I'd like it so very much, but even this is better than the past few months."

A sudden loud shout from outside caught their attention. Torin sprang to the door and flung it open. Despite the sleeting rain, flames danced and leaped from the roof of a caravan two rows over. A horse screamed in terror and voices shouted. Torin leaped to the ground and ran to help, whistling the shrill call for any of his soldiers within hearing to come now! Emergency! As he ran from her caravan he shouted back over his shoulder. "Sunshine! Ring the bell in the square!"

She grabbed his cloak, threw it over her

shoulders and ran to the center of the Market where a warning bell stood sentinel. By the time Torin reached the blazing caravan, he could hear the frantic ringing of the bell.

## Chapter Seven

A crowd was already gathering, despite the weather. Torin grabbed a broad-shouldered man by the upper arm. "Get some help and move those other caravans!" he shouted.

The man stared into the scarred face, recognized the Captain of the Queen's Guard, and in turn grabbed the men nearest him. They ran to the caravan closest to the burning one, and began to pull it away, heaving and straining at the weight. A man and woman clung to each other in the rain, weeping and frightened. The man kept trying to break free from her arms and run back into the caravan, but several others held him where he was.

"Is there anyone else in there?" Torin asked.

The woman turned toward him; shook her head.

"No. It was only the two of us."

"My lamps!" the man cried. "Our money! Let me run in and save what I can."

Torin looked at the caravan. At least half of it was engulfed in flame. Burning bits swirled into the night sky. Some were extinguished by the rain, others were picked up by the wind and hurled over the Marketplace. He shook his head. "You'll never survive in there!" he shouted over the roar of the fire.

The terrified horse screamed again and Torin ran to the front of the caravan. The horse was tied to one of the shafts close to the driver's seat. Flames licked out the small window and billowed from the roof. The horse screamed again as an ember floated down and touched its hip. It pulled against the rope and danced in a frenzy of fear.

Torin avoided the hooves, and pulled a knife from his boot. He grabbed the rope with one hand and sliced it free with the other. The horse bounded backward, nearly dragging Torin off his feet. He kept his balance; long years of working with the Destraini warhorses had made him more than prepared to cope with a panicking carthorse. He pushed its chest and moved it back and away. His soldiers had begun to arrive and he handed the horse over to one of them.

"Take this poor thing away from here," he said. "Find an hostler to tend its burns and tell him to send his charge to me."

He turned back to the caravan. The entire thing burned bright. The heat was ferocious and he



could feel the skin on his face tightening from it. He noticed the nearest wagons and caravans had been moved to a safe distance. A bucket brigade had begun passing water from the river.

Torin quickly organized a second, and took his place closest to the flames. He heaved the water, his arms and shoulders moving in a steady rhythm. Throw the water, pass the empty bucket back, accept the new full one, throw the water. Again and again and again. Finally, the rain and the brigades accomplished the task.

He dropped the last bucket and stared at the smoking ruin. Nearby, the Trader's wife sobbed softly. Torin turned his head to look at her. Sunshine stood by her, an arm across her shoulders, Torin's cloak shielding her from the weather. The Trader himself stood near, hands hanging and emptiness in his eyes.

"We lost everything," he said. "Everything." Torin dragged himself to them.

"You still have your horse. His wounds are being tended."

The Trader held out his hands. "But I have nothing to pay for his care," he said. "Our money, our goods...it's all gone."

"The horse's expenses are taken care of," Torin said. "Tomorrow, when it's light and the embers have cooled, I'll have my men sift through what's left. If your money melted in that heat, well, there

are ways to find out its worth. And there are resources to help you, Trader. It will be well."

The wife looked up at Torin. "How can you say that?"

Torin gazed at her. "You're alive — both of you. It's a good start, Mistress. One or both of you could have roasted in there, so take what good you can find." He raised a hand to wipe the rain from his face and winced.

"Come with me, Licia," said Sunshine. "You can sleep in my caravan tonight." She led the couple away.

Torin lingered to give last commands to his men and to set a guard over the smoldering remains. Then he staggered to Sunshine's caravan to retrieve his cloak. He stared at the door, idly wondering if his arm would be able to raise high enough to knock on it. He hoped so. Rain had run down his neck, under his armour and had soaked the tunic beneath. His trousers were sodden from rain and water from the buckets. His boots squelched with every step. Most of him was cold and wet and shivering except his face, which felt hot and tight.

"'Scuse me, Cap'n," said a voice by his shoulder.

His neck creaked as his head pivoted toward the voice. "Yes, Harley?" His throat hurt from the shouted instructions and the smoke. "Aren't you

off duty? Why are you here?"

Harley shuffled his feet. "Well, I was close by, wunt I, when the bell rang and I thought I'd best be givin' a hand, like. I just wanted to know if you needed summat else from me, before I go back to, well, where I was."

Torin looked closely at him. Beneath his cloak, a rather garish garment peeked forth. Torin recognized a loose blouse of Bell's and he held back almost hysterical snorks of laughter. The dimple in his cheek winked madly. "You could knock on this door for me, if you'd be so good before you go."

Harley blinked at his captain, but did as requested. "Enten else, Cap'n?" he asked.

"No, thank you, Harley. Oh, one thing...you can tell Bell I've sorted things out. She'll understand."

Harley nodded and trotted away. Torin turned to the now-open door. He looked up the steps at Sunshine. "I've come to collect my cloak," he croaked.

Sunshine stepped back. "Come in for a moment, then. I'm just getting Licia and Erol settled. Come in out of the weather."

He climbed the steps, and lurched inside. "Pardon my intruding," he said.

"You're not intruding at all," said Sunshine. "I put your cloak by the stove to dry some. It's wet through in places."

"Oh good, it'll match the rest of my clothes," he said. "I suppose it's lost all ability to confer any warmth as well?"

"Let it heat up a few more minutes and it'll give you some warmth." She gave hot tea to her guests, who huddled together on the padded bench which did duty as a bed. She pulled down extra blankets from the nook over the driver's seat and gave them to Licia and Erol. "Would you like one?" she asked Torin.

"No thank you, Mistress," he said, keeping his tone polite and formal in front of the others. He looked around the caravan and jerked his head at Sunshine for her to come closer. She did. "Where are you going to sleep tonight?" he asked.

"The floor, I suppose," she replied. "It wouldn't be the first time."

"The Queen will pay for an inn for them for a night," he said, his voice too low to carry across the small room. "You needn't give up your own bed."

"I told them that, but they want to stay nearby." She glanced over at them. "Personally, I think they're just more at home in a caravan." She shrugged and looked up at him. "Torin! Your poor face."

"Oh gods, now what?" He tried to lift his hand, but his arm had different ideas and told him it had done far more than its fair share and had no

intention of raising any higher than his waist, and then only if it felt the action entirely necessary. "What's wrong with my face?"

"Your forehead is all blistered, and your cheeks are quite red. And I think your hair is a little singed in front."

"That would explain the hot feeling in my face, then," he said. He shivered violently. "It's a nice counterpoint to the cold everywhere else. Could I have that cloak now?"

She brought it and wrapped it around him. "You probably need a Healer," she said. "But Emeera's gone to a patient, so you said."

He smiled. "I actually said that because she told me to tell you she was with a patient. She may very well be at home, but it's across the city and this is minor. A little salve will do the trick, most likely. I can probably trust the Royal Healer." He smiled lopsidedly at her. "I'll just stagger out into the night and find my way back to the castle." He frowned, concentrating, and managed to bring one hand up to mid-chest where it clutched the cloak. He grimaced. Sunshine stared at him; looked back at her friends and stared at Torin again.

"Wait just a minute," she said to him.

He leaned back against the door, weary beyond reason now that the adrenaline had left his system. He became aware of aching in his shoulders and back from the unaccustomed usage. He thought

that sliding down the door and sleeping right there might not be a terrible idea. He was just debating whether or not to collapse when Sunshine came back.

She took her own cloak, which had been covered by his on the peg earlier, and put it on. "Come on," she said.

He looked at her. "Where?"

"I'm taking you home," she said. "You're in no condition to be wandering the streets alone. You'll fall off a bridge or something, so I'm going to see that you get home safe and sound, and then you can pay for a carriage to bring me home again."

"Will you walk me all the way to my chambers?" he asked, starting to feel a little giddy.

"If I must," she said. She pulled him away from the door. "You're sure you'll be all right?" she asked Licia.

The other woman smiled weakly. "As well as we can be," she said.

"I'll be back in a while, then," said Sunshine. She opened the door and held Torin's upper arm while he negotiated the steps. She followed him into the stormy night.

## Chapter Eight

They walked close together to the streets that outlined the great Market Square. Torin looked up and down for any sign of a cabbie, but the streets were deserted.

He looked down at Sunshine. "You don't have to be out in this with me," he said. "The castle's not far. I'll make it."

She shook her head. "To be honest, Torin, I'd rather be out here with you than back there with them. I know they've had a terrible blow, but I can't say I feel much like sympathizing. He's always trying to make new lamps and experimenting with new oils and this isn't the first time it's gone wrong. Of course, he's never burned down their whole caravan before, but still you'd think he would have learned not to do that inside." She looked up at him, squinting at the rain that hit her face. "Of course, if you really want me to go back..."

"No! No. I just didn't want you to get chilled."

He looked again for a cab and shook his head. "Let's hurry," he said. "Maybe it'll help warm me up."

She slipped her hand through the slit in her cloak, then through the one in his and sought his hand. She linked her fingers with his. "You *are* frozen," she said. "Let's go."

They ran through puddles and runnels of water, Torin shortening his stride so Sunshine wouldn't trip. He enjoyed the feel of her hand in his, even though his numb fingers wouldn't bend properly. He led her through a narrow alley which brought them quite close to a small door in the castle wall. He kicked it. "It's Torin," he shouted. "Open the damn door." The door flew open.

"Captain!" said the guard and snapped a salute.

"Merek." Torin nodded back. "Thank you." He led Sunshine past the guard, who closed the door again and barred it. She looked around. They were in an area near the stables.

Torin led her around buildings, and in through an inconspicuous door. Then up a short staircase, through another door, and into a long corridor.

"Well, I'm completely lost," she said.

"You're supposed to be," he said. "Now you can't sneak out without my knowing about it." He winked at her, and stopped in front of a solid wooden door. A small symbol decorated it. He lifted the latch, pushed the door open and ushered



her inside. "Welcome to my quarters, Miss Wolf," he said.

Torin followed as Sunshine stepped into the big sitting room. A large fireplace took up a good part of the wall opposite the door. Heavy drapes covered the windows on either side of the fireplace, blocking the sight of the rainy night. Comfortable chairs faced each other over a thick rug before the hearth. A door stood ajar in one end wall. Beside the door, a large tapestry covered the wall and a table with weapons stood before the tapestry, an altar of some kind.

Against the opposite wall, an elegant secretary held paper, parchment, quills and pots of ink. Beside the door they had just come through stood a table with chairs. Various other chairs were scattered through the large room, some straight backed, some upholstered.

Torin tugged a bell-pull near the door. A few minutes later, a manservant knocked and entered.

"You rang, Captain?" he asked.

"Yes, Gome. I need lots of hot water. I am in dire need of a bath. And we need soup with lots of meat in it...and bring bread. And mulled wine."

"Will you be bathing here or in your bedchamber, Captain?"

"Is there a fire in there?" Torin asked.

"Yes, sir. I made it myself a few hours ago when I kindled that one, and I added more wood

to both not long ago."

Torin glanced at the roaring fire in the fireplace. "Good. Then I'll have my bath in there. Save dragging the tub around."

"Anything else, Captain?"

"No, that should be good. Thank you."

Gome tugged his forelock and took his leave. Torin let his cloak slide from his shoulders and then draped it on one of the chairs before the fire. He looked around for Sunshine, and found her standing in front of his altar. She studied the tapestry behind the table, then looked at the collection of weapons on the table, and went back to the tapestry. Torin joined her.

"Where did you get this?" she asked, waving at the tapestry.

"From friends in Tirna," he said. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"What do people say when they see it?" She looked at the Folk in the picture, dancing around a bright bonfire, some in the throes of Changing as they celebrated Summer Solstice.

"Most think it's a nightmare or a fairy tale," he said. "Not that I have many guests as a rule."

"And what are all these?" she touched a dagger with a stained blade.

"They're all weapons that have tasted my blood," he said. "And all belong to men now dead. They serve to remind me that things could as

easily have gone the other way." He pointed to the sword in the centre. The pieces of its blade were lightly fitted together. "This is the one that let me down against Madlach."

He touched a flail. The wooden handle was wrapped in leather, and eight or ten chains hung from one end. Rather than ending in balls with spikes, each chain terminated in a sharp barbed hook. "This was his," he said. "Madelach's. It gave me this."

He turned his ruined cheek toward her and she shuddered at the thought of how it must have been. She reached up and ran tender fingers over the scar. He put his hand on hers and pressed it to his face, then turned and planted a soft kiss on her palm. And another. "Will you stay a while?" he asked. "I did order soup for us both. I know we've had supper, but I thought the heat might do us good."

"I would love to stay," she said.

"Good. Then put your cloak on the other chair and let's stand before the fire until they bring everything."

She draped her cloak as he had done his and they stood by the fire, enjoying the warmth. A pair of servants knocked and entered. "Your bath water will be here soon, Captain," said one. They went into his bedchamber.

Torin smiled at Sunshine's mildly alarmed

expression at the noises they made. "There's a tub for bathing," he said. "It's rather large because I don't like being cramped and it usually sits well out of the way. They're just moving it to the hearth."

The servants came out again. The older one studied Torin critically. "Forgive my saying so, Captain, but you look like a drowned rat. You too, Miss, although much more lovely overall. Would it be improper to offer the lady one of your robes, Captain? I can send in a lady's maid."

"That would be good, Thel. Very considerate. And help me here, would you?" Thel nodded at the other servant to go fetch the lady's maid. Then he went to Torin's side. He unbuckled the shoulders of the armour and set it on its frame to dry. Then he helped pull off the sodden boots. He pulled them onto boot-trees so they wouldn't lose their shape, and set them at one side of the hearth. They would dry, but not too quickly. Last, he helped unbuckle the sword belt and hung it in its place. By this time, the lady's maid had arrived. Thel told her what was needed and she led Sunshine into Torin's bedchamber.

Torin turned his back to the fire in an effort to dry that side of himself. A short time later, Sunshine reappeared. Her hair, although still damp, had been brushed till it shone. She wore one of Torin's soft warm robes which hung to her

toes. The sleeves dangled past her hands. The cowed hood lay about her shoulders, leaving her head bare.

"The maid is putting my clothes before the fire," she said. "They should be dry soon." The robe did nothing to conceal the curve of breast or hip and Torin smiled appreciatively.

"Not too soon, I hope," he murmured. Moments later, the traffic in and out of his room became almost frantic. Servants carried in big cauldrons of steaming water and one of cold. They finished filling the tub and were on their way back to the kitchens when the tray with soup, bread, and mulled wine arrived. There were also thin slices of meat and cooked vegetables in a light pastry.

"Bring it into the other room," said Torin, leading the way. "I can bathe and eat at the same time."

The servant set a low table near the tub and put the tray on it. He nodded and left. Torin stood by the tub.

"All I have to do now is take off my clothes and get in. This could be fun." He was thinking of the heaviness of his arms and when Sunshine giggled mischievously, he looked at her, puzzled.

"It could be a lot of fun," she said.

Torin chuckled deep in his chest. "That's not what I meant, saucy wench. Now come over here

and help me out of my tunic. My arms feel like they have leaden weights on them and raising them over my head is difficult." He stared levelly at her. "And having them support my weight for any length of time is completely out of the question."

She moved to his side. "You can just lie there," she said, smiling, then helped wrestle him out of the tunic, lifting his arms one at a time to get them free.

He bent down so she could pull it over his head. "I could, but I might fall asleep," he said. "Just toss that into the basket over there. It's all smoky and needs a good laundering."

She did as she was told, walking across the room to the basket in question. When she turned back, he was naked and stepping into the tub. He eased himself into the hot water, hands gripping the edge of the tub, arms trembling with the effort of holding him up. He hissed when the hot water reached his tenderest parts, but continued the slow descent. Finally, he sat and stretched out his legs and leaned back along the sloped end. He sighed.

"Oh gods, but this is wonderful," he said. He slid into the water until it lapped at his chin. He let his arms slide down and sink into the welcome heat.

Sunshine looked around, found a small

footstool which she brought to the side of the tub. She sat on it and gazed at him. She dipped her hand into the water and yelped. "Torin, how can you stand it so hot?" she shook her hand to cool it.

"I love it this hot," he said. "And it should help my arms. Right now they refuse to cooperate with me."

"Won't it be hard to eat your soup if you can't lift your arms?" she asked.

"Mmmm, I suppose it might," he said. "I can but try. Let them soak here a little while first."

She took one of the goblets of mulled wine and leaned toward him. "Here, have a sip of this," she said. He lifted his head. She put the cup to his lips and he took a long sip of the warm and spicy wine. Sunshine followed suit before she put the cup back. She crossed her arms on the edge of the tub, laid her head on them and smiled at him.

"Do you know what it's doing to me, having you lying there naked and close enough to touch?" she asked.

He laughed softly. One arm bent at the elbow and the hand rose out of the water to touch her chin. "Is it anything like what it would do to me, were our positions reversed?"

"I hope so," she said. She looked at his forehead. "You forgot to get salve for that burn," she said. "Shall I send for someone?"

He sighed. "I'd rather not," he said. "But I

suppose I should have it tended to. Go ring the bell and ask Gome for something for burns." He watched her rise and walk away.

She came back far too soon with a Healer behind her. "Gome is apparently quite observant," she said. "I had just put my hand to the pull when the Healer knocked on the door. It gave me quite the start."

The Healer came forward and sat on the stool Sunshine had used. He studied Torin's face. "It's not too terrible, Captain. I doubt it will require bandaging, although you might want some for when the blisters break. Or I could break them for you now but I believe it's best to let the skin beneath heal first." He opened his pouch. "I have a small jar here of salve. I won't put it on now; you'll only wash it off. However, if your companion will be here when your bath is done, perhaps she will apply it for you."

"Yes, I can do that," said Sunshine. "How much should I use?"

The Healer showed her the appropriate amount and gestured at Torin's face to show her exactly where. He bowed to them both and left.

Torin sighed again. "There is a small bar that fits across my door," he said.

She smiled and hurried out to the other room before he could finish the instruction. When she returned, her smile was more mischievous than



before. She resumed her seat.

Torin sat up. "I think I'm ready for that soup now," he said. "You will help if I have an attack of the vapours or anything, won't you?"

Sunshine laughed. "Oh of course, Captain." She leaned forward and kissed his mouth. "Silly Captain."

The heat had benefited his arms and he was able to hold the bowl in one hand and eat with the other. But when he was done, his arm trembled when he passed her the bowl to put on the table. He sank back in the water. She dipped her hand in again.

"Mmmmm," she said. "Now this is more my temperature."

He smiled slowly. "There's room in here for two," he said. "If you want to join me."

## Chapter Nine

Her eyes almost glowed at him. She stood up by the tub and lifted the robe over her head in a slow, sensuous movement. Torin watched her legs appear, thighs, the soft curls at their juncture. He sighed when the bottom pair of nipples came into view and again when her breasts appeared, nipples erect. She dropped the robe and stepped into the tub.

She sat between his feet and stretched her legs out on top of his, her feet close to his hips. He put his hands on her legs, stroking from ankle to knee. "Mmmmmm, this is nice," he said. "I like skin on skin."

"It depends on whose skin," she replied. "I certainly like yours on mine." She bent one leg rhythmically, stroking her calf along his thigh.

His eyelids dropped halfway and he smiled. "You know what that's doing to me."

"I know what I *hope* it's doing to you," she said. She slid forward in the water until she was

between his knees with her legs still over his. She bent her legs and snuggled her feet in close to his buttocks, then put both hands on the tops of his thighs just above his knees. She ran her hands in a long slow movement all the way up to where legs met body and back down again. Once. Twice. Several times.

She looked down into the water. "Yes, it seems to be doing what I had hoped for," she said.

His own hands had cupped her calves while she had been playing with his legs, and now he slid them to her waist. He leaned forward. "I'm delighted you approve," he said. He kissed her at the base of her neck and nibbled his way up to her jaw and left a trail of soft kisses to her mouth. He tasted her lips and she opened her mouth to him. The kiss deepened and lingered and when they drifted back from each other, both were breathing a little harder than they had been.

Sunshine's hand went up his thigh again, this time slipping toward his midline. Her fingers curled around the hard shaft. She pressed it back toward his belly, lifted her bottom from the floor of the tub and moved closer to him. She straddled his thighs, held his erection against his body and pressed herself to its underside. She began to move her hips slowly.

Torin's head dropped back on the high rim of the tub at that end and he groaned. The sensation

of Sunshine's warm and open center rubbing up and down his erection bordered on the ecstatic. He shivered with pleasure. Sunshine's pace began to quicken and her breath came faster.

Torin raised one hand to her breast, ignoring the arm's complaint, and teased her nipple. His other hand settled for toying with one of the lower ones on her belly. She arched her back and pressed herself harder to him as she rubbed her most sensitive spot faster and faster on the hard flesh beneath her. Her hands gripped the sides of the tub as the first wave of climax washed over her. She cried out — short, sharp sounds to match the short, sharp jerks of her pelvis — followed by his name over and over. She slid down his thighs a little, panting and trembling, her eyes closed.

He slipped his hands beneath her, raised her up, slid down in the water and lowered her again. Her eyes flew open when he began to penetrate her. "Oh! OH! Ohhhhhhh!" Another wave crashed over and through her as he sank into her depths.

He held her by the waist, closed his eyes and focused on the delightful sensation of being squeezed by muscles deep inside her. Adding to his pleasure was the wanton way she writhed on his lap. Increasing his enjoyment even further were her sounds of arousal and extreme pleasure. Before too long, he caught up to her and joined her in the ecstatic throes. He sank back, and pulled her

to his chest.

She slid her hands up his back, laid her head against his shoulder and kissed his neck. One of his arms circled her waist and he forced the other up so he could touch her cheek and temple. He twisted his neck and looked at her. "You are so lovely," he said.

She kissed his neck again and pressed herself closer into his embrace. "Does this mean I win that coveted third place?" she asked.

"Third place?" he asked, unable to follow her train of thought.

She lifted her head. "Yes. That spot for a third lover-friend."

"Oh, that." He drew down his brows and gave her a thoughtful look. "Well, it's not exactly third," he said.

A hurt expression rose on her face. "What? What is it? Thirty-fifth?"

"No, no. Nothing like that, sweetest Sunshine. No. It's third, if we are speaking in chronological terms only. If I were to number you all in order of personal preference — how I would choose should you all turn up in town at once and I could only be with one of you — then I am afraid you will have to settle for first." She blinked at him. He smiled and kissed her mouth. "That is, if you think you can stand that position."

"First?"

"Mmm."

She blinked again, thinking. "What you are saying is that you would rather be with me than the other two?"

"Mmm."

"Don't tease like that, Torin," she said. "It's hurtful."

"I'm not teasing, sweet."

She touched his lips. "But I know where your heart really belongs, Torin. I *know*. And I know that neither I nor the others can ever really have you or your love."

He kissed her again gently. "Yes, the greater part of my heart belongs to Emeera," he said. "And it likely always will, but it doesn't mean I have no love in it for anyone else. In point of fact, Miss Wolf, there is a part of my heart shaped like a beautiful woman who turns into a beautiful wolf the colour of sunshine, and it also happens that that very part is quite loving and devoted." He gazed into her eyes. "And I would never, ever knowingly do anything to hurt that lovely wolf-woman."

She touched his lips, studied his face and leaned forward to taste his mouth. They traded tender kisses for long minutes. She sat back. "You love me? Even a little?"

He laughed softly. "Rather more than a little," he said. "Didn't Emeera herself tell you that the

only people who can hurt me are the ones I love?"

Sunshine linked her hands behind his neck.  
"Yes, she did."

"Well, then," he said. He kissed her once more.  
"Let's get out of here. The water's getting cold and I want to get under the blankets before I get another chill." He watched her rise and climb out, and followed her.

They dried each other with the huge towels that had been warming before the fire, and then scrambled into his big bed.

## Chapter Ten

Torin stretched out, luxuriating in the feel of the clean sheets on his naked body. He sighed and held out his arms for Sunshine to nestle into. He lay on his back with one arm wrapped around her, his hand on her waist and her head resting on his chest. She put her leg over his and wriggled to have as much of her body touching him as possible. One hand slipped under his shoulder. The other went to his chest and he covered that one with his free hand.

His eyes drifted almost closed and he made a noise of contentment. Sunshine kissed his chest. He responded by kissing her forehead. She lifted her head to look at his face. His eyes closed, struggled open again, gazed at her for a moment while he stroked her cheek with tender fingers, and then closed again.

"I'm not all the way asleep yet," he murmured. "But probably soon."

"I think you deserve a chance to sleep," she



said. She traced the beard that edged his jaw. "There's so much I want to say to you, but it can wait."

One eye cracked open. "Good. I'll be able to make more sense later." He kissed her lightly, closed his eyes again and fell almost instantly asleep.

\* \* \* \*

He awoke some time later, lying on his side. Sunshine's back was against his chest, her bottom in his lap. His arm was around her and his hand held one of her breasts. He smiled. The lightly erotic dream he had been having seemed to be partly true. He released her breast and put his hand down to move his erection from its place along her buttocks. It nestled now between her thighs, the head nuzzling its way, parting the soft lips and rubbing gently back and forth.

Sunshine sighed in her sleep. She pushed her hips back toward him. He slid his other arm under her neck, kissed her hair and continued the slow back and forth movements. Every stroke rubbed the soft head on her clitoris and she moaned softly in her sleep. His hand reclaimed her breast. He teased the nipple until it stood out and he switched his attentions to her other breast. He nuzzled her neck, kissed her ear and nibbled the

corner of her jaw.

"What?" Her sleepy voice made him smile. The hand on her breast moved again, took grip of his erection and changed its angle of approach.

This time, as his hips moved forward, the head slipped in. He pressed deeper. "OH!" Sunshine's voice had gone rapidly from sleepy to surprised. She twisted her neck to look at him.

He craned around at her. His hips kept their slow rhythm. He kissed her. "You seem surprised to see me," he said.

She closed her eyes for a moment as she sought to match his movements. "I was at first. I thought I was home in bed with Ranid and I couldn't understand why it felt so good." She sighed. "And it feels soooo good."

"Mmmm," he agreed. "It does. *You* do." They fell silent, concentrating on their activity. Sunshine leaned her upper body forward which allowed Torin to penetrate deeper. They strained together, sometimes in perfect rhythm, sometimes at odds, which made them both laugh.

They stopped then and started again. Torin reached around her to put his hand low on her belly. He tickled the curls and then dipped a finger lower still. Sunshine covered his hand with one of hers. She pressed his fingers even more firmly to her sensitive bit. "There," she said. "Right there."

His thrusting became more intense and focused. He panted and groaned, pushing deeper and deeper into her as his climax roared through him. When the spurting diminished, he resumed caressing her until her legs thrashed and her hips bucked and she begged him to stop. Sunshine unbent herself and leaned her back against his chest again. His arms tightened around her. He kissed her hair and when she turned her face toward him, he kissed her cheek. She squirmed in his embrace to face him and wrap her arms around him, then spent long moments licking and nibbling his neck. He laughed softly in her ear and tilted her face up for a lingering kiss.

"I seem to be having difficulties getting enough of you," he said.

"I'm having similar difficulties," she replied. One of her hands wandered down his back, over his buttock down the outside of his thigh. "I think I'm enjoying rediscovering the joys of sharing myself with someone. Everything feels so right and nice and lovely." She sighed. "You know when my back was facing you and you had your hands on my breasts?"

"Yes."

"Well, Ranid does that sometimes but it always feels dirty and sneaky when he does it, as if he thinks he's doing something terrible. But when you do it, it feels sensual and exciting and right."

She trailed fingers up the front of his thigh. "And I would never do this to him," she said, as her hand made its way more centrally and cupped the parts that had been so recently giving her such pleasure. "He'd think me the worst kind of wanton, if I did."

Torin smiled, a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "I think you're rather good at being wanton," he said, and winced at the gentle tweak she gave the sensitive body parts in her hand. She laughed and put her arm around him again.

"I'm learning," she said. "It's been some time since I've had any inspiration to be that way."

"You're doing very well, for someone out of practice," he said. "And I am quite willing to keep practicing with you." He kissed her again, and she responded eagerly.

He rolled her onto her back and pushed himself up on one elbow to look down at her. He drew circles and patterns around her nipples, pausing now and again to capture one and tease it. Down her belly, up to her breasts, over and over, slowly and tenderly, his fingers caressed and explored.

"That is something I miss so much," she said. "He grabs these two —" She put her hands on her breasts. "— but he ignores the others. I love when you do what you're doing. I feel as if I'm really *me* when I'm with you like this. I don't have to hide anything or pretend anything. I can just be

Sunshine of the Folk of Lorca."

"I'm rather fond of her," he said. "Did you know?" He bent to kiss the middle pair of nipples on her belly. The tip of his tongue took over drawing circles around them, moving to the lower pair and slowly working up her body. He laid his cheek on Sunshine's breast and continued to run his fingers up and down her body, barely touching her, his contact feather light. "You are so lovely," he said softly. He turned his neck far enough to kiss between her breasts. She put her arms around his neck and head and held him to her. She stroked the hair at his temples.

"You should undo your braid." He kissed the same spot.

"No. It's all smoky and disgusting. I was too tired to wash it." He lifted his head. "Next time. I promise."

"I'll hold you to it," she said.

He smiled with his mouth on her skin. "You can hold anything of mine to anything of yours anytime you want." He kissed her again and raised his head to wink at her.

She shook her head in mock remonstrance. A mischievous smile tugged at her lips, giving away her true feelings. Torin sat up between her legs, looking down at her. The open curtains at the end of the bed allowed the fire and the candles on the mantel to cast soft light on her body. Her thighs

were parted and he moved her legs to improve his view of what lay between them. He touched her mound and followed the contours of the soft lips. His fingers went down around the curve of her buttocks and back along the tender thighs. He parted the outer lips and gazed at the pinkness within. He wriggled down to rest his head on her thigh and get a closer look. "This is so pretty," he said. He explored with a gentle finger. Sunshine squirmed a little. "I'm not hurting anything, am I?" he asked.

"No, dearest," she sighed. "Quite the opposite."

He smiled at the sultry and sensuous tone of her voice. He touched the inner lips and then her clitoris. He teased it between two fingers, enjoying her reactions. He moved his head up her thigh then, and tasted her. She shivered. He licked her again — a long, slow trail of his tongue, dipping into sweet nooks and then circling her clitoris. He made a sound of pleased delight and pressed his mouth tighter to her, careful not to let his teeth dig into the tender flesh.

"I could get to like that a very great deal," she said, writhing under his ministrations. "Ohhhh, yes. A *very* great deal. Oh, Torin." Her head fell back on the pillow. Her hands clutched the blankets, released, clutched and released. She arched her back and the moan building in her throat came out as more of a scream. Torin's head

snapped up. "No. Don't stop yet! Oh! Please!" She whimpered and her body twisted side to side. Torin held her hips to still her pelvis long enough for his mouth to resume its activity. Sunshine wailed again.

This time Torin didn't stop. He continued until Sunshine flailed at his head. "Stop now. Oh, great Creator, Torin. Stop. Oh. Oh. Ohhhh." He planted a last soft kiss and moved to lie above her. His legs twined with hers, his weight on lightly bent knees and elbows. His body touched hers along its entire length.

"I did say I can't get enough of you," he said.

"Mmmmmmmmm," she said. "I thought you meant enough of the other thing. You know."

"That too," he said.

She opened her eyes and looked up into his dark ones. "That was the most incredible, intense thing I have ever experienced in my entire life." She smiled with mischief in her eyes. "How can I ever repay you?"

Torin dropped his face into her neck and chuckled deep in his throat. He shook his head back and forth. "I can't," he said. He cleared his throat. "There is a way, but I can't ask." He lifted his head again. Sunshine took his chin and turned his face to one side.

"Are you blushing?" She studied him, laughing. "You are!" The dimple appeared in his

left cheek and he bent to kiss her. He laughed softly. "You have to ask now," she said. "I want to know what can bring such red, red roses to the good Captain's cheeks!"



## Chapter Eleven

He looked into her eyes, touched her lips with his fingertips and kissed the tip of her nose. "It's not something I can ask of anyone else," he said, the dimple in his cheek winking at her. "Something I haven't had for, mmmm, eight years."

"Eight years? You were how old?"

"Fifteen. You remember I told you my very first was with a Folk girl."

"Yes," she put her arm around his neck. "She taught you well."

"Yes, she did. We learned together and tried almost every single thing we could think up that didn't make either of us feel too uncomfortable." He nuzzled her cheek and kissed her again.

"So what is this thing you would like me to do, that you can't ask of anyone else? And whatever happened to your Folk girl?"

"She Danced with my heart brother and has had two litters and is still one of my dearest

friends. I love her dearly but we no longer romp – not since she and he Danced.” He sighed and the dimple appeared again, deeper than ever. He chuckled.

“Tell me, Torin, or I’ll Change and bite your bum.”

“The Changing part is fine,” he said. She stared at him. He laughed again and cleared his throat. “You also remembered I said I don’t like wolf tongue in my mouth?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m rather partial to it in other places.”

Sunshine gazed up at him. Sudden realization dawned in her eyes and she laughed. “I see.” She caught her bottom lip between her teeth. “Truly?”

“Yes. Truly.”

She kissed him on the mouth and nibbled his lips. “It sounds like a very pleasurable thing to do,” she said. She kissed him again. “Now get off me so I can Change.”

Torin grinned. His eyes sparkled with anticipation and he rolled onto his back. Sunshine straddled his belly and bent down to kiss him. “I had best do enough of this to tide me over,” she said, kissing him deeply several times to their mutual enjoyment.

She crouched then, balanced lightly on feet and hands. She put her lips against his throat. He felt her mouth change shape and became aware that

the arms and legs to either side had become more slender and covered with the light golden coat. She grinned at him. He looked up at her.

“Wait a minute, Miss Wolf,” he said. He took a firm grip of her neck and shoulders and rolled out from underneath her. With a deft and easy motion, he turned her on her back, put one leg across her and loomed over her. She snapped her teeth at him. He snapped back and showed his teeth. She gave him wolfen laughter and exposed her throat. He bent and rubbed his face against it, then kissed the soft fur. He sank his fingers into the thick ruff of her neck and kissed her throat again. He rolled away then and stretched out on his back.

She bounded to her feet and stood over him. He snapped his teeth at her. She snapped back and showed her teeth. He laughed and dropped his head to expose his throat, which she licked gently. Having established by wolfen protocol that they were equals in all ways, Torin put his feet together and let his knees drop out to the sides.

Sunshine snuffled her way down his body, tasting him here and there as she went. She sniffed at his thighs and the black hair at their juncture. He sighed. Her tongue made an experimental swipe along one thigh.

“Mmmmmmm,” said Torin, moving that leg a little more to the side. She started at his knee and

licked all the way up his inner thigh with long swipes of her wolf tongue. At the top of his leg, she trailed her tongue down around the solid curve of his buttock.

"Oh, Sunshine," he said. "That is exquisite. Don't stop." She nudged him gently between the legs with her nose. Then she went to his other knee and licked her way up his leg, making sure to pay the proper attention to his buttock.

Her tongue explored the sensitive places between his thighs with slow, almost thoughtful swipes. He groaned and squirmed with pleasure. Her wolf tongue curled and cupped in ways a human one couldn't hope to match. Torin closed his eyes and let all his attention focus on the delightful sensations.

She licked and cupped each in turn and gently nuzzled between them with nose and tongue. Torin sighed, half moaning. Sunshine's tongue lapped at the base of his erection, curling around it. She licked along its length from base to tip, underside first, then again along one side and the other. She nosed gently between it and his belly and licked the top side base to tip.

With every stroke, her tongue molded itself to the contours of the shaft, bringing deep sounds of pleasure from Torin's chest and throat. She flicked her tongue at the tip. His hips jerked in response. She grinned, lay down beside him with one

foreleg across his body and began licking the top half with increasing speed.

Shorter swipes applied more rapidly and focusing more and more on the sensitive head. He groaned. He reached down to touch her where she lay beside him and caressed her thick coat. "Oh, gods, Sunshine," he gasped. "It won't be long now." He panted.

Sunshine stood up and changed her angle of attack. Her tongue flicked and swiped; short fast licks all around the head, her tongue seeming to be everywhere at once. He cried out, groaned and arched his back. The first spurt hit his chest, the rest followed lower and lower as the power waned. Slowly, slowly his hips lowered back to the bed. His body trembled in the aftermath. Sunshine waited a few moments, then licked the hypersensitive tip softly. Torin drew in a sharp breath.

"Careful," he said. She licked the softening shaft and then made her way up his belly, licking him clean. When she reached his chest, she dragged her tongue slowly across his nipples. He grinned up at her and took her ruff in both hands. "I think I have been amply repaid, Miss Wolf," he said. He kissed her cheek. She lay down on top of him and rested her chin on his shoulder close to his neck. He put both arms around her. He felt the fur shrinking under his arms. Her ribs widened

and her forelegs became arms. He felt the long nose pull into her face and the hair on her head lengthen.

She stretched her legs out along his and kissed his neck. "I'm glad you enjoyed it, dearest Captain."

"Oh, yes, cherished Miss Wolf. I enjoyed it very much." He lifted her face and kissed her mouth. "More than very much, but I don't think there are words to say how much." He hugged her, then reached around for the blankets to cover them. They snuggled together in the warmth, exchanging soft kisses while gentle hands touched and caressed until sleep claimed them both.

## Chapter Twelve

Torin drifted awake to the sensation of Sunshine's fingertips making light circles on his lower belly. He smiled and opened his eyes, his arm already curling around her.

"Good morning," she said. She offered her mouth for a kiss. Torin accepted the offer and rolled toward her. He put his leg over hers and pulled her leg between both of his. He wrapped his arms around her, drawing her close.

"Mmmmmmmmm," he smiled with his face in her hair.

"Mmmmmmmmm, indeed," she said. "Do we have time for once more before we have to start the day?"

Torin twisted his body and reached out a hand to pull the side curtain on the bed. He studied the quality of the light coming in the window for a few moments. He dropped the heavy curtain and

wrapped himself around her again.

"I think so. But if we're too long about it, we'll miss breakfast."

"We can eat later," she said, kissing and nibbling the base of his throat.

"But I need food in the morning," he whined. "I'm a growing boy." Sunshine's hand wandered down and gripped him.

"So I notice," she said. He chuckled and pushed himself up on one elbow. He looked down at her. She reached up to touch his face, trace the shape of his lips, careful to avoid the red blisters on his forehead. "We should do something about that," she said.

He kissed her fingertips. "I'll be fine," he said. "There are other more important things on my mind right now."

He threw the blankets back so he could look at her, touch her and savour her presence in his bed. They kissed and left feather-light touches on each other as if this were the first time they had seen each other naked. They spent long tender minutes exploring each other, trading soft and yet exciting kisses. Torin smiled at the hard buttons of Sunshine's nipples and kissed each one.

When he entered her at last, they continued the slow and gentle pace, hips moving in small circles, side to side, experimenting and enjoying each new sensation. Climax came almost as a surprise to



both of them. They clung together, bodies pressed as tightly to the other's as each could get.

He kissed her lips. His dark eyes shone with his pleasure in having her in his arms. He sighed. "I suppose that means we have to get out of bed now," she said.

"Soon," he said. "And then we have to get you back to your caravan, evict your overnight guests and I have to try to sort out what they are or are not entitled to, to help them get back on their feet. At least they still have the horse. That's a beginning."

"And I have to track down the berries that Ranid needs for his new drink. Then I'm supping with Emeera and I have to head back tomorrow." She scratched his beard, earning a grin and a kiss.

"That means you're here for another night," he said.

"Yes, it does."

"Do you think you can stand another night with a rather close friend?" he asked, idly toying with the hair at one of her temples.

"I somehow doubt there would be much standing involved," she said.

He chuckled. "Probably not much."

"And I wonder if I would be able to walk after two nights like this. I'm not even certain how well I'll manage today. Poor little miss hasn't had this much activity in years, if ever."

"I understand perfectly," he said. "My little soldier there hasn't been put through his paces like this in a while himself." He kissed her. "We could always just cuddle together and actually sleep some."

"Do you truly believe that?" She bit his chin gently.

"No. Not in the least." He hugged her to his chest. "It's up to you, dearest Miss Wolf."

"Is it all right if I give you an answer later? Can you drop by my caravan?"

He nodded. "Yes. I can do that. Now — out of bed and let's get moving." They scrambled out of bed and into their clothes. Torin made use of the garderobe in the wall between the windows and offered it to his guest.

Sunshine stood by the open door, holding her breath against the anticipated smell. The sound of water made her look. "What's this?" She peered into the hole in the seat. A narrow trickle of water ran from one side to the other in a wide pipe.

Torin glanced over. "That is the work of someone very clever," he said. "The castle was originally built over a spring that fed the river. Now the water is pumped to several cisterns to supply the castle, and pipes like that one lead eventually to the swamps south of the city. It's a lot more pleasant than the ones that just lead down the outside of the wall."

"Well isn't progress a wonderful thing?" Sunshine closed the door and tended to her needs.

When she came out, Torin was no longer in the bed chamber. She found him in the main room. He had pulled on his long boots, their tops folded down below his knees, and now put on his leather cuirass. He tightened the buckles, strapped on his sword belt, tucked gauntlets into his belt and picked up the plumed helmet. He grabbed his cloak and passed hers to her.

"Ready?" he asked. He unbarred and opened the door.

Sunshine paused on her way through. She looked at the door and then at the helmet in his hands. "That's what that is," she said. She tapped the symbol on the door. "It's a helmet. I thought at first this room was the armory or something."

Torin ushered her into the hallway and closed his door. "It's a plumed helmet," he said, shaking the horsetail plume at her. "Only the Captain wears it, so it's on my door to identify my quarters to people who know. People who don't know, think it's the armory " He grinned. She punched his arm. He laughed. "But now you know." He offered her his arm and led her toward the stables where he could collect his own horse and claim a carriage to give her a ride back to Market.

He led her along a different route from the one of the previous night. At the stables, he called one

of the hostlers. "I need a small carriage to take Mistress Sunshine to the Market," he said. "Make sure there is a warm rug. The morning has a raw feel to it."

"Yes, Sir," said the hostler, hurrying away to tend to the necessities.

"While we're waiting, would you like to see Darkling?" he asked.

"Darkling?"

"My horse. Come on." He led her into the huge stables. She kept close to his side as they walked the wide aisle in the middle. He led her to a big stall where a grey Destraini warhorse played with his breakfast. He looked around at the sound of Torin's voice. He tossed his head two or three times and walked over to the stall door. He put his forehead on Torin's chest and pushed. Torin rubbed the horse's neck affectionately. Sunshine stared at him.

"He's beautiful," she said. "But where did he get his name?"

Torin gave his helmet to Sunshine and slipped into the stall. He patted the dappled shoulder. "He was almost all black when he was born. The name suited him then. Actually, it suits him still. He's a dangerous bastard when I need him to be, aren't you, Dark?" Torin put his head out over the stall door, which he had closed behind himself and whistled for an hostler. "Bring me Darkling's city

tack," he called when the young woman appeared. She nodded and went to the far end of the barn.

"You get to ride in a carriage today," said Torin to Sunshine. "All bundled up in a warm woolen rug, and I get to go out on this beast." He put his arm across the wide back and leaned on Darkling. The horse twisted his neck, nipped Torin's cloak and tugged it. Then he let it go and went back to his breakfast, his jaws making solid crunching noises with the hay and mixed feed.

"He's quite impressive," said Sunshine.

The hostler returned with the tack. "Shall I tend this, Sir?" she asked.

Torin waved her away. "I'll do it, thank you." He settled the blanket on Darkling's back, careful not to brush any hair the wrong way, then put the saddle on top. He reached under for the girth, buckled the straps and pulled them tight.

"I would have thought you'd bridle him first," said Sunshine.

Torin shrugged. "For most horses I would. But he's eating right now and he's good. He'll let me do whatever I need to without fussing. We trust each other." He ran his hand over the solid curve of the horse's rump. He smiled at Sunshine, picked up the bridle and took hold of the strap that went behind Darkling's ears in two fingers. With the other fingers and thumb, he gripped the horse's forelock and lifted his head out of the

manger. His other hand cradled the bit. He slipped his thumb into the horse's mouth, behind the front teeth and pressed on the bottom gum. Darkling's mouth opened, Torin slid the bit in with his left hand, the right pulling the bridle up the horse's face, settling the strap behind his ears. He checked all the straps, examined Darkling's hooves for any stray stones and clapped the horse on the shoulder. "All right," he said. "Open the door, please, Mistress Sunshine." She did and stepped back.

Torin led the great warhorse out into the aisle. Sunshine closed the door while Torin nudged and maneuvered Darkling into such a position that he blocked all view of Torin and Sunshine from the few hostlers and soldiers that wandered in and out. When Sunshine turned from latching the door, Torin caught her with one arm and pulled her close. He bent to her and kissed her mouth. She responded after a brief hesitation, offering him her tongue. They stepped back from each other. Sunshine gave him a mischievous grin. "Do you know what that does to me?" she said in a near whisper. "My nipples are begging for your hands and I'm all tingly lower down."

Torin glanced around. Seeing no one near, he stepped closer to her and put a hand under her cloak to cup her breast and run his thumb over the erect nipple. His eyes shone. His dimple winked at

her.

"Oh, you're wicked," she said. He chuckled, kissed her quickly, dropped his hand and tugged on Darkling's reins.

"You did say your nipples were begging for my hands," he said. "And I only had one free." He leaned down toward her, speaking quietly. "If it's any consolation, I'm more than tingly lower down. I have a feeling that riding is going to be a little uncomfortable at first this morning."

She laughed. "Serves you right, too," she said.

"It likely does," he said, amiably enough. He took his helmet from her and put it on, wincing when it slid over the raw skin of his forehead. "We should have tended to that," he said with a rueful smile. He took the gauntlets from his belt and donned them, tugging them well over his forearms. They walked back to the entry where a small carriage waited. He handed her in, courteous and polite, made sure she was well covered in the warm rug, and told the driver the destination. As the carriage pulled away, he tossed the reins over Darkling's head, put his foot in the stirrup and swung himself onto the big horse. He set out on a different route to the Market.

## Chapter Thirteen

Torin rode to the site of the burned out caravan. There was nothing that stood out as being worth salvaging. Two soldiers, wearing heavy leather gauntlets, were sorting the rubble into three piles: completely destroyed, mostly destroyed and partly destroyed. Darkling whickered and danced at the smell. Torin murmured to him, calming him somewhat. He tossed his head, but stopped the dancing. "Any idea of the cause?" Torin asked.

"No evidence, Sir, if that's what you mean. This was Erol's caravan, though, and I'd wager coin to ashes that he was 'experimenting' again."

"Speaking of coin, have you found his strongbox yet?"

"Yessir. Bennis has it. Not much else survived. It must have been a dandy blaze."

"That it was." Torin looked around. "Here come the Traders themselves," he said.

Erol and Licia clutched each other's hands as



they made their halting way to what had once been their home and source of income. Licia sobbed aloud when they got close enough to see the charred ruin.

Torin whistled for Bennis. The lieutenant's head snapped up and he looked around. He lifted a hand in a wave and trotted to Torin's side. "You called, Captain?"

"I understand you have the strongbox from the ashes. It belongs to these good people."

"Sir!" Bennis turned to Licia and Erol. "Traders." They turned toward him. "The Captain says this is yours." He held out the strongbox. Erol gawped at it. Licia stared before reaching trembling hands for the sturdy metal box. "Oh thank the gods," she said. "It survived, Erol. Look. I said it was wise to spend the money for the best." She thrust it at him. It thudded into his chest. He stared stupidly at his wife even as his hands rose to hug the box.

"But you were counting the money last night, when it all started," he said. "It was all out on the table. I saw it."

"Yes, and when you panicked and began flailing at the flames, I put all the money in the box and closed it tight before I came to help you." She shook his shoulder. "We have ourselves and our horse, thanks to the good soldier last night, and we have our money. We can manage

somehow."

"But a new caravan costs so much," Erol moaned. He rocked the box in his arms.

Torin cleared his throat. They looked up and up at him atop the great warhorse. "You can get a loan from Her Majesty's Relief," he said. "Lieutenant Bennis here will take you."

"We can't afford a loan," Licia said simply. "The rates..."

"The point of Her Majesty's Relief is to provide aid for such as you in trying circumstances. You have to pay back only the principal sum within the agreed-on time. The officers there will explain more. You'll be up and running again in no time."

Erol stared up at him. "And my wares? My goods? How do I replace them?"

"Speak to the Relief Officers," said Torin. "Bennis, take the Traders, would you?" He was irritated by the whining tone in Erol's voice. Bennis snapped a salute and led the couple away. Torin nudged Darkling and rode along the line of caravans, leaving his men to their work. They didn't need him looming over their shoulders and he had a city to patrol.

He rode out of the Market and spent most of the morning in the more criminal sections of the City, making sure all was in order. The mere sight of the great horse and the helmeted soldier was often enough to quell incipient brawls. He

returned to Market at midday and bought himself a spicy meat pie from a Chaviss Trader. He ate as he rode seemingly random paths through the Market.

He stopped at Sunshine's caravan and dismounted. He looped the reins through a metal bar attached to the caravan for just such purpose, hopped onto the bottom step and knocked on the door.

"Torin!" Sunshine smiled down at him. "We were just talking about you. Come in." She stepped back to allow him room to enter.

He climbed the steps and once inside, he took off his helmet and set it aside. He saw the room's other occupant and he smiled and bowed. "Healer," he said. "Always good to see you."

She smiled from the bench where she sat with a mug of tea in her hands. "Good afternoon, Captain," she said. "I hear you had quite a night." She paused. "What with the fire and everything."

"Yes. It was quite eventful. I had Bennis take the Traders for Relief. They'll be fine. Have you any more tea, Mistress Sunshine?"

"Yes, of course," said Sunshine. She prepared a mug for him and gave it to him.

He sat in one of the two chairs and sipped the hot drink. He looked from one woman to the other. "All right," he said. "You two are looking far too smug for my comfort." He looked at

Sunshine. "And I distinctly remember your saying you were just talking about me. What exactly were you talking about?"

"Sunshine told me that you were kind enough to provide her a bed for the night," said Emeera.

Torin sipped his tea and gazed at her over the edge of the mug.

Emeera and Sunshine exchanged glances. They both flushed and looked away, neither of them looking at Torin.

"Perhaps I should be heading home," said Emeera, rising to her feet. "I wanted to make sure the fire hadn't touched you and I see you're quite well. You are coming for supper, aren't you, Sunshine?"

"Yes, of course I am."

"You needn't leave on my account, Meera," said Torin. "It seems I have no secrets here." He leveled a gaze at Sunshine, who flushed again, and he turned the black eyes on Emeera.

"I think it's best if I toddle on," she said. "I don't know if I should ask this first." She looked to Sunshine, who nodded. Emeera turned back to Torin. "Would you care to join us this evening? It would balance out the sexes at supper."

"Sit down, Emeera," said Torin. "Before I answer, I want to find out a few things. Sit."

She sighed and went back to the bench. Torin rubbed his eyes with one hand and leaned back in

the chair with his long legs stretched out before him. He spoke first to Sunshine. "What have you said, exactly?"

"Enough," she said. "Not details or anything, but enough that Emeera knows I have broken the vows I spoke before the Holy Man." Her voice dropped. "I'm sorry if I have broken your trust, Torin, but I had to tell *someone*." She swallowed hard.

Emeera glared at Torin and went to her sister-by-marriage. She put her arm around Sunshine's shoulders and murmured comforting sounds. "Don't you hurt her," she said to Torin. "She has enough of that from Ranid and she doesn't need it from you."

Torin rose in a fluid motion, took a long stride across the room and crouched before them. He took one of Sunshine's hands and one of Emeera's. "Right here I hold two of the dearest women to me in all the world. How could I live with myself if I hurt either of you?"

He kissed Emeera's hand and pressed it briefly to his forehead. Then he kissed Sunshine's palm and held her hand against his cheek. He looked up at Emeera. "I will never stop being her friend any more than I would stop being yours." He released their hands and put one of his up to touch Sunshine's cheek. "You haven't lost my trust, sweetling. I suppose if you had to tell someone,

there is no one better." He looked up at Emeera again. "But will this hurt you? Will you think less of me or of her for what we have done?"

Emeera kept her arm around Sunshine's shoulders. She thought for some time before she answered. "At first, when she told me that she had spent the night in your bed, I was disappointed in her. And you, but more her — I almost expect it of you." She gave him a crooked smile. "But we talked and she explained about her customs and that Ranid had never wanted to make the Promise her way and I thought about my parents."

"Your parents? What have they to do with any of this?" Torin asked.

Emeera looked down at Sunshine, who smiled weakly back at her and patted Emeera's hand. "My mother came from Brinded," said Emeera. "My father was from here — the City itself — and when they wed, they had both sets of rites and words so they could honor each other's gods. Then, as their marriage went on, my father's gods and rituals became less and less important and my mother's became all. I grew up with Bride's gods and rites, so when I married Rojer there was no conflict that way." She patted Sunshine's shoulder. "When I realized how little Ranid cared about Sunshine's beliefs, I remembered how unhappy my father would seem at special times and I realized that to Sunshine, she wasn't really

married and she wasn't breaking faith with her gods. I don't agree that what you are doing is right, but I understand that you both feel it is." She smiled sadly. "I won't give my blessings, but I won't withhold my love from either of you. You're both very dear to me and I only hope this doesn't crash down and hurt you both."

Torin's hand had slipped from Sunshine's face and made its way to her waist. He looked from Emeera to Sunshine. "Can you live with that? Would you rather keep last night as a memory and move forward from here as we used to be?"

"No. I mean, yes, I can live with Emeera's understanding disapproval and no, I don't want to go back the way we were. Not yet. Not until I absolutely have to." She bent forward and leaned her forehead on his for a moment.

Torin smiled and looked up at Emeera. "Then, cherished Healer, if you can stand having us both at your table, I would be delighted to join you this evening." He stood again.

"Then I had best be on my way," said Emeera. She squeezed his hand and he squeezed gently back. "Be good to each other," she said. She put on her cloak and left.

Torin held a hand down to Sunshine. She took it and let him pull her to her feet. "Forgive me?" she said.

He took her into his arms, careful not to crush

her against the hard leather of his armour. He brushed her hair back from one temple and smiled down into her eyes. "Of course," he said. "It was only a matter of time before she realized the truth. Neither of us could hide it from her, I'm sure. As long as she loves us still, all is well."

"And as long as you love me," said Sunshine in a quiet voice.

Torin smiled and kissed her lips tenderly. "That is likely to be a very long time," he said. He kissed her again before he collected his helmet and returned to patrolling the City for a few more hours.



## Chapter Fourteen

After a quick bath to wash the smoke of last night's fire out of his hair and a change of clothing to something less forbidding, he made his way to Emeera's house. She answered his knock and opened the door wide. "Come in," she said. "You're the first to arrive."

He hung his cloak on a peg by the door and took the proffered seat near the fire. "Where's Rojer? Shouldn't he be home by now?"

She gave him a wry look. "When it was only his brother's wife coming for supper, whatever we had in the house was good enough. When he discovered the illustrious Captain of the Queen's Guard was also coming, he had to run back to his bakery for a cake and some breads that otherwise would be sold tomorrow as 'day old' and bring them home."

Torin grinned. "I'm good for something, then," he said.

Emeera snorted and half-smiled. "Sunshine

seems to think so."

Torin's eyebrow climbed his forehead. He cleared his throat. "Let's have this out in the open, shall we?" he said. "Before Rojer gets home and before Sunshine gets here."

Emeera set the knives on the table rather more firmly that was absolutely necessary, crossed her arms on her breasts and turned toward him. "Yes, let's do." She tapped her foot. "When I sent you back to make things right with her, I expected you to try to put your friendship with her back in place, not to throw her skirts over her head for your own enjoyment. For reasons that now escape me, I expected you to have enough sense to *think* with the head on your shoulders and not the one between your legs."

"We did put our friendship back in place," he said. "That *is* what I went back for. I had no intention of taking it any further. Not until we were certain..."

"Oh, so Sunshine happened to slip and her skirts flew up and you accidentally fell on her? It was all a big 'whoops, sorry'?"

"No! No." He lowered his voice. "No. After the fire, Sunshine insisted on taking me home. I was cold, wet, hurt — you'll notice my nice collection of blisters which we forgot to put salve on, and which my helmet did nasty things to — and she was concerned. Neither of us set out to seduce the

other, Emeera. It happened." He sighed. "And I don't want it to unhappen. I enjoy *her*. I have since we first met. I enjoy her company and her humor." He put a hand to his forehead to rub — a habit when he was thinking — and hissed.

Emeera came forward and examined his face. "That needs something," she said. Light fingers touched the blisters and scabs. She went to her cabinet of medicines and herbs and took out a small pot which she brought over. As she smoothed its contents on his forehead she spoke. "I'm disappointed in you both," she said. "I know your proclivity for enjoying women and I can live with it. I don't like it, but it is part of your nature. It's just that I've never known, or at least I've never known that I knew, one of your paramours."

She added another tiny smear of ointment. "I know what you get out of it. I don't understand what pleasure there is for her in having another man besides Ranid heaving and grunting and sweating over her. Surely one is more than enough."

She finished and put the pot away. When she looked at Torin again, he had an odd smile. "Do you remember a very long time ago," he began. "A night in my shelter at the camp? One of the times you shared my bed for warmth and comfort?"

She stared at him. "Yes," she whispered.

"Do you remember how close we came to breaking all our promises to everyone else?"

She nodded.

"Do you remember how it felt, Meera? When I touched you? When we touched each other?"

She turned away, cheeks flaming. Torin rose and stood behind her, his hands on his shoulders. She shook her head. "No."

"I know you remember," he said. "*That's* what she gets from being with me."

"I see." Her voice was an even lower whisper. She straightened one of the knives on the table, twitched a napkin into place. She took a deep, shuddering breath and turned back to him. She looked up into the dark eyes. "So you hold her and she feels safe and loved and beautiful, is that it?" Her chin quivered.

"I hope so," he said. He touched her face and put his arms around her. She stood stiff in his embrace, then slid her hands around his waist and rested her cheek on his chest. He hugged her and kissed her hair. "Just as I always hope you do when I hold you like this." He tilted her face so he could look at her. "Tell me honestly if my being with Sunshine hurts you. I'll end it now."

"It does a little," she said. "But I think stopping will hurt her more than continuing will hurt me. Torin — be careful with her. Don't make her life

more difficult than it is." She hugged him back. "And don't deprive me of this."

He chuckled and kissed her forehead. "Never. You're very dear to me, Meera. More than you know."

She patted his cheek as she pulled away. "Go sit. They should be here soon and I don't think Rojer would appreciate finding me in your arms."

Torin smiled at her and resumed his chair by the fire. He had no sooner stretched out his legs when the door opened and Rojer entered with Sunshine close behind.

"Look who I ran into," he said.

Sunshine smiled at the sight of Torin before the fire.

"Yes, Rojer and I ran into each other at the corner." She set the covered basket of bread on the table. "He was quite laden, so I gave him a hand."

Rojer went to the pantry to put the cake aside for later. Torin had risen to his feet at their entry and now went to Sunshine to take her cloak and hang it up. She smiled up at him and he gave her a quick wink.

"It's getting cold again," said Rojer as he came back to the main room. He held his hands to the fire for a few minutes before taking off his own cloak. "I thought it was going to rain again, but it almost feels cold enough for snow." He took the other chair by the fire.

"It's too early yet for snow," said Torin. "Freezing rain, most likely. Such fun for walking on the cobbles." He waved Sunshine to the seat he had occupied earlier. She shook her head. "I'll be a good sister tonight and help Emeera. Sit down, Captain."

He bowed his head and resumed his seat. "If the weather does take a nasty turn, I'll have to whistle up a covered carriage. I had enough of the wind and rain last night." He looked over to Sunshine. "I can offer you a ride back to Market, Mistress Sunshine."

"It's very kind of you, Captain," said Sunshine. "Thank you." She and Emeera exchanged glances.

"Supper, gentlemen," said Emeera. "Come to the table." Rojer sat at the head, Emeera at the foot, while Torin and Sunshine took places across from each other.

They ate and talked about the fire and how the rain had probably kept it from spreading too far. "Not that I want to stand out in such a storm too often," said Torin. "I had enough of that nonsense during the war. Thank the gods for hot baths." He broke a piece of bread and dipped in the gravy. "I keep hoping the Queen, may the gods guide her in this, will install baths similar to the Chaviss style. I have talked to her, her advisors have talked to her. A few of us sent for a Chaviss engineer to come and see what would be involved in converting the

old ballrooms." He took a bite of the bread and gravy, chewed and swallowed.

"It would be nice if there were public ones," said Sunshine. "Not just in the Castle for you privileged louts."

She kicked his foot under the table. He retaliated by stretching out his legs and capturing her foot between his. She grinned at him.

He smiled back. "It would be nice," he said. "At least one of those old rooms is close to the main door. It could be made available to the public. But the other two are not too far from my quarters. I rather like the idea of having an eight-foot marble pool of hot water at my convenient disposal."

Roger snorted. "Bathing is all very well when it's needed," he said. "But for pleasure? I'll never understand it."

"We'll have to get you to Chav some day," said Torin. His right foot played with Sunshine's captured one. "There are some interesting variations on baking you might find useful, and I'm sure you must know tricks and recipes that would be new there. It could be a highly profitable venture."

Roger gave him a doubtful look.

"I might be able to learn some new medicines and such," said Emeera. "But it's a long journey, and we'd have to stay for several days at the least. I don't know if I would be comfortable leaving my

patients for so long." She shrugged. "It's likely best to stay here."

"Don't be so hasty, Emeera," said Rojer. "The Captain has a good point. It might be profitable. When does the next caravan train leave?"

"There's one in six weeks or so," said Torin. He hid a grin at the triumphant look Emeera had given Sunshine. "Will you have time to make arrangements?"

Rojer frowned in thought. "Oh, I don't see why not. Besides, I hear it's quite warm there and with the cold weather coming, it might be good for my joints. I think we should go, Emeera."

She lowered her eyes. "If you think so, husband," she said.

"I'd like to go," said Sunshine. "If Ranid's new brew works out, we'll have something new to sell, and he might enjoy having Chaviss wine at the source. Perhaps you can convince him, Rojer. I know he'll listen to your words of wisdom."

Rojer beamed at her. "Of course, dear sister. You have my permission to tell him it's all my idea."

"Thank you," she smiled sweetly.

The dimple in Torin's cheek winked a multitude of times as he fought the grin that tried to surface. He turned his attention to his food and the conversation wandered other paths.

The meal ended with the excellent cake Rojer



had brought home. It was light and airy and served with berry preserves and cream. Torin pushed his empty plate away with satisfied sigh.

"That is something I wish you would teach the Royal Baker, Rojer. There is nothing to equal it in the Castle." He spoke sincerely and Rojer basked in the praise.

"Would you like to take the rest with you?" he offered.

Torin opened his mouth to refuse but caught Emeera's subtle nod. "Why, yes, thank you," he said.

Rojer rose to put the cake and berries and cream in covered dishes for Torin to take. Torin could not resist the temptation to say, "Isn't that woman's work, Rojer? I'm surprised at you."

"Oh I wouldn't ask Emmy to pack my cake," he said. "There's a knack to it, you know. You can't just mash them all together in a pail. Why, 'twould be soggy and unpleasant in the extreme. No, it has to be done right and I prefer to do it myself."

He bustled about the pantry. Emeera rolled her eyes. Sunshine suppressed a snigger and Torin winked at Emeera and grinned. She smiled back. Rojer came back with the dishes, which he put in a lidded wicker basket. "There you go, Captain. Easy as anything to carry now."

"Speaking of which, although I hate to eat and run, I really should be going. Mistress Sunshine?

Will you stay with your family or share a carriage with me?" He stood.

"I'll accept the offer gladly," she said. "If Emeera and Rojer will forgive my departure so early." Sunshine looked to Emeera.

Emeera paused so long before answering that Torin began to worry. "Of course, Sunshine. I'll miss your company, but I know you have an early start tomorrow. Visit longer next time."

They joined Torin near the door. He helped Sunshine with her cloak. Rojer stood nearby with the basket on his arm.

"Yes, Sunshine, and tell Ranid my idea for our expedition to Chav. It'll be splendid." He turned to Torin.

"Thank you for joining us, Captain. It's always a pleasure to entertain you."

"Always a pleasure to share your table and enjoy your excellent baking." Torin put on his own cloak, bowed over Emeera's hands, nodded to Rojer and took the basket.

He led Sunshine out into the cold night and whistled shrilly. An answering whistle came from several streets over. A more distant one sounded. "A carriage will be along soon," he said. "Shall we start walking to stay warm?" He carried the basket by its handle, idly swinging it as they walked.

"It's cold," said Sunshine.

"But at least it's not raining."

She smiled up at him. "Not yet."

"Keep your tongue, woman," he said. "If I get drowned again tonight, I'm blaming you for tempting the gods."

She touched his arm through his cloak. "Are they the only ones I'm tempting?"

He chuckled. He was saved from answering by the clatter of a covered carriage pulling up behind them. He opened the door and handed Sunshine in. He put his head in.

"Are we going to the Market, the Castle or the *Dancing Wolf*?" he asked. "And the answer to your last question is, 'No. They're not the only ones.'" He gazed at her.

"The *Wolf*," she said.

He told the destination to the driver and climbed in beside her. He set the basket beside him on the seat, which pushed him closer to her. He wrestled his cloak back on that side and put his arm around her shoulders. She snuggled against his side and leaned her head on him.

"You talked with Emeera," she said.

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"She said that if I stopped being your lover it would hurt you more than continuing as such would hurt her."

"She wants you," Sunshine said. "She doesn't know it yet, nor would she admit it, but she does."

Torin kissed her forehead. "Whatever happens with Emeera will happen in its own time," he said. "Tonight, I want you. I want to think about you, and hold you and love you and leave Emeera at home. If she's going to be joining us, then we should go to your caravan and have cake."

"No, she's staying at home. I promise." She lifted her face to look at him.

He cupped her cheek with his hand. "Good." He ran the tip of his tongue across her top lip. She sighed, parted her lips and her tongue sought his. Lips and tongues teased and played. Torin's hand made its slow and careful way down her neck and under her cloak where it found a softly curved breast to caress and hold.

The carriage moved on. By the time they stopped in front of the inn, Torin's trousers had become somewhat uncomfortable and both he and Sunshine were breathing a little harshly. His hand had wandered to warm and interesting places and was reluctant to leave.

"I think we're here," said Sunshine, while Torin kissed her neck.

"Mmmm." He raised his head and looked out the tiny window. "So we are." He kissed her once more, took his hand from beneath her skirts and helped her restore her clothing to a semblance of decency. He adjusted himself within the confines of his pants, took up the basket and climbed out of

the carriage. He offered his hand as an assist to her, paid the driver and opened the inn door for Sunshine to precede him.

The bustle in the main room was a little more subdued than on their previous visit, but not by much. Abby spied them from a table she had just served and she hurried over to them.

"Well, look who's here. It's lovely to see you again, Miss," she said. "I thought he must have broken your heart or done some other evil thing to you. Welcome back."

"Thank you," said Sunshine. "It's very nice to see you, too."

"Your room again?" asked Abby of Torin with a wink. "Shall I bring up wine?"

"Yes and yes and that will be all we need. We've just come from supper with friends. Here." He handed over the basket. "Some very good cake from Rojer the baker, with berries and cream."

Abby's eyes lit up. "Whoo! Rojer's cake! Mum will love this. Thank you. Scoot on up. I'll be right there."

Torin took Sunshine's hand and led her up the stairs to the room at the end of the hall. A welcome fire gave light and heat to the room. Torin used a spill to light several candles in sconces while Sunshine hung their cloaks on the pegs. He tossed the spill itself into the fire and turned to her.

"Where were we?" he asked, drawing her close.

She kissed his throat. "You had your hand up my – skirts," she said. "I think you should wait for Abby to drop off the wine before you go back there, though."

"I suppose," he said. He tugged the end of the lace on her bodice and began to loosen it.

"Torin!" Sunshine protested when he bared one of her breasts. His hand covered it.

"What?" he asked. He kissed her cheek. He pinched her erect nipple gently between thumb and fingers, smiling down at her all the while.

"Abby?" she reminded him.

"What about her?" He lowered his head to take her nipple into his mouth. His tongue played with it. He was still sucking and nibbling when Abby knocked at the door. He lifted his head, put both arms around Sunshine and hid her naked breast against his chest. "Come in," he said, grinning down at Sunshine. Her cheeks glowed pink.

Abby entered with the wine and goblets. She looked at the two in their very close embrace. "I see," she said. "I'll just set this over here, then. Enjoy your stay." She grinned at them, set the wine and cups on the table at the side of the bed, and took her leave, closing the door tight behind her.

"See?" said Torin. He finished loosening the laces on her bodice and pulled the entire top of her

dress down to her waist.

"Your turn," she said. She tugged his shirt free of his pants and pulled it over his head. She dropped it and Torin put his arms around her. Skin touched skin and bodies pressed close together. They sighed and stood for a long moment wrapped in each other's arms, enjoying the sensuous feeling. They traded tender kisses and helped each other out of the rest of their clothes. Torin picked her up and carried her to the bed. He laid her down and lay beside her, caressing her lightly.

She ran her hand over his chest, traced the line of a scar, then pulled his head down for a long kiss. He hugged her close, pressing his body to hers and wrapping a leg around her. She kissed him again, then his jaw and neck. She sighed.

"I wish Eme..." She stopped.

Torin looked at her. "You said she was staying home," he said. "You promised."

"I know. I didn't mean to drag her into bed with us. I'm sorry." She touched his face. "I wish she could have this with you, too." She smiled. "Not that I really want to share you with anyone too frequently, but it would be so good for her."

"Don't do this," he said. "Don't set my mind thinking about her when I'm with you like this." He looked into her eyes. "Or I *will* make love with her, but I'll use your body to do it. I don't want to

do that with you. I don't ever want to use you like that." He blew out a breath. "That's what I do with women I pay to lie with me. I close my eyes and they become whoever I want most at that moment." He rolled onto his back and stared up at the canopy above them. "When I'm with you, I want *you*. Don't do this, Sunshine." His jaw clenched and relaxed and clenched again.

"I can't help thinking of her," she said. "I know what it's like for her with Rojer and...what are you doing?"

He had sat up on the edge of the bed. He stood up and went to fetch his pants. He pulled them on, tucking his rapidly-wilting erection in and pulling the laces tight. He picked up his shirt and came back to the bed. "Here. Put this on." He held out the shirt.

"What? Why?" She reached for it, giving him a hurt and puzzled look.

"Because if I'm going to spend the night with Emeera in my arms, I'm going to do it properly. She only ever lay naked with me once. All the other times she wore a dress or a nightgown and I always kept my trousers on. Since she won't go away and I refuse to use your body to make love in her stead, put that on."

He waited for her to comply. When she had pulled it on and down to mid thigh, he lay back down beside her. He put his arms around her,



pressed her head to his chest and kissed her forehead. "Go to sleep, sweet," he said. He took a deep, slow breath and eased it out again. He kept breathing slowly through his mouth, his chest shuddering lightly every few breaths. Heaviness filled his chest, his throat ached with unshed tears and his eyes burned. He kissed her forehead again, stroking her hair with one hand. The other rubbed her upper arm from elbow to shoulder and back, over and over.

Sunshine lifted her head from his shoulder and looked at him. She touched the trail left by a single tear that had slid down the side of his head toward his ear. "Torin?"

He waited a moment. "Yes?" His voice was carefully neutral; emotionless.

"If I can get her to go home, will you make love with *me*?"

"I don't know," he said. "She's here and I don't know if *I* can get her to leave." He turned his face toward her. "I want so much to be with you. Just you." He smiled wryly. "I can't make love to two women at once." He laughed softly then as a memory surfaced. "Actually, I can, but not when one is invisible and intangible." He ran the backs of his fingers along her cheekbone. "I love her, but I don't want her here. Not right now and I don't know how to make her go away." He kissed her forehead. "I wish I could. I wish I could lie here

with you and love you with everything I have, but I'm so afraid that she will be there in my mind and heart, and all you'll get is my body." He sighed heavily. "I'm sorry, Sunshine."

"So am I," she said. "I'm leaving tomorrow and I won't see you again for, well, until we come to join the train to Chav." She rested her palm on his cheek. "I had hoped for a night like last night." She gave him an unhappy smile. "Perhaps we shouldn't come here. Things seem to go wrong when we do."

He smiled. "They do, don't they?" He put both arms around her and hugged her to him. He looked into her eyes. "Why don't we sit up, have some wine, talk and maybe Emeera will go home where she belongs and we can make this a happier place. I like it here and I would like to be able to bring you here and have both of us enjoy it."

While he spoke, he extricated himself from her arms, got the goblets which he passed to her and then picked up the wine. Sunshine sat up, the blankets covering her lap. Torin poured wine for both of them and put the wineskin aside.

"To...what?" he asked.

"To sanity?" she suggested. "To being able to love each other without losing our minds every second time?"

"Yes. To that." They touched the rims of their cups together and drank deeply. Torin smacked

his lips. "Have you ever met Husin?" he asked.

"The vintner? No. I've only been to Chav once and I've never met him here."

"I'll have to take you to see him. He's quite the colourful character and it delights me that he is family." He smiled at her.

"Take me? When?"

"When we go to Chav, dearest Miss Wolf," he said.

"We? Since when are you going?"

"Since I found out my favourite women are going," he said. "I'm due to escort a train there, and perhaps I might track down that engineer and drag him back with me. I want those baths."

She smiled at him. "So you're going to lead the military escort in person?"

He swirled the wine in his cup. "Yes. I do that now and then. It keeps me from stagnating from too much time in the city."

Sunshine sipped at her wine. "So we'll have the pleasure of your company on the journey and then Yumi will run off with you the moment you set foot in the city."

She ran a fingertip around the rim of her goblet. "I'll never have a chance to love you at all."

"Never say 'never' my sweet," he said. He leaned forward and kissed her. "Chavistan holds lots of pleasant surprises and while I think we should all stay at Yumi's House, don't assume that

she will consume all my time." He smiled. "There are things I'd like to show you and Emeera both and then there are things I would like to share with you alone."

"Such as?" she asked.

"Well, I'd like to introduce you and Emeera to Husin. Of course, we'll have to bring your husbands, but I'm sure Husin will find them highly entertaining. Husin finds many things entertaining. You'll love him, I'm certain. And then there are the markets and gardens. Lots of fascinating things."

Sunshine cleared her throat. "And what things would you like to share with me alone?"

"Oh, the baths, for a beginning," he said. "My favourite room with the deep carpets. The food."

"Don't you think Emeera would like the food?"

"Yes, and there are things I'd like to share with her in that regard, but I'd like to have you in my room and hand feed you some of my favourite delicacies. Sharing food can be incredibly sensual, did you know?"

She shook her head, smiling at the expression on his face. Her nipples rose under the material of his shirt. He reached out a finger and touched them one at a time. "Take my shirt off," he said softly.

"Is she gone?" she asked, pulling the hem up her body.

Torin helped pull the shirt over her head. "Almost," he said. He touched her breasts; bent to kiss them. She wrapped her arms around his head and held him to her.

"Don't stop," she said. She lay back. He followed her down, kissing his way up to her mouth. He lay atop her and caressed her hair.

"She's gone," he said. "For you, too?"

She nodded. "Yes. Just you here with me." She lifted her head and kissed his chest. "Do you think we can make love? Just the two of us?"

"Oh yes," he said. He kissed her tenderly. "Would you be so kind, most beautiful Sunshine, as to help me with my trousers?" He rolled onto his back. She laughed and sat up to unlace and tug his pants free.

## Chapter Fifteen

He reached for her and pulled her down on top of him. His arms encircled her, one hand sliding down to the small of her back, the other up between her shoulders. He held her softly and looked into her eyes.

"I love this with you," he said, voice gentle and eyes gleaming. "I love the feel of you in my arms." He kissed her mouth, lingering and tasting her. "I love the way you taste. I love everything about being with you." He rolled her over and slid deep into her. "And I love this," he said. "I love being inside you." His hips moved back, withdrawing him to the very tip and then pushed slowly forward until he was completely engulfed again.

She moaned softly. He repeated the action, and again. Sunshine shivered in his embrace. She lifted herself to meet him and put her arms around his neck. His heavy braid dropped over his shoulder. She pulled it. "You promised last time to undo this," she said, her hips still moving with his.

"Go ahead," he said. He kissed her neck. "I'm a little busy at the moment."

She groaned in pleasure, spread her legs wider and planted her feet on the bed to meet his thrusts better. At the same time, she freed a hand and removed the leather thong that bound the end of his braid. While their bodies moved together and he kissed her face and neck, she combed her fingers through his hair until a black curtain fell down around her. "Mmmmm," she said.

"Ah, Sunshine," he groaned. He chuckled and buried his face on her shoulder, his hips held forward and not moving. He shuddered from toes to shoulders and chuckled again.

"What are you thinking?" she asked, beginning to laugh a little herself.

"You don't want to know," he said with his lips on her skin.

"It's not Emeera?" The worry in her voice brought his head up. He gazed at her and brushed her hair back from her brow.

"No, love. Not at all." He kissed her tenderly. "If I told you, you mightn't understand." He flicked his tongue over her lips. "I was thinking about battles and supplies and troop movements."

"What?" She looked up at him. "This isn't really the time for that."

He laughed and kissed her. His hips resumed their gentle back and forth movement. "It was the

right time just then," he said. "It was too close to being over sooner than I wanted so I had to think of something else. I had to distract my little soldier before he fired off his crossbow and spent all his ammunition."

"I see." Sunshine said. She laughed then and wrapped herself around him. "And he's under control now?" She laughed harder, unable to pick up the rhythm again.

Torin laughed with her and hugged her tight. "Yes, he's doing better." He shifted his position. "No discharging his weapon until I give the order."

Sunshine grinned up at him. "His aim seems good," she said, moving her body once again. "I think he's right on target."

Torin grinned back. "His aim is excellent. He's just a little too eager sometimes. Perhaps with adequate training, he'll learn to restrain himself."

She found and matched his motion again. She closed her eyes for a moment and then looked into his face. "I'm always happy to help him practice."

"Mmmmmm." The pace began to quicken. "He's always happy to have you." He paused. "Help him. Practice. Oh gods."

Sunshine's fingers dug into Torin's back as the first tremors of orgasm took hold of them both. She bit his shoulder. He closed his eyes and let his hips thrust as they would. He listened to her cries



of passion and desire fulfilled and let himself go. He crushed her to him, called her name and slowly collapsed on top of her. She wrapped her arms around his head, holding it to her shoulder. She kissed his temple; brushed the long hair back over one of his shoulders.

She smiled. "I think his ammunition's all gone," she said.

"I think he broke his bow," Torin replied. He raised his head and grinned down at her. She laughed at him. He bent lower for a soft kiss.

She sighed. "Do you know I don't remember the last time I laughed when I made love?"

"It was last night, wasn't it?" He closed one eye, a thoughtful frown settling on his face. "Maybe this morning?"

Sunshine hit his shoulder. "Besides with you, Fool," she said.

"Ohhhhhh," he said. He rubbed his cheek on hers. She shook her head at him.

"Silly man. Maybe that's why I love you. I can laugh with you." She touched his cheek.

"Perhaps so," he said. "It amazes me that you do, you know. I'm not an easy person to love. Not like some others in this room."

She smiled again. "Thank you," she said. "Now get off me. You're getting heavy."

He rolled to one side and they snuggled together. His hands wandered idle paths over her

curves. "This is good," he said.

"What is?" Her own hands were gently exploring as much of him as they could reach.

"This. All this. Holding you. Loving you. Touching you. Being naked with you. Being with you. All of it. It's all good."

She pressed her face to his chest. "I don't want to leave tomorrow," she said. "I don't want to not have you for the next six weeks." She looked up at him. "And the journey to Chav is going to be horrible — having you so close for — how long? A week? — and not be able to make love? Arrgghhh." She made a wordless sound of frustration.

He chuckled. "Just make sure you're in the city a few days early," he said. "We'll make some time for each other before we go. You're right about the trip. It can be from a week to ten days to get to the capital city. It'll be torture." He kissed her deeply. "Ahh, but when we get there..." His voice trailed off and he winked.

"That's what I want to ask you about," she said. "You act as if we'll have all the time we want to be lovers. How do you plan to manage that with Ranid there?"

Torin grinned. "Would you like to know?"

"Yes!"

"Then let me tell you a few things about Chaviss Pleasure Houses, my beloved."

## Chapter Sixteen

“Where shall I begin?” he mused. Sunshine half-lay on him, her arms folded on his chest and her chin on her arms. He stroked her back with one hand and held one of her hands with the other. “Tell me about Yumi’s House,” she said. “That’s where you want to go, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Apart from the lady herself, the House is comfortable, well-run and a restful place to be.” He smiled. “Yumi’s House is aimed at satisfying the senses. All of them.”

Sunshine frowned. “What other kinds of pleasure are there?”

“There are Pleasure Houses that cater to those who want a mental challenge—games and contests and puzzles and such. Others offer pleasures for the emotions — plays and songs and stories that touch the audience and evoke all the emotions. Whatever gives pleasure can be found in one House or another.”

“Oh. I didn’t realize that. All right, tell me what

Yumi's House offers for the ear, since she touches all the senses?"

"Music from several different skilled players; the sound of the fountains in the gardens; singers." He ran his finger around the contour of her ear.

"Well. What about the nose?"

"The gardens again. There are flowers and blossoms that delight with their scent. Incense to burn in your room, if you're so inclined. Scented oils for your bath. What sense next?" He kissed her nose.

"Taste." She smiled mischievously.

He grinned. "Food. Drink. Sweets and savouries." He put his mouth to hers and tasted her tongue. "Next?"

"Eyes." She batted her eyelashes at him.

"Beautiful women, attractive men—so I have been told; I'm no judge of male beauty; statuary, paintings, tapestries, the gardens and mazes. Everything, everywhere you look is a delight to the eye." He kissed her eyelids.

"And touch?" She caressed his fingers with hers and brushed her chin along his beard.

"The baths. The sheets. Clothes. Beautiful women. Handsome men." He grinned. "Any delightful thing you can think of, my beloved."

"I can think of quite a few delightful things," she said. "And they all involve you. Which brings

me to my next question. How are we supposed to enjoy each other with Ranid right there?"

Torin grinned. "That's one of the nice things about the rules at Yumi's house," he said. "You each get your own room." He paused. "In different wings." He paused again. "And neither of you can know where the other's is." He smiled.

Sunshine absorbed this tidbit of information. "I see..." she said.

Torin kissed her and put both arms around her. "So he need never know if you are in your room or not."

She slid her hands around his ribs and under his back. "That's rather convenient," she said. "The other side, of course, is that I don't know about him, either."

"Do you really care? Would it matter to you if he were to dally with some of the women who frequent the House?"

Sunshine smiled and shook her head. "Not if they would teach him a few things about pleasing his wife. Although, I expect she'll be well-taken care of in that regard." She kissed him. "There's only one thing you haven't considered."

"What's that?"

"Yumi herself."

Torin blew out a breath and hugged Sunshine gently to his chest. "Shall I be honest with you and risk having you walk out again, or shall I lie and

then be deceitful with you in Chav?"

"I won't leave," she said. "I know she's dear to you."

Torin frowned and pursed his lips. "Yes, but she and I have an understanding. She's...she lets me be me," he said. "Not that you don't, but you haven't seen the darker sides. You've never seen the man who wakes in the grip of a nightmare with a scream caught in his throat. You don't know the man who can kill with his bare hands."

"And Yumi does?"

"She's never seen me kill anyone," he said. "But she has endured my leaping out of bed in the middle of the night and running through her gardens until I drop from exhaustion and then I can sleep again."

Sunshine lifted her head and looked into the dark eyes. "Running? Why? From what?"

"My demons. Ghosts of all the soldiers I killed during the war. Ghosts of those I loved that I couldn't save — my cousins, my brother..." His voice trailed off and his eyes gazed into the past. "The first man I ever killed. I run until I can't think; until my mind is blurred with the exhaustion of my body and then I sleep." He dragged himself back to the present. "It's getting better with time, but still..." He offered her a twisted smile. "Spend enough time in my bed and you'll find out."

She caressed his face. "I intend to," she said. "Which brings us back to the original question."

Torin smiled. "Yes. My first answer is this: that I will probably want to spend our first night there with her." He touched a fingertip to Sunshine's lips. "But that may change. I don't know." He kissed her. "I may be so maddened by the journey and having you so close but not available that I may forego time with Yumi altogether."

She smiled. "I wouldn't ask you or her to give each other up on my account." She cuddled close. "Even though I much prefer having you to myself."

"We'll have to see, my love," he said. "But be prepared, will you? I don't want to hurt you. I don't want you to feel that I don't want you or need you or love you. It's simply that I may need her just then, too."

Sunshine sighed and put her head on his chest. "I don't want you to need anyone else," she said. "I want to be unreasonable and demanding and I want you all for me, but you have to share me with my husband, don't you? So I suppose I must resign myself to sharing you. I'd rather not have to, though." She sighed again. "It's the only way to keep you, isn't it? The harder a woman tries to hold onto you, the sooner you're gone for good. Am I right?"

Torin nodded. "Yes. I'm afraid I don't react well

to being 'owned' by anyone. On the other hand, sweet love, I don't want to own you, either."

Sunshine laughed softly. "You were right earlier when you said you're not easy to love."

"You can stop any time you need to," he said.

Sunshine shook her head. "No," she said. "I can't. It's too late. The best I could do is stop sharing your bed and I'm not quite ready to do that just yet."

"Then we'll just have to see where life takes us," he said. He kissed her and caressed her shoulder. "As for Chav and Yumi – there's always a chance that one of her other lovers will have turned up at the same time. We'll sort it all out when we get there. It's a long time away and right this very minute, we have something much nicer to think about."

His hand slid around to her belly and found one of her extra nipples. She squirmed against him. He lifted his body so she could slide her leg beneath him and wrap it around his waist. They made love on their sides, facing each other and gazing into each other's eyes. He held himself inside her as he wilted afterwards, trying to stay connected as long as possible. He touched her hair, her cheek, and kissed her tenderly. "Something is changing," he said. "Loving you is changing something in me and I don't know what it is."



"Is it bad?" she asked.

"No." He smiled with his lips touching hers. "Not at all. Hmmm. I wonder..." He closed his eyes and held her to him. He was still pondering when he fell into a deep and restful sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Torin's eyes snapped open when he felt Sunshine sit up. "Where are you going?" he asked.

She started and turned her face toward him. "You startled me," she said. "I thought you were asleep."

"I was. I'm a light sleeper. Where are you going?"

"I have to get back to Market. There are a few things I must do before I leave and I want to get going early. It's a three day drive to Brinded, if the weather holds."

Torin sat up and swung his legs out of bed. "You were going to leave without saying goodbye?"

"No. I was going to get dressed first and then say goodbye," she said. "I thought if I tried talking to you when we were both still naked, I would never get out of here."

Torin laughed and kissed her shoulder. "Good point. Fine. We'll both get dressed, then."

He lit candles to replace those that had burned

away to nothing and they sorted out the clothes scattered on the floor. Torin caught Sunshine's hand as she laced up the bodice of her dress. "Wait," he said. His eyes danced with mischief. He finished braiding his hair and tied the end. Then he pulled down the top of her dress and bared both breasts. He bent to kiss them, lipping and tonguing her nipples before giving them one last caress. He pulled up her dress and tugged the laces comfortably tight.

"You're terrible," she told him, smiling all the same. "But that was lovely."

He tucked his shirt into his pants and tied his own laces. He winked at her. "Just to tide us both over," he said. "It's going to be far too long until I get to do that again." He put his arms around her waist, gazing down at her. "My beautiful Miss Wolf."

"My handsome Captain," she said. "My lover."

He stepped closer and bent to kiss her. "In every meaning of the word, my sweet. I'm going to miss you."

"The weeks will pass quickly," she said. "I hope."

They stood together for a short time, simply holding each other. At last, Torin stepped back from the embrace. He wrapped Sunshine in her cloak and took his from the peg. He gave it a dramatic twirl before he settled it on his shoulders

and pulled up the hood. "I'll get you a carriage," he said.

"What about you?" They walked to the stairs and down to the front door.

"The walk will do me good," he said. "Help me sort out whatever is going on inside my mind, my heart, my spirit."

Outside, a piercing whistle brought an almost immediate clatter of hooves and wheels on the cobbles. Torin handed Sunshine into the small cab. He stood on the step and leaned in to kiss her.

"Be safe, Torin," she said.

"You too, sweet Sunshine," he said. "I'll be looking for you." He jumped down, closed the door and gave directions to the cabby along with enough coins for the fare and a tip. He watched it drive away, then strode out along the street in the predawn darkness.

## Chapter Seventeen

Sunshine stared across the kitchen table at Emeera.

"You're what?"

"Pregnant. Again. I daren't travel, Sunshine. You know the luck I've had."

"I know, but first I find that Torin's off near the Ridian border and now *you* can't go. I'll be with Rojer and Ranid for almost a month with no one to keep me sane. It's not fair!" The last came out as an unhappy wail. She put her head down on her arms and fought tears. "It's just not fair. Your gods hate me. Or Torin's gods. Somebody, somewhere hates me." She lifted her face and scrubbed her cheeks. "Are you going to be all right here by yourself?"

Emeera smiled. "Almost a month home alone with Rojer off to Chav. Oh, I think I'll manage." She smiled.

Sunshine laughed aloud, her own dismay put aside for the moment. "Yes. Actually, you've got

the good end of the deal, haven't you? *I'm* stuck with both of them. For a MONTH." She groaned. Then she thought. "I suppose I could count my blessings. If Rojer is going to ride with us and stay in our caravan, Ranid won't be likely to demand too much in the way of his husbandly rights."

It was Emeera's turn to laugh. "See? Things are looking up already."

The door opened. Ranid and Rojer entered. "We're all set now," said Rojer. "Ranid and I made a good deal on renting a second caravan. It'll have room to carry some supplies I'll need to show my wares and then bring home whatever we might pick up in Chav. Not to mention it'll give Ranid and Sunshine some privacy? Ay?" He leered at the women.

Emeera suffered a mild coughing fit into her hands. Sunshine smiled sweetly at her husband and his brother. "How thoughtful of you," she said, wishing they had both been run over by the rental horse and trampled beyond recognition.

\* \* \* \*

A week had passed since they had left the great castle-city. Up ahead was the border with Chav and a small outpost for the soldiers who guarded the crossing. Sunshine huddled in her warmest woolen cloak as she drove. The horse plodded

along, head down, doing its best not to slip in the frozen mud of the road.

The caravan ahead of her held Ranid and Rojer, who had taken to sharing the driving duties of the rented caravan with Ranid's brew while Sunshine took care of their own caravan. A soldier thundered past on his way to the outpost. She craned her neck, trying to see what the commotion was. A second soldier galloped by.

"What is it?" she called out, but received no answer. "Fine. Ignore me. Why not? I'll find out soon enough what all the excitement is. Maybe they've closed the border and we'll all have to go home. Hah!" She derived a certain satisfaction from the idea.

The road curved to the right, affording a glimpse of the stone buildings of the outpost. Several soldiers seemed to be milling about on horseback. She watched the second one who had gone by drawing to a halt and speaking to another. He dismounted and pointed back toward the train of caravans. Another soldier nodded at him and trotted toward them. Sunshine frowned, wondering what was going on. When the soldier came close, she called out to him.

"Excuse me. What's going on?"

"Nothing serious, Mistress Trader," he said, turning his horse for a moment to keep beside her. "We're changing guards is all. We've been on the

border for some time and it's our turn to go to Chav." He grinned and headed for the back of the train.

Sunshine shook her head and laughed to herself. "All that fuss," she said. She concentrated on her driving, glancing over at the activity as the caravans drew closer.

"Oh!" One mittened hand flew to her mouth. "No, it can't be. There, see? It's not the only one."

A dappled grey warhorse, riderless, had caught her eye, but then she spotted two more almost identical to the first. "I need to be warm and I need some company," she said to herself. "I'm starting to imagine things." Her horse's feet slipped and all her attention was diverted to him. She sighed when he kept his footing.

The train was slowing now as the first wagons cleared the border. She looked again to where the grey horse had been. A smile touched her lips and spread. He was no longer riderless. A tall soldier had climbed into the saddle. "It could be anyone," she said. He was too far away to identify with the warm felt underhood hiding his hair. He put on his helmet and she grinned. The horsehair plume fluttered in the icy wind.

The grey horse danced in place and then lunged away from the small group, followed by another soldier on a grey horse. Sunshine half-rose, trying to see where horse and rider had gone, but they

were lost to view. She sat down again, smiling. The first few wagons had crossed the border to Chav and were wending their way forward. The train continued its slow journey to the border and the guards on the other side.

Sunshine tried to keep a silly grin from her face but it kept surfacing. She looked around again and saw the plumed helmet coming closer as the rider made his way back along the line of caravans. The other soldier trailed a little behind and on the opposite side of the vehicles. The plumed soldier paused at each driver for a few words of greeting. She watched him stop to speak to Ranid and Rojer and then there he was. She kept her eyes on her horse, ostensibly to keep a safe distance between him and the caravan ahead.

"Good afternoon, Mistress Trader," said a voice she didn't recognize. Her gaze snapped from the horse to a pair of blue eyes which regarded her from beneath the plume.

"Good...good...good afternoon," she stammered. She blinked, confused.

"All is well?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you. Very well." She offered him a wan smile.

"Good. Safe journey to you, Mistress." He rode on.

She turned to her right, craning almost out of her seat to watch him ride away. She sighed as she



resumed her position. The second soldier had trotted past most of the caravans. He drew close on her left. She looked again around to the right at the soldier with the plume.

"Is something wrong, Mistress Trader?" the soldier asked.

She whipped around. She hadn't seen him take a position beside her caravan.

"No, it's fine, thank you," she said, embarrassed at having been caught. She avoided looking at him and *tchked* to her horse.

"Are you certain?" The amusement in his tone brought her unwilling gaze to meet his. Near-black eyes gazed at her from the plain helmet. Lips twitched under a black moustache. She could see the black beard on the point of his chin. All else was hidden. She waved a hand in the general direction of the plumed soldier.

"Who was that?" Annoyance, relief and a budding joy warred for supremacy in her heart.

"That's Laert — one of my lieutenants. He's taking command of the forces while I am out of the country." He smiled.

"You sent him ahead on purpose!" She leaned toward him and flailed at his arm. "You...you...you evil something or other."

He grinned and winked. "Yes, I did. I am evil." He leaned toward her and lowered his voice. "But I'm here and you're happy to see me."

She gave him an arch look. "What makes you think so?"

He glanced around and lowered his voice further. "I heard your nipples pop up. All of them." She flushed, laughed and this time succeeded in striking his upper arm.

He grinned at her.

"If they did, it's only because I'm cold," she said. "Nothing to do with you." She shook her head at him, feigning exasperation.

"Then I shall have to investigate at the earliest opportunity," he said. "And make sure the room is sufficiently warm so there is no doubt as to the reason."

Colour rose brighter in Sunshine's cheeks. "I look forward to it," she said. She smiled at him.

"As do I, lovely Miss Wolf," he said. "And now, I had best be about my duties." He bowed his head, winked at her and continued his ride along the train.

Sunshine caught her bottom lip between her teeth and bit it to keep from shouting her joy out to the skies.

## Chapter Eighteen

The caravan master had done his work. All the papers were in order for all the caravans in the train and they rolled across the border without being stopped by the Chaviss guards. The train moved onward. As they crested the hill and began to move down the far side, the weather changed so abruptly that Sunshine was almost taken aback.

By the time they had gone halfway down the hillside, she had taken off her mittens and thrown her cloak back. When they stopped at the camping place for the night, she could hardly wait to find someone, preferably Torin, to ask about the sudden change. She climbed down, grateful for the chance to stretch her legs.

A soldier strolled up to her. "Mistress Sunshine?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "How may I help you?"

"The Captain sent me to tend your horse and to extend an invitation to you and your companions to join him for wine and a small bite. He sends his

apologies in advance that the meal will be cold."

"Where is he?" she asked.

"The Captain's vehicle is bringing up the rear of the train," said the soldier as he unhitched the horse from the shafts.

"Thank you," she said. She wished she could simply run back and have a few minutes alone with Torin, but he had extended the invitation to Rojer and Ranid as well. She sighed and went to them. She passed along the message.

"That's very kind of him," said Rojer. He turned to Ranid. "But only to be expected. He and I are *that* close, you know." He held up a hand with the first second finger crossed tightly over the first.

Sunshine suppressed the hysteria she felt at the very idea. "Why don't you go on ahead, Sunshine," said Ranid. "Rojer and I will take care of the horses and be there in a few minutes. You did say he's at the back?"

"That's what the soldier said. I'll go find the Captain and tell him we're glad to accept." She smiled at her husband and his brother and hurried away. The Captain's caravan was easy to identify with the soldiers that milled in and out.

One of them bowed his head. "Mistress Sunshine? The Captain is expecting you. Go on in." He offered his hand to assist her up the steps. She went in through the open door.

Torin stood by a tiny table talking with yet another soldier. He offered her a brief smile, finished speaking to his man and sent him on his way. The soldier nodded politely to Sunshine as he squeezed past her and closed the door behind him. Torin went to her and took her hand. He looked down into her eyes. "How long before they get here? Or are they right with you?"

"A few moments. No longer." She wondered if he had heard her nipples this time. They had certainly popped up at the mere touch of his hand.

He grinned. "Damn." His arm slid around her waist and he moved close to her. "Then we only have time for this." He bent down to her and touched his lips to hers. He ran his tongue over her lips, seeking entry. She opened her mouth and sucked gently on his tongue when it slipped between her lips. She moaned softly into his mouth and pressed her body to his. She felt the hardness in his trousers and desire bloomed in her belly.

"Oh, Torin," she whispered. "Oh."

"I know," he murmured, nuzzling her hair. "Oh gods, Sunshine, I know." He took her face in her hands. "Not tonight, nor tomorrow, but with good speed we'll be in the city itself before noon of the next day. And that night, you are mine." He kissed her again.

"What of Yumi? I thought you wanted to be

with her our first night there." She kissed his beard.

"I told you the last time I saw you that loving you was changing something in me," he said. "That's part of it. I want to be with you as much as we can arrange." He kissed her mouth and her nose and both cheeks. Then he let her go and stepped back. "Have a seat, Mistress Sunshine," he said. "Let's put on a more seemly demeanour, shall we?"

"Yes, Captain. We shall."

"Would you like a little wine?" He poured four goblets, setting two aside for Rojer and Ranid. He gave one to Sunshine and sat across the caravan from her. She watched him, delighting in his grace of movement. "To dear friends," he said, holding up his cup.

"Very dear friends," she said. They touched cups and sipped. A soldier knocked on the door and opened it at Torin's command.

"The rest of your company, Captain." He stepped back to allow Ranid and Rojer to enter. Torin smiled at his guests and offered them seats. He gave them goblets of wine and sat again on the narrow bench that was also his bed.

Sunshine watched him, marveling at the courteous manner with which he treated both men. No one would have guessed that a few moments earlier he had been in a deep and

passionate embrace with the wife of one of them. Every time she remembered the kisses, the feel of his erection against her belly, tingles of desire danced inside her and it was all she could do to keep from wriggling on the cushion beneath her.

"My apologies, gentlemen, Mistress Sunshine," said Torin. "Had I known for certain that I would join the train I would have tried to have something better to serve you. We will be sharing the same food my soldiers are having. I hope it will be satisfactory."

"I'm sure it will," said Rojer. "I admit I am rather surprised to see you. We had heard you were on the Ridian border."

"I was," said Torin. "It was nothing serious and took less time than I had thought it would although too long for me to return to the City first." He grinned. "How has your journey been so far?"

"Cold," said Ranid.

"But much nicer since we crossed the border,"

Sunshine added. "I wanted to ask: is it always so abrupt — the change in weather?"

Torin smiled. "Yes. I've never understood why, but as soon as you crest the hill and start down, it all changes. It's one of the very good things about coming to Chav in the heart of our winter."

A soldier knocked and opened the door. "Supper, Captain." He held up a large platter

covered with a towel.

Torin rose and went to him. He bent and took the platter and brought it to the small table. The soldier closed the door.

"We're being rather informal," said Torin. He removed the towel. The platter held slices of cold meat, cheese, bread rolls and some fruit.

"Mistress?"

"Please, Captain," she said. "We all know each other well enough to dispense with formalities, do we not?"

She set her goblet on the floor. Torin gave her the towel to put in her lap and she took a sampling of food which she set in the towel. The men drew their seats closer to the table and the meal began in earnest. Sunshine ate and watched the others, wishing Ranid and Rojer would simply vanish like smoke. She wanted another kiss from Torin. She wanted his hands on her body and she desperately wanted him to do something about the intense tingle between her thighs. She wondered if she would survive two more nights without going mad.

"More wine, Sunshine?" Torin's voice interrupted her reverie.

"What? I mean, pardon me?"

"Would you like more wine?"

She held out her goblet. He put his hand on hers to steady the cup while he poured from the



wineskin. She almost jumped at the warm contact. The tingle became even more intense. Ranid and Rojer were in an animated discussion. Torin glanced at them, then gave Sunshine a wink and a little smile. His long fingers caressed the back of her hand as he released her.

"More for you, Ranid? Rojer?" Torin held out the wineskin.

"Oh, no thank you, Torin," said Rojer. "My brother and I should be going. We have to organize our caravans before we set out again. Best to be ready. When will we reach the city?"

"By midday the day after tomorrow, I should think," said Torin. "I hope you find it profitable."

"I think we will," said Rojer.

"Yes, indeed," said Ranid. "You should stop by later and try my new beverage. It's got a nice kick to it."

"Perhaps I shall," said Torin.

"I'm most eager to hear your opinion of it." Ranid turned to Sunshine. "Are you ready? Shall we go?"

She held up her goblet. "I'm not done this yet," she said.

"Well we're not waiting for you half the night," said Ranid. "Do you mind if we leave her, Captain? I know it's a bit unseemly — a woman unchaperoned, but surely she's quite safe with you."

"Oh, absolutely safe," said Torin. "She could not be left in better hands." He smiled at both men. "I will even escort her to your caravan when she is ready."

"You're very kind, Torin," said Rojer.

"Very kind, indeed," said Ranid. Torin saw them to the door and closed it behind them. He turned to Sunshine.

"That was too easy," he said. He laughed. He pulled back the curtain and looked out the little window. "There they go. I almost thought they would hide beneath and listen, but no..." He laughed again and held out his hands to her.

"Come here, my lovely."

She put her cup down and went to him. He put his hands on her waist and looked down at her. He took a step closer, touched his lips to her temple. He breathed in her scent. She put her hands on his shoulders and lifted her face to him. His lips left butterfly kisses on her cheek, her forehead and finally her mouth.

"Touch me," she said, her voice a whisper. "Oh, Torin, touch me."

"Anywhere in particular?" His eyes almost glowed at her.

"Yes." She pulled her skirts up. "Here. I'm so wet and I need..." She took one of his hands and placed it between her legs. Gentle fingers parted the folds and explored. He found the risen bud of

her clitoris and pressed it, circled it. She put her face on his shoulder, panting, moving her hips on his hand.

He explored deeper, a finger sliding into her while his thumb continued the circling. She cried out softly. Her body convulsed and his arm tightened around her waist while his other hand probed deeper still. She panted and clung to him. "Stop," she breathed. "Oh. Oh. Oh, I needed that."

Torin drew his hand away. He licked his fingers and smiled at her. "Shall I tell you what I need?" She slid a hand down his chest and belly and trailed her fingers over the outline of his erection. She tugged at the laces of his trousers and managed to loosen them enough to reach in and free him. She wrapped her hand around the shaft and pumped gently.

"Will this do?" she asked.

Torin kissed her. "No." His hands were already pulling her skirts up again. "Come over by the door so I can hear anyone approaching." She stood with her back against the door. Torin lifted her skirts, bent his knees and pressed forward. She rubbed the soft head on her clitoris a few times before she rose on tiptoe and guided it lower. His hips pushed him into her halfway. They both sighed. He held himself still.

"This is going to be short and fast," he said.

"I don't mind. I've already had my pleasure.

This is mostly for you, but oh Torin you feel so good in me."

"You feel so good wrapped around me." He kissed her and pushed deeper into her. She squeezed him and moved her hips to his. He groaned into her mouth.

"Hard and fast," she whispered into his ear. He chuckled and complied with short, hard and fast thrusts. He bit his lips to keep from shouting out as his climax came. His legs trembled. His whole body shivered. Sunshine felt him throbbing with every spurt into her depths. She shivered with him.

When he withdrew, she felt the wetness on her thighs, running down her legs. Torin tucked himself into his trousers and retied them. He looked at Sunshine and the small puddle between her feet. "Whoops," he said. He brought the towel. "Lift your skirts again, my love." She did and he knelt and wiped her legs and the sweet place between them. He kissed the soft outer lips, dipped his tongue briefly to taste her, then mopped the floor. He put the towel aside.

"I really should tend to washing that one myself, I think," he said.

She laughed as she went into his arms. "I thought you said not tonight," she said between kisses.

"Mmmmm. I was wrong, evidently," he said.

"I'm afraid there wasn't much in the way of making love, though. More raw passion, wouldn't you say?"

"Raw passion, desperate need and perhaps a little love?"

"More than a little, beloved." He kissed her again and hugged her close. "More than a little."

She looked up at him. She touched the scar on his cheek. "Much more than a little," she said. They looked at each other.

"You should drink your wine, Mistress Sunshine," he said. "So I can escort you home, as it were."

"Yes, Captain," she said. She kissed his chin and picked up her cup. They shared the last of her wine and one more kiss before they left his caravan. They walked through the camp, talking of inconsequentials, drawing no more attention than any other pair of friends would have done.

## Chapter Nineteen

They stopped at the steps of Sunshine's caravan. She smiled at him as she climbed the first step. "I'm so happy you turned up," she said. "When I found out you had gone north and then Emeera couldn't come along and I was going to be with those two the entire trip, well, I almost sat and wept."

"You remind me — where is Emeera? I thought she had looked forward to this."

Sunshine mentally kicked herself for bringing up the name. She hesitated, wondering if she should reveal Emeera's secret and then decided that if Torin had been in the City when Emeera had found out, he likely would have been the first to hear the news. "She's pregnant again," she said.

Torin's eyebrows rose. "Is she?" He smiled a gentle smile. "I hope this one makes it to term. I know how hard the lost ones have been on her. I understand why she wouldn't risk the journey. I will have to ask the gods to treat her gently this

time."

Sunshine studied the expression on his face. "You don't mind too much that she's not here?"

"Only insofar as I enjoy her company, but I do have another friend here whom I enjoy just as much. More, in some ways." He winked at her and she had to fight down a wide grin. He looked over at the rented caravan. "I suppose I should drop in on your husband and his brother and sample the gin or screech or what-have-you that he's made. Is it any good?"

Sunshine shrugged. "I don't care for it. I'm more of a wine and ale drinker."

"So am I," he said. "Although, there have been times, and will probably be more, when a good drunk has been what I wanted. Sometimes I need to shut my mind off but I'm a nuisance when I'm drunk. Ask Emeera some time." He grinned at her, took her hand, bowed over it and pressed it briefly to his lips. She wished she could invite him in for a proper goodbye kiss, but knew it would turn into more and if Ranid were to come in and find her wrapped naked around Torin, the situation could get ugly.

"Enjoy Ranid's offering," she said.

Torin laughed softly. "I already have," he said and walked away.

Sunshine snorked loudly and clapped both hands over her mouth. She went into her caravan,

still laughing to herself. "Oh, dear Creator. He's terrible. But he's lovely."

She could hardly wait to get to the City and find what delights he had in mind for her.

\* \* \* \*

Torin's knock was answered almost immediately by Rojer. "Captain! Come in, come in." He stepped back, opening the door wide. Torin took the offered seat and accepted a mug of Ranid's alcoholic efforts. He sniffed it and swirled it before taking a cautious sip. It rolled across his tongue and burned a path down his throat. It hit his stomach where it spread its warmth. He raised an eyebrow at the effect and tried a bigger sip. He grimaced at the burn, but nodded at the general effect. He raised the mug. "It wouldn't take much of this to drop a man, would it?" he said, and accepted a refill.

Ranid grinned as he topped up the mug. "Not much, Captain, not much. What do you think? Will it go over well in the Market there?"

Torin took a third sip. "I'm sure you'll find an establishment or two who will want some. I can think of one Pleasure House at least where it will be most welcome, and you should give a sample to Yumi herself. She caters to the senses, and this certainly impacts them, doesn't it?"



"What did I say?" said Rojer to his brother. "Didn't I say he would know where to go?"

"You know this Yumi quite well, do you?" asked Ranid.

Torin smiled. "Quite well, yes. I think you'll enjoy staying at her House."

Ranid flicked a glance at his brother, then leaned toward Torin. His voice dropped. "We were talking about that on the drive," he said. "It's all very well for Rojer to sample the, er, local — you know — but I'm traveling with my wife. I can hardly enjoy, well, I'm sure you know what I'm driving at."

Torin took another sip of the drink. "But you and Sunshine will have separate rooms. It's one of the rules of Yumi's house. Neither of you will be near the other, so she need never know who might be warming your bed." He drank again. "Of course, the other side of that is you won't know who is warming hers."

Ranid laughed aloud. "Oh that's rich," he said. He nudged his brother. "Warming Sunshine's bed. As if anyone but me would have her."

Torin kept a carefully neutral expression. "You don't think another man would want her? You're not worried she might find pleasures untold in another's arms?"

Ranid positively snorted with amusement. "Pleasure in bed? Sunshine? Oh, when we were

courting and first married she was pretty enough and we enjoyed each other well, but those Folk women age quickly, don't they? She's not the girl she was and it's only been four years." He drank deeply of his gin.

Torin made a mental note to ask Sunshine how old she was. Folk aged differently from other people, but someone not privy to their secret would have no idea.

"Still, there are many men who visit Yumi's House," he said to Ranid. "I don't doubt *someone* will find her to his taste."

Ranid laughed again. Rojer looked thoughtfully at his brother. "He might be right, Ranid," he said.

Ranid frowned. "You don't really believe that," he said. He waved a hand in the general direction of the other caravan. "Sunshine?" He looked at his brother and then at Torin. Both regarded him in turn and shrugged.

"It's possible," said Torin. He swirled the gin in the mug.

Ranid drained his cup and looked into its empty depths. "Even if someone did, she'd not go with him." He cast a sly look at the others. "She's not very, um, well, passionate."

Only a brief flicker of the dimple in Torin's left cheek betrayed his amusement. Ranid went on, "Of course, you don't want your wife to be too demanding in that regard. It could wear a man out

if she wanted it all the time, but not many women do, do they?" He sounded almost wistful. "I suppose they don't get the same pleasure a man does from it. What say you?"

He glanced from Torin to Rojer.

"Emeera always acts like she's doing me a big favour," said Rojer. "It's my right as a husband, isn't it? You'd think a woman would be grateful for all a husband does. You're lucky not to be tied down, Captain. But you must have needs, dunt you? What d'you do?"

Torin smiled. "Oh, I have a few friends who are willing to lie with me now and again. Yumi, for instance." He smiled again. "I must meet different women than you do. I don't think I've ever bedded anyone who didn't enjoy it as much as I did."

Rojer and Ranid guffawed at him. "Oh, that's so rich, Captain."

"I'm quite serious," Torin said. "You should most definitely experience some of the women in Yumi's House. I find it helps to keep an open mind with them. They know what they like and they'll tell you. Go along with their desires and you'll find pleasures you've never imagined." He finished his drink. Ranid and Rojer smirked at each other.

Rojer licked his lips nervously. "You, er, you really think we — you know?"

"Absolutely. You'll have to follow the rules of the House, but there's no reason we can't all enjoy ourselves. Including Sunshine, of course."

Ranid's brow clouded. "I don't think I like that idea very much. Not that I think there'll be men lined up to have her or anything, but even one..."

Torin opened his mouth as if to speak, then snapped it shut. He shook his head. "What is it, Captain?" asked Rojer.

"It's silly of me even to suggest it," said Torin.

"What?" asked Ranid.

"I was going to say that I could watch over her for you," Torin said. "Stay nearby and perhaps frighten potential bedmates away, but it's foolish. I do want my own pleasures."

"Oh, but it's a capital idea," said Ranid. "She likes your company and it might distract her. But yes, I can see where having her around could lower your own chances." He sighed.

Torin pressed his lips together in a thin line. "Still, we are all friends here, are we not? I am sure I can find moments here and there. I'll be glad to keep her out of too much mischief for you." His expression was of a man making a supreme sacrifice for his dearest friends.

"That's damned decent of you," said Ranid. Rojer nodded.

Torin handed over the empty cup. "It's nothing. I had best be on my way," he said. "I've a train to

patrol and soldiers to lead. Have a good night, gentlemen. I'll see you on the morrow." He left them to their own devices and walked away, shaking his head in amazement.

## Chapter Twenty

As predicted, before noon on the second day the caravan train clattered and rattled across the bridge and through the main gates of the capital city. Torin rode Darkling at the head of the train and guided them to the open market area, where the various caravans split off from the train. Some took up their places immediately, others headed down side streets. Torin gathered his soldiers.

"We're here at last," he said. "You all know the drill and the routine. If I have any complaints from the local guards or constabulary, the consequences of your misbehaviour will be harsh and immediate and you can be sure you will never be chosen to come here again. Clear?"

A chorus of "Yes, Sir!" soared into the air.

"Then meet back here on the seventh day at noon. Tomorrow counts as the first day and if you have any difficulties deciding when to turn up, I may be found at Yumi's House. Remember you are representatives of Her Majesty, Queen Rualle,

may the gods guide her always. Act accordingly." He surveyed the restless group, smiling inwardly. He had chosen the best of the best for this duty; men he thought deserved a break from the harsh Destraini winter. "Dismissed." They fell into groups of twos and threes and wandered away.

He rode to the caravan driven by Rojer and Ranid. Sunshine's was parked parallel to the other. Torin pulled up between the horses. "Ready, then? Follow me." He turned his horse and started off across the square. He heard the clatter of hooves on brick and the rattle of wheels as the two vehicles followed him. He led the way through the wide streets to Yumi's House of Pleasures.

He turned in at an open ornately wrought iron gate in a tall sandstone wall. A flowering climbing plant had flung tendrils over the top and the light scent of its blossoms filled the air. Torin rode into the open courtyard and turned left. He stopped his horse and waited for the caravans to follow. He waved at them to stay close and he went under a tall arch to the stableyard.

"Captain Torin!" A young woman wearing trousers tucked into knee high boots, and a loose shirt came to his side. She looked at the caravans that had pulled up behind him. "Friends of yours?"

"Yes." He smiled and leapt lightly to the

ground. He passed her Darkling's reins. "Would you tend him for me, Tala?"

"Of course." She rubbed the horse's neck familiarly. "Hello, my beauty," she said to Darkling. "Would you like some warm mash and a drink? Maybe a nice rubdown? Of course you would." She grinned at Torin and led the horse away.

Several other women arrived in the company of three muscular young men. All wore similar costumes to Tala's. Torin smirked at the grins on Rojer's and Ranid's faces. He strode over to the leading caravan. "We have arrived, gentlemen," he said. "If you will alight, these good people will tend your horses and put your caravans over there."

He went back to Sunshine's caravan. She had already climbed down and had handed over control of her horse to one of the young men. She smiled as Torin approached. "Should we bring our personal things?" she asked. "Clothes, toiletries, anything?"

"You can come down and get them later, if you like," he said. "I thought we should get our rooms and settle in. Perhaps have something to eat. I, for one, am ready for a hot bath and a change of clothes."

Sunshine looked around. Rojer and Ranid joined them. "I just realized," Sunshine began.



"Your caravan isn't with us. Where are your things? What will you wear?"

Torin smiled. "I keep sufficient clothing stored here," he said. "When I am in Chav, I prefer to wear Chaviss clothing. I blend in rather well, except for the length of my hair. You should try some yourself. All of you. I think you'll find it very comfortable." He rubbed his hands together briskly. "Now, are you ready to meet Yumi?" He turned and led the way into the House.

They passed through the courtyard to the front door. Torin pushed it open and waved the others inside. They stood in the marble entryway, staring about with wide eyes. "This is a palace," Rojer breathed. "A veritable palace."

"This way," said Torin. He took them across the floor to a wide staircase that swept in a gentle curve to the second floor. "Yumi usually greets her guests up here," he explained as they went. "One of her staff will have told her of our arrival by now and she will either be waiting or will join us shortly."

At the top of the stairs he went partway down a gallery that overlooked the entry below. A half-open door swung all the way at a touch. Again, Torin ushered the others in before him. The room was both elegant and comfortable. Deep chairs and couches invited one to sit or recline as desire dictated. Bright carpets delighted the eye with

their patterns, and the feet with the depth of their plush. Platters of fruit and cheese sat temptingly on low tables. Sheer draperies were pulled back from tall windows that looked out over a garden. A fountain outside splashed and chuckled, its cascading waters scintillating in the near noon sun.

A tall slender woman rose from one of the chairs. Her dark hair hung past her shoulders. The gown she wore fell in soft drapes, suggesting rather than revealing the curves of breast and hip. She held out both hands as she came forward. "Torin!" Her hands met his and she moved close to him. She lifted her face to him, smiling.

He smiled back. "Yumi," he said. He bent to kiss her. "Always a delight." They gazed at each other, then laughed together. He enfolded her in a warm embrace and she hugged him in return. "Allow me to introduce my companions," he said.

Torin turned toward the others. His hand rested on Yumi's hip as she stood close by his side. "This is Rojer Baker," he said, gesturing. Rojer bowed awkwardly, his eyes darting about the room. "His brother, Ranid...what shall we call you, Ranid? He was a trader and farmer but he is now trying his hand at distilling," he explained to Yumi.

"How interesting," she said, smiling at both men. She directed an enquiring gaze at Sunshine

who smiled back.

"Who is this?" Her voice was low and musical.

"This is Ranid's wife, Sunshine. She runs the stall when they come to Destrain with their goods. Rojer is married to the Healer Emeera." He touched his cheek as a reminder.

"Oh, *that* Rojer Baker," Yumi said. She stepped forward and offered a hand to each of the brothers. "Torin has told me so much about you. I am delighted to meet you at last." She winked over her shoulder at Torin. He beamed at her, enjoying the private joke. He had no secrets from Yumi, including his personal feelings about the boorish baker.

"Oh, has he? How very kind," said Rojer. He bowed over her hand.

"Yes, very." Ranid followed his brother's example.

Sunshine merely smiled and curtsied politely. Yumi released the brothers' hands and touched her skirts lightly, not quite wiping her palms.

"May I offer you refreshments after your long journey?" She waved toward the platters. "There is wine and ale or tea or coffee, if you prefer."

"Coffee? I've never heard of it," said Rojer.

She raised an eyebrow. "No, I don't suppose you have. It's quite new and very nice when it's made properly. I'm afraid it's not alcoholic, but it's good, all the same." She turned to Torin. "I think I

know what you want," she said.

"A hot bath," Torin said in unison with her and they both laughed.

He grinned. "You know me well, Yumi."

"You know the way," she said. "I will tend to your friends, if you want to go immerse yourself. Which clothes would you like sent down?"

"The blue trousers, white shirt, sandals." He squinted one eye, thinking. "That should do. Oh, before I go, have you anything available to suit Rojer and Ranid and Sunshine? I think I might have talked them into trying Chaviss clothing while we're here. I'm certain they are eager to sample Chaviss customs." He winked at the brothers, who grinned back. Ranid licked his lips, giving himself a furtive look.

"I'm sure we can find something," said Yumi. "Now, while the Captain runs off to soak his cares away, what can I offer you all?" Her gesture indicated the food, wine and couches.

"Do you think someone could show me where the baths are?" asked Sunshine, her voice uncertain. "I'm feeling rather weary, myself, after the journey. I've been in these same clothes for several days, and a bath sounds most appealing."

Torin and Yumi locked gazes. He glanced at Ranid, who gave him a subtle nod. Torin winked at him – conspirators in keeping Sunshine away from predatory males. "I'll show her the way," he

said, returning his eyes to Yumi.

She looked at him thoughtfully. "Thank you, Torin."

He bowed from the waist and winked at her. "My pleasure," he said. "Mistress Sunshine? This way."

## Chapter Twenty-One

Torin led Sunshine out along the gallery and turned down a long hallway with doors on either side. "These are some of the guest rooms," he said as they went. "They're for people who just want to stay here as at an inn. They're close to the front doors and the main dining room downstairs. Your room will be in one of the other wings where you'll have a little more privacy."

"I see. What about your room? Where will that be?"

Torin grinned. "It depends if the one I usually take is free, or if I have to settle for one of the others. If I get my preferred one, it's on the second floor over that way." He waved his hand. "You can't get there from here."

"That must make it awkward to find." She looked up at him with a quizzical expression.

He laughed. "I mean this part of the second floor doesn't attach directly to that part. You have to go down and around. I'll show you, after I

know for sure where I'll be."

They turned down a short hallway and descended a spiral staircase. They came out in another short passage. Torin led the way through one of a pair of doors in the wall at the end of the hall. They stood in a large marbled area with several corridors leading from it. Five or six men and women, all wearing similar costumes, walked back and forth, bearing towels and other items. "The baths," said Torin. He nodded at one of the young men, who nodded back and held up a forefinger. "He'll be with us in a moment."

Sunshine stared around. The branching corridors all had three or four doors on either side. Most were open but a few were closed. Torin glanced at her. "The open doors are baths that are either empty or which have someone who wants company and doesn't care particularly who. The closed doors with a colour token on them are people who are expecting a certain someone, who will know which colour to look for. The blank closed doors are occupied by people who wish to bathe alone or who do not want to be disturbed by unwanted visitors." He smiled mischievously. "Which would you like?"

Her cheeks grew rosy. "I would rather enjoy particular company," she said. She touched the back of his hand.

He caressed her fingers. "Is that so?"

"Yes. I've never been here before. I...I don't know the customs and I don't want to give offense to anyone. I thought perhaps if I had someone with me who knows what to expect, then he could keep me from embarrassing myself too badly." She looked up into his face.

"Wise thinking, Miss Wolf," he said. The young man approached.

"Captain Torin. Good to see you. Bath for each or both together?"

"Both together, please Umer," he said. Umer bowed his head and led them down one of the corridors to a door near the far end. Torin let Sunshine enter first. "Yumi will be sending clothing down for me," he said. "Make sure there is also a change for the lady."

Umer studied Sunshine's figure. "I will have a selection sent," he said. "Anything else, Captain? Husin's wine? Food?"

"Wine is always appreciated," said Torin. "As for food, are there any of those little meat pastries available. You know the ones I mean."

Umer laughed. "I certainly do. We've just been serving the midday meal. There must be some left over. I'll put together a tray of your favourites. What would you like, Miss?"

Sunshine whirled toward him. "I don't know. I've not had much experience with Chaviss food. Torin?" She appealed to him with wide eyes.



"Best bring some rare meats...do you have any of that raw stuff?"

"The tartare? Oh yes. Some of that?"

"Please. Thank you, Umer."

The attendant bowed again, turned and left, closing the door behind him. Torin smiled at Sunshine as he walked across the room to a wide, low bench. He sat and pulled off his boots, which he set beneath the bench. Sunshine looked around at the sparse, but practical furnishings.

"This is incredible," she said. She fingered the thick towels that were stacked on a shelf. "What is this?" She held up an odd-looking item.

Torin looked over at it. "It's a scrubby thing," he said. "It's the skeleton of some ocean creature. I think you'll enjoy the way it feels when it's wet." He took off his leather cuirass.

"It's rather scratchy when it's dry," she said, rubbing it across her hand.

"That's what gets you squeaky clean," he said, and pulled his shirt over his head. He stood up and began to unlace his trousers. "Are you going to bathe in your clothes?" he asked.

Sunshine examined the dishes of soap and looked at the lamps on the walls. "No, but I would rather wait until what's-his-name brings the wine and clothes and things. It's one thing being naked with you. It's quite another to be naked with strangers."

Torin had taken his trousers off, folded them and put them with the rest of his clothing. He untied the end of his braid and began to comb out his hair with his fingers. He laughed. "Sunshine! You're Folk. Since when has one of your people been shy about being naked?"

She stared at him, one hand over her mouth. "Oh great Creator, Torin. You're right." She barked horrified laughter. "Since she married one of yours who is almost demented when it comes to nudity." She shook her head.

Torin gave his head a last shake to loosen his hair. "Then join me, my love," he said. He put a foot on the top step of the wide pool. "Ahhhhhh. Perfect."

Sunshine sat to pull off her boots. "Does perfect for you mean far too hot for me?"

Torin grinned over his shoulder. "Not this time. This is hot enough for me, cool enough for you and thanks to the cleverness of Chaviss engineers, it will stay this temperature for as long as we want it." He walked into the water, which came to his hips. "Mmmmmmm." He sat down and lay back, floating. His hair fanned out. Sunshine gazed at him for a moment, then hurried out of her clothes.

She had taken two steps into the water when a soft knock sounded at the door. "Come," said Torin, opening one eye. He dropped his feet and

pushed himself to the seat built into the side of the pool. The door began to open. Sunshine's hand rose instinctively to cover the nipples on her belly. Torin held out a hand and drew her into the water. He guided her bum to the seat beside him and she flashed him a grateful smile. The door opened wider.

"Umer?" Torin said. "That was quick."

Yumi stepped into the room with folded clothing in her hands. "Not Umer, Torin," she said. She closed the door and turned toward the bath. "Oh!"

The three stared at each other. Yumi put the folded clothing on a shelf and gazed at the pair in the sunken pool. Torin looked from Sunshine to Yumi and back again, staying silent. Sunshine lowered herself in the water and darted glances at the other two.

She cleared her throat. "Perhaps I should find another bath," she said.

Yumi smiled. "If you feel you must," she said.

"I would rather you didn't," said Torin, putting his arm around Sunshine's shoulder and smiling at Yumi. He turned his gaze on Sunshine. "I like having you here."

She stared into his eyes. "But..." She waved her hand in Yumi's direction.

Torin brushed the backs of his fingers along her cheek and jaw. "But nothing," he said quietly. He

looked over at Yumi. "I'm sorry to surprise you like this, but there was no real opportunity to warn you."

She gazed back at him. "No, I suppose there wasn't," she said. "Perhaps you and I will have a chance to talk later. Just the two of us."

He inclined his head. "Of course," he said. "But later."

Yumi smiled wryly. "Much later, if I know anything about you." She looked at Sunshine. "Don't let him wear you out," she said.

Sunshine smiled sweetly back. "He hasn't yet but not for lack of trying."

Torin ducked his head, causing his hair to fall in an impenetrable curtain around his face, hiding his expression from both women.

"Indeed," said Yumi. "Then I shall leave you to entertain each other. You were expecting Umer, you said? I'll urge him to hurry so you can get on with your — bath."

She closed the door behind her as she left. Torin pushed his hair back on one side and looked at Sunshine. "You're wicked, Miss Wolf," he said.

"She started it with her snippy little comment." Sunshine flared her nostrils at the door. She looked into Torin's face. "You're positive you want *me* here?"

He smiled and leaned over to kiss her cheek and to rub his face against hers. "Yes. I want you.

Just you." He kissed her mouth and put both arms around her to hold her lightly to him. She relaxed then, tension slipping from her back and shoulders. Her arms slid around him and returned the embrace.

"It's good to hear." Warm lips touched his throat.

He rested his chin on the top of her head. "I wish I could find the right words to tell you how important you are," he said.

"I've heard that actions speak louder than words," she murmured with her lips on his neck.

He chuckled. "Is that so?" He pulled back and looked into her eyes. "I think I can find the right actions."

He kissed her then; a slow, tender and lingering kiss that left them both breathless. One of his hands moved to her belly and toyed with the nipples there.

"Those actions are quite a nice start," she said. She played with his long hair, pulling it over one of his shoulders and twisting it into a rope. "I love your hair loose. Did you know?"

"Then you'll enjoy this visit," he said. "I seldom braid it when I'm here."

"Mmmmm. Nice." She lifted her face and nibbled at his cheek.

Umer knocked on the door and announced his arrival before he entered. He carried a large tray of

food and wine. A young woman followed him with several garments for Sunshine.

"Yumi said she had brought your clothing, Captain," said Umer as he set the tray within easy reach of the couple in the bath. "I think you will find something in that selection to suit the lady." He nodded to his helper to put the clothing on one of the benches. "Have you everything you need?"

"Yes, thank you, Umer," said Torin.

"Shall I put the 'do not disturb' sigil on the door?"

"Yes, thank you," said Torin. Umer bowed, and he and the young woman left. Torin looked at Sunshine. "There. With the sign on the door, no one will bother us."

"Good." She kissed him. Her nostrils flared again. "Something smells wonderful," she said.

Torin laughed and reached for the tray. He dragged it a little closer and began to explain what was what. "Food first?" he asked.

"Food first," she said. "You wouldn't want me to faint partway through and drown."

He dipped his finger into the raw ground meat mixed with spices and oils and savouries. "No, we can't have that," he said. He held it out to her. "Open up."

She opened her mouth and he gave her his fingertip to lick clean. She closed her lips over his finger and ran her tongue over it to get all the

tartare. "Mmm, that's good. More please." He smiled and fed her more, following this dollop with a soft kiss. She laughed. "You did tell me once that food could be very sensuous, didn't you?"

"Something like that," he said.

"I'm beginning to see what you mean." She looked at the other things on the tray. "What's your favourite?"

He pointed. "Those. I love those, but let me get my wine. They're spicy and hot so dip them in that little bowl first." He took his goblet in one hand. "All right. I'm ready."

She picked up the pastry, dipped it in the yogurt and held it to him, her other hand cupped below his chin to catch falling crumbs. He took a bite, his expression one of ecstasy. He took a second bite, swallowed and then had a mouthful of wine. Sunshine studied the bit left in her hand, sniffed it and popped it into her mouth. She chewed and swallowed. Her eyes went wide and she fanned her open mouth with her hand. Torin laughed and dipped a finger into the yogurt to spread it on her tongue. She swallowed again. He offered his wine.

"That's *hot*," she said and sucked air across her tongue.

"I said it was," he replied. "That's why you dip it in the yogurt — it cuts the burn, silly wolf." He

kissed her.

“What else is there. Something that won’t set fire to my mouth?”

He began to explain the foods on the tray and they sampled and enjoyed, mostly delighting in the sharing and the company.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

When they had tried a little of everything on the platter and had finished off a few of the selections, Torin drained his wine and slid into the water, floating on his back. "Mmmmm," he said. "I'm stuffed." He drifted slightly. His hair fanned out in the water.

"So am I," said Sunshine. "But pleasantly so." She ran her fingers through the cloud of his hair. He smiled at her.

"You could wash that for me, if you wanted to," he said hopefully.

"I could, could I?" She continued playing.

"You could." He dropped his feet to the floor of the pool and waded to the edge. He opened a jar of soft soap and scooped some into his palm. He took Sunshine's hand and rubbed it on his, smearing the soap across both palms. Then he put his hand and hers on his head and began to spread the soap. "Like this," he said, smiling mischievously.

"I know how to wash hair," she said, and got more of the soap. Torin turned his back to her and sank to his knees in the water. The ends of his hair fell into the water, but Sunshine gathered it up and scrubbed from scalp outwards. He sighed, almost purring. His eyes half-closed.

"I love having someone else do that," he said.

"I'll have to remember that." She combed her fingers through his hair to take out any tangles. "There you go. Time to rinse."

He sank into the water and submerged, shaking his head slowly back and forth. He came up for air and submerged again in a different spot, and came up at Sunshine's side.

"Your turn," he said and waited for her to wet her hair. Then he returned the favour, lightly scrubbing her scalp, washing her hair and combing out the tangles.

"I'm not going to drown myself to rinse," she said.

"Then lie back and float and I'll take care of it for you." She did as he said and he stood at her side, his long fingers stroking her hair, swirling it in the water. She sighed. "What comes next?" she asked.

He wiped a thumb along her hairline and scooped water in his palm to rinse the last bits of soap away. He took her hand and helped her stand up. "Now we wash everything else," he

said. He took the sea sponge and soaked it. He squeezed it and put soap on it. "Turn around."

She turned her back to him, pulling her hair over her shoulder out of the way. He ran a hand over her entire back from neck to the dimples at the base, and followed with a light circular motion of the sponge. He spent long, slow minutes scrubbing her back before his hands moved to her hips and up her sides. "Lift your arms," he said, and continued the stroke up past her armpits and along her arms to the elbows. His hands slid down again to her hips and around to her belly.

He stepped closer and continued the gentle scrubbing, his arms around her and hands now washing from the soft curls at the bottom of her belly all the way up to her throat. She leaned back against him and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Could we do this every day while we're here?" she murmured. Her raised hands descended onto his head and caressed him.

"I think so," he said. He kissed her temple. She turned her face toward him and kissed his mouth. He abandoned the sponge in favour of letting his hands do the job on their own.

He caressed her with slow strokes, circling around her nipples with one hand while the other moved lower. She moaned into his mouth and reached behind her to grip his erection. Her thighs parted and his fingers wandered between the soft

lips. She moved her hips to meet his hand as he moved his to take advantage of her gentle grip. He broke the kiss with one final lick of her lips.

"We will definitely have to do this every day," he said. The hand caressing her nipples moved up. He cupped her breast for a brief moment and then wrapped his arm tightly around her. He pulled her close to his chest while his other hand continued its sensuous fondling between her thighs.

She sighed and shivered. "I love when you do this," she said. "I love your hands on me."

"I love my hands on you, too," he said, and kissed her shoulder. "And yours on me and — mmmmmm."

"And this?" She moved the tip of his erection down from where it nestled between her buttocks until it slipped into the soft furrow beneath. He moved his hips slowly back and forth, seeking entry.

"Yes, this," he said. Sunshine adjusted the angle of his approach and he slid into her. "And this. Oh, yes, this."

He held her to him as he moved back through the water and sank onto the bench built into the side. His strong embrace kept them joined and brought her down onto his lap. He entered deeper still.

"Yes, this," she said. Her head dropped back

onto his shoulder. "Oh, Torin, I love you in me."

He kissed her neck. "I love it, too. Sweet Sunshine."

He groaned against her skin. They moved together, her hands over his, pressing him closer, guiding him to increase her pleasure with circles and soft pinches. He bit her shoulder suddenly, groaning deep in his chest. He pushed hard into her, filling her with warmth. Their hands kept caressing her most sensitive part until she, too, cried out and ground herself against his wilting erection. He kissed the teeth marks he had left in her skin.

"Sorry. I got carried away."

She laughed and kissed him, twisting her neck. "I think I've done similar to you. It's all right."

He hugged her to him. "You're all mine for the next, what — week?"

"Mmm. Something like that."

"Good." He kissed her again. They sank down into the warm water and floated for a little while. Torin sighed and rose to his feet. "Time to get out, my sweet," he said. He took her hand and led her up the steps.

Torin wrapped Sunshine in a large, soft towel and put his arms around her.

"How am I supposed to dry myself like this?" she asked.

"I'll do it for you," he said. His hands

wandered over the towel, pressing it to her skin. Down her back, over her buttocks and thighs, his hands made their firm and gentle way.

She brought her hands up to rest on his chest, and leaned into him. She kissed the notch of his collarbone. "I suppose you want me to turn so you can dry my front," she said.

He kissed her forehead. "If I do that, we'll never get out of here," he said. "So I had best leave those parts to you. There *are* other things I would like to do today."

"Really?" She stepped back from his embrace and began to dry her breasts and belly. "Do those other things involve me in any way?"

"As a matter of fact, they do." He wrapped a towel around his long hair and twisted it tight. Her expression brightened.

"Truly?" He squeezed his hair harder.

"Truly. There's a lot of day left yet. I thought we could take a little stroll along the local streets, see this area of the city, meet some of the people."

She sat on the bench to dry her feet. Torin shook out his hair and roughly towed himself dry. He pulled on the white silk shirt, leaving it open while he put on the blue trousers. He crossed the ends of the shirt front across his belly before buttoning the waistband of the pants. Then he buttoned the front flap and cuffs of the trousers. He slid his feet into simple leather sandals.

Sunshine stared at him. "What?" he asked. He ran a comb through his hair.

"Your chest is showing." She swallowed as her eyes made appreciative journeys up and down his figure from head to toe and back. "I like those pants."

He glanced down at himself. He shrugged. "They're comfortable." The heavy silk hugged his buttocks and belly, then fell in loose folds to the tight cuffs at his ankles. "Are you dry? Let's get you dressed so we can go." He took her hand and drew her to her feet.

They looked at the clothing that had been dropped off for her to choose from.

"I don't know which to choose," said Sunshine, holding up one dress after the other.

"I rather like you the way you are," Torin said, smiling mischievously. "But I think it might draw comment on the streets, and if Ranid saw you, he might become suspicious."

She stuck her tongue out at him, earning herself a quick flick of his tongue at hers. She giggled. "You choose, then." She thrust the clothes into his hands. He raised one eyebrow at her and sorted quickly through the various garments.

He held one out. "Put this on first." Sunshine put on the light silk undergarment while Torin studied the various outfits. "Here," he said. He held out a pale rose dress with a light purple sash.

He helped her tie the sash in the Chaviss fashion, with the ends hanging down the side of one thigh. He smiled his approval. "Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?" He put his arms around her and kissed her.

Her eyes sparkled. "Thank you." She gave him a brief hug. "I need shoes, if we're going out onto the streets," she said.

He nudged a pair of sandals with his toe. "These look like they should fit. Umer has a good eye."

She frowned at them. "Are you sure they'll stay on?"

Torin held out a foot. "I don't have any trouble."

She shrugged and slipped her feet into the simple shoes. She tried a few experimental steps. "They feel like being barefoot," she said.

"Are we ready, then?" He tucked her hand into the bend of his elbow and led her from the room.

She glanced up at him as he led her out to the courtyard. "Do we need money for anything? I don't have a single coin with me."

"Not this time," he said. They crossed the courtyard and went out to the street. "This is a simple stroll, not a shopping expedition." He covered her hand briefly with his. "Tomorrow, I'll take you to a Market or two."

"Won't Ranid and Rojer want you to show



them where to sell Ranid's gin?"

Torin grinned. "I did promise I would keep an eye on you, Mistress Sunshine. How better than to stay by your side?"

She laughed and pressed his arm with her hand. "Do you propose to have me with you all when you take them to whatever establishments you have in mind?"

"We could do that," he said. "I thought rather to have Yumi take them under her wing." He gave her a wry grin. "Of course, she might be a little annoyed with me at the moment. I should have made a moment or two to explain you to her. I'll have to talk with her later."

"I would have understood if you had asked me to leave," she said. "I know she's a special friend."

"Yes, she is," he said. "But I wanted to be with you. I want as much time as I can get with you, as long as you have no objection."

"Night and day?" She gave him a smile full of mischief and promise.

He laughed softly. "Yes. Night and day."

The street debouched into a wide square with a fountain splashing in the center. Trees grew here and there about the perimeter, making welcome shade. Low benches provided places to sit and chat, or simply sit and enjoy the fountain's music. Instead of cobblestones, a mosaic of city scenes covered the ground.

"This is lovely!" Sunshine smiled and trailed her fingers in the cool water as they strolled past. She flicked droplets at Torin, who quickly retaliated. They laughed at each other and continued their stroll.

They went through the square and down a broad avenue. Sunshine gazed at the tall walls with various flowering plants hanging over their tops and cascading down. She took deep breaths of the delicate scents. Torin smiled down at her. "A little different from Destrain, isn't it?" he said.

"It's incredible," she said. "What's behind all these walls?"

"Gardens, mostly," he said. "All the homes along here have gardens. The Chaviss are big believers in surrounding themselves with living things. I want to show you some of the gardens and walks back at Yumi's." He pressed her hand to his side. "In fact, my room has a private area of its own. Just right for a wolf to have a little run in."

She looked up at him. "Is it a good place for a wolf and a man to play in?"

"Oh yes. Room to romp and chase and play." He grinned. "I do enjoy wolf play and I don't get enough of it."

She smiled. "We'll have to remedy that," she said. "It's not often I get to play wolf, myself. She leaned her head briefly against his upper arm. "I

like that I can be either with you and that you like both."

"I love both," he said, and freed his arm from her light grasp. He took her hand then, linking his fingers with hers. She coloured at his words and looked away. He squeezed her hand and brought it to his lips for a brief kiss.

"Make sure you don't do that when Ranid or Rojer is around," she said. She caressed his hand with her thumb.

"I'll be careful," he said. "Mind you, neither strikes me as being the most observant man I've ever met. They could probably have walked in on us in the bath and not realized what was going on, even with you in my lap." He grinned. "Of course, that obtuseness works to my advantage. I wonder if they'll notice anything tonight."

"Tonight? Why? What's happening tonight?" She blushed suddenly. "I mean, that they would notice."

Torin laughed aloud. "I thought we should participate properly in the House's customs," he said.

"That's when men and women gather in the big room to make contact with a willing partner. I rather doubt the brothers will like the rules much: contact must be initiated by a woman. It's how Yumi protects her clientele. So if a woman doesn't speak to them first, they're not allowed to

approach her."

Sunshine pondered this. "You mean if we're all there together, more or less, if I don't say anything to Ranid, he can't speak to me?"

"Not without being removed from the room."

"And you?"

"I may talk with the other men and any woman who speaks to me first."

"Do you have to go with the first woman who asks?"

"No. Assuming more than one is interested in me and all of them strike up a conversation, then it's up to me to choose among them. The other side of that is if there is someone there I want desperately and she never says a word to me, then I am out of luck."

Sunshine grinned. "I can see potential there for fun," she said.

He raised an eyebrow and looked down at her. A smile tugged at his lips. "Don't make me wait too long, Miss Wolf. What if I give in to temptation and wander off with someone else?"

"You wouldn't do that to me," she said.

Torin gave her an *Oh, I don't know about that* look.

She frowned. "Would you?"

He kissed her hand again. "Never. I'll wait all night for you, if that's what it takes."

"Even if Yumi herself makes an offer?"

"Even if."

They walked along the avenue, turned a corner and found themselves on a street with more shops than homes. The number of people increased substantially and they were forced closer together as they made their slow way past the brightly coloured awnings of the shops.

"You won't mind too much if I tease you a little tonight? I mean, if I don't speak to you right away?"

"It's probably wise for you to do that," he said.

"Keep Ranid on his toes if you talk to some others first. Then, when you do approach me, we can make it look as if I am saving you from the depredations of all the men there. Ranid will be positively grateful to me for leading you out of there, leaving him free to take up with whoever might want him."

"Do you think anyone will?" She raised a face filled with doubt to him.

"I'll speak to Yumi and offer to pay one of her escorts extra if no one else is interested in him. Maybe she'll be able to teach him a few things." He winked at her.

"Oh I see. Is this where you learned what you know?"

He chuckled. "Some of it. Which reminds me, there's something wonderful I want to share with you one of these nights."

"What?"

"You'll see. Oh, look. Rafi's open for business. Let's stop for coffee."

"Coffee? What's coffee? Yumi mentioned it — what is it, exactly?"

"Something wonderful."

"But I haven't any money. You said we didn't need any."

"We don't. Not at Rafi's. He'll trust me to pay him later. Come on."

He held out a wrought iron chair for her. She sat and looked up at him. "I'll be right back," he said, and disappeared into the small shop. Delightful aromas wafted around him as he went through the door. He breathed deeply. A dark-haired man glanced up from sorting through dark beans.

"Torin!" He came around the counter to embrace the tall soldier.

"Rafi!" Torin returned the embrace. "Coffee for two, if you would be so good. I'll pay you tomorrow." He patted his shirt. "I'm afraid I came straight from a bath and I've nary a coin with me."

Rafi grinned. "Pfft. If I can't trust you, I can trust no one anywhere. For two, it is." He craned his neck and looked past Torin to where Sunshine sat under a bright awning, watching the people going by. "Go sit with your lovely companion. It'll be a mere moment. Anything to go with it?"

"I think not. We ate well while we bathed."

Rafi laughed. "Among other pleasant activities, I've no doubt. Go sit. I'll be there before you know it." He winked and turned away.

Torin returned to Sunshine and sat beside her where he, too, could observe the passersby. "What do you think so far?" he asked.

She smiled, shaking her head. "It's incredible, Torin. The colours and the sounds and the smells and, and everything. It's so different from Destrain. No wonder you like coming here. And I thought it was all for the Pleasure Houses." She dimpled at him.

Rafi set a small tray on the table. He put steaming cups before each of them, with delicate silver spoons. A small jug and a dish of white crystalline powder were set out next.

"Sugar, Rafi? I'm honoured." Torin grinned at the other man.

"My brother has taken up making it," said Rafi. "I can get it for less than both arms and a leg and I've been tempting my customers with it. It's much easier to measure out than honey, is just as sweet and of course, when people ask where I get it, I send them to my brother. Why, even your cousin has been buying some to make sweeter wines."

"Really? I'll have to sample some when I go visit him."

Sunshine was examining the sugar. "This is actual sugar? And it's as sweet as they say?"

Torin dipped a fingertip into the tiny dish and offered it to her. She gave him a doubtful look but opened her mouth. He touched his sugar-coated finger to her tongue and laughed aloud at the expression on her face. "I think she likes it, Rafi," he said.

"It certainly seems so," said Rafi. He smiled at them both, took up the empty tray and bowed as he took his leave.

"Oh my!" Sunshine dipped her own finger into the sugar bowl. "It's got a different taste from honey." She frowned. "And I think it's sweeter. Why do we have some? I know it's used for medicines and wine, but why is it on our table?"

"Coffee can be bitter," said Torin. "I'm learning to like it in all its guises, but I like mine a little sweet. And with a touch of cream." He dropped a spoonful of sugar into his cup and stirred, adding a splash of cream from the silver jug. "When I first tried it, I found it too harsh, but I'm growing quite fond of it." When he had his coffee to his taste, he offered a sip of it to Sunshine.

She grimaced. "You like this?"

He laughed. "Let me make yours the way I started out with mine." He added generous amounts of cream and sugar and stirred well. "Try that."



She sniffed it. "It smells wonderful," she said. She tasted it carefully. "This isn't too bad." She sipped more. "Not bad at all." She sat back, lightly holding the handle of the cup, watching the people going past. "This is nice; sitting and watching. I like this."

"I do, too," he said. "There's always someone interesting going by. Hmmm." He frowned.

"What?" She looked at the people in the street.

"That young boy over there. I think he's up to no good. He's been watching that woman from the corners of his eyes and edging toward her. See the one I mean?"

"The one in the ragged trousers? Yes, I see him."

"Let me see if I can prevent something ugly. Stay here." He rose gracefully and strode out of the tiny yard to the street itself, making his unobtrusive way toward the boy and his apparent victim.

Torin's seemingly aimless stroll took him behind the boy. He watched the youngster from the corner of his eye, waiting to see if his suspicions were correct. When the boy's hand moved toward the unsuspecting woman's basket, Torin stepped forward. His hand closed on the back of the boy's neck, thumb digging painfully into the tender place below his ear.

"Owww!" The boy twisted in Torin's grip, but

the soldier, prepared for such an eventuality, merely took a firmer grip. He looked down into the wide and angry eyes.

"You don't really want to bring attention to yourself, do you?" he said quietly. "You do know what would happen."

He pulled the boy across the street and away from the shopper, who had given them only the most cursory glance when the boy had cried out. Torin nodded politely at her, garnering a pleasant smile in return as he removed the boy from her side.

"Let me go!" The boy twisted in the iron grip. Torin took him by the arm and forced him past the low fence that kept the tables from being bumped into by shoppers in the street.

"Sit!" He pushed the boy down onto a chair. He resumed his own seat, keeping a grip on the thin wrist. The boy glared at him. Torin sipped his coffee and smiled at Sunshine. "The thing is this: the punishment here in Chavistan for stealing is to have your hand cut off and the stump seared to stop the bleeding. It's a lifelong reminder to everyone you ever meet that you are, or were, a thief, and it makes it difficult to work in an honest trade."

"I never been caught," said the boy.

Torin leveled a gaze at him. "And what if I had waited a few heartbeats more before I grabbed

you? What then, when your victim realized the items in your hand had come from her basket? Hmmm?"

"Surely they wouldn't exact that punishment on such a young boy," said Sunshine.

"He's not that young," said Torin. "What are you, lad? Eleven? Twelve?"

"Not telling." His nostrils flared as the smell of something baking wafted from Rafi's shop.

"Well, in any case, yes, they would. The Chaviss believe in stopping such behaviour at a young age. If someone is old enough to commit a crime, he is old enough to pay the price. Or so goes the code of laws here." He looked at the boy. "You're old enough to understand that. Why resort to such a risk?"

"I'm not telling you anything. Let me go." He pulled his arm, to no avail.

"Well, then, if you won't tell me, I'll just have to turn you over to the peacekeepers and explain how you came to be in my company. They'll only take a finger from each hand, since you didn't actually complete your theft." He drank more of his coffee, ignoring the horrified look from Sunshine. The boy's face went pale. He pressed his lips together.

"Why would they believe you? You're not even Chaviss, are you? They'll just let me go and tell you to stop bothering the local people." His

expression was one of false bravado, and fear lurked behind his dark eyes.

Torin smiled. "Shall I demonstrate for you?" He looked around and raised a hand in greeting. "Don't dare run, my young friend," he said quietly. "Just sit here." A few moments later, a member of the Chavistan Peacekeepers strolled up.

"Captain Torin! Good to see you. Is that ragamuffin giving you grief? Shall I take him off your hands?" The boy's eyes widened and he looked from Torin to the Peacekeeper and back.

Torin's eyes flicked the merest glance at the boy. "That won't be necessary, Oram. He is sitting here by my invitation. We're just discussing the possibility of my hiring him as something of a guide."

Oram snorted. "I can recommend someone better than that for you." He gave the boy a stern and calculating look. "You're Iriomo's boy, aren't you? I thought you had gone to live with relatives. What are you doing in the city?"

The boy squirmed in his seat and did not reply.

"He's been remarkably silent when it comes to personal questions," said Torin. "Who's Iriomo?"

"A trader who went east. He took his wife and older son, and left this one with friends. When he didn't come back, they turned the boy out."

Torin leaned back in his seat. "I hear a story

there, Oram. What's the rest of it?"

The Peacekeeper grinned. "I haven't time to tell it all now. If you can find the one who returned, he might regale you with the tale for the price of a drink."

The boy glared sullenly at Oram. "My father will come back," he said. "I have to be here when he does."

"Best be going back to your relatives, boy," said Oram. "Your family's gone. Accept it."

The boy's lips thinned and his hands clenched into fists on the table. Torin put a hand on his shoulder. "Are you so certain they're gone?" he said to Oram.

"Quite so. The story that Vor tells makes little sense, but the one part that rings true is that no one survived but him and that only by sheerest luck. This boy would be better off with his uncle before he loses a hand." He looked directly at the boy, who stared defiantly back. "If you take him on as a guide, make sure you keep a close eye on him, and your purse tucked well inside your shirt."

Torin smiled. "I doubt he'll give me any trouble. He's not a stupid boy, although I think he's rather stubborn. What do you say, lad? Would you like to earn some honest coin?"

The boy frowned, looking into Torin's eyes. He nodded slowly. "My name isn't 'lad'," he said.

"It's Sorih."

"Then, Sorih, why don't we get you a little something to eat and we'll discuss what I expect of you and find a price that suits us both?" He looked at Sunshine. "Would you mind fetching Rafi?"

She smiled as she rose to her feet. "Not at all." She went into the shop.

"I hope you don't regret this, Torin," said Oram.

"I won't," said Torin. "Although the boy will, if he betrays my trust." He looked into Sorih's face. The boy stared back and nodded.

"I understand," he said.

Oram shook his head. "You're a braver man than I am," he said. "If you need help, you know how to reach us. Enjoy your visit, Torin. I'd best be on my way."

Torin stood and the two men shook hands before Oram resumed his patrol of the streets. As Torin sat again, Rafi and Sunshine came to the table.

After ordering a light meal for the boy, Torin turned to Sorih as Rafi went to fetch the food. He held the boy's gaze for a long moment before he spoke. "I want you to pay close attention to what I am about to say." He paused and touched his scarred cheek. "You see this?" The boy nodded. Torin continued, "The man who gave this to me

lived for perhaps another two minutes after he did so. I have the weapon that did the damage sitting on an altar with all the other weapons that drew my blood. All of them belong to men who are now dead."

"So what?"

"So I want you know that, although you think me weak for feeding you and taking you on as a guide, if you betray me and steal from me, I'll take your hand myself. If you're very lucky, I'll even sear the stump so you don't bleed to death."

The boy lifted his chin. "You wouldn't do that. You think I'm a child."

Torin smiled mirthlessly. "You know, during the war, Madlach sent out boys younger than you against our army. I lost count of how many died at my horse's hooves or my sword. Believe me, Sorih. If you try to steal and fail, you'll lose a finger before you realize I even have a dagger in my hand. If you succeed, your hand will be gone just as fast."

Sorih looked from Torin to Sunshine, whose face had gone quite pale. He looked back into the cold black eyes. His throat clicked audibly when he tried to swallow. "You don't scare me."

"As long as you intend to honour whatever agreement we reach, you have no need to fear me," said Torin. "I want you to know that I am willing to help you, but I will not tolerate betrayal

of my trust. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then let's agree on your duties and pay while we wait for Rafi." Torin gave the boy a warm smile, the iciness gone from his dark eyes.

They began their negotiations.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

“So then, we are in agreement?” Torin watched Sorih wipe the crumbs from his lips.

“Yes,” said the boy. He gulped down the last of his juice and wiped his mouth again.

“Good. Then I think the best thing to do right now is to return to Yumi’s. I’m sure I can persuade her to find a place for you to sleep...unless you have some other place?”

“I suppose I could come with you. For one night, anyway. Maybe longer.”

Torin’s lips twitched as he suppressed a smile at the honour Sorih seemed to be conferring on him. He rose with easy grace and held his hand down to Sunshine. “My lady,” he said. She took his arm, nodding politely, and stood by his side.

“Sorih?” she said. The boy looked at the pewter plate for any remaining morsels, then pushed his chair back.

“I know a quick way to Yumi’s house,” he said.

He frowned. "But the lady might not like the alley part. It's prob'ly not polite to take her there."

"We'll just go back the way we came," said Torin. He started off with Sunshine at his side. Sorih trotted to catch up and tried to match Torin's strides. "Tell me, Sorih, do you know any inns or drinking establishments or Pleasure Houses that might be in the market for a new intoxicating drink?"

"So now you think I'm a drunkard? Or maybe my father was, is that it?" Sorih glared at Torin.

"No. But it's obvious that you've been surviving without a home. It's a reasonable assumption that you've made yourself familiar with a great many public places. The reason I ask is that I have a - friend - who is looking for buyers for his gin. Of course, if you can't help, I'll find someone else."

"Oh." Sorih frowned. "I might know a place or two."

The corner of Torin's mouth twitched. "Are you welcome at any of these places?"

"Just what do you think I am, anyway?" Sorih's indignation didn't quite ring true in Torin's ears. "My father was a respectable trader. My parents were good people. You shouldn't treat me like a street rat. I'm not."

"You're right. I'm sorry. Perhaps when we get back to Yumi's, you and I can sit down together

and have a serious conversation. We should both know who we're dealing with, don't you agree?"

Sorih nodded sullenly. Silence descended on the small group as they made their way back to the House. Torin called to one of the many servants of the House. She gave him a wide smile as she walked to them. "How may I serve?"

"You could escort the lady to her chamber and tell me if I have my usual room, if you would be so kind." Torin smiled back.

"I will do that gladly," she said. "And yes, you are in your preferred room."

Sunshine relinquished her grip on Torin's arm to follow the servant. Torin found himself walking behind them with Sorih, and was terribly amused to see that Yumi had put Sunshine into a chamber only a few doors down the hall from his own. He led the boy to the spacious room and out onto the stone patio that looked over a small walled garden.

"Sit," he said, stretching himself out on one of the comfortable recliners. He kicked off his sandals and looked at the boy.

Sorih looked around with a frankly appraising glance. He sank slowly onto one of the other seats. "What do you want?" he asked.

"I want to know more about you," said Torin. "You said your parents were good people, your father respected. What made him go east and why

did he leave you behind?"

Sorih looked out over the garden. He breathed deeply of the scented air. His face twisted and he seemed to be fighting some deep emotion. Torin watched without seeming to, his eyes apparently focused on the flower beds and bushes. At last, Sorih spoke. "My father heard from a traveler that there was a special route east. He said it would take us to a place of wonders and riches, and if we could bring back goods from there, we'd be wealthy beyond dreaming." He looked out over the gardens. "We were always poor. Always on the edge, you know? But we never stole from anybody. I knew other traders who had more than us and they'd send their children out in rags to beg in the streets. In some villages, they'd go right into kitchen gardens and take things. Sometimes the clothes drying on the bushes. You've seen the like."

"Yes. I have." Torin didn't tell the boy the harsh punishment sometimes meted out to such thieves in Destrain. "Go on."

Sorih scrubbed his face with his hands for a moment. He took a deep breath. "I overheard Dadda talking to Momma after the traveler was gone. They argued, you know? She didn't want to go east. Nobody does. It's dangerous. Everyone knows that. Everyone. I bet even you know."

Torin nodded. "Yes, I have heard the stories."

"See? Anyway, Dadda wanted to try. He said to Momma that he would get the exact map from the traveler. He said he would pay the traveler to guide them, and get a whole train to go. Big riches, you know? People would go. Stupid ones." His jaw clenched and his lips pressed whitely together. Torin waited silently for the boy to go on. "They did, too. I don't know, maybe eight caravans and families. I was supposed to be with them, you know? But I didn't want to. Oh no. Not me." He looked into Torin's face. Tears slid silently down his cheeks. "I was scared, see? Little baby Sorih. That's what my brother said. Well, he's dead, isn't he? And Momma and Dadda with him. They just shoulda stayed here." He leaned forward, his arms crossed on his knees, and put his head on his arms. His shoulders shook with suppressed sobs.

Torin watched him for a few moments, then sat up and reached out to rest his hand on Sorih's shoulder. The boy jerked under the touch, but did not withdraw. They sat thus until the storm of weeping had passed. The boy finally regained control of himself and sat up, rubbing his face with his sleeve. He glared at Torin as if daring him to say anything.

Torin merely looked back with compassion. "Are you certain they're gone?" he asked. "Is there no hope? You seemed quite adamant to Oram that

they would return."

Sorih's head swung back and forth. "Hardly anyone ever comes back from the east. Only one trader made it and he's gone mad. He raves about metal birds dropping eggs of fire and everything burning up. According to him, everyone else got caught in the fires and the falling eggs." He rolled his eyes. "I don't believe the part about the birds, but he was all burned on his face and arms, and his clothes were burnt, too. Whatever really and truly happened, I don't think Dadda got away. He was usually near the front of the caravan, see? And the one who came back, well, he liked it near the back and so I think that the leaders got burned all up." He fought for control. "I tell the peacekeepers that he's coming back so they'll think I'm a little mad and leave me alone."

Torin patted Sorih's shoulder and leaned back again in his chair. "Tell me this, then," he said. "You said your family never stole. What were you up to in the street?"

A flush rose in Sorih's face. He avoided Torin's gaze. "This is a pretty nice garden," he said.

"Yes, it is," agreed Torin. "What were you doing?"

"I like the smells of the flowers. What are they?"

"I haven't the faintest. Who was she?"

"Who?"

"The woman you were going to steal from. Do you know her?"

"I was only going to take a small roll from her basket. I was going to bump the basket to make the bread fall and then she wouldn't want it and I could have it. It's not exactly stealing."

"How old are you, Sorih?"

"Who *are* you, anyway? Why are you asking me all this? What's it to you?"

Torin shrugged. "Nothing, I suppose. Perhaps you remind me of someone. I'm trying to find out if you're worth helping or not. I don't mind helping, but I hate wasting my time on ingrates and connivers. As for who I am — who do you think I am?"

Sorih studied him. "Well, you seem to know the peacekeepers pretty good, and you've got that whopping big scar on your face. I bet you didn't get that from falling out of a plum tree. You walk like a soldier, and you look sort of Chaviss, but men don't have such long hair here. And you wouldn't need a guide if you came from here. So you're a soldier from somewhere else." He paused. "I'm almost twelve."

"You've got a good mind. I like that. I can work with a good mind. Yes, I'm a soldier from Destrain. I'm the commanding officer of the Queen's Army, may the gods bless her." They gazed at each other. At last, Torin heaved himself

out of his chair. "Come with me, Sorih. We'll get you settled in a room somewhere and make sure that everyone knows you're with me. Don't leave the grounds of this House unless you're with me or on an errand for me. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. While you're here, you may eat as much as you wish. You have only to ask at the kitchen. If one of the staff here asks for help, please be civil and give it to them. There might be a future here for you, if you prove yourself worthy."

Sorih half-smiled. "Me? Here? Doing what?"

"Lots of things. Follow me. Let's get you settled for the time being."

They strolled back through Torin's room to the wide corridor and down to the servants' area.



## Chapter Twenty-Four

After having seen Sorih into the capable hands of the woman who ran the kitchens, Torin wandered off through the House in search of Yumi. He found her in her own rooms, talking over Household details with one of her aides. She dismissed the other woman when she saw Torin in the doorway. "I'll trust your judgment as to the music tonight," she said. "If there is anything more, I'll send for you."

The aide smiled at Torin as she went past him. She closed the door behind her. "Come have a seat," said Yumi.

"Would you like anything?"

"Not just at the moment, thank you," said Torin. He sat on one end of the divan which faced the open doors of the patio.

Yumi filled a wine goblet and took her place at the other end, one leg curled under her. She sipped her wine, looking at Torin over the rim.

"I'm sorry I didn't warn you," he said. "I could

have handled it all better."

"It's quite all right, dearest," she replied. "You are under no obligation to me, you know. I do enjoy your company, in and out of bed, but you are free to do as you please here." She ran a finger around the rim of her goblet. "I take it the husband knows nothing."

"Nothing." A dimple appeared in his left cheek. "About several things."

Yumi laughed. "I rather had that impression, just from walking them to their rooms. What's an intelligent woman like her doing with him?"

Torin shrugged. "The same reason Emeera is married to the brother."

"Your Healer?" Yumi coughed up the wine she had just tried to swallow. "Oh, Jerah, Torin! You said so earlier, but I thought you must have been jesting."

"No." He grinned. "No, dearest Yumi. Two of my most cherished women are married to a pair of buffoons."

Yumi put her cup down and covered her mouth with both hands. Gales of laughter rang through the room. Torin's deeper voice provided a chuckling counterpoint. "Oh, Torin. Oh, dear." She giggled again. She *ahemmed* and regained control. "I admit I was rather disappointed to find you already claimed this afternoon, and I gather I won't have much of your time this visit, but I'll be

fine. I think your companion doesn't like me very much."

"You *were* a little snippy with her, Yumi," Torin said. "She doesn't react well to that sort of treatment."

Yumi picked up her wine again and sipped it. "You're right. I'll make it up to her tonight. I assume you and she want to be together?"

"Yes. I want to show her the meeting room and let her experience it. I told her the rules, and I think she's eager to see her husband at the mercy of women he finds desirable." He leaned forward and held out his hand. "May I have a little of that?"

She passed him the cup. "Of course. Might I ask how you plan to walk off with her without the husband becoming suspicious?"

Torin drank and handed the goblet back. "I promised him I would keep her safe from any man deranged enough to want her."

Yumi laughed out loud. "'Deranged?' Why so?"

Torin shrugged. "He thinks her plain and unattractive. I disagree." He grinned.

"So do I," said Yumi. "She's lovely. Well, then, tonight should prove most interesting. I'll make sure *someone* approaches them both. The rest is up to you."

"Thank you, Yumi." He rose to his feet. "I appreciate it more than you know."

She stood, putting the cup aside again. She went to him and put her hands on his shoulders. "Anything for you, dearest Torin."

He put his arms around her and drew her close. He kissed her warmly. "Next time, cherished Yumi." He touched her lips with a forefinger and strode from the room.

\* \* \* \*

Torin and the brothers were already in the spacious room when Sunshine entered with Yumi. Sunshine glanced toward them. Torin tipped her a quick wink, bringing a tiny smile to her lips. She looked quickly away.

"Oh, good," said Ranid. "There's my wife. A woman I can talk to."

He started across the room. Torin restrained him with a hand on his shoulder. "No, you can't. I've already explained it three times, Ranid. No speaking to any woman who hasn't spoken to you first. Here. In this room. Now."

Ranid frowned. "Not even my wife? But..." He folded his arms across his chest and glared at Sunshine and Yumi, who were making their slow way around the room.

"Not even. Besides, do you really want to be tied up with your own wife when there are so many lovelies here?" He gestured at the small

groups of women scattered here and there through the room.

"Better her than no one at all," grumbled Ranid.

"He's got a point," said Rojer. He took a goblet of wine from a tray offered by a strolling servant.

"I wouldn't worry," said Torin. He made eye contact with a young woman in an almost sheer gown that did little to hide her charms. He offered a smile and a nod, sending his long hair cascading over his arms. She raised an eyebrow and smiled archly. The tip of her tongue peeked forth for a moment. She spoke to her companions, while keeping a watchful eye on him. They turned to look and were treated to Torin's most charming smile. He tossed his hair back, half-turning away to present his profile. "The trick is to lure them," he said to the brothers. "You smile, you nod, you catch their eyes and invite them with yours."

"And it works?" Rojer licked his lips nervously. He stared openly at the quartet of charmers.

"Usually." Torin glanced over his shoulder and winked at the woman in the nearly transparent dress. She laughed with the others and rose to her feet. Ranid and Rojer goggled as she made her meandering way toward them. She smiled at both of them, but spoke only to Torin.

"I've heard you've been promoted," she said. She stood on tiptoe to kiss him. He put an arm around her waist and returned the kiss.

"Yes. Some time ago, now." He looked her over with appreciative eyes. "You look ravishing, as ever. Tempting, dear Usha. Very tempting."

She touched his chest, exposed by the loose shirt he wore. Her finger trailed down to the waist of his pants. He was aware of Rojer and Ranid's intense interest in the proceedings. "Only tempting?" She laid her palm on the warm skin of his abdomen. "That's all?"

Torin grinned down at her. He put a fingertip at one edge of the neck of her dress and followed it down the contour of one breast and up part of the curve of the other, then settled between them. "I did say 'very tempting'," he said. He put his mouth close to her ear and whispered something.

She laughed, pulling back a little. "Perhaps I can tempt you more next time you visit, then?" She kissed him again.

"Perhaps," he said. She shook her head, laughed again and rejoined her friends. They looked over at the trio of men, waved and smiled.

"I don't suppose that's enough to let us talk to them," said Rojer.

"No, I'm afraid not," said Torin. "But the evening is young."

He looked around the room. "I see Sunshine has found someone to talk to." He didn't say it was one of Yumi's many employees.

Ranid searched frantically for his erring wife.

"What? Nononono. Torin, you have to put an end to that. You did say you would watch over her."

"She hasn't spoken to me yet," said Torin. "I can do nothing at the moment."

"Well, just get over there and watch her, then. Would you?" Ranid danced from foot to anxious foot.

"Of course." Torin smiled again at Usha. "I hope you appreciate what I'm giving up for your sake."

"Oh, I do. I truly, truly do. Thank you."

Torin sighed and walked away, making his way toward Sunshine and her companion.

Yumi intercepted Torin before he reached Sunshine's vicinity. She slipped her hand between his arm and body, lightly grasping his elbow. He smiled down at her.

"Good evening, Torin," she said. "Are you enjoying yourself so far?"

"As a matter of fact, I am," he said.

She laughed softly. "I saw you playing with Usha. It was most entertaining to watch your companions' reactions. I believe both of them were more than a little — how shall I put this — aroused by your mutual caressing."

Torin dimpled and chuckled. "It was fun," he said. "I demonstrated how to lure a woman to speak to one."

He glanced back over his shoulder at Ranid,

who flapped his hands in Sunshine's direction. Torin shrugged one shoulder and made a wry face in response before turning his attention back to Yumi. "What may I do for you, dear Yumi?" he asked.

"I just wanted to tell you that your Sunshine and I had a lovely chat before we came in. You won't have to worry about any difficulty between us."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"She's very fond of you." Yumi looked sidelong up at him.

He returned the look. "I'm very fond of her."

"Be careful with her," she said. "I don't mean that she's any danger to you, but I think her husband could turn ugly if he ever suspects the truth."

Torin smiled. "I can take care of myself," he said.

"But can Sunshine?" Yumi glanced at the Folk woman and back to Torin.

He looked over at Sunshine, who glanced his way and smiled. He thought of her ability to Change, and laughed softly. "Oh yes," he said. "Better than many women, I suspect. And now, cherished Yumi, I have to go save her from Iali's clutches." He gave her a warm embrace and kiss. A few moments later, he stood beside Sunshine and Iali.



"Lovely companion, Iali," said Torin. He smiled at Sunshine, who smiled back and said nothing.

"Why, yes," said Iali. "I think so."

"You're very kind, Iali," said Sunshine, carefully avoiding addressing Torin directly. He grinned at her.

"She's wicked, though," he said to the other man.

"Is she? How so?" Iali continued his delicate stroking of Sunshine's forearm.

"She lured me over here with those eyes," said Torin. "And now she's deliberately not talking to me. She's a temptress."

"Ignore him, Iali," she said. "I didn't lure him at all. My husband sent him here, hoping I would greet him out of habit."

"But you are too wise to fall for such trickery?" Iali moved closer to her and slipped an arm around her waist.

She sidestepped his embrace, laughing, and bumped into Torin. "Whoops, I'm sorry." She clapped a hand over her mouth. "Dammit!"

Torin and Iali both chuckled. "I'm quite unhurt, I assure you," Torin said to her. "And yes, that counts." He offered her his arm. "Shall I escort you outside for some fresh air, Mistress? Show you the gardens, perhaps?"

Iali took her left hand. "No, Sunshine. Stay with me. I'll take you dancing in the ballroom."

"But the moon is just rising and the night-blooming flowers will open soon. It's lovely out there." He sighed.

"Of course, it is your choice, my lady."

"I suppose my husband will feel safer if I go with you, Captain," she said. "My apologies, Iali. The gardens beckon." She freed herself from his light grip and took Torin's offered arm.

As they strolled toward the wide doors that led to the garden, Torin looked over his shoulder at Ranid. They nodded to each other, happy conspirators in keeping Sunshine out of the clutches of lustful men.

They strolled down the wide shallow steps to the paved walk. Sunshine breathed deeply of the lightly scented night air. She leaned her head against his upper arm for a brief moment and smiled up at him. "This is lovely."

The western sky glowed with the last of the sun's rays. Narrow trails of cloud made deep purple and red bands across the darkening sky. The moon had begun her climb and showed her full face to the world below. Sunshine lifted her face to the sky. "A star! Look." She pointed.

Torin smiled and pointed out a small cluster of stars that had become visible. "The Chaviss call that one Jerah's vine," he said. "Jerah is the goddess of wine and winemaking and everything that goes with it." He led her from the main

walkway down one of the side paths. Lamps on posts made pools of soft light with shadowed places between them. She slid her hand down his arm and linked her fingers with his. He squeezed her hand gently.

"Are we going any place in particular?" she asked.

"Perhaps," he said, raising a single eyebrow. He smiled archly down at her and moved off the path onto the cropped lawn.

"Where are you taking me?"

"A more private place than the paths," he said. He took her between tall hedges with flower beds at their feet.

Even taller trees standing here and there held out exotic leaves. Moonlight filtered down to light their way. A night bird's song pierced the air and then rose and fell in a series of trills. Sunshine came to a stop, listening. Her sudden halt jerked Torin and he stumbled. "What is it?" he asked.

"Shhh. Listen." Her eyes glistened in the moonlight and her teeth gleamed when she smiled at the repeated song. Torin smiled at her delight. He moved closer to her, enjoying the birdsong almost as much as her reaction to it. When she turned her attention to him, he bent and kissed her smiling mouth. She leaned into him then, putting her free hand on his chest. One kiss became two, two led to more—soft and exploring.

His loose shirt, open down the front, invited her hand to wander over his bare skin. She touched his chest and ribs, slid her hand up over the ridge of his collar bone and around his neck. He pulled back from the kiss and touched her face. "Mmmm. Delightful." Her breath came in short gasps.

"Can we go back to your room?" She touched her lips to his chest.

"Not yet," he said.

"No?" A wistful note entered her voice.

He gave her a mischievous smile. "No." He resumed leading her through the garden.

"Why not?"

"Because there is a very nice spot here that is perfect for lovers," he said. He smiled over his shoulder at her. "And it's much closer than my room."

## Chapter Twenty-Five

A few more turns brought them to a tree with low sweeping branches. It stood among the tall hedges, seemingly blocking the path. Torin swept the hanging branches aside and revealed a deeply shadowed space. He ushered Sunshine in before him and followed, letting the branches fall back into place. They stood for a few moments letting their eyes adjust to the deep gloom. The light of the moon filtered among the leaves. Soft moss grew underfoot, thick and inviting. Torin folded his long legs and drew Sunshine down beside him. He kissed her, his hands slowly untying the sash that wrapped her waist. She pulled his shirt free from his trousers and pushed it down his arms. He shook each arm free, never quite relinquishing his touch on her.

With the sash gone, the sides of her dress gaped open. His hands slipped under the material and caressed her skin. She sighed into his mouth, her own hands wandering freely over his chest and

back. His hair cascaded around their faces as he leaned over her, pushing her back onto the soft moss. A few deft movements relieved her of the dress and Torin sat up to enjoy the view.

He ran light fingers over her breasts and the nipples on her belly. "You are so exquisite," he said. He kissed her throat and face before nibbling her lips. She smiled and kissed him.

"You make me feel exquisite," she said against his mouth.

"Help me," he said. "My hands don't want to leave your body and I would very much like to be naked with you."

She laughed softly and unbuttoned his pants. She pushed them down the narrow hips, reaching inside to free his erection. He groaned at her touch and moved his hips in slow strokes. He shivered. "Mmmmm," he murmured. He kicked to free his legs from the trousers and only entangled himself in the heavy silk. He lifted his face from hers and stared down at his legs, a deep chuckle beginning to rumble from his chest. "I'm trapped!" He rolled free and sat up.

Sunshine pushed herself into a sitting position, giggling at his predicament. She offered a helping hand, and together they fought his legs out of his pants. They both snorted with laughter by the time they were done and collapsed on the moss, hugging each other and giggling helplessly.

Intermittent chuckles continued tumbling forth as he kissed her throat and cuddled her to his chest. He pulled back to look at her, the dimple in his left cheek winking madly. She took a handful of his hair and pulled him close for a soft kiss. His left hand covered her breast. His thumb played with the risen nipple. He kissed her lips, her chin, her throat. A trail of soft kisses led across her collarbone to her shoulder and down her breast to claim her nipple from his hand. Gentle teeth nibbled and tugged. His tongue explored, flicking, tasting.

He pressed his mouth closer and suckled, drawing soft sounds of pleasure from her. She put her arms around his head and neck to hold him close. "Don't forget the others," she said between panting breaths.

He smiled and raised his head. "I won't forget any of them." He moved to the other breast. His hand slid down to the first pair of nipples below her breasts and began to tease and toy. By the time he finished with the last two, low on her belly, she was writhing and gasping.

When he lifted his head, she reached for his shoulders and arms and pulled him toward her. "Want you." She wrapped her legs around his. "Now. Please."

He moved up her body. His hands went under her shoulders and he lay on top of her. She freed

one hand to reach down to guide him and cried out when he began to penetrate, a sharp, "OH!" of pleasure. He pushed his hips forward, sinking deep into her, and made his own deeper sounds of delight. His arms tightened around her. His entire body pressed hard against hers and they clung to each other.

He kissed her face, tasted her lips and tongue. She lifted herself to him. Their bodies moved together, finding sweet rhythm without thought or effort. He murmured her name as he thrust into her. His right hand came out from beneath her to stroke her hair, touch her face. "Gods, Sunshine," he said, panting now. "Gods, I love this with you." His hips moved in shorter thrusts now. Harder and faster. He looked into her eyes and grinned fiercely. She clutched his hips and arched her back, a cry of intense pleasure rising from her parted lips. Her body jerked hard against him. Muscles deep inside her squeezed him in pleasant rhythm and carried him over the brink. He pushed forward, trembling and groaning. Shivers of pleasure ran from head to toe and he pressed his face to her hair. "Oh sweet Sunshine," he murmured. "So good."

She kissed his temple, brushed his hair back from his face. "I love you," she said. Her hand flew to her mouth. "I mean, I love doing this with you." Wide eyes regarded him.



He smiled slowly and traced the line of her cheek with tender fingers. "It's all right," he said. He rolled off her and drew her to him. His arms closed around her, warm and comforting. He held her head against his chest and kissed her hair.

"Don't you know how loved you are?" She raised her head to look at him.

"But..."

"Shhhh," he said. "No 'buts' tonight. There's just us here, sweet love. Don't bring anyone else." He kissed her mouth. "Just you and a man who loves you—woman and wolf." Warm hands caressed her skin. "Trust in that, Sunshine. He does love you."

She kissed his chest and laid her cheek on it. "I love him," she said. "I wish..." Her voice trailed off. "Never mind what I wish. Tonight—this week—all my wishes are true." She lifted her head again and kissed him. "You're right. Here, now, there's just my lover and me, and nothing else matters."

His eyes gleamed in the moonlight that fingered between the leaves. He rocked her gently in his arms. She pushed herself up on one elbow and gazed down at him. His hair lay in a black pool around his head and under his shoulders. He smiled up at her, trailing a fingertip over the curve of her breast. He frowned, listening, and when she opened her mouth to speak, he put his fingers on

her lips.

“Shhhhh.” He looked toward the concealing branches and mouthed, “Listen.”

Sunshine tilted her head. Distant voices drifted nearer. Torin clapped a hand over his mouth to smother the gales of laughter that tried to burst forth. His belly tightened and vibrated. Sunshine’s brows drew together then climbed her forehead. She bit her bottom lip, looking intensely at Torin. She shook her head.

“Oh no!” Her mouth moved silently. Torin sat up and put an arm around her and held her close to his side.

With his mouth next to her ear, he said, “Stay quiet. Yumi knows what she’s doing.”

He kissed her temple and grinned at her. The voices came ever closer.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

“**T**he gardens are quite extensive.” Ranid’s voice was now close enough to hear.

“Yes, they are,” said Yumi. “And the hedges make them seem even moreso. All the winding walkways give the illusion of great space, and the places like this, where there is room to stretch out and picnic or engage in whatever pleasurable activity comes to mind, add to the illusion.”

Sunshine pressed her mouth against Torin’s shoulder. He felt the vibration of suppressed laughter in her body and his arm hugged her even closer. Someone in Yumi’s party carried a torch that lit the clearing beyond the tree. The flickering light made even deeper shadows under the low branches, which helped conceal the couple. At the same time, it allowed them to see out quite clearly between the leaves.

Yumi took Ranid by the hand and led him to a stone bench. They sat with their knees lightly touching. The servant with the torch stood near

the entrance, his back turned to the people within.

"Will Rojer and, 'em, Usha be joining us, do you think?" asked Ranid. He cleared his throat and glanced about.

"Oh, I don't think so," said Yumi. She put her hand on his thigh. "Do you really want company?"

Torin raised his eyebrows and looked down at Sunshine. Her eyes were wide as she gazed through the screening leaves at the scene before them. She glanced at him and shrugged. He smiled. His fingers touched her chin, turning her face toward him for a soft kiss. She parted her lips and the kiss became deeper and more demanding. He drew back, leaving one more touch of his lips on hers. They turned back to the pair outside.

A stirring in Ranid's trousers told clearly the effect Yumi's touch had on him. He cleared his throat again. "No, no, not, em, not really." He giggled and gave a furtive look around. "You're sure we're safe here? I wouldn't want my, em, you know, Sunshine and Torin to walk in on us."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about them," said Yumi. Her hand trailed up and down his inner thigh. "Waler will keep anyone who wanders by from coming in. Besides, I'm sure Torin is taking good care of Sunshine."

Sunshine nodded and laid her head against his chest for a brief moment. His hand cupped her

breast and teased the nipple into a hard bud. She dropped her hand to his leg, stroking up to cup and caress him. His response was immediate and her fingers closed around his erection. He ran his hand down her belly and explored the soft warmth between her thighs. She sighed, moving her hips in slow circles. He lay back in the moss and drew her to him. Her eyes almost glowed in the filtered light, and a wide and mischievous smile touched her lips.

Outside, Ranid squeaked. "There, isn't that better?" Yumi's voice held a note of amusement. "The poor thing was stifling in there. Doesn't the night air feel good on it?"

"Oh yes." Ranid sounded half-strangled. "And your hand. Oh! Oh gods!" He groaned suddenly.

Sunshine lowered herself and Torin had to fight down a groan of his own as he sank into her depths. He held her hips and lifted to her. The pleasures of their own love-making did not keep them from being aware of the voices beyond their haven.

"There now," said Yumi. Torin heard the laughter tucked beneath the words and knew that Ranid would hear only the sympathy on the surface. "Didn't that feel nice?"

"Oh, oh yes. Yes, it did." Ranid panted between the words. "I wasn't expecting—and well, I've only had Sunshine for the past few years. Well,

except for the occasional harlot, and, oh gods, that was very nice." His voice took on a wistful tone. "I don't suppose we could, well, you know."

"Oh, I think we could manage something," said Yumi. "But perhaps it would be better inside on a nice big bed. Would you like to try several girls at once?"

Ranid made a choked sound and Torin almost loosed a shout of laughter. Instead, he pulled Sunshine closer and pressed his face to her neck. Silent laughter rocked them both.

The voices moved away. Evidently Yumi was taking Ranid back to the House. The torchlight faded away.

When they thought it was safe, they gave voice to the laughter they had suppressed. They clung to each other, snorting and giggling, never breaking their deep connection. Their bodies continued the timeless rhythm, and the climax rolled over them while they were still consumed with laughter. Shudders of pleasure mingled with the gales of good humour and left them breathless.

Sunshine lay in Torin's arms afterward, smiling against his chest. "I hope he enjoys himself," she said.

"I'm sure he will. He had better. I promised a large bonus to Yumi's staff to make sure he and Rojer were well entertained. Good thing, too. I can't imagine many women being seduced by a

man whose crossbow fires off its ammunition so precipitously."

Sunshine giggled. "Now you know what it's like for me. It always seems to be over before I realize it's begun."

Torin shook his head. "That's just sad." He kissed her and sat up. "Let's get dressed and go back inside. I want to show you more of the House and its pleasures before we retire to my room for the night. And I promise not to be done before you have a chance to enjoy yourself."

She laughed. "I don't need such a promise from you, beloved. You've not let me down yet." She pulled her dress on and Torin helped to rearrange it and tie the sash properly.

"You do that awfully well for not being able to see much."

He kissed her. "Practice, dearest Sunshine. Many of the women here wear similar gowns and you know I don't keep to my rooms when I'm here alone." He slipped into his own clothes and felt around until he had tracked down their sandals. They crept out from their hiding place and went out onto the paths again, a pair of friends out for a casual stroll.

"And just where are you taking me now?" she asked. The moon had risen higher and bathed the gardens in its silver glow.

Torin hugged her hand to his side and smiled

down at her. "I thought we might wander inside, listen to music, and perhaps even enjoy a dance or two."

Sunshine laughed. "You dance?" Her eyes twinkled in the moonlight.

Torin raised an eyebrow, tossing his head. "Yes. And quite well, I'll have you know." His left cheek dimpled.

"Then, yes, I most definitely want to try that." She chuckled all the way to the spacious ballroom.

Torin ushered her in before him. They stood to one side, out of the way of the dancers on the polished floor. The musicians were ensconced on a railed balcony at one end of the room. Crystal chandeliers, each with countless candles, shimmered and glowed. Sunshine sighed and pressed close to Torin's side.

"I feel like a girl in a fairy tale," she said. "I keep waiting for someone to realize I don't belong and throw me out in the street."

Torin put an arm around her waist. "You're the loveliest one here, beloved. Of course you belong."

They waited for the dance to end, then took their places for the next one. "What if I don't know the steps?" she whispered to him. "I'll look foolish."

"Watch me and mirror what I do," he said. "You'll be fine."

The other couples lined up and when all the



dancers were in place, the musicians struck the first chord. A look of relief crossed Sunshine's face. Torin grinned at her, held out his hand, and the dance began.

Their fingertips hooked lightly over each other and they stepped to the side with the other dancers. A little hop, half turn, turn back and onward. Torin's dimple deepened. His dark eyes shone in the bright lights from the chandeliers. Sunshine smiled up at him, delighting in his company. She had been pleased to realize the dance was one she knew and she was even more pleased that her partner showed such grace and style.

*He moves like a cat, she thought. Like quicksilver. He flows through the steps.* She found herself striving to match his fluid movements.

His smile said she had succeeded. More than that the other dancers slowly dropped out, leaving them in the center of the dance floor. Sunshine faltered when she noticed they were alone and being watched by scores of eyes.

"Steady, dearest," he murmured. He made the next full turn, his hair swirling around his shoulders and arms.

She spun back toward him. Their hands made contact again and she lost herself in the dance, the warmth in his eyes, and took comfort from the intermittent touch of his hand on hers.

His wink and smile gave her courage to continue until the music wound down and faded away. They came to a stop. He bowed deeply to her. She dropped a nervous curtsey. Thunderous applause filled the room from the crowd around the edge of the dance floor. Sunshine felt her cheeks glowing and not merely from the exertion of the dance. Torin chuckled, bowed his head to the onlookers, and led Sunshine to one of the small refreshment tables.

"Oh my," she said, as he pressed a delicate glass of fresh juice into her hand. She sipped the unfamiliar drink, decided it was just the thing she needed and drained the cup. She sighed.

Torin finished his own drink. "Shall we dance again, or would you prefer to watch this time?"

"I think I need a rest after that," she said. "I'm not used to being the centre of attention. It's — different."

He tapped his scarred cheek. "I'm used to people staring," he said. "But, yes, this was certainly out of the ordinary. I've never had that happen before. Of course, I've never had the perfect partner before, either."

She laughed up at him. "You're silly." She watched the next dance taking shape as the musicians warmed up. "But we were good together, weren't we?" His smile made her knees turn to water and she fought to stay upright.

"Yes," he said. "We're very good together." He put his arm around her waist and they turned to watch the dancing.

After resting and watching, they joined in the next few dances, whirling and twirling with the others on the polished floor. Torin took great delight in Sunshine's evident enjoyment of the music and intricate movements of the dances. As the music faded from the most recent dance, he led her aside.

"Had enough?" he asked. Sweat ran down his chest.

Sunshine's neck gleamed with perspiration and the hair at her temples was damp. "What did you have in mind next?" she asked.

He grinned. "I was thinking a swim would feel good, or a quick bath in cool water and then there is something I think you will enjoy very much."

She sipped the juice he had handed to her, gazing at him over the rim of the cup. "Why do I think it involves nudity?"

Torin shrugged one shoulder and drained his own cup. "I have no idea why you would think that, Sunshine." He offered the most innocent smile he could muster, dark eyes wide and mischievous. "It does, mind you."

Sunshine put her cup on the table and laughed softly. "Yours, mine or both?" He set his empty cup by hers.

"Either, or both. Are you interested?"

"I'm interested in cooling off first. That sounds like an excellent idea. I think I can guess what follows." She took the offered arm. He led her out of the ballroom and down the hallway to the baths.

"Your guess would be wrong," he said. "Partly. What you're thinking comes after the after-bath thing."

She looked up at him. "Oh." Her eyebrows climbed her forehead. "Now I *am* curious. What is it? Does it involve food?"

"No food. You'll see. And I guarantee you will enjoy it." He led her to one of the baths that had cooler water, calling to one of the attendants to make sure there were robes in the small bath chamber. They undressed quickly and stepped down into the welcome coolness of the water.

They had descended a few steps when Torin grabbed Sunshine around the waist with one arm. "Plug your nose!"

"What?" Torin's free hand covered her mouth, his finger and thumb pinching her nose shut. His other arm tightened around her, drawing her close against him. Before she could react, he made a half-turn and fell backwards into the water, taking her with him. The resulting wave sloshed water over the edges of the bath pool. They surfaced immediately. Torin pushed his hair back.

Sunshine sputtered and flailed, getting her feet beneath her. "Oh! Oh! Oh!" She spit water at him and tried to glare. He laughed aloud. "Oh, you! I'll get you one day, Torin Invanusson." She was laughing now, herself. "One day. It might take me years, but some day when you least expect it." She struck the surface of the pool with her hand and sent a sheet of water at him.

He splashed back with both hands, turning his face away and laughing harder. While she wiped water from his eyes, he submerged and grabbed her by the knees, toppling her under once more. She had time to give a little shriek of surprise before the water closed over her head. He grinned and fled to the other side of the pool where he hooked his elbows over the edge. She swam after him, although the water was only a bit more than waist deep. As she neared him, she Changed.

"Hey, no fair!" He turned to make his escape, but she flung herself through the water and nipped his buttock.

He yelped and grabbed at her, but she evaded his grasp and he fell into the water yet again. As he swam to the surface, he aimed for her and came up with his arms around her neck and shoulders.

"Got you, Miss Wolf," he said. She snapped her teeth at him and grinned. He grinned back, scratching her ears and neck. He pressed his cheek to the top of her head. "You'll have to Change

back, you know," he said. "There won't be any way for me to explain how I came in with a woman and left with a wolf."

She snuffed at him and flowed into human form in his arms. "How's this?" She leaned against him, sliding her arms around his ribs.

"Very nice," he said. He held her and kissed her forehead. "Very, very nice."

She returned the kiss. "Now, about that after-bath thing you mentioned —"

He smiled one of his slow smiles. "I've been thinking about that. We're going to save it for another night."

"What? That's not very nice; offering me untold pleasures and then taking them away."

"A mere delay, dearest. And I promise it will be worth the wait."

"So what else do we do tonight, then? Beyond the obvious, I mean."

He stroked her hair with one hand. "We'll think of something. We could just go to bed and snuggle and sleep. It *has* been a rather long day."

"I suppose it has at that," she agreed. "And I do like snuggling and sleeping with you." She kissed his chest.

"Then, now that we're all cooled off, why don't we do that?" He led the way up the steps and helped her into one of the thick towel-like robes. They donned soft slippers and Torin led her to his

room, avoiding any of the places where they might run into Ranid or Rojer.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Torin closed the door behind them and tossed his robe onto a chair. Naked, he went across the room to open the wide doors that led out onto a broad patio. Moonlight filled the patio and lit the steps to a walled garden below.

He turned, smiled at Sunshine who still had her robe wrapped around her, and went to the big bed. He tugged the gauzy curtains into place and slipped between them to sprawl across the counterpane.

"Are you coming in, or will you stay out there all night?" he asked. He watched her take off the robe, her body mysterious and alluring in the moonlight, and made more mysterious by the curtain around him. She pulled the thin material back and climbed onto the bed. Torin held out his arms to her with a warm and welcoming smile.

"In a minute," she said. "I want to look at you."

"Me?" He stared down the length of his own body.



"Not much there to look at unless you're partial to scars."

"It's very nice to look at," she said. She bent over to kiss one of pale scars on his belly. "You're long and lean and I like your skin." She brushed her lips against him and sat up again. "I like this little line of black hairs and the patch it leads to." She traced from his navel downwards and he grinned at her as his body responded to the light caress.

She laughed softly. "He's always quick to raise his head, isn't he?" she said, trailing her fingers along the rising erection.

"Yes, he has quite the mind of his own. And he likes you. *I like you.*"

"I like him—and you—very much." She leaned down and pressed her cheek to the shaft and kissed the head. Her tongue left a cool trail from base to tip and Torin shivered pleasantly.

"Mmmmmmm," he said. "I like when you do that."

"I know you do." She kissed him again and turned her attention to his legs.

"More scars," she said, tracing one after the other.

"How did you ever survive the war with so many weapons scoring hits on you?"

He shrugged and bent one leg so he could see his thigh. "Most of them only ever struck me

once," he said. "And then they died very quickly. This one was carelessness on my part, and that one—" He twisted his leg to show the back of his thigh. "—was pure luck on the enemy's part."

She wrapped her arms around his thigh and rested her head on his bent knee. One hand stroked along his leg as she gazed at his face. "Do you remember how you got each one?"

"No. Only a few of the more spectacular ones. Or the really stupid ones." He grinned at her and lifted his other leg to show his calf. "See that?" He pointed out a small round pucker in the meat of the calf.

"Yes. How'd you get that?"

"I got very, *very* drunk, fell over and stabbed myself with the dagger in my boot."

"What?" He shrugged and laughed. "The scabbard had worn out at the tip, which I didn't realize and well, that's the price for excessive drunkenness. I didn't even realize until the next day what I had done."

"Do you still get that drunk?" She kissed her fingertip and touched the little scar.

"Sometimes. Not often, but sometimes."

"Why?" Leaving a random pattern of light kisses up his legs and torso, she made her way into his arms. He wrapped her in a close embrace.

"It quiets my demons for time," he said. "Lets me sleep."

"I can think of nicer ways to make them hush," she said. She nibbled his neck. His head fell back to expose more of his throat to her. He made a deep sound of pleasure.

"So can I," he said and rolled toward her.

He drowsed in the comfortable afterglow, a contented smile on his lips. He was aware of Sunshine snuggled against his side, her back to his ribs and her head resting on his arm. He turned his head toward her and lifted his head to kiss her shoulder. He put his arm around her and fitted his body to hers. She murmured wordlessly and stirred.

"Shhh," he said softly. "Go back to sleep."

"Murm fmff?"

He pressed his face to her hair and breathed in her scent. His hand sought and cupped her breast. She sighed and fell into deeper sleep. Deep contentment filled him and he slid into dreams.

Movement beside him brought Torin to full wakefulness. He laid utterly still, his eyes closed for a few moments while he assessed the situation with his other senses. He opened his eyes and looked at Sunshine in the faint light.

She was sitting upright in the bed. "Something wrong?" he asked.

"No. Not wrong." She looked down at him. A sound, almost of embarrassment, escaped her lips. "This is going to sound foolish, and I couldn't ask

it of anyone except you..." Her voice trailed off.

"What is it?"

Her hands twisted together in her lap. "Every night I spend with Ranid, I have to make sure I stay in this form. But there are times when it would be nice if I could Change and curl up as a wolf. I don't get to do it very often."

Torin smiled. He reached out to stroke her shoulder and arm. "Woman or wolf matters not, sweetling. Both are delightful to snuggle with."

"You're sure? What if you feel, you know, desires in the night?"

He sat up to kiss her shoulder. "I know how to coax the wolf to woman when I need her," he said. He nibbled the base of her neck. "Change if you want to and let's go back to sleep. I'll take Miss Wolf for a run in the garden in the morning."

She touched his face and put both arms around his neck. Her lips touched his and they kissed long and slow and deep for a few moments before she pulled away. He watched as she flowed into the pale wolf. He lay back on the bed and held out his arms. She padded over to him and flopped down, her head on his chest. He put one arm around her and scratched her ears with the other hand.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

"Mrmfrmmm," she answered.

"Good," he said, and went almost instantly back to sleep.

The morning sun flung itself into the sky and tried to blaze down into the garden off Torin's room. Its efforts were thwarted by the trellises, hung with roses and wisteria and other climbing plants which offered a shaded and private area below.

Wolfen chuffing and deep male laughter floated into the morning sky, startling a songbird to sudden silence. Torin, naked with unbound hair, zigzagged among the posts that supported the trellises above. Sunshine pursued him, tongue lolling, ears waving loosely as she loped across the grass. Torin swung behind a post thick with the stems of the wisteria. He faced Sunshine, both his hands on the post as he peered first around one side and then the other.

Chuckles bubbled forth and increased when the wolf suddenly dropped her chest to the ground. Her front feet splayed out and her head tipped to one side. She grinned at him. Her hind feet were braced on the soft grass. Her tail waved; a happy banner. He risked a quick glance at the shallow steps up to his room and the small patio before it.

"You're quick, Miss Wolf," he said. "But you've not caught me yet."

She laughed and growled at him. *I will*. He feinted left, and as she leapt to chase him, he swung right and dashed around the post. He sprinted for the patio—their agreed 'safe' spot.

Sunshine recovered from the deception, spun on one hind foot and closed the gap with several long leaps. She nipped at his heel, then jumped and nipped his buttock.

"Ow!" He stumbled and almost fell, but recovered quickly. He scrambled up the steps and into the room where he collapsed on the rug, laughing and rubbing the nipped spot.

She bounded to his side, grinning. "You're wicked," he said. "And far too fond of biting my bum."

She nuzzled his thighs and licked them. Her tongue soothed the buttock where a small bruise had started to form.

"That's a bit better," he said. He stroked her head and ears. As his hand caressed, her ears drew closer to her head. He watched the Change move down her body. She kissed the bruise and sat beside him.

"It could have been worse," she said. "You could have turned just then and I might have bitten something more sensitive."

He gave her a horrified look and cupped his genitals with both hands. "Don't even think it," he said. He grinned then and held out his arms. She lay on top of him and snuggled into the warm embrace. He brushed her hair back from her face. "You're so beautiful," he said. "Have I mentioned?"

"Now and again, I think." She smiled and kissed him. "Tell me what we're doing today."

"Mmmm, well I think you owe me more than a kiss for that savage bite you took out of me, and then after that, I think a quick bath and then we should go visit my cousin, Husin. You'll like Husin."

"But you promised to take Ranid to see Husin, too. They'll have to come with us. That won't be nearly as much fun."

"If Yumi needs wine and if she would ask them to accompany her in one carriage, then you and I could take our own smaller one. Five would be too crowded, even in the big carriage."

"I see. Do you think she would do that?"

"It depends largely on whether she spent any time in bed with either of them," he said and snorked with laughter.

"She might have had all she can stand."

Sunshine hit his shoulder with a half-closed fist. "You're being mean," she said, laughing.

"I can't help it, sweetling. There is something about the pair of them that brings out the evil bastard in me. You, on the other hand —" He smiled slowly and ran his hand down her back and over the curve of her hip. She smiled and kissed him again.

"Now, what was it you wanted as payment for the little love-bite? Was it this?" She wrapped her

legs around his, pressing herself close to him. "It starts like this," he said. He returned her kisses and lifted his hips to her. They tumbled across the rug and lost themselves in passion and tenderness.



## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Yumi stood by Torin's side, her hand on his waist.

"You're going to owe me more than you can ever repay," she said. Her lips twitched.

He put an arm around her waist and drew her closer. "I already do," he said. He nuzzled her ear and kissed her. "Tell me, cherished Yumi, who spent the night with them?"

"Not I," she said. "I had quite enough of Ranid's fumbling in the garden. I do hope you brought sufficient gold, silver, jewels, wine, and silk for the two who did. And I want you to know there will be a different pair of girls each night and it's going to cost you. I won't ask any of them to repeat the experience."

"That bad?"

"From all reports: Yes. And now you want me to entertain them all the way to Husin's and back." She stared into his eyes. "She had best be worth it."

"She is. And I promise to make it up to you the next time I visit."

She sighed and shook her head. "I wouldn't do this for many, you know."

"I know. And I appreciate it more than you will ever believe." He kissed her again and held her with both arms for a moment. "Here they come." Yumi nibbled his beard before freeing herself from his embrace. She turned toward the brothers and Sunshine as they came from the main house to the courtyard where the carriages awaited.

"I hope you don't mind riding with me," she said to Ranid and Rojer. "Of course, if you prefer, you could share the large carriage with Torin and Sunshine and I could take the smaller one." She offered a sweet smile to them all.

Torin held back a glare. "Or they could ride together and you and I could share the smaller carriage," he said. His hand slid over the curve of her hip. He leered down at her. Ranid and Rojer exchanged glances. Sunshine smiled.

"Perhaps the men should take the larger vehicle and you and I could ride together. Talk women talk." She glanced at Torin and the others.

Yumi laughed aloud. "That would be capital! Then let us do that very thing, at least on the way there. We'll choose another arrangement for the ride home again."

Torin squeezed Yumi's buttock almost hard

enough to draw a yelp. He smiled innocently down at her and kissed her cheek, then strolled toward the brothers. He nodded at Sunshine as they passed each other. She winked at him and grinned.

He shook his head. "Wicked, wicked wench," he murmured. He smiled widely at Rojer and Ranid. "Shall we?"

They climbed into the carriages, and were on their way.

\* \* \* \*

Sunshine settled into the comfortable cushions beside Yumi, a nervous flutter in her belly. She cast a quick glance at Torin, who had taken the seat opposite the brothers. He caught her look and narrowed his eyes at her. The dimple in his left cheek winked and he shook his head the merest amount. She stuck out the tip of her tongue and looked away.

"That was inspired of you," said Yumi. She gave a quick order to the driver and the carriage rolled forward and out of the courtyard. The second carriage followed. "I admit you surprised me. I would have expected you to want to ride with Torin."

Sunshine turned her face from the fascinating scenery of the city and looked at Yumi. "I thought

you might want a break from Ranid and Rojer."

Appraising eyes surveyed her. "And you wanted to talk to me about Torin."

"Yes."

"I doubt there is anything I can tell you that you don't already know." Yumi looked Sunshine over. "He seems very fond of you."

"I'm very fond of him." Sunshine looked past Yumi at a graceful home with climbing plants hanging from the wrought iron balconies. "I know his heart is elsewhere, but I'm willing to take what he can give me."

Yumi nodded. "The Healer?"

"You know about her?"

"Yes. Torin and I have no reason for secrets. We're friends first and foremost. I have other lovers that I might choose over Torin were they to turn up together, just as he prefers to be with you this trip. My only objection was that I had no warning." She smiled. "As for the Healer, I know she has a large part of his heart, but after watching him with you, I have to say I think you have an equally large part."

Sunshine laughed and shook her head. "No, I don't think so. Oh, I know he cares for me and he treats me very well, but I doubt he loves me like that."

Yumi glanced over her shoulder toward the carriage behind them. "I wouldn't be so sure," she

said. "His feelings tend to run deep and strong without drawing loud attention to themselves."

Sunshine shrugged. "Well, whatever it is he feels, he's good to be with. He's a good friend."

"Yes. He is that." Yumi gave her companion a speculative look. "Tell me, how did you meet him?"

A slow smile touched Sunshine's lips. "I'm not sure I can explain," she said. "My people are very secretive and how he and I met is tied up in that secret."

"You're Folk, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

Yumi chuckled. "I had a friend some years ago who was Folk. He quite surprised me when he shared that secret. He has since Danced with his love and I haven't seen him in some time, but it is thanks to him that I have rooms with hidden gardens, such as the one Torin has."

They gazed at each other for some moments. "I gather you did not look exactly as you do now when you first met?"

"No. I looked very different. So different, in fact, that when we met again some years later, he did not recognize me right away."

"I see. Tell me how you met the first time."

"It's rather a long story."

"We have rather a long ride and I'm very interested."

“All right, then. I’ll tell you.” She made herself more comfortable and began her tale.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

“**D**uring the war against Madlach, we Folk in Destrain allied ourselves with the Destraini army. Many of us, male and female alike, took to the front to fight against the Westernen foe. “I was one of them.” Her gaze went into the distance as she stared down the years at the memories. “I was very young. So young. And yet, I couldn’t let the others go while I stayed home and played. Off to war they went, not knowing what they would face.”

“You were a very brave girl. I doubt I could have done it.”

“Brave and foolish are often mistaken for each other. Or perhaps they go hand in hand at times.” Sunshine smiled. “I sneaked along when I should have stayed home. My uncle Padraig was leading a group who were scouting out the Westernen troops. I followed them, but then I found the trail of a single soldier and I followed that, instead. That soldier was a Destraini scout, himself, and he

realized he was being stalked, even though I thought I was being remarkably clever and silent."

She smiled again. Yumi laughed. "I have an idea who the scout might have been. Please continue."

"You likely guess correctly. The scout was none other than Sergeant Torin of Oakwood. Heart son to Lordach of Tirna and well-acquainted with Folk and our customs." She frowned, pulling up the memories. "I wasn't sure what to make of him. He intrigued me and frightened me all at once."

"He still has that effect on quite a few people."

"Yes, he does. Oddly enough, he doesn't frighten me at all any more. However, back then, I was a mere cub who should have been at home. He caught me and treated me as an older wolf would have done, but I knew he was only human. It surprised me.

"Then my uncle and the others joined us. They wanted me to go home right then, but Torin thought I'd be safer with all of them together, so I was allowed to stay. It was winter and cold and snowing and when we camped for the night, I was too afraid to ask anyone to cuddle with me for warmth so I curled up by myself. All the others were lying around or on Torin, and he ordered me to come join them. He even had me get under the blanket with him.

"Of course, back then, I was practically a baby.



He was simply being kind to a wayward child."

"That sounds like Torin," said Yumi.

"We only had a few days together. He sent me home after we had a strange adventure which I've often wondered about. I'm half-convinced it was a dream, but I don't know for certain. In any case, when he and I rejoined Padraig and the rest, he had one of them escort me home. Just as well; I was really too young to be there."

"And he never saw you other than as a wolf?"

"Not until well after the war was over and we encountered each other again in the Market in Destrain City. I didn't tell him right away, but he put the puzzle together."

"And then you became more than friends."

"Yes, but not for some time. And now, well, now he is what he is and I am what I am, and married to someone else."

Yumi laughed softly. "He seems to have a knack for loving women who aren't available. I wonder if he does it a-purpose."

"It certainly keeps him from the promises of marriage vows and Dancing. Perhaps it's best for him not to be tied to a single woman."

Yumi studied her. "Hard on the woman who loves him, though. Or 'women', rather."

"Perhaps. Your turn. Tell me about how you met him." Yumi nodded and told of meeting the young Lieutenant and introducing him to Chaviss

culture.

Sunshine laughed softly as Yumi finished her story.

"So he was most appreciative, then," she said. "I'm sure Ardan appreciated the gift of the wine."

"I know he did. I was just as pleased to have met such an enthusiastic young man. Eager to learn, eager to please and willing to try new things. What more could I have asked?" She smiled.

"It seems I have a great deal to thank you for," Sunshine said. "I think he learned quite a bit from you."

"And I'm sure he's been more than willing to share what he knows with you."

Sunshine smiled and glanced away. They rode in silence for a few moments, then Yumi touched Sunshine's arm. "There is something else I have to ask," she said. "Of course, you don't have to answer, but I'm burning to know."

"What is it?"

"How did you ever come to wed such a boor as Ranid? I know the Healer's marriage to the brother was arranged, but I also know that your people don't believe in such things. So how in the world did you end up with him?"

They gazed into each other's eyes. Sunshine shook her head. "I was very young, and he was very charming and funny and—" She paused to

gather her thoughts. "The war wasn't over yet, but I had been to Westernen, I had seen all manner of things and being a good girl in the village wasn't enough any more. I wanted more. I wanted to see places and people —"

"You wanted the adventure without the danger?"

"Exactly. And this young Trader came to our village fairly regularly with tales of distant places and people. He was very taken with me, and I with him. I wanted out of the village, he wanted a young wife who would share his life and travel with him, and well, one thing led to another."

Her eyes narrowed. "His mother wasn't pleased that he had wed without her blessings, and a savage Folk girl, at that. She keeps saying it won't last, that I'll rescind my vows that someday it'll all fall apart. I know she's waiting for me to back out just so she can tell him — and me — 'I told you so.' So I intend to stay his wife until she dies. I absolutely will not give that old harridan the satisfaction of being right."

Yumi studied her companion. "You would rather endure Ranid to spite his mother, than to have Torin for yourself?"

An odd smile crept across Sunshine's lips. "I thought we agreed his heart belongs to Emeera. He would never truly be mine. It would only seem so, and one day things would conspire to put

them together and, well, I would rather have what I have with him, and know it for what it is, than to think I have something more and to lose it."

The carriage crested the long, gentle slope it had been climbing and Husin's vineyards came into view.

## Chapter Thirty

Sunshine gasped at the expanse of grapes growing in tidy rows along the hillsides, and the bright big house with its courtyards and large outbuildings.

"Before we get there," Yumi said, "you should know that Torin will be treating me as he always does. Husin knows we are occasional lovers, and he'll expect a certain behaviour from Torin when I am about. It's not to hurt you or to make you feel left out, but to provide camouflage for you and him. Do you understand?"

Sunshine nodded. "Yes. Thank you for the warning."

"And here we are." The carriage wheels rattled over cobblestones and they drew to a halt in a wide courtyard. The second carriage stopped behind them.

Torin leapt nimbly from the second carriage before it had come to a complete stop. He trotted forward and opened the door of the first one.

Smiling, he offered his hand to Yumi and helped her down to the cobbled courtyard. When he turned back to Sunshine, he gave her a wide and toothy smile as he held out his hand. She looked into his eyes and grinned back.

"Did you enjoy your ride, Torin?" she asked, stepping down.

"Oh, it was quite—interesting is too strong a word. What am I looking for?"

"Dull? Excruciating?" She offered suggestions with a gleam in her eye.

"It was an experience," he said. "One that needn't be repeated any time soon." He gave her hand a subtle squeeze before turning to Yumi. "Husin should be out to greet us," he said. He put his arm around her waist. She leaned against him, her hand on his shoulder. She smiled at Sunshine and winked. Ranid and Rojer had waited for the carriage to halt before climbing down and joining the others.

They looked around the wide courtyard at the surrounding buildings where Husin made and stored his wine. "This is much larger than I envisioned," said Ranid with a touch of envy in his voice.

"I believe Husin's great-grandfather started it," said Torin. "He passed it to his son, who expanded it and Husin has taken it further."

"I'm impressed." Ranid's tone said he was

more jealous than impressed.

A voice boomed from inside one of the buildings. "Well, why didn't someone tell me sooner that carriages had arrived? What impression is this to be making?" The voice preceded the appearance of Husin himself. Torin grinned, releasing Yumi. He took three long strides toward the vintner, whose broad face was suddenly wreathed in smiles. "Torin! By Jerah!" Powerful arms wrapped Torin in a rib-creaking embrace. "It's terribly good to see you!"

Torin returned the hug. "It's good to see you, Cousin," he said. They beamed into each other's faces and thumped each other on the back. Husin thrust Torin to one side and made his way to Yumi with outstretched hands. His voice rumbled from his chest.

"Ahhh, the delightful Yumi." He enfolded her in a bear hug which almost left her breathless. He smiled politely at Ranid and Rojer, and then smiled widely at Sunshine.

"Who is this delectable person?" he asked. Torin stepped forward.

"Allow me to present my dear friend, Sunshine of Lorca, her husband, Ranid of Brinded and his brother, Rojer."

"Friends of Torin's are always welcome here!" Husin embraced Sunshine and offered his hands in welcome to the brothers. "Come, come. We

must go inside and get out of the morning sun before it cooks our brains. It's a long ride up from the city." He clapped his hands and when a boy appeared, gave him instructions to care for the horses and carriage drivers. "There now, they'll be well taken care of. Now, come along, come along." He held out his elbows. Yumi tucked her hand into the curve of one and nodded to Sunshine to take the other.

Husin roared merry laughter. "Aha! See now, here I am with all the lovely ladies. Life can hardly get better." He led them into the house, Torin and the others trailing behind.

He escorted them into a spacious room with wide windows. A refreshing breeze lifted gauzy curtains. "Nuri, my darling. My Light! Where are you? We have guests!"

Husin took the ladies' hands and kissed them before ushering them to comfortable lounges. "Make yourselves at home, dear lovelies, and I will find my beautiful wife. Torin, you're family. Fetch wine for our friends. You know where everything is, do you not?"

"Of course, Husin." Torin bowed his head as Husin bustled away. "Have a seat," he said to the brothers. "There is no point in attempting to resist Husin's hospitality. I'll be back with wine in a moment." Rojer and Ranid sat together on a wide couch, looking about. Sunshine watched Yumi



stretch out on the lounge chair and followed suit.

Torin winked at her as he passed on his way to the wine pantry. By the time he returned with a tray of goblets, Husin and Nuri had joined the others. "And were you sensible enough to bring wine for us all?" Husin raised one eyebrow almost into his hair. He examined the tray. "Of course you were."

He rubbed his hands together. Torin served the ladies first, then the brothers, saving the last two goblets for himself and Husin. He settled himself on another of the long chairs.

"To family and friends," he said, lifting his cup in a toast. The others echoed the sentiment and sipped the wine.

"Now, Cousin," said Husin. "What of interest have you to share with us?"

Torin shrugged. "Not a great deal. Ardan has been exiled, for charges I refuse to believe, and I am now the Commander of Her Majesty's Army."

Husin's eyes widened. Nuri made a small sound of surprise. "That is quite the responsibility for a boy of your years," said Husin. He held up a hand at Torin's expression.

"I know. I know. You're a man. A veteran soldier. HaHA! You're a boy to me, little Cousin. A veritable infant in arms." He bellowed laughter.

Torin gave Husin a fierce look, then smiled suddenly. "Ah, everyone looks young to an old

man like you, Husin. I'm always pleased to discover you can still walk without a cane when I come to visit."

Husin snorted laughter. Sunshine giggled. Yumi laughed aloud while Nuri chuckled and shook her head. Rojer and Ranid tittered and drank more of their wine.

"I could take you outside, young pup, and teach you a thing or two about old men." Husin winked hugely at Torin and put his arm around his wife. "But I prefer to show my lovely Light that there is life in the old dog that I am."

Nuri stroked the backs of her fingers over Husin's beard, smiling up at him. "There is indeed, and I won't have him wounding it competing with young warriors."

"Ah, now, Cousin," said Torin. "You know I wouldn't hurt him very much. After all, there is wine to be made. I wouldn't do anything to interfere with that!"

Ranid cleared his throat rather noisily. Torin looked at him. He nodded his head in Husin's direction and raised his eyebrows at the soldier. "Oh, yes. I had almost forgotten." Torin smiled at Husin. "Ranid here is experimenting with the creation of a form of gin," he said. "He begs your indulgence and would ask if you know anything of such fermentation, and whether you would offer advice on improving the flavour and

smoothing out the bite."

"I'm afraid I'm not much of an imbibor of such liquors, but I will gladly give advice. Have you a sample with you?"

Torin looked at Ranid. "Well?"

"Oh, er, yes. Yes, I brought a bit with us just in case. It's, er, out in the carriage. No hurry, though. I just hoped that I might learn from your experience, as it were."

Husin heaved himself to his feet. "Well, then, come along and let us try it out. Who will join us?"

"I'll stay here, beloved," said Nuri, smiling at Husin. He squeezed her hand and passed her his half drained goblet.

"I'll come along," said Yumi. She rose gracefully from the long chair. Ranid and Rojer stood. They all set their cups on various small tables.

Torin settled himself more comfortably on the lounge. "I'll stay with Nuri," he said. "We can't have everyone abandon her."

"If no one objects, I'll stay here as well," said Sunshine. "I'm afraid I'm not much help when it comes to the gin production."

"Well, then, off we go." Husin led the small group back to the entry courtyard.

Sunshine heaved a sigh and smiled at Nuri and Torin. "I hope it's not too much of an imposition," she said to the other woman.

"Not at all," said Nuri. "Husin loves giving advice, whether it's wanted or not. Being asked is like manna from the gods to him." She smiled. "Mind you, I won't guarantee that what he knows about flavouring and aging wine will work with your husband's gin."

Torin grinned into his goblet. He took a deep drink and said, "He can hardly make it worse. Although I have to admit that it can knock a man off his feet in a very short period of time. Potent stuff, that gin, and just what many men want after a bad day. But I think Ranid wants a slightly better class of customer. He's hoping a less harsh drink will draw the higher classes."

"And an endorsement from Husin will open the doors of those higher class homes and establishments," said Sunshine. "It's embarrassing to come to your home and be treated so well, knowing that Ranid is after anything to increase his profits. I'm very sorry, Mistress Nuri."

Nuri chuckled. "Oh, don't worry on that account, my dear. Husin is not as dull as he sometimes appears. The drink will get no nod of approval from him until it is of a quality that he himself would offer his customers."

Torin looked at Sunshine and winked. "It looks as if he'll be selling to the inns and taverns in the old town for quite a while yet, then," he said. He finished his wine and jackknifed out of the seat.

"Would you ladies join me for a walk, while the others are out destroying their throats and stomachs?"

He offered his elbows to the ladies. They exchanged a glance and a nod, and rose to join him. Nuri slid open a screened panel which led them to a paved walk and the three strolled out into the bright day.

As they strolled the path, Torin shifted his right arm until Sunshine's hand slid down his forearm to his hand. He linked his fingers through hers and squeezed gently, all the time carrying on conversation with Nuri. "I don't remember those roses the last time I was here," he said, pointing with his chin.

"No, Husin got that bush from a Trader. They have a lovely scent to them when they open just a bit more. Even now you can get a hint."

They breathed deeply, standing near the roses. "They're beautiful," said Sunshine.

"What's that?" Torin lifted his chin, turned his head from side to side. "Is that a fountain? I thought Husin said they were too much trouble."

Nuri laughed and led the way down a branching path. "He did, until someone showed him a trick to feeding the water to it, and then having the excess feed the vines below. Look there."

They came out to a small paved area with

marble benches around the edge and the fountain in the middle. Water splashed and foamed over the edges of a fluted bowl into a larger one below, and from that to a third. From there, it ran into four tiled channels which led down the gentle slope of the hillside to one of the many vineyards.

Torin stood by the fountain and gazed at the view spread out below. "This is incredible, Nuri," he said. "Much nicer than the pump that was here, but doesn't this overwater the vines?"

"It can be turned off from the house," she said. "It's quite the clever arrangement." Sunshine trailed her fingers in the biggest part of the fountain. She glanced at Torin, who was still admiring the vista. A mischievous smile tugged at her lips. Nuri happened to look over at her and catch her eye. The women smiled at each other. Nuri stepped away from Torin, and dipped her hand in the water. With a quick nod to each other, both women scooped water at the unsuspecting soldier.

The double handful of cold water struck his chest and belly. Some splashed into his beard. He shouted and jumped back, silk shirt soaked and clinging to him. Sunshine and Nuri shrieked laughter, and threw more water at him before he had recovered from the first onslaught.

"Oho! Someone is in trouble here," he said, and leaped toward the fountain. He struck the surface

of the water with a roundhouse swing and sent a spray of water toward Nuri, then turned to Sunshine. "You, Mistress," he said, and lunged at her.

She screamed laughter and ran around the fountain with Torin in close pursuit. He pounced and caught her, both arms circling her waist. "Time to cool you down, I think," he said, and lifted her. She laughed and beat his chest with one fist.

"Don't you dare!"

"Torin!" Nuri tugged his arm.

He looked down at her. "I can't very well do this to you, Cousin. Husin would drown me in a wine barrel." He held Sunshine over the water. "Besides, something tells me it was all this one's idea." He tipped her and dipped her feet into the water. She kicked and splashed and struggled and he almost dropped her. He hoisted her in his arms and adjusted his grip.

She put one arm around his neck. "You wouldn't ruin Yumi's dress, would you?" she asked, batting her eyelashes at him.

"Yes, I would. Besides, dear Mistress Sunshine, 'tis only water. It'll dry." He tipped her the other way. Her head fell back and she stared at the water in front of her nose. Tendrils of hair came loose and fell into the fountain.

"Please?" she said.

"HMMMMM. What say you, Nuri?" he said, holding Sunshine in a precarious position over the wide bowl of the fountain.

"You'd have to explain it to her husband," she said.

"I could tell him she tripped and fell," he said. "He'd believe that."

Sunshine let her left arm drop to the water and once again splashed a big handful up at Torin. She half-soaked herself in the process, but laughed as the water hit his face and ran down the planes of his cheeks.

"You wicked woman!" He grinned and dropped her into the fountain. She shrieked and scrambled to her feet, the dress clinging to her curves and almost transparent.

Torin offered her a hand to help her out, and admired the view now available and much more delightful than the previous one that had caught his attention. She glared at him but giggles bubbling forth took any sting out of the look. Torin cleared his throat. "I, uh, think we should probably get you into something dry, Mistress Sunshine," he said. His eyes struggled to stay focused on her face, but were drawn instead to the intriguing glimpses the wet dress presented.

Sunshine looked down at herself. Colour rose in her bosom and throat, reddened her cheeks. "Yes, I think we should." She pulled the wet material



away from her breasts and belly. "Mistress Nuri?"

"I'm sure I have something that will do very nicely," said Nuri. She looked at Torin. "Although I somehow think that my cousin doesn't object too strongly to the current state of your apparel."

Torin tore his eyes from the shadows at the juncture of Sunshine's thighs. "Not at all," he said. "And I would offer my shirt to you, Mistress, but it's gotten all wet and is no better than your dress itself." He smiled into Sunshine's eyes and offered her his arm.

The three headed back to the house. They entered the large sitting room, leaving a trail of water behind them, most of it from Sunshine.

Nuri looked at the other two. "You both need some dry clothes," she said. "It should be entertaining to explain this to the others." She studied Torin. "I think you'll fit into Jalili's clothes," she said. "At least until yours dry, and Mistress Sunshine, I know I have something that will fit you. This way, my dears."

She led them down a corridor and up a flight of stairs to the second floor. She stopped at one of the doors. "This is my son's room," she said. "Wait a moment, and I'll see what he has that will suit." She went through the door. It swung mostly closed behind her.

Torin smiled down at Sunshine and put his arm around her waist. "You look enchanting like that,"

he murmured into her ear. With one eye watching the door, he kissed her neck. He slipped a hand through the folds of her dress and laid it against the cool skin of her belly. "I could help warm you." He kissed her again. "Dry you off."

She leaned her head on his shoulder. "That would be lovely," she said, "But I think Nuri would suspect something."

He withdrew his hand. "I suppose you're right." He stepped away from her a moment before Nuri came out with dry trousers and a shirt in her hands. "These should do," she said. "Just go down the hall to the third door on the left. It's empty and you can change your clothes there. As for you, my dear, you come with me."

She led Sunshine the other way. Torin stood watching for a minute or two, then took himself to the room Nuri had suggested. He quickly stripped to his skin, dried himself with a towel from the wash stand, and sorted out the mysteries of the new trousers.

Nuri waited in the hallway with Sunshine's wet dress in her hands. "Give me your wet things," she said to Torin. "I'll hang them to dry." She looked him up and down. "You look quite Chaviss in that, you know. If it weren't for the length of your hair, you would blend right in."

She took his shirt and pants from him and went down the hall. At the top of the stairs, she paused.

"Your friend will be along in a moment. If you would be so good as to wait for her to show her the way back to the sitting room?"

"Of course." He strolled the corridor, looking at the paintings on the wall. A door opened and Sunshine peeked out. Torin smiled.

"Oh good," she said, and came out into the hallway.

Torin went to her. "I'm here to escort you back downstairs," he said. He put his arms around her waist. "Although I would rather escort you back into that room."

She touched his face and linked her hands behind his neck. "That will have to wait until later," she said. "All you may have right now is this." She kissed his mouth. He savoured the kiss, nibbled her lips and held her close for a long moment.

He sighed. "Shall we go downstairs now, most cherished?"

"Mmmmm. I suppose we must."

A reluctant Torin stepped back from her. He took her hand, pressed it to his lips and led the way to the sitting room.

Nuri encountered them at the bottom of the stairs. She watched them descending together. "You make a very handsome couple," she said. "Did you know that?"

"Don't tell my husband," said Sunshine, a

dimple appearing in her cheek.

Nuri laughed. "I had forgotten about him for the moment," she said. "You look so at home at Torin's side." She shook her head. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"Sunshine and I are very old friends," said Torin. "I believe I have known her longer than Ranid has, although he doesn't know that." He glanced down at Sunshine. "We are very comfortable together."

"That must be it," said Nuri. She opened and closed her mouth, smiled, and led the way to the sitting room. The others returned shortly thereafter.

Yumi stared hard at Torin and Sunshine. Torin smiled at her and patted the lounge where he reclined. He rolled onto his side to make a place for her to sit. She made herself comfortable, and spoke quietly.

"What happened to your clothes?" She darted a glance toward Sunshine.

Torin grinned. "An incident at a fountain. I was outnumbered, but I managed to avenge myself on one of my attackers."

"I see. I think I should have stayed here with you three. It was surely more interesting."

"Did you learn anything?"

"That I don't care much for the taste of Ranid's drink, and that you're right in your assessment of

its potency. I hate to admit that I might have room for some of it in my House. And I know one House in particular that will want a great deal of it."

Torin's reply was interrupted by Husin. "'Tis a good thing you didn't join us, my Light," said Husin. He barreled into the room and dropped into a chair. "It would have dropped you on the instant. The drink is a potent one, no denying it. I can think of a few Houses that would be glad of a supply, but by Jerah, it can give your throat a good burn on the way down! What think you, Torin?"

"It's a fast path to unconsciousness," said the tall soldier. "And I know of more than a few who would welcome that in a drink."

"Ah ha ha! I'm sure you do. But as I said to these good fellows—" Husin's gesture took in Rojer and Ranid. "— they'll sell more if they make it a little less powerful. Better to need four or five drinks instead of only two or three."

"Your good cousin was also kind enough to give me some advice on smoothing out the flavour," said Ranid. He licked his lips and smiled.

"Better and better," said Torin. "Your drink will be the envy of all the distillers in Destrain if you take Husin's advice." He rested his hand on Yumi's hip. She leaned back against him.

Nuri studied them, a smile playing about her lips. She looked toward Sunshine, who sat alone in a comfortable chair. "You will all stay for supper tonight?" she said to her guests, more of a statement than a question.

"I defer to the ladies," said Torin. "And to Rojer and Ranid. But I want to mention that Nuri and her head cook are marvels in the kitchen and that a meal here is nothing to be sneered at. Not to mention the quality of the wines before, during and after the meal." He grinned.

"I'm always delighted to accept," said Yumi.

"Perhaps Sunshine and I could impose on you to let us in on some of your secrets, Nuri?"

Nuri rose gracefully to her feet. "Of course you may. In return, perhaps you will let me in on some of yours."

She smiled and raised her eyebrows. "Come with me, then, dear friends." She led Yumi and Sunshine away from the sitting room.

Husin watched them go and gave Torin a brief, hard look. Torin smiled blandly back. Husin gave a loud bark of laughter. "Ha HA! Well, now with the ladies out of the way, we are free to discuss what we will. Tell me, friends of my cousin, what did you think of your first night in Yumi's House?"

## Chapter Thirty-One

“Yes, I’m rather interested myself in how your evenings went,” said Torin, sipping his wine.

“Before we tell you, I have to thank you again for watching over Sunshine for me. I, er, don’t think I would have felt quite comfortable pursuing, well, you know, my own interests, if I had been worried about her.” Ranid turned to Husin. “Your cousin relinquished his own freedom last night to give me peace of mind. He watched over my wife and kept her out of the clutches of other men.”

Husin sputtered and choked on his wine. He coughed to clear his windpipe and looked over at Torin. “Did you? How very kind of you, Torin. It’s not everyone who would give up his own freedom in Yumi’s House.” He beamed at Torin, his eyes sharp and piercing.

Torin smiled blandly back. He shrugged. “It wasn’t so terrible,” he said. “Sunshine is pleasant

enough company, although not quite what I'm used to when I visit with Yumi."

"No, I imagine not," said Husin. His fierce gaze met Torin's.

Torin continued the bland smile, but nodded once to his cousin. Husin nodded back. There would be private conversation later. Husin dragged his attention back to Ranid and Rojer. "Then you must tell me all about your evening after your lovely wife was off in safe hands."

"Yes, please do. Vicarious excitement is better than none," said Torin.

"I do regret that you had to give up yours," said Ranid. "And I assure you I won't forget your kindness." He cleared his throat nervously. "I'm a bit, well, you know, unsure of the properness of all this—how much I should divulge."

Husin bugled laughter. "Ah, we have no secrets here in Chav," he said. "Not when it comes to this. Tell on, friends of my cousin."

Ranid and Rojer looked at each other and then at Torin and Husin. Both cleared their throats, seeming nervous and ill-at-ease to the amused Torin. He made a show of making himself comfortable, his wine goblet held in linked fingers, resting on his belly as he lay back in the long chair, feet up, hair loose around his shoulders.

He turned his face toward Husin. "I think they're afraid I will think ill of them," he said. "It's



not our custom in Destrain to wander into other beds after taking vows, although I can't say it's never done. It's just that it's not done so openly." He smiled widely at the brothers. "Go ahead and tell us your adventures. I promise that what you say here will never reach the ears of either Sunshine or Emeera. Your secret is safe."

"Indeed it is," agreed Husin. "All secrets are safe in this house."

He and Torin beamed at each other and turned faces with raised eyebrows to Ranid and Rojer. Again the brothers exchanged nervous glances.

"You go first," said Ranid. Rojer blinked and coughed into his hand.

"Very well," he said at last. "It all began —"

\* \* \* \*

Torin listened to Rojer's story with an expression of fascination, as if such sexual escapades were new to him. In truth, he couldn't begin to imagine anything more mundane than the experiences Rojer related with growing confidence and animation. He avoided making eye contact with Husin after the first time their gazes connected. Both had had to turn suddenly away, Husin consumed with a sudden choking fit on his wine and Torin busy with fishing imaginary dust motes from his goblet with his forefinger, his head bent deeply to the cup. Rojer continued, heedless of the

amusement he had caused his host. Ranid sat by his brother, all rapt attention.

"And what did you think of the baths, then?" asked Torin, when his wine was sufficiently dust-free. He sucked the wine from his forefinger absently.

Roger's face turned a deep red. "Most, erm, most enjoyable," he said.

Torin gave him a bland smile. "I've always been partial to them, myself," he said. "Especially with company. There's something free about floating in warm water, surrounded by warmth while part of you is surrounded by even nicer warmth." He grinned at Ranid, thinking of Sunshine's warmth in particular.

"Well, you know, it's something you have to get, erm, used to, I suppose," said Roger. "It seems unnatural somehow." He cleared his throat.

"More wine?" Husin rose from his chair and refilled Roger's cup. He sat again and smiled, his own goblet cradled on his ample belly. "I agree with Torin," he said. "There is great pleasure in a big hot bath."

Ranid's head bobbed up and down. "Oh, yes, yes. Mmmmm."

Roger looked at him. "You didn't?!" He stared. "You did?"

Ranid smiled nervously. "Well, you know, Roger, when in Chav —" His voice trailed off. He

sipped his wine.

"Do tell, Ranid," said Torin. He rose fluidly to refill his cup and stretched out again, his attention on Ranid.

Torin cradled his drink on his chest, hiding his amusement at the deep red of Ranid's cheeks. He carefully avoided making eye contact with Husin, whose attention seemed focused on Ranid. Ranid spoke in a low voice, as if to be certain he would not be overheard in the distant kitchen.

"Well, first of all, Mistress Yumi spoke to, er, Rojer and me and brought another young woman with her so we both, that is to say, Rojer and I, had someone to, to, er, speak with. It was very kind of her."

Torin nodded agreement and smiled over the edge of his cup. "So what happened after you all got together?"

"Well, er, we all chatted a bit and had some wine and then Yumi took me for a walk in the gardens."

His flush deepened until Torin feared Ranid might suffer an apoplectic seizure. "Do go on. The gardens are lovely, are they not? I gave Sunshine a tour of them myself last night."

Ranid made a small strangled noise. "Did you indeed?"

"Oh yes. I took her to one of my favourite spots; one with a large tree with low-hanging branches

and a bench to sit and talk. It's very nice there, but you might not have seen it." His eyes twinkled with wicked amusement at Ranid's obvious discomfiture.

"Oh, well, I really can't, can't say that I was paying much attention to the, er, the trees, you see," said Ranid. "Yumi's company is, well, distracting."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Torin. "Please, go on."

With more stammering and stuttering, Ranid related the adventures, prolonging the duration of Yumi's stroking of his erection as if he had lasted for more than a few moments. Torin kept a fascinated expression on his face, sparing a brief wink at Husin.

To hear Ranid's tale, he was an accomplished lover, more than able to satisfy the three young women who had taken him to his room for what seemed to be an extended romp. Torin suspected the romping was over far sooner than Ranid suggested, but kept his opinions to himself.

Soon enough, Ranid finished his story.

"And what of you, Torin? Did you get away from Sunshine at last and have a bit of fun for yourself?" Ranid asked.

"I had a very pleasant evening, actually," Torin replied. He was saved from having to make up a tale by the announcement of dinner. The four men rose and went into the dining room where

servants had set the table for seven.

Yumi and Sunshine were already seated. Husin directed the others to their chairs. He, himself, took the head of the table with Torin to his right. Sunshine sat to Torin's right and Ranid sat beyond him. Yumi was to Husin's left with Rojer on her other side, and the foot of the table would evidently be Nuri's seat. Her voice could be heard on the other side of the door which led to the kitchen, and a moment later, she joined them.

The meal passed in pleasant conversation and laughter. Husin's booming tones encouraged the brothers to become a little more expansive than usual. Torin's dry humour provided a counterpoint and the voices of the women added a pleasant undertone. Wine flowed freely and by the end of the meal, Ranid and Rojer were more than a little drunk.

Torin leaned back and pushed away the little dish which had held his dessert. "Wonderful, as always," he said.

Husin belched agreement. "Indeed. Nuri, my Light, you have worked your magic again. I am blessed beyond belief to have you."

She inclined her head. "It is well that you realize it."

She smiled.

Yumi put her hand to her mouth to hide her own burp. "Yes, a wonderful meal. Thank you so

much."

Sunshine added her thanks, as did the brothers somewhat belatedly. Torin glanced at them.

"I hate to eat and run," he said. "But I believe we should be getting back before they're gone altogether."

"But Yumi hasn't even told me what wines she wanted to pick up," said Husin. "Therefore, the carriage hasn't been loaded yet. Stay a bit. Stay the night, if you wish."

Torin glanced around the table, his gaze lingering a moment on Sunshine. He looked into Husin's eyes. Ranid yawned hugely. "I could go for a bit of a lie down," he said.

"So could I," echoed Rojer.

"That settles it, then," said Husin. He clapped his hands, and when servants appeared, he directed them to take the brothers to a room where they could lie down in comfort to digest and sleep off some of the wine. When they were gone, he rose to his feet. "Join me in the other room," he said, and led the way.

They took places on the couches and made themselves comfortable. Nuri and Husin sat together, she seeming slender and almost fragile next to his bulk. Husin's eyes darted looks at Torin, Yumi and Sunshine. "I hear my cousin kept you free from danger last night," he said to Sunshine.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

Sunshine looked at Torin. He shrugged. "Ranid told him I watched over you last night," he said.

"So you did," she replied.

"Walk with me, Torin," said Husin, and heaved himself to his feet. Torin followed him out to the garden. They walked past the roses and stood near the fountain, now silent. Torin, unused to looking up at many people, raised his eyes to Husin's. They stared at each other for a long moment.

"It's a dangerous game you play," said Husin at last.

"There is no danger for me from Ranid," said Torin.

"It is not your safety I'm concerned for. What of the lady if her husband finds out?" He frowned. "It is her I am concerned for."

"I assure you that she is quite capable of taking care of herself should Ranid turn ugly."

"And what of her reputation? Her self-respect?"

Her heart? Is she capable of taking care of herself when you break that?" Husin's dark eyes bored down into Torin's. "To eyes that can see, it is obvious she is more than smitten with you, Torin. She loves you and soon or late, this will hurt her more than you begin to realize."

Torin folded his arms across his chest and stared through Husin into the middle distance. Silence surrounded them, but for the occasional call of an evening bird. At last, he heaved a sigh and focused his eyes on his cousin. "She does love me," he said. "And I, her. But you're right. She won't divorce her husband — she has told me as much — so what more can we have than this?" He waved one hand in a vague gesture. "What can I do? I cannot suddenly turn my back on her, refuse her my affection. What do I do?"

Husin reached out a hand and dropped it on Torin's shoulder. "Give her this time while you are here, and on the way home, tell her it must end between you. At least, the passion must end. Stay her friend, if you can, if she will let you, and love her as that. Nothing more."

Torin nodded. He gave Husin an embrace and they headed back to the house. The expression on his face, when they walked in, caused Sunshine to look at him in concern.

He smiled at her, shrugged and sat down again. "I've given my wine order to Nuri," said Yumi.



"She has already given directions for the kegs to be loaded into the big carriage. If we can wake Ranid and Rojer, we can head back tonight."

"As you wish," said Husin. He waited until word came that the wine was safely stowed before sending servants to bring the brothers downstairs. He and Nuri escorted their guests outside and saw them into the carriages: Rojer, Ranid and Yumi in one, Torin and Sunshine in the other. Husin raised an eyebrow at the arrangement.

Torin embraced Nuri and then Husin. "It will give us a chance to talk," he murmured into Husin's ear. Husin nodded.

"Be well, cousin," he said. "I am delighted to have met you, aptly named Sunshine." He bowed over her hands, kissing them both. At last, all the goodbyes were made and the carriages rolled out of the courtyard and headed back toward the city.

Sunshine snuggled against Torin's side and lifted his arm so that it circled her shoulders. He kissed her temple somewhat absent-mindedly, stroking her upper arm with a light touch. A deep and thoughtful sigh heaved itself out of the depths of his chest. She looked up at him.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

A long silence preceded his answer. At last, he looked down into her eyes. "Something Husin said," he replied. "Something I didn't want to hear, nor consider, but I think he may be right."

She sat up and pulled away a little. Her hand rested on his forearm. "What did he say?"

"He made me realize that what we have cannot last as long as I would like it to." His lips twisted in a wry smile. "He said it would break your heart one day, if we were to continue as we have been."

She stared at him. "You want to stop — now?"

"No. Not at all. I don't really want to stop ever, but he's right. Someone is going to get hurt soon or late. You won't untake your vows and be with me; I won't do anything to cause Ranid to challenge me to a duel because he is no match for me and it would be too easy for me to kill him and you would hate me for it. So, beloved Sunshine, what is there here for me? For us?" He touched her face. "Beyond the now — what is there?"

"I don't know." She pressed her cheek into his palm and covered his hand with hers to hold it in place. She tried to smile and failed. "I don't know."

They fell silent, gazing at each other. Sunshine spoke first. "Is this the end of everything? Our friendship? Our closeness? All of it?"

"No. Not all. I will never stop being your friend. Not now. Not ever. I will always be there when you need me."

"And when I need you beside me in my bed? Will you be there?" She held his hand in both of hers.

He shook his head. "Not after we go home. While we are here in Chav, at Yumi's House, yes. Every night, if you will let me. But not on the journey back to Destrain, and not after we are back where we belong." He stroked her hair. "Even though I often feel you belong beside me."

"I thought you wanted Emeera at your side. Isn't she your true Light? Isn't she the one who belongs beside you?"

"Perhaps no one belongs beside me," he said. "Perhaps it is my fate to love women I cannot have and to grow old alone, guarding my Queen and my city. Perhaps I am too much the soldier to be a husband to anyone." He shrugged a shoulder then lifted his arm. "Come back close to me. If I cannot have forever with you, I will take what I can right now and love you while I can."

She put her arms around his waist and pressed herself to his side. His arms circled her and held her close. The carriage drove on in the deepening twilight. They spent that night spooning together in Torin's big bed, lovemaking on hold for the time being. After breakfast the next day, Sunshine looked across the table at Torin.

"I've been thinking about what you said last night," she said at last. "And I want to be alone today to consider all our options. My options. My choices. Do you mind?"

His lips moved in a sad smile. "No, I don't

mind, but I wish we had made love last night."

"Why?"

"Because I know you, and I believe I know what conclusion you are going to reach, and if I'm right, the last time we shared passion truly was the last time."

She shook her head. "No. I promise we will have one more time together before we say goodbye to being lovers. I want us to know when the last time is so we may enjoy it to its fullest." She rose, kissed his brow and left the room.

Torin spent the day squiring Ranid around the city, taking samples of his gin to several different Houses. He pretended joy at the orders Ranid received for several barrels of his concoction, and they celebrated with an elaborate meal in the House which had ordered the most.

By early evening, Torin had had enough of Ranid's company and was more than ready to spend time with Sunshine. She was nowhere to be found, nor would Yumi's staff tell him where she was. He went to the baths, indulged himself in a hot bath alone and then dressed for the evening.

He found her in the large meeting room, talking with a group of several young men, all of whom seemed to be vying for her attention. Torin caught her eye and smiled. She inclined her head and looked back to the men around her.

"So, that's the game you wish to play, is it?" he

murmured to himself. He smoothed the frown that had settled itself between his brows and turned his back on her. If she wanted to punish him, he refused to give her the satisfaction of knowing that her behaviour hurt his feelings in any way. He lifted a goblet of wine from a passing servant's tray and gazed around the room. There were several women he recognized from previous visits and he mulled over which of them to try to attract when a voice spoke from near his arm.

"Well, well, well, look who's wandered in from the cold lands." The contralto voice sounded amused.

He turned gracefully and bowed over the woman's hand. "Alanta," he said, and kissed the back of her fingers.

"Torin." She slipped her hand into his shirt and caressed his chest. "It's good to see you. Are you waiting for anyone in particular?"

Torin resisted the impulse to glance over at Sunshine and her suitors. "No. No, I'm not."

The tip of her tongue poked out between red lips. "I know you seldom grace a woman with your company two visits in a row, but do you think I can lure you tonight?"

"There is a possibility," he said. "But I make no promises."

"You never do." She took her hand from his shirt and ran her fingers up his inner thigh. "Then

again, I'm not asking for anything you are not willing to give."

"Now, Alanta, you know half the fun for me is the chase. What challenge is there when you are so bold?"

She pouted. "You said you like bold."

"And so I do, but there are times when I prefer subtlety." He took her hand and kissed it again. "Shall we walk?"

He tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow and began to lead her toward the doorway which led to the gardens. Sunshine's voice stopped him.

"Leaving so early, Captain?" she asked.

He smiled at her. "Merely taking a stroll," he answered. "Would you care to join us?" Alanta's fingers dug painfully into his arm. He ignored the pinch and kept his attention on Sunshine.

"Why, yes, I would." She took his other arm and the three of them strolled out into the garden. Sunshine stroked Torin's arm gently as they walked, while on the other side, Alanta made her displeasure known with sharp fingernails.

Torin stopped at a curved bench, freed himself from the women and sat in the middle spot. He gestured at his sides for them to take their places. Sunshine raised an eyebrow, then sat at his left. Alanta stood looking down at them for a few moments.

"I was hoping to have you to myself," she said

to Torin, ignoring Sunshine's amused expression. "You did say I could lure you."

"So I did," he said. "But I didn't say you would catch me, and I also said I made no promises."

Alanta sighed. "Then I gather there's no point in my staying here, is there? I'm not in the mood for three in a bed. If you will both excuse me." And without a backward glance, she strode away, head held high.

Torin shrugged and turned his attention to Sunshine.

"How was your day on your own?" he asked, taking her hand in his.

"Thoughtful. A little lonely, but it's probably best for me to get used to that again, don't you think?" She smiled sadly.

"I'm not abandoning you completely, sweet Sunshine," he said in protest. "It's only this we're giving up." He cupped her breast in his free hand.

"Only," she said and put her hand over his. "Do you know how this sustains me? Do you know what it means to me?"

"I know it doesn't mean enough for you to untake your vows and devote yourself entirely to me." His thumb moved over her nipple, which had risen against his palm. "And I would Dance with you, if you would."

"Don't say that, Torin. You know that you would leave if Emeera untook her vows, or if

anything happened to Rojer. I know you love her more."

"I love her differently, not more," he said. "Or perhaps I love her the same. It's a moot point, in any case, since neither of you is free to be with me." He leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

"No, we're not." She rested her head on his shoulder, freed her hand from his and put it around his waist. "But I still need you. I need the closeness with you."

He released her breast and took her into his arms. "Be with me, then, while we're here at Yumi's house," he said. "But when we leave, we have to return to being friends. I can't keep tormenting myself, Sunshine, nor you. We'll both be mad in a matter of months, if we keep this up. It's safer for both of us, our minds and hearts, if we stop."

"I don't want to," she said. She kissed his throat.

"But if we must, then I claim you every moment until we leave. No more coming to the meeting room and pretending we're looking for someone. I want to be with you." She pulled back and looked up into his face.

He gazed down at her, then bent to kiss her. His lips captured hers and his tongue caressed with tender movements. She sighed into his mouth and pressed herself hard against him. Her hand



wandered to his trousers, which were open down both sides, and reached inside to touch him.

"Anyone could walk by here," he said against her hair, pulling her skirts up and slipping a hand between her thighs.

"Let them," she said. "I hope Ranid's the first one. He needs to see this."

She released him long enough to untie the waist of the trousers at one side and push the front part away. His erection sprang free, rising from the thatch of black hair, proud and ready to do her bidding. She slid to one side. "Straddle the bench," she said, and when he had done so, she followed suit, and lifted her skirts to her waist.

"Do you like what you see?" she asked.

"Very much." He reached for her, and his fingers explored the softness hidden by the golden curls.

She moved her hips with the rhythm of his hand, and came closer to him. She climbed over his legs and lowered herself to his lap, her skirts falling over their thighs.

He held her waist and let her guide him into her, groaning as her warm depths engulfed him. He thrust deeply, lifting his buttocks off the bench. She wrapped her legs around his waist and clung to his shoulders. Her head dropped back and she moaned softly. They paused at the same moment, to prolong the pleasure, and smiled that they

should have done so without speaking.

They spent a few minutes kissing softly and touching each other's faces, lost in the wonder of their union. Still without speaking, they resumed the gentle motion. It quickly became more urgent, hard and deep thrusts from both of them, he seeking to bury himself in her, she seeking to take as much of him as she could. Their climaxes came at the same time, and he bit back a loud shout. She hid her face against his neck, mouth open, the cries of orgasm muffled by his throat.

He held her tightly to his chest, stroking her hair.

"Can't we stay here forever," she asked with her lips still brushing his throat.

"Would that we could," he said.

She sat up and looked into his face. Light fingers traced the zigzag path of the scar on his face. "Let's go inside." She untangled herself from him and stood up, shaking her skirts down into a more seemly position. He retied the waistband of his pants and rose. He took her by the hand and led her inside.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

The rest of the week passed in a flurry. Yumi listened to Torin's plea on Sorih's behalf and took the boy in to learn the many duties of an employee of a great Pleasure House. Torin knew the boy would gain a great deal from the experience and if his family ever returned from their trip east, by some great miracle of the gods, he would be able to help support them with his wages.

Sunshine and Torin managed to avoid Ranid and Rojer most of the time and spent every moment they could, together. All too soon, the day of departure arrived.

Torin stood on the steps overlooking the big courtyard where Rojer and Ranid's caravans awaited their drivers. Rojer and Ranid effusively thanked Yumi for the hospitality of her House, bowing over her hands. She smiled at their faces and grimaced over their bowed heads at Torin and Sunshine, who suppressed their laughter.

Sunshine embraced Yumi. "Thank you for everything," she said. "I'll never forget you or your House. It's been an amazing time. Thank you."

"I do hope you'll come again," said Yumi. "You'll always be welcome here." She hugged Sunshine and released her.

Sunshine followed Ranid and Rojer to the caravans. The men climbed onto the driving seat of one, and she took the second. Both headed toward the gate where they waited for Torin to join them to lead the way.

"Well, my cherished Yumi," said Torin. He took her hands. "Thank you for your understanding and willingness to share the duties of keeping those two idiots occupied. I owe you and your lovely ladies a debt I may never be able to repay."

Yumi laughed, low and enchanting. "You do indeed owe us all. Please never bring them back here, if it can be avoided at all." She kissed his cheeks. Looking past his shoulder, she said, "Your horse is here."

Torin turned and smiled. Sorih, dressed in the uniform of a stable boy, walked toward him, carefully leading Darkling by a short rope. The horse tossed his head from time to time, nearly pulling the slender boy off his feet, but Sorih kept a firm grip and spoke in a no-nonsense tone. He stopped at the bottom of the steps.

"Your steed, Sir," he said, and sketched a bow.

Torin released Yumi's hands and strode down the few steps. "My thanks, young Sorih. He seems to have been well-tended. I'm very pleased." He took the reins. Sorih undid the short rope and coiled it around his wrist.

"He's a very good horse, if you don't let him get too bossy," he said.

Torin chuckled. "Indeed he is. You found that out on your own?"

"Yes, Sir." Sorih patted the great warhorse's shoulder. "Thank you, Captain, for the good word, for the chance to get out of the gutter. My dad will be proud when he gets home."

"Indeed he will, lad. Indeed he will." The soldier kept his opinion that Sorih's family would never return, to himself. Instead, he nodded to the boy, to Yumi, and vaulted into the saddle. Then he led the caravans to the great square in the centre of the city, where they joined with the rest of the train.

Torin rode Darkling around the perimeter of the cluster of caravans and other vehicles. He gave directions to each driver regarding their position in the train, and impressed on them the importance of keeping in line. With a shout, he raised his hand and waved the first wagon forward. The driver flapped the reins on the flanks of his horses and the animals moved forward. One

by one, the rest of the train followed, Torin's soldiers taking their assigned places along the sides. As Sunshine's caravan passed him, Torin bowed his head. She inclined hers in reply, and the Trader train rolled out of the great Chaviss city.

The day before they reached the border with Destrain, Torin gathered all the Traders together. With the caravan master at his side, he announced, "Tomorrow, we cross back to Destrain. You may have forgotten, in Chav's warm clime, that it is winter back home. I recommend you get your warmest cloaks and mittens ready for the crossing. The weather changes just as abruptly on the way back as it did on the way in. It is best to be prepared. We won't be stopping for anyone until after we have all crossed into Destrain."

As he had warned, the temperature dropped just before they reached the border guards. Those few who had not believed him, regretted their decision not to put their cloaks close to hand on the driving seat. The best they could hope for was that they would stop soon after the crossing.

Torin, used to the wayward behaviour of some Traders, kept the train moving for a short time after they had passed the border. It was long enough to make the point that the Traders really should listen to his advice, but not so long that anyone would suffer actual frostbite.

That night, when the caravan stopped to make camp, Ranid knocked on Torin's door.

"Come," Torin said.

Ranid stepped into the warmth of the caravan.

"Good evening, Captain," he said.

"Ranid," said Torin. He waved the other man to a seat.

"Oh no, thank you. I've only come to ask something of you."

"Ask away." Torin leaned back on the bench.

"Well, there's a few of us who are headed to Brinded, and we want to know if we can leave the train tomorrow when we reach the right road, or if we have to come all the way back to the city."

"You can do as you wish," Torin said. "Of course, if you take the road to Brinded, you give up the protection afforded the train by my soldiers, but perhaps if there are a few of you traveling together, it will be safe enough."

"That's what we was thinking," said Ranid. "And you see, I did get quite a few orders for my gin. I need to get home and start on it right away."

"Of course." Torin gave a thin smile.

"Thank you, Captain. I appreciate it. And, er, by the way, I also appreciate the care you took of my wife back there." Ranid's eyes narrowed for a moment, as if he suspected something but didn't want to confront a skilled soldier.

"It was my pleasure," said Torin, with another

thin smile. "I wish you both a safe journey home to Brinded. I gather that Rojer will keep the rented cart and return to the city with the rest of us."

"Yes, so he will. I imagine he's eager to get home to Emeera. Well, then, I'll just be going." Ranid hurried from the Captain's caravan. Torin saw him through the window, almost running toward his own caravan. He wished he had a reason to stop in to say goodbye to Sunshine. They hadn't had so much as a minute together since the train had left Chavistan. Ah well, perhaps it was all for the best. He went back to the reports from his soldiers.

The caravan train reached the crossroads to Brinded shortly before noon the next day. Four vehicles pulled away from the main train and turned north. Torin rode alongside a short distance, ostensibly to make sure there were no bandits just here, in reality to see if he could say goodbye to Sunshine.

He spoke briefly to each Trader as he passed them on his way back to the others who were continuing on to the great castle-city of Destrain. When he reached Ranid's caravan, he found Sunshine at the reins.

"Mistress," he said. "Where is your husband?"

"He's inside where it's warm, figuring out how much gin he has to make, and how much of each ingredient he's going to need." She looked into



Torin's dark eyes.

He smiled beneath his helmet. "Then perhaps one of these days, I'll see you in the City, looking for what he needs while he stays home and brews his brew."

"Perhaps so," she said. "Perhaps we can have tea together."

His voice lowered. "I'll miss you, Sunshine."

"And I'll miss you." Her voice was just as quiet. "But I'm glad I won't lose my friend."

"Never. You will always have him." He raised his hand to his helmet, bowed from the waist, and galloped away. In a short time, he caught up with the main train, and fell back into the role of Captain of the Queen's Guard. He glanced over his shoulder at the distant vehicles, his gaze lingering on the one driven by Sunshine of Lorca, until it crested a hill and vanished from sight.

He sighed, wondering if he had made the right decision, then turned his attention back to job at hand. Only time would tell. In the meantime, he had his duties to attend to. He clucked to his horse and rode to the head of the train.

## About the Author

C.E. Barrett is the author of the romantic science fiction novel, "Angels Among Us". Currently living in southwest Nova Scotia, Canada, C.E. Barrett spends the cold maritime winters writing and denying the snow outside.